

Rex Jaeschke's Blog Postings from
Tales from the Man who would be King

Volume 01 – Dec 2009 through Nov 2010

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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- Updated outdated information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 2009, “Hi Ho, Hi Ho, it’s Off to Blog We Go”

Dear friends and colleagues, welcome to the first posting on my personal [blog](#).

1.1 A World of Publishers and Writers

As [A.J. Liebling](#) wrote, “Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one.” Of the many millions of people having access to the internet, a significant percentage of them have decided that as they can easily create their own blog, they too can be publishers and writers. Unfortunately, having something worth publishing does not appear to be a prerequisite.

I arrived in the US in August 1979. Very soon after, I recognized that for a product, idea, or person to be successful in the US [and maybe in most countries] packaging was paramount with substance being a distant second. If you can’t get potential customers to look at your wares—typically via some flashy advertisement, scantily clad woman, or other promotional vehicle—the quality of those wares is unimportant. And, as best as I can tell, blogging and social networking provide the masses with tools to promote themselves—and to do so shamelessly.

Without substance, you don’t get many repeat customers for your products but with a potential customer base of 300 million one-time customers here in the US [and many more if you can sell to the world] you can still do a lot of business. For example, take the prestigious [and fictitious] legal firm of Dewey, Cheatham, and Howe [Do we cheat them, and how], which has been screwing over its clients since 1902! Of course, with substance as well as attractive packaging you literally can “write your own ticket.”

Regarding setting up a blog, it is quite easy; once I got the software installed, I had a reasonably decent mockup operational within 30 minutes. But what to do after you have played with all the dazzling features? The blogosphere is littered with “publications” having only a handful of entries, fewer than five followers (excluding family members, who are “required” to subscribe and to appear interested), and with very long delays between posts. Once the novelty has worn off, most bloggers simply run out of things to say, assuming that is they had anything to say to begin with.

So, does the world need yet another blog? And if so, does it need one from me?

1.2 Why I Want to Blog

I enjoy writing [I *really* do], I like reading good and clever writing—[George Bernard Shaw](#), W.S. Gilbert (of the team [Gilbert and Sullivan](#)), and [Oscar Wilde](#) immediately come to mind—and I’ve even been known to take an English grammar book on holiday! [That coupled with the fact that I have a copy of the US Constitution by my bed might make me rather odd, but then I never was accused of being normal. *See future postings on that topic.*]

Instead of writing about work-related topics, I’ve decided to push myself into other areas. However, that doesn’t mean I intend to write about things I’m not familiar with. As many of you know, from about 1990 to 2005, I worked only halftime, and after some four years of working more than fulltime since then, once again I am back in part-time mode. As such, I have a very full life outside of my work and I’ll draw topics from that.

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With this blog, my goals are to do the following:

1. About once a month, write and post a substantive essay.
2. Share my perspectives with friends and colleagues in a manner not possible during phone calls, emails, or short in-person visits.
3. Stimulate discussion and encourage lively interaction and constructive criticism from my readers. (Yes, dear reader, I mean you specifically.)
4. Take responsibility for my words and set a reasonable example of writing.
5. Set a respectful tone and discourage knee-jerk reactions. The world definitely does not need more flaming/ranting on blogs, in emails, or other public forums.
6. Be informative, educational, and, hopefully, a little entertaining.
7. Do my bit to improve the quality of the blogosphere. You can't improve the process if you don't participate, right?

I see no reason why any of my postings will need to be published in a hurry. To that end, it is very likely that I will write each one over a period of weeks or months so it can be fully baked before its public debut. I certainly plan to have at least two people—with whom I don't always agree—review each one before it is posted. That way, most—if not all—of my errors, missteps, and faux pas will have been detected and fixed.

1.3 A Few Rules

This is a personal project; at this time, I do not plan to announce this blog to the world, just to invited guests like you who might be interested readers and possible respondents. And while I'm open to suggestions for topics, style, and so forth, ultimately, it's my blog. If you don't like the rules, you can always invent your own game just as I'm doing with this blog. After all, we can all be writers and publishers now!

1. Although I encourage you to submit comments, they will be moderated. Specifically, they will only appear on my blog once I have reviewed and accepted them. The reason for this is to eliminate spam and other malicious postings. It is also to guard against knee-jerk and potentially offensive replies. If ever you should disagree so much with someone's writing or speech that you "just have to dash off a rebuttal that very instant," then it is highly likely you will embarrass yourself more than them once everyone reads what you wrote while so overcome with emotion. [Regarding emotion, I am a Vulcan.] In such cases, by all means write the response but sleep on it for at least a night if not two or three. Make sure your brain is in-gear before you press the "send" key.
2. When you submit a comment, I expect you to be responsible for what you write. Specifically, you **must** use your real name and email address. I can assure you that the comment, "Rex, thou reeky, flap-mouthed clack-dish!!!", posted by someone calling themselves "Aphrodite" or "JuliusCeasar" will be rejected, whereas the same comment from a reader willing to put their real name behind their words will almost certainly make it through the process.
3. As you write comments, remember that more than a few of my intended readers have never lived in the US, and that their native language is not English. I say this not to try to confine your or their responses in any way, but to remind you that "normal is relative." Not everyone drives

on the right, writes a date “month/day/year,” has Christmas in winter, or uses the term *college* to mean a 4-year university.

4. In order to help me improve the quality of the blogosphere, if you have an English-language spelling checker please run it over your responses and add grammar checking if you can. It has often been said, “You are how you dress” or “You are what you eat.” I’d add to that, “You are how you write.” Try to set a good first impression.
5. Above all, have some fun and don’t be intimidated, especially if English is not your first language. Enthusiasm and a willingness to engage in constructive conversation count for a great deal. And if you learn something in the process that’s great.

1.4 A Bit about My Writing Background

I have been writing for publication for more than 25 years. Before I started, I received numerous technical publications each month. However, few articles in each issue interested me, and for those that did few authors went far enough in their treatment. [Years later, when I became an editor, I discovered that there are lots of writers who have something to say, there are lots of writers who can deliver on time, and there are lots of writers who understand the mechanics of good writing. Unfortunately, finding a writer with all three of these skills is very difficult and, consequently, all but the highbrow or best-known monthly publications have trouble getting more than a couple of really good pieces per issue.]

After some time, I found myself saying, “A lot of this is crap! I could do at least as good a job as most of these authors.” Well, talk is cheap and so it became “put up or shut up” time! To be sure, I was handicapped by the fact that I’d failed English the final two years of high school and I thought that *grammar* was the person married to grandpa, but hey, this was America where anything was possible, right?

For many years, one of the main commodities I have dispensed, and for which I’ve charged handsomely, is common sense. [Frankly, the word is a misnomer; **common sense doesn’t seem to be very common at all!**] So, when I sat down to write a letter to the editor of a magazine for which I thought I’d like to write, I knew that if I said something like, “Hey, I’d like to write for your publication, but I don’t have any qualifications whatsoever, and I have no idea what I’d write about.”, the chances of getting any reply, let alone a favorable one, were slim to none. Instead, I sent him a business proposition. I pointed out some topics that I thought would be of interest to his readers, and about which I just happened to have more than a passing interest and knowledge. I mentioned that I was prepared to invest in the hardware and software needed to write and that although I had never written for publication, I was a quick and enthusiastic learner.

Within several weeks, I had an offer to try out for softalk for the IBM Personal Computer. I was asked to write a review of a program primarily to provide a sample of my writing and to see if I could deliver on time and to a certain article length. Once I managed that the editor agreed to a 3-month trial series on the relatively new computer programming language C [the topic that launched my very successful independent consulting, teaching, and writing careers], called *The C Spot*. Before the three months ended, I had sold a modified version of the series to a non-competing publication (*DEC Professional*) and my writing career was launched. [*softalk* went out of business within a year or so, but the other publication had me writing a monthly column for more than 12 years. Thank you very much Linda.]

Eventually, I went on to write hundreds of columns and features, and half a dozen technical books (one of which was translated to Japanese and Russian). I started and edited a quarterly publication and later started, edited, and published another quarterly. At one time, although I was writing three different columns each month and one each quarter, writing was still a small part of my business. All my writing was technical in nature and consisted primarily of 3,000-word articles. The one exception was a weekly newspaper column on home/small business computing. Each week, I had to introduce a topic, say something useful about it, and conclude it, all in 600 words without being able to rely on readers having read any previous installments. That was the hardest writing I ever did, and it paid the least! [If you are curious to learn more about my technical writing, see www.rexjaeschke.com/writing.html.]

With all that writing behind me, you'd think I might know something about writing. I do now but it came relatively late in the process. After all, that's what editors are for right? They're there to "whip into shape" the text that writers submit. Of course, make their job too big or too difficult and you'll be out of a job.

1.5 English was My First "Foreign" Language

Regarding my appreciation of writing and literature, I consider that I had a very poor start, so it was not surprising that I didn't enjoy it let alone understand it. [Even now, I joke with my son Scott an avid Shakespeare fan. He says Shakespeare wrote only 11 tragedies while I say that all 39 of his plays were tragedies!] Most of my elementary education took place in rural Australian schools with 25 children in seven grades being taught simultaneously in one room by one teacher. Looking back, I'm surprised I learned anything and I'm truly amazed at how academically capable I turned out to be. Growing up, the only books in our house were a 10-volume British encyclopedia; a small atlas; some WWII, Disney, and Phantom comics; and some western novels. No one in the family had a library card, that's for sure!

Of course, by the time I got to that big-town high school of 500 students in five grades and 16 different classrooms I was assumed to have some rudimentary appreciation of the written and spoken word. Which, I expect I did not. [I find it amusing to compare that with my son's high school, which had 1,600 students in four grades and his wasn't an especially large school.] That combined with my finishing Year 12 high school a week before I turned 16—with the corresponding lack of maturity—meant I was not well grounded in things literary. I can say with great certainty that at 15 years of age having to read, understand, and write intelligently about my Year 12 novel, *Jude the Obscure*, by Tomas Hardy, was "Mission Impossible." After years of therapy, I no longer wish Hardy to die a miserable and cruel death every week, once a month would be just fine!

I do recall, however, that from the earliest days I had a small library of books. I received them from school or Sunday school, and I still have most titles to this day. In my much-abridged version of the Dewey Decimal System, each book was numbered, starting at 1; very original! I confess quite readily that I am a non-recovering bookaholic. [See the October 2010 posting, "[Books by My Bed](#)."]]

My linguistic epiphany came when I started foreign language lessons in my mid-30's. For years, I'd dabbled with a Berlitz course in German—"Der, die, oder das, das ist die Frage. Was ist die Antwort?"—but I still hadn't finished the introductory tape after 10 years! As I was travelling to international destinations and Spanish seemed to be one of the easiest languages to learn I decided to take a formal class in that at [Georgetown University](#), in Washington D.C. [Georgetown is run by the

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Jesuits, a Catholic brotherhood that is well versed in languages. They offered non-credit courses in more than 60 languages, each course running for 10 weeks for three hours each Saturday morning.] The textbook was great and in English but before I could understand the Spanish grammar rules, I needed to learn what they were for English, and so began my long journey into grammar. Later came a 10-week introductory German course, followed by a 10-week intermediate Spanish course and after that a lot of self-paced learning of Spanish, German, and to a lesser extent spoken Japanese.

The next major event of a literary nature occurred when my wife, Jenny, went back to university to get her Aussie teaching qualifications upgraded so that she could teach in the state of Virginia. She had to take a 16-week English class and she chose to do it on a compressed schedule—eight days over four consecutive weekends—at a local Community College. Not having taken university-level English either, I decided to tag along. As it happened, the theme was essays. For me it was a whole new form of writing, and as well as liking to read essays I found I was pretty good at writing them. After that, I “discovered” audio essayists who read their works on National Public Radio and video essayists who are featured occasionally on the Lehrer NewsHour TV program.

So, some 15 years into writing for publication I learned about English grammar, punctuation, and the process of writing. And I now know that grammar was not in fact married to grandpa; they just lived together “without the benefit of clergy” [thanks much Tish for introducing me to that ever so genteel phrase] and practiced conjugation.

1.6 Conclusion

Several years ago, I came across the following poem by the great American statesman and inventor Benjamin Franklin. It so impressed me that I memorized it, printed a copy, and taped that to the edge of my computer screen where I can see it every time I write.

*“If you would not be forgotten
As soon as you are dead and rotten,
Either write things worth reading,
Or do things worth the writing.”*

According to some readers of my technical materials, I have been writing “things worth reading,” and more than a few of the readers of my travel diaries have reported that I’ve been doing things “worth the writing.” As such, I am encouraged to try to bring the same success to this blog. I look forward to hearing from you. And, as the dwarfs sang in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, “Hi Ho, Hi Ho, it’s Off to Write I Go.”

2. January 2010, "Travel: Home Stays"

It has been my experience that people who travel for pleasure fall into two main camps: tourists and travelers. Tourists tend to have less time and less frequent trips and they don't want to spend time on organizing lots of logistics themselves. They want the security of having their itinerary locked-in in advance. They stay in hotels, eat in restaurants, and go on guided tours. Many want the romance of an international encounter but at arm's length from the locals. Travelers, on the other hand, often take long and frequent trips. They want to "make things up as they go" and might not have any accommodation or travel tickets booked at the destination. They stay with host families. They buy food at bakeries and supermarkets and they picnic in scenic places. They wander the back streets in search of the unexpected opportunity, photo, or personal encounter. To be sure, many people have a leg in both camps and one approach does not fit all circumstances or personalities. Both have their place and their adherents. As for me, I prefer to be a traveler as much as possible.

Many of my trips have involved stays with strangers, most of whom I had contacted in advance—but maybe only one or two days before—through one organization or another. Some hosts were people I met while on the road and others were "friends of friends". Some of my travel diary readers have commented on how exciting it must be to arrive in some far-off place with an as-yet unknown "friend" waiting to meet me and to share hospitality and a cross section of their life and community. And yes, it generally is exciting. Inevitably, I am asked how I organize a home stay and whether I have encountered any problems. And since I also host travelers, I am asked about that too.

What follows are some of my experiences, both as a host and as a traveler. I also offer some advice for anyone considering hosting or traveling in this manner.

2.1 Europeans Tête-à-Tête with the Philistine Americans

[*Tête-à-Tête* is French for *face to face*.]

My first experience in hosting via an organization came through American Host Program (AHP), a group that, unfortunately, is now defunct. During the Cold War, a teacher couple from California was traveling in Europe. They were disturbed at the negative view that many people had of those arrogant war-mongering Americans ("What? Us, warmongers?"), so they decided to do something about it. They invited teachers and librarians to come to the US for 30 days and to stay 10 days with each of three families, or 15 days with each of two families. Guests had to have reasonable English skills so they could have a prolonged and meaningful exchange with a small cross section of the real America (you know, with people like me, immigrants!). Hosts provided accommodation and meals and were asked to be ambassadors for their country. To be sure, it was a big commitment for both parties, but it was only once a year, and it was a great opportunity to have a meaningful exchange and to make lasting friendships.

From 1988 through 2000 Jenny and I hosted 12 sets of guests, 10 of whom were on their own (seven women and three men) and two who brought spouses. They were from Austria (1), Finland (1), France (2), Germany (7), and Sweden (1). Three were born and raised in the former East Germany. As well as hosting them, I have stayed with or visited eight of them at least once and one of them, Astrid,

numerous times. She has also visited me again. I keep in touch with four former guests via my trusty and cheap [Skype](#) internet phone software.

2.2 Peace, Brother!

Seventeen years ago, I read an article in the travel section of the Washington Post newspaper about a couple traveling in Wales with their 3-year-old daughter and staying with host families. The host organization was [Servas International](#). Soon after, Jenny and I joined as both hosts and travelers, and three years later, we also became interviewers for new members. [As it happened, our first Servas trip as a family was to Wales where we stayed with three completely different hosts.] Servas has members in more than 60 countries and is a peace-based organization intended to facilitate dialog between people from different countries, regions, or cultures. [I host and stay with members from other parts of the US as well as other countries. After all, the US can be viewed as 50 different countries.]

Most Servas hosts provide accommodations and meals for two days and nights. The rule is that a traveler doesn't just "use" a host for an overnight stay or wear out their welcome over a longer period, although hosts and travelers can agree to other terms. For example, a veterinary surgeon in Mexico offered a month's stay provided guests helped him in his practice. Some hosts offer longer stays if you buy language lessons from them. One man offered a long stay if you worked some hours each day helping him renovate his large villa.

There are also Day Hosts, people who cannot—or chose not to—have people stay overnight; perhaps they live in student dormitories or are members of a religious order. They like to meet guests for coffee or a meal, to take them on a walking tour, or to practice their English. Day Hosts are great! They allow for meaningful contact with little commitment. In either case, travelers arrange directly with hosts based on entries in host books, each of which covers a single- or multiple-country region. Membership runs for a year at a time and most countries charge an annual membership fee.

I've stayed with hosts in Costa Rica, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Uruguay, the US, and Wales. [As I write this, I am staying with the second of two hosts in Normandy, France, where I'm spending a 7-day holiday after a business meeting in Paris. The experience has been fantastic, despite the inclement weather, and I'm already planning a return trip; thank you Jean-Claude, Brigitte, and Martine.]

Given the "competition" from internet-based hosting organizations, Servas is looking at going online in some form or another. However, one of its strengths is that membership requires personal references and an interview.

Servas conducts an international conference every few years. Some countries host annual conferences, and some local chapters hold regular events. In the Washington DC area, we have a summer picnic and a Christmas party, with occasional functions through the year as members chose to organize them. The idea for these is to allow local members to meet each other in addition to the people from out of town who they host.

2.3 Bring out the Best China

My first internet-based hosting experience was with Hospitality Club in 2005. I was planning a vacation to Hong Kong yet there were no overnight Servas hosts there—only Day Hosts. As it happened, Hospitality Club only had Day Hosts too, but I made contact with a number of members living there, and an expatriate American and two young Chinese businesswomen each agreed to meet me. The American took me on a walking tour of the financial district and had a meal with me at an Irish pub where his wife joined us. One Chinese woman took me to a banquet with her extended family. The other took me to a neighborhood restaurant and brought two friends who wanted to practice their English and to pepper me with questions about travel.

2.4 Can I Surf Your Couch?

In mid-2008, I was staying with a Servas host in Philadelphia, and he introduced me to CouchSurfing (thanks Todd). This internet-based organization is very popular. There are members in pretty much every corner of the planet. Although I have yet to stay with a host—I tried to in Rome, Italy, in May 2009, but without success—I have hosted quite a few members, mostly domestic travelers within the US. One of them finished up living with us for five weeks while he worked on the 2008 Obama Presidential campaign, a cause dear to our hearts.

2.5 The Second Viking Invasion

Some friends of ours were involved in a Danish program that needed extra hosts one year. Jenny and I were “pressed into service” and discovered that that year’s group was made up of retirees from the island of Fyn who were amateur folk dancers. They were traveling around the eastern US having a holiday and performing. We hosted the leader and his wife and had a great experience. [I have stayed with them twice since and met their extended family.] In subsequent years, we hosted other adult groups as well as members of several Danish national youth gymnastics teams.

2.6 Konnichiwa and Domo Arigato

[These Japanese words mean *hello* and *thank you*, respectively.]

In 1999, I read in our local newspaper about a hosting opportunity. A company nearby provided Business-English lessons and customer-service training to employees of foreign companies. Most students were from Japan, and their companies sent them for 2–12 weeks. Over the 3-year period before the school’s closing Jenny and I hosted 14 Japanese men and woman, most of whom each stayed with us for two weeks. The school gave us US\$120/week towards the cost of meals, and we were asked to spend at least an hour a day speaking English with our guests and helping them to use the skills they were learning. We had some great experiences and I visited several of our guests back in Japan. On one memorable occasional at a dinner party that we hosted I prompted Harusa to “sing us a song,” and without fluster she broke into a Japanese girl-scout campfire song.

2.7 Don't Wait for a Knock at Your Door

You don't need to be a member of a hosting organization to host, however; you just need to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves. For example, while staying in a youth hostel in

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New York City I gave my contact information to a German traveler called Frank who was headed toward Washington DC. I invited him to stay, and he did. (Separately, I had also invited a Chinese professor called Frank to stay, so when someone called Frank phoned Jenny to be picked up at the train station she looked for Chinese Frank when it was German Frank waiting!) Whenever I meet interesting people on my travels, I hand them a business card. I do so more to keep in touch on a personal level than for possible business connections.

Once, I was waiting at the Toronto airport for a flight that had been delayed by the first snowstorm of the season. I got talking to a young Brazilian mother who was flying home to Rio with her 5-year-old son. We were together more than an hour before our flight was called. We didn't sit together in-flight, but I saw her at the airport on our arrival. By then she had missed her connection to Brazil and was going to have to spend the night until the next flight 24 hours later. Although she was prepared to deal with that, I told her that in 15 minutes, my wife would pick me up, and we could host the two of them. She hesitated for all of five seconds before accepting. The next day, she gave me a music CD by well-known Brazilian singer and songwriter [Tom Jobim](#). Although it wasn't something I would have bought for myself, I came to really like it and 10 years later I still play it regularly, thinking often about that fortuitous meeting.

I remember well a very nice random-act-of-kindness bestowed on Jenny and me when we traveled to Brussels with our 3-year-old son. We'd ridden a public bus to the [Waterloo battlefield](#) and were eating our picnic lunch at the top of the huge earthen memorial. There our son played with a girl about his own age, so we got to meet her parents, a Canadian couple posted to their embassy in Brussels for several years. They invited us to ride back to the city with them and to spend the afternoon and an evening meal at their house, after which they'd drop us back at our hotel. We cheerfully accepted and had a great time.

Opportunities are all around us; we simply have to recognize and take advantage of them!

2.8 Some Host and Traveler Considerations

There are many things for a potential host or traveler to consider. Based on personal experience, these are the main ones I cover when interviewing new members for Servas:

1. Home Access: Should the host give the guest a house key? Some hosts require that a guest leave when the host does—possibly early in the morning—which means that the guest typically cannot get back in until the host is back home. In general, this is very inconvenient for the guest. Traveling can be hard work and some days you just want to lie in bed, read a book, and write postcards, do laundry, or rest.
2. Food: Discuss any food restrictions and allergies. Hosts or travelers may be vegetarian or vegan. Don't be shy as a host about asking guests to contribute food or, if you are a guest, to bring food or offer to buy food. Remember, the host is already providing accommodation without charge.
3. Generosity: Hosts are well advised to not say "Make yourself at home" since they have no idea what the guest's home life is like.
4. Helping Out: Good guests offer to prepare food, cook, clean, and help with other household chores without needing to be asked.

5. Phone use: Understand the rules about phone use and the cost of calls.
6. Smoking: Do not violate any smoking rules of the host. [I have heard of a case in which the host said, "You may smoke in my house, but if you do you may not exhale!"]
7. Appropriate Expectations: If a guest wants a choice of food, that's called a restaurant. If they want an en suite bathroom or a private bedroom, that's called a hotel.
8. Computer stuff: Is internet access available and, if so, what are the costs and limits? Travelers often take many digital photos, which fill up memory cards. Offering guests to burn pictures on a CD-ROM or DVD is very thoughtful, but don't be shy about charging for the media you use.
9. Space: Give everyone his or her space. Don't smother your guests but don't ignore them either. Don't over plan.
10. Convenience: Discuss things that might be needed unexpectedly such as umbrellas, hats, gloves, water bottles, and picnic equipment.
11. Interaction: Unless it has been pre-arranged otherwise, be prepared to spend some quality time with each other and to have a meaningful exchange. A host stay should be more like a good bed and breakfast experience rather than a cheap hotel visit.

2.9 What's the Worst that can Happen?

So, what are the risks of inviting strangers into your home? Should you be worried about them stealing all your stuff or running up large telephone bills with international calls? What if they are escaped mental patients who killed their families with an axe?

After 20 years of hosting, I am very happy to report that I have had none of the problems most people think might occur. And, apart from some family photos, home movies, and personal effects, household goods are replaceable. It's just stuff, right? My experience has been that if you are that much in love with your stuff you probably aren't a real traveler. [To paraphrase [Helen Keller](#), "I met a man who complained he had no shoes until he met a man who had no feet!"] As for the escaped mental patient, if he stays at my place, he'll simply think I'm a fellow patient. We'd probably get along just fine.

The worst I can report is a lack of synergy, punctuality, or sensitivity. (Fortunately, not all were with the same guest!) In the latter case, Jenny and I hosted a young Russian man who lived three hours away on the mid-Atlantic coast. He was using the program to stay with families on weekends to get to meet Americans and to learn about their culture. However, a few hours after we met him, we decided that we needed to have a serious talk with him about his approach. When he didn't understand something or didn't agree with it he expressed very strong opinions about it even saying things like "Why do Americans do such stupid things?" and "We had much better ways of doing that back in Russia." The next day we told him that sooner or later he was going to stay with someone less understanding than us, and they would simply tell him to go back home if he was going to be that ignorant and arrogant, and rightly so. While his intent was good, his execution was seriously flawed.

In this internet age, I have computers and gadgets throughout the house with protected wifi access. However, because my internal network is not secured from one machine to the other, I don't give open access to my computer systems. If guests have their own laptop, they can "plug in" without breaching my security. Take sensible precautions and you should be fine.

As far as staying with strangers, I have never felt any environment was unsafe or unhealthy. I've had a couple of experiences that made me wonder why the hosts bothered, however.

2.10 Conclusion

As with many other aspects of life, problems in hosting can arise from a lack of communication and unreasonable expectations. Most can be avoided with a little planning and some common sense. As a host, ask yourself what you'd reasonably expect as a traveler, and as a traveler ask yourself what you'd reasonably expect as a host. While it's not necessary to be a traveler to be a good host or vice versa, experiencing it from both sides certainly can help. I've had many great experiences from hosting and from being hosted, and I have made some long-term friends. I've really gotten to appreciate that "normal" is relative to the experience of each person even within the same country or region. [See §4 for the first instalment of the *What is Normal* series.]

Is hosting or traveling for you? Are you more interested in the journey than the destination? Are you more interested in the cultural aspects than the sights? Do you want the challenge of being an unofficial ambassador for your country even if you disagree with your country's policies? (One Mexican host held me personally accountable for much of the illegal immigrant policy that was being enforced in California!) As for me, I'm a *traveler*, not a *tourist*!

You never know what new friendship, experience, or adventure is waiting for you around the corner. But don't sit at home and dream about it, go make it happen. Create your own luck. Oh, and beware of hosts and travelers who list "axe murder" under their personal interests!

3. February 2010, “Where’s My Damn Gold Watch?”

On December 12, 2009, I achieved a significant milestone: I completed 40 years in the workforce. That’s 280 in dog years! How time flies when you are busy working to pay taxes!

Of course, as I’m still just a young whippersnapper you may well ask how I’ve clocked up so many years. Well, I was sent out to work in the coalmines of darkest South Australia (SA) at the age of six where I worked 20 hours a day. And when I got home to the hole in the ground in which all 14 of us lived my dad thrashed me to sleep with a broken beer bottle. And that was on a good night! [Thanks to the Monty Python gang for that inspiration.] Of course, I exaggerate; the shifts were only 18 hours and our hole was one of the more comfortable models. At least we didn’t have to eat cold gravel *every* night; that only happened when we were bad.

All right. Ok, I’ll start again. Being six months younger than students in my own class and then having completed two elementary school grades in one year, I started high school (Year 8) at the grand age of 11 years and 2 months. As a result, I completed Year 12 one week before my 16th birthday.

So, with all that experience and maturity under my belt what was I to do with my life? Well, I had two things going for me. I was a decent math and science student with good enough grades to get admitted to the South Australian Institute of Technology (SAIT), but only as a part-time/evening student. And I had enough ability to be offered a spot with the Under-17’s team at a semiprofessional Australian Rules football club based in Adelaide. [This was in 1970, well before the national professional league (AFL) began, and when Adelaide—a city of around a million people—supported 10 semipro clubs. It still has nine of them, and two pro teams as well. See the January 2020 posting, “Football, Aussie Style.”]

The sport would keep me fit and give me something to do with my spare time, and it would even generate a little income, but that would be invested for a rainy day. And the studies would keep me busy two nights a week from February through early December; however, I’d have to have a job of some sort to pay the rent, pay for school tuition and books, and to buy polish for my football boots.

3.1 Hoe, Hoe Hoe, a Hoeing We Will Go!

At the time I finished high school, my father worked for *Simarloo*, an American fruit conglomerate owned by the Mariani family from Silicon Valley, California (back before electronics arrived there, when it was a valley full of fruit growers). While local growers in Australia were content with their 20–50 acres of citrus, stone fruits, or vines, not so those big-time Yanks. Simarloo put thousands of acres under irrigation. And just before I started work there, they planted 10,000 almond trees!

Now classes at SAIT and training for the new football season—which ran from April to September—didn’t start until March, so I had 10 weeks to kill before moving to the state capital 150 miles away. As such, I signed up as a general laborer at Simarloo making AU\$1/hour (which was comparable to US\$1 at that time). There was plenty of overtime available, but it paid the regular rate. I distinctly remember earning \$100 one week; yep, I worked 100 hours, which is probably one reason why I like to keep it around 25–30 now.

Each morning, someone drove me to some remote patch of young fruit trees that were 1–2 feet high, and left me there alone with a large water container and a freshly sharpened hand-held hoe. You know them there gardening implements for weeding, with the long wooden handle! At noon, someone drove me back to the main shed for lunch with the other worker bees. And in the afternoon, I'd do it all over again. My job was to walk up and down 250-yard rows removing weeds from anywhere within a foot of the base of each young tree. And as my water was left at the end of a row, I had 500 yards to go to the next drink, and it was high summer with average temperatures reaching at least 95 degrees F (35 C). Fortunately, it was dry heat. To this day, I have to say that I'm not much into gardening!

3.2 If I Had a Hammer

In March 1970, I packed up my meager possessions and moved to Adelaide, the capital of the Aussie state of SA. My family had arranged for me to live with a widowed, old-age pensioner within walking distance of my football club's stadium, but that was all the help I got. I also had the name of my "minder" at the football club and around AU\$500 in my bank account.

I started night school with classes in chemistry and lab-related studies and my goal was to get a job in a science lab; however, as a 16-year-old in a strange city I found it hard going. After three weeks of looking at the job situation and spending money, but not earning any, I took a temporary job at *D.B. Harrison and Son*, a small factory that made wooden boxes for the wholesale fruit and vegetable trade. Each of these boxes had a lid, which was held in place by two small wooden stays nailed one on each end. My job was to nail those on by hand. I soaked the rather small stays in an old bathtub of cold water for some hours so they wouldn't split when nailed onto a box. I worked with two other drones and the son of the cantankerous owner. I earned AU\$16 for a 40-hour week and paid \$12/week for room, laundry, and meals including a cut lunch on weekdays. After a few weeks, I was given a \$4/week raise. I worked there four months.

3.3 Extruders Beware!

I took a cut in pay to move to *BG Plastics*—a firm that specialized in plastics extrusion—making those nice little molded plastic packages in which brush and comb sets were packaged. The highlight came when the state fair (the Adelaide Show) was held, and we made plastic spacesuit helmets for kids and sold them there. I took a turn working at the booth; however, almost all the buyers wanted them assembled. And as I was the fastest assembler they had, I got to work the fair for two whole weeks. That job lasted six weeks.

3.4 Oil be Loving You, Oo Oo Ooh

A fellow student knew I was looking for a lab job and as he was about to quit his he recommended me to his boss. I fronted up to *Adelaide Margarine* for an interview and got the job. That company was a subsidiary of *Vegetable Oils Australia*, which operated an oil refinery near Sydney as well as thousands of acres of olive groves around the country.

Although I was hired to run the quality control lab, I was really being trained in factory management. We made cooking margarine, most of which was packed in 50-pound boxes for commercial bakeries. The rest was in half-pound blocks for retail sale. Once every hour I'd do routine testing on the new

batch of margarine that had been made. Other duties included testing the milk reconstituted from powder, testing the water, and placing Petri dishes in various parts of the factory to detect the presence of molds. It was routine chemistry with a little microbiology thrown in.

Although I was still only 17, once I proved to be a self-starter I got to help manage the ordering and shipping of the bulk vegetable oil from the city rail yard and I served as an emergency driver for the transportation department. Quite often, I got to drive one of the company cars (even though I didn't have one of my own), and I even managed to drive one up the back of a car that stalled at a traffic light. (Don't you just hate that when that happens!) I also became proficient at driving a forklift.

Being a non-union employee, during several union strikes I also got to put on white coveralls and a hair net and cap to actually *make* the margarine. On one such occasion, I had to "supervise" the company President who had no clue as to how things worked out in the factory.

At age 18, I had my first business trip—a week in Sydney to visit the refinery and the main labs. It was heady stuff to catch that Boeing 727 and to have a driver pick me up on arrival and again each day at my hotel to go to work.

For quite a while, I had a separate contract with the company to bottle vegetable oil at nights and on weekends. That was my first entrepreneurial fling, and it went well.

3.5 Rex Learns about Chemical Aids

After 2½ years, I was ready to move on and I chose pure lab work rather than the applied world. I had also completed my first 3-year program at SAIT so I could command a better deal. I joined the *South Australian Department of Chemistry* where I caused a ripple with their pay grade system. No one had ever gotten that qualification before age 21. [Back then, full adult pay started at age 21.] So, at 19 they agreed to pay me as though I was a year older.

The Department was small with fewer than a 100 people, and it had five divisions: Forensics (doing stuff for autopsies and all the state's blood alcohol testing), Agriculture (looking at mercury in fish and DDT in the state's food supply, among other things), Cereals (playing with cereal grains and cooking in their test bakery), Gas and Explosives (testing public gas supplies and issuing explosive permits), and Food and Drugs, of which I was a part. I was assigned to the Pesticide Residues lab as a Technical Officer Grade 1, complete with white coat, safety glasses, and a pocket protector containing pens and a spatula. [See photo at right.]



This was the age of 2-4-D, 2-4-5-T, Chloropicrin, and other nasty chemicals that were being sprayed onto all sorts of aspects of the human and animal food chain. And aerial sprays caused wild bird's eggs to have very thin shells. Pesticides collect in fatty tissue and professional hunters would go out, shoot foxes, and send us batches of fox fat to analyze the impact of sprays in rural areas. My principal job was to check the Adelaide metropolitan area supply of eggs, milk, and fresh fruit and vegetables to monitor their pesticide levels. Occasionally, I'd get one-time tasks. The most exciting things that came

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our way were the stomach contents of a farmer and his dog. Wishing to commit suicide by drinking a concentrated chemical—Hey, sign me up for that plan!—Farmer Brown forced a dose down Rover's throat to make sure it was quick acting. Once he saw that it was, he took a solid swig himself. Forensics got the case and handed off the pesticide component to my group.

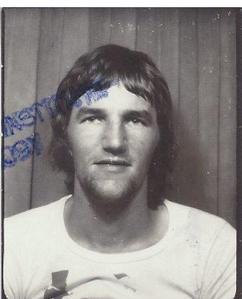
Once, I was on-loan to the main Food and Drug lab to test 240 bottles of red wine for artificial coloring. I took a 20 ml sample from each bottle, gassed it with CO₂ to preserve the contents, and resealed it. After many weeks of negative tests, and checking and rechecking my control process, about three bottles from the end I found one that was over the limit. The Deputy Director of the Department was so excited when I told him that he had to come and repeat the test himself. Months later, after I had given away most of the bottles of wine to staff members, an agriculture inspector came by and asked what happened to all that wine. Of course, I had to inform him that it had been “consumed” during the testing.

I had taken on the task of handling lab maintenance requests for the whole department and enjoyed getting out of the lab to work with the maintenance staff. The electricians and plumbers I used supported the state library, state natural history museum, and Government House as well. On one visit to find them at Government House I had the good fortune to meet and chat with the Governor, Sir Mark Oliphant, a noted Australian scientist who worked on the Manhattan project in the US during WWII. [In Australia, the head of government in each state is an elected politician called the *Premier*. The (largely ceremonial) head of state in each state is the *Governor*, appointed by the Queen and who represents the Crown.]

While I was taking classes in my second 3-year course at SAIT, I discovered computers and programming. Minicomputers were becoming affordable, and labs were starting to install them to automate all kinds of things. And while I loved programming, the Department didn't have any computers. It was time to move in a different direction.

3.6 Along the Highways and Byways

The SA Government had an acute shortage of computer programmers, so they had SAIT develop and teach a 3-month training program to be run in the summer when the campus was otherwise empty. They announced an opportunity for state civil servants to take an aptitude test to see if they would qualify for selection to this program. In my case, I had already taken the test as part of an effort to see about transferring to another department. As for the other 500 applicants, they all had to cram into a very large hall and compete with each other and the clock. I was one of the “25 chosen ones” and in January 1976, we went off for 13 weeks to be full-time students on full pay and benefits to learn COBOL on CDC mainframes. Along the way, we also did a bit of Fortran. [See my SAIT student ID photo at left.]



Each student was assigned to a state government department and mine was the *South Australian Department of Highways*. After that, we served six months “on the job training” before moving to the rank of *Computer Systems Officer Grade 1*. And for those of us already with a pay grade ahead of that level, we kept it. My team leader was a former high school teacher who delighted in teaching.

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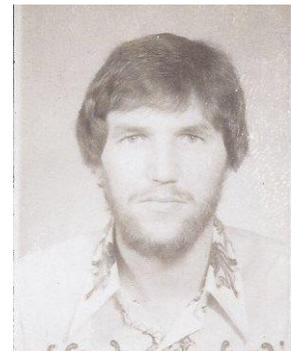
After a solid stint in coding standard validation, update, and reporting applications in COBOL, I literally attached myself to an engineering group that got me my own office—only the Grade 4 boss had one of those—and a project processing statistics from highway and bridge concrete crushing compression results. From there, I transferred myself to a Digital Mapping group that had its very own DEC PDP-11 minicomputer. There, I designed and implemented a system to digitize from topographic maps all the state-owned or maintained roads and their adjunct facilities like bridges, rail crossings, and quarries. That got me into real-time data acquisition. I then tied that system to a cadastral system of land use and valuation information allowing planning engineers to figure out where to run new highways through neighborhoods. That project involved a lot of plotting and graphics. Others in my group worked on a system that gathered traffic statistics by punching holes in paper tape when cars ran over those rubber hoses you see stretched across a highway, and they were on the fringes of the first work in SA on computerized traffic system controls.

The state government was a classic British Commonwealth operation; you waited for someone to retire or die to get ahead. And I was a young man in a hurry! Once again, it was time to move on.

Along the way, I dropped out of my science course, one class short of completion. Then I started a 3-year Computing Science degree as a halftime student—*without any previously earned credits transferring*—with time off with pay from the Department. By the time I left Australia in mid-1979, I'd completed one year of that program. And just like Bill Gates, I never did get to finish university, yet somehow, he finished a few billion ahead of me; however, due to a drop in the price of Microsoft stock I've managed to narrow the gap.

3.7 Laboring in Chicago

After traipsing around Asia and Europe for five weeks playing tourist, in August 1979 I entered the US via New York and rode the Eastern Airlines Shuttle to the Nation's capital, Washington DC. A week later, I was living in Chicago and consulting to the *US Department of Labor*, Region 5, which covered six mid-western states. [See the October 2018 posting "Living in Chicago."] [See the photo at right, taken just before I left Australia.]



My main project was to design and implement a system to track all apprenticeships in a 4-state region. Each state office had a computer terminal and dial-up modem to access the minicomputer in Chicago. When I delivered the system, users moved from an antiquated, error-prone, batch system to an interactive system, the contents for which they controlled directly. And they could query it in real time. It was very successful, and I was asked to demonstrate it to other regions.

My second project was to design and implement a system for the Federal Occupational Safety and Health Agency (OSHA) in Cincinnati, Ohio. Numerous public and private organizations and companies sent their lab instruments to OSHA for repair or calibration, and my system was used to track instruments from arrival to shipping.

3.8 Achtung Gesundheit!

After 13 months in Chicago, I started with *Software AG of North America* whose headquarters was in Reston, Virginia. The company developed and sold database management software. I was the first non-IBM mainframe person at HQ. Nominally, I was the technical support manager for a new product, the company's first foray into the world of minicomputers. In reality, I did whatever it took, developing installation procedures, writing training manuals, delivering training, and working with developers, sales, and marketing staff. [See photo below of Businessman Rex!]



It was a stormy 2½ years involving quite a bit of travel, the company going public, and a lawsuit around my project. Along with that, I was thrown in at the deep end to manage staff and I had the unenviable task of hiring people for a project I knew was going to be cancelled! [To this day, I have no interest in hiring or managing anyone.]

So, what does “AG” stand for? The parent company was German, and *Aktiengesellschaft (AG)* is a suffix indicating public trading and limited liability in Germany. Whenever I was asked its meaning, I usually said the (nonsense) title above, which means literally *Attention and To your health*.

3.9 Farming out the Cash

For some months in 1983, I worked on a contract with the *US Department of Agriculture* where I developed spreadsheets to manage federal grant money for agricultural research. I also worked on various database systems. PCs were becoming popular and lots of groups wanted to control their own computing destiny.

3.10 Becoming a Mainiac

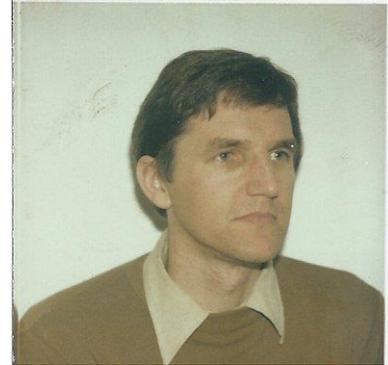
Late in 1983, a major opportunity came my way when a company had need for a person experienced with DEC PDP-11s, real-time process-control, and Fortran. It was a great fit and I soon found myself in the wilds of Maine at *Great Northern Paper Company's (GNP's) Millinocket* papermaking factory. For each of three weeks a month, on Monday mornings I flew from Washington DC to Boston, Massachusetts, and then to Bangor, Maine. From there I drove more than an hour to the town nearest the north end of the Appalachian Trail. On the following Friday afternoon, I did the reverse process. It took six hours each way, and so began my extraordinary flying experience.

GNP generated a great deal of the power it used at its papermaking facilities at six hydroelectric dams and two steam plants. My project was to maintain, document, and later to enhance the software that ran on a network of minicomputers to monitor the steam plants and control the hydro plants. I got to hang out with a great bunch of engineers, electricians, and power dispatchers and I made some good friends.

By the way, rumor has it that if you spend one or two winters in Maine you are a *Mainer*. If you spend three or more, you are a *Mainiac*! I travelled there at least 150 times over an 18-year period! [See the January 2019 posting “My Time in Maine.”]

3.11 Doing It My Way

After five years in the US, in mid-1984, my application for permanent residency was approved and I got my Green Card. [See photo at right of my ID photo that was on my Green Card for the 24 years I had it until I got US citizenship in 2008.] Very soon after, I started in business as an independent consultant. I continued to work on the GNP project for another 14 years, first as a subcontractor and then as the prime contractor. And I implemented the software changes for some major engineering additions to the power generation system.



Along the way, I started writing for publication and I spun off collections of articles into some seminars. As I wrote more, I started to plan each series, turning the resulting work into a seminar and then a textbook. And I continued this approach for some 15 years. Early on in that process, I started a quarterly publication and was its editor until it was sold three years later. Some years thereafter, I published and edited another quarterly. By then I had a very nice writing and publishing business on the side.

In December 1984, I attended my first meeting of a computer technology-related standards committee. It was a US committee, but before the end of my 15 years as member, international representative, then chair, it had spun off an international counterpart. That got me onto a regular schedule of national then international meetings, usually with some personal travel as well. And when I retired from that activity, I was hired by Microsoft as a consultant to help them build their own standards capability. Ten years later, I am still working with them in a number of forums relating to computer programming languages and office technology. Almost all my work is as project editor where I write and/or edit some or lots of a specification, and I help manage the maintenance process. For quite a few years, this meant attending 2- or 3-day international meetings every month, and on one project, 2-hour phone meetings every 1–2 weeks.

After a long break, I'm back to writing and teaching and recently I started a website with a partner to sell a lot of my previously published and unpublished intellectual property.

Throughout my 25+ years of being self-employed, I've had two very important rules: **never ever** hire anyone, and take as much time off as I can afford. And I am very happy to say that I have never reconsidered either of those, and, in fact, I have reinforced them many times. For 15 years, until 2006, I worked halftime and now after a few years of working more than full time on several interesting projects I'm back to part time. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

3.12 Conclusion

Now my boss is an understanding bloke, so recently I had a chat with him about cutting back my hours or even retiring. Of course, he laughed aloud, but said nothing. So, for the foreseeable future I guess I'm stuck with a good income, a part-time job, plenty of interesting work, a good amount of travel, a chance to work with some really good people, and no gold watch. Oh well, I guess someone has to do it, right? And as for retirement I guess that will happen when I die; however, I can't help thinking that maybe, just maybe, Hell might be a technical support job at a software company!

4. March 2010, “What is Normal? – Part 1: Getting Started”

This is the first in a series on this topic. It contains observations I've made after the following experiences: living for 25 years in Australia and another 30 years in the US; working with and hosting people from other regions and countries; and making more than 350 domestic and international trips for both work and pleasure.

4.1 Introduction

Ask anyone what the word *normal* means and it's very likely they'll understand it to be something like “according to formal or informal rules, usual, ordinary”, while its opposite *abnormal* means “to deviate from the usual or normal.” Being normal is often associated with being socially accepted while to be abnormal has negative connotations. This is not always fair; it might just mean *different*. As for me, I have never claimed to be normal, and I've never aspired to be *usual* let alone *ordinary*. And many years ago, I decided that it was easier and much more useful and interesting to be different than it was to be better. [Like normal, *better* is another of those relative words, better than what?]

What is often forgotten about normal is the fact that its meaning depends on the context in which it is being used. For most people, their everyday interactions are with people in the same local area in the same local language using the same local customs. They are all operating in a normal fashion. However, 100 miles (or kms) away, people from another community interact with people in their local area, in their local language, using their local customs, all of which might be quite different from those of the first group. Yet the second group is also behaving normally. As for me, in a normal week I speak by phone with and write via email and instant message to people from a number of countries, from Asia through the Americas to Western and Eastern Europe.

Well that might be interesting from an anthropological point of view, but why should the average (dare I say, normal) person care? As long as there have been humans on this planet, they have grouped together in small bands, and then larger ones, right up through states and nations. And this has resulted in the creation and evolution of language and customs. They have traded with their neighbors, intermarried with them, and gone to war with them. And quite often, they have had significant misunderstandings with each other, based on differences in religion or custom.

In today's highly interconnected world very few of us can avoid being exposed to the customs of other groups, some of which are radically different from our own. Unless we are intent on becoming isolationists, the challenge is to try and understand things from their perspective, probably without having experienced it or anything like it ourselves. Our normal is not their normal, and suggesting they should behave like us is at best naïve or ignorant and at worst foolish.

4.2 We are Products of our Own Environments

While we certainly inherit some things genetically, I'm a great believer in people being shaped by their environment; the larger their environment the greater the number of influences on them. In my own case, I spent my first 16 years in a rural community of South Australia (SA), most of the time living 5–30 miles from a town of about 5,000 people. My parents had a 6th-grade education. I had no role models for higher education or any profession, no or limited access to television, and limited choices of

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radio stations. Once every few years we made a day trip to the state capital. The most exotic thing I did was to spend several weeks on an [Aboriginal Mission](#) (which is much like a Native American Reservation here in the US) when I was 15. My environment was quite small.

Despite its enormous size, Australia was a country in which most people got from Place A to Place B by driving, and if it couldn't be driven in a reasonable time people didn't go there. [This changed somewhat once airline deregulation happened just as it did in the US.] As a result, people didn't go far on vacations and their exposure even to people from neighboring states was very limited.

After WWII, Australia supported a series of large immigration waves, each of which had a significant and permanent impact on the nation. The first to come were the English and Scots, then the Greeks, Italians, and Yugoslavs, and they came in the tens of thousands. After that, the economic refugee "Boat People" from Vietnam arrived, followed years later by the Sikhs, and more recently by people from various parts of the Middle East. As many of these people worked as itinerant fruit pickers, they took seasonal work on my hometown's citrus, grape, and stone fruit properties. Over time, they stayed permanently and started social clubs, sporting teams, newspapers, and radio programs, and for the most part, they integrated into the local community.

From age 16 to 25, I lived in [Adelaide](#), a city of about a million people that is the capital of the state of SA. While there I bought a car, traveled to several other states, took my first airplane ride, became politically aware, and started voting, which is [compulsory](#) in Australia; is that normal? I also discovered music, theater, and computers. My environment got substantially bigger. [However, I realize now that I didn't take advantage of it nearly as much as I could have.]

At 25, I left Australia for a multi-year adventure abroad. By that time, I had visited a number of regions of my large home state (which is nearly 150% the size of France or Spain) and I'd visited small parts of a few other states. Then, over a 5-week period, I visited Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, India, Italy, Switzerland, France, and England. By the time I arrived in the US, my environment had become much larger, especially as I wasn't going home at the end of the trip. In fact, those five weeks were just the beginning of the adventure.

Despite my extensive travels and interactions, I can still be surprised when it comes to normalcy. One such example occurred during my first visit to the state of [Western Australia](#) (WA) several years ago. [Each time I go back to Australia, I try to visit different bits of it to see what it was I had unknowingly left behind.] I was touring the southwest corner of that state when I came across a small town with a butcher shop. Right about then I had a yearning for some smoked sausage of the kind with which I'd grown up called [mettwurst](#). Interestingly, the butcher knew exactly what I wanted, and asked me if I was from SA. I replied that I was, at which point he reminded me that the recipe for mettwurst came to Australia with the German immigrants in the 1840's, but they only settled in SA, so mettwurst was not normally available in other states. [Subsequently, I spent time discovering more about my own family background and state's history. As a result, I found that much of my knowledge about Australian customs really was specific to my home state or region.]

Another example involves books. I have worked with *Nihon-jin* (Japanese people) for more than 25 years. I've visited and travelled in Japan on numerous occasions, and I've hosted quite a few in my house, so I've come to learn quite a few things about their culture and customs. Being a book lover, I

like to go to bookstores when I travel, and I do so in Japan. Most books written in Japanese have the front cover where we Westerners would say is the back cover, and vice versa, with the text going down the page in columns from right-to-left, and with pages being numbered from right-to-left. So, when I see a stack of books on a table in a Japanese bookstore, I have this incredible urge to go and “turn them up the right way.” I know they are already the right way up, but after all these years I still have not yet adjusted to that difference.

4.3 Getting in the “What is Normal?” Mindset

So, what does normal mean to you? Without thinking too hard about them, answer the following questions:

1. On what date does summer begin?
2. If it is 11 o'clock in the morning in New York, ignoring any adjustment for Daylight Savings Time, what time is it in Paris, six 1-hour time zones to the east?
3. What date does 1/12/2009 represent?
4. Write the following value as a number: Three thousand four hundred point five.
5. How many lowercase letters are there?

Now let's go over each question and see how your answers compare with those from other readers of this blog.

On what date does summer begin? Here 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.

It's 11 o'clock in the morning in New York, and Paris is six 1-hour time zones to the east. From where I'm sitting near Washington DC, I'd say it was 5 pm in Paris, but my friend Stéphane—who lives there—would probably say it was 17:00. [It has been many years since I've worn a watch. However, I do carry a pocket computer that has a clock. When I travel to a country that uses a 24-hour clock, I change my computer clock to use the local time display format just to “get with the program” and to experience a different kind of normal. This is also useful when I look at transportation schedules as they typically use the local time format.]

What date does 1/12/2009 represent? In the British Commonwealth (and numerous other) countries, dates are written “day/month/year”, in which case, this date would be December 1, 2009. However, in the US it represents January 12. [I am reminded of two things regarding date format differences. I had a traveler coming to stay and she informed me by email that she'd be in my area around 5/6. She was from Australia, but had been touring the US for some months, so I didn't know if she meant May 6 or June 5. I had to ask; otherwise, I might have been preparing for her visit on the wrong day. The second has to do with the attack on the World Trade Center (is that spelling normal?), which took place on September 11, 2001. Here in the US, that date is referred to as 9/11; however, I was surprised to also see it written and hear it spoken the same way in Australia where it would normally be 11/9.]

I write the value “three thousand four hundred point five” as 3,400.5; but my German friend Astrid would write it as 3.400,5. In France, Stéphane would write 3 400,5 (with a non-breaking space as the thousands separator) and in Geneva, a French-speaking part of Switzerland, Daniela would write 3'400,5. What we native English speakers generally refer to as the decimal point is actually known to others as the *decimal comma* or *decimal separator*.

As to **how many lowercase letters are there**, being an English speaker, I'd say 26. However, my Russian friend Sonja would say 33 (using the post-revolution Cyrillic alphabet) and my Danish friend Keld would say 29 (the 26 English letters followed by Æ/æ, Ø/ø, and Å/å, in that order). [Years ago, during a lecture I gave in Copenhagen, I said naïvely that the Danish alphabet had three *extra* letters (meaning the 26 English letters plus three more). A member of my audience raised his hand and politely informed me that his alphabet had *exactly* the right number of letters; there were no extra ones! That day, I learned a valuable lesson about normal.] On the other hand, my Japanese friend Misato would say that not only doesn't she have any lowercase letters—poor Misa—she *doesn't have any letters at all or even an alphabet!* (Which begs the question, “Is there such a thing as a crossword puzzle in Japanese?”) She writes using Kanji ideographs from Chinese, and symbols from the Hiragana and Katakana syllabaries. [You should have seen the stunned look on the face of the young sales person here in the US when during a stay with us, Misa signed a credit card slip using Kanji and the clerk had to check it against the “signature” on the back of her card! “That doesn't look like a *real* signature,” he said.]

Having done that little exercise, let's go back to a statement I made earlier: “The meaning of normal depends on the context in which it is being used.”

4.4 Computer Software and the Concept of Locales

In my initial blog post, I said that I was going to write about things outside my work, but bear with me while I get a bit closer to that subject. After all, my work is my life, and my life is my work! [I promise not to be a complete computer nerd, however.]

You are reading this blog post using a web browser, and its controls and menus very likely are annotated in your native language, whatever that may be. How then does someone design and implement such a program so that it supports multiple languages and conventions? Twenty five years ago, I attended my first meeting of a committee that was producing a standard specification for the very popular C programming language. As some implementers of the resulting standard wanted ways to support different cultural conventions the committee invented a foundation stone—called a *locale*—for doing that. Simply stated, a locale is a named collection of local conventions of nationality, culture, and language.

Here are some examples of locales. A US locale supports the English alphabet, a 12-hour time format, a month/day/year date format, a comma thousands separator, and a decimal point, among other things. On the other hand, a France/French locale supports the French alphabet, a 24-hour time format, a day/month/year date format, a space thousands separator, and a decimal comma. Note the use of “France/French”. That is necessary because former French colonies, which still speak French, might have conventions different to those used in France. Likewise, for the languages of the other colonial powers, such as the Dutch, English, Portuguese, and Spanish.

In the two examples above the whole country uses the same set of conventions. However, that is not always the case. For example, Canada supports two official languages (English and French), Belgium supports two (Dutch and French), Finland supports two (Finnish and Swedish), and Switzerland supports four (French, German, Italian, and Romansh). And to make it interesting, some towns near one or more borders use one or more conventions borrowed from across those borders.

Implementers of computer programs determine which locales they will support and produce corresponding versions of their products. The larger topic of supporting customs and conventions in computer software is known as internationalization (or I18N for short, as there are 18 letters between the first and the last) and the application of I18N techniques to produce a particular flavor is known as localization (or L10N). As my involvement in information technology standards increased and globalization in business took off, the ideas of I18N and L10N dovetailed very nicely with my own interest in natural languages, customs, and travel.

4.5 Broadening Your Own Horizons

Not everyone has the opportunity, time, or budget to travel abroad, to work with or host foreigners, or to do any number of seemingly exotic things. And not everyone wants to. [That said, I've long maintained that by definition experiencing foreign travel must be positive. Either you have a good time, meet interesting people, and possibly even adopt some changes in your lifestyle as a result, or you have a bad experience that causes you to appreciate more what you have back in your own country and home. Either way, you will learn something about yourself and your own circumstances relative to the rest of the world.]

Here are some small ways to be pleasantly abnormal without expending much effort or expense:

1. Travel to the next town, county, or state just to have a look around and meet the locals
2. Read an article, book, magazine, or newspaper that is outside your ordinary fare; spend time browsing at your local library or bookstore
3. Talk to people who've traveled and asked them why they did and what they learned about themselves
4. Select a radio station at random; listen to music in a different language or from a different culture
5. Talk to visitors from other towns, states, and countries; talk to immigrants
6. Visit a museum or art gallery; go to a concert or see a play; try to sit through a ballet [I fell asleep during Swan Lake in St. Petersburg, Russia. You wouldn't believe how long that damned swan took to die!]
7. Look at alternate news sources [I get my daily world news in English from DW-TV (Deutsche Welle in Berlin, Germany) and I watch programs regularly from and about Japan, in English, on NHK.]
8. The Internet truly can be your oyster, and if you don't have a computer, get free access to one at your local library
9. Look up in a dictionary new words you come across; improve your word power; do a crossword
10. Set out to learn something new and useful at least once a month

Now, add at least five of your own ideas to this list.

4.6 Conclusion

In future installments in this series, I'll look at a number of different aspects of cultural differences. These will include writing systems, calendars and dates/times, numbers and counting systems, currency, measurement systems, forms of address/names, computer keyboards, electrical and phone plugs, driving, address formats, country and place names, surviving with chopsticks, and some cultural things such as which gestures might get you in trouble and which indicate to observers that you are dead!

I'll close this first part with a story about the first night I ate in the US after arriving in August 1979. I was seated in the restaurant at my hotel in suburban Washington DC and I'd ordered a salad and an entrée, which in the US is a main course; go figure! The salad came, but being a good Australian I waited for the main meal to arrive before I started my salad. After all, *everyone* knows that you eat your salad *with* your meal! Well, I waited and I waited some more and finally I asked the waiter. I was politely told that he was ready to serve my main course just as soon as I finished my salad. Welcome to normal!

5. April 2010, "The Road to US Citizenship"

Although many people emigrate every year, my guess is that most of the six billion people on this planet will hold only one country's citizenship throughout their whole life. Being (pleasantly) abnormal, not only did I choose to emigrate, but I also chose to obtain a second citizenship.

So, what does getting US citizenship involve? Although immigration is a hot topic in this country (especially illegal immigration), most Americans never go through the process, so it has been my experience that they have only a vague idea of what it entails. When asked, my standard response has been, "You have to show proof of purchase of at least two hand guns [some people think that's plausible], swim the Rio Grande [some think that's only a requirement for people of Hispanic origin], and name the capitals of all 50 states." Of course, the first two "requirements" are nonsense, and while the third seems plausible, the failure rate for American-born citizens would be very high. But to be fair, how many Brits can name all their counties? And how many Japanese can name all their prefectures? Of course, people from countries like Australia (which is so poor it can only afford six states and a couple of territories) have it much easier.

[Regarding knowing all the state capitals, the knowledge-challenged office worker with light-colored hair was tired of having co-workers call her a *dumb blonde*. The next time it happened, she replied, "I'll have you know that last night I went home and learned the capitals of all 50 states." When asked the capital of Wyoming, she replied, "W, of course!"]

What follows is a discussion about my initial visa status in the US, my getting permanent residency, and my eventual decision to take out citizenship.

5.1 The Devil Made Me Do it!

To paraphrase American humorist Dave Barry, "Should You Become a US Citizen? Should Anybody?" [See his very funny book, *Babies and Other Hazards of Sex: How to make a tiny person in only 9 months with tools you probably have around the home*, 1984, ISBN 0-87857-510-3.] But seriously folks, why did I want to become a US citizen? And why did I wait so long?

Let's start by looking at the "disadvantages" of living in the US without having citizenship:

1. No voting at the federal, state, or local level, and since voter registration rolls are used for things like public school board and sheriff elections, pretty much all voting for political positions is off limits. [That said I've heard it stated, "Why bother to vote when you can own your own member of Congress?"]
2. Cannot run for the Federal Senate or House of Representatives.
3. No security clearances, but since I'd always had a "No nukes, no spooks" rule that wasn't a limitation.
4. Must actually be in the US at least once a year. Specifically, if you leave the country for more than a year you might not be readmitted. The rationale is that if you want permission to live and work in the US then you should be living and working in the US, damn it! [Interestingly, once you have citizenship, this requirement goes away.]
5. No jury duty because selection is taken from voter registration rolls.

You can join the US military without being a citizen, but (presumably) you must swear an oath to the US.

So, what prompted me to become a US citizen?

- After George H.W. Bush's unimpressive tenure, his pathetic vice president, Dan Quayle, and wayward son George W. Bush's two terms, I wanted to have a vote in the choice of my future leader. I thought, "Who will they elect next, a B-grade movie actor?" [Actually, I was a fan of Ronnie's.] And when friends abroad asked me why I wanted to be a citizen of that country I nobly replied that I had to separate the office of the presidency from the person currently occupying it. However, I was careful never to say that we couldn't possibly do worse. If it should ever happen that we get a President Palin, I may well be looking for a third citizenship! [Do you know that I can't see Russia from my house?]
- Once the Guantanamo Bay detention center started to get publicity, I tried to figure out the practical meaning of the term citizen in the Constitution. If being a citizen really meant, "having US citizenship," I didn't, so what rights did I really have? Could I be jailed indefinitely without trial simply for farting in the general direction of some right-wing Nationalist law-enforcement officer?

After five years in the US, I obtained permanent residency, and five years after that I was eligible to apply for citizenship. So why did I wait a further 18 years?

- Unlike many people who immigrate to the US, I was not a refugee or stateless person, and I wasn't escaping from anything. In fact, when I left Australia in 1979, life there was very good. I owned a house with a small mortgage, I had a good job, the weather was very nice, and Adelaide was indeed a fine city in which to work and play. I didn't need US citizenship.
- Prior to 2002, Australia did not allow dual citizenship, and I was in no hurry to give up one reasonably respected passport for another. Why not have both if that were possible? [And if you have a problem with anyone having multiple passports, I respectfully suggest you probably have never had that option to consider for yourself.]

5.2 In the Beginning

I entered the US in 1979 with an H-1 visa, which allowed me to work for a period of one year (but only for my visa sponsor). I was classified as a non-resident alien (you know, like Robin Williams as "[Mork from Ork](#)"). To open a bank account, I needed a [Social Security Number](#), so I applied for one and got it.

At the end of the first year, I applied for a 1-year extension and that was granted. I could only live and work in the US in this manner for a maximum of five years, after which I needed to get a more permanent status.

Now when you apply for a temporary work permit, you agree that it is *not* your intent to stay permanently. Then, once you have been here for "a suitable amount of time," you can inform the immigration authorities that you'd really like to stay permanently. For me that happened after two years. But it took three years for me to get that permanent status. The reasons were several: I didn't have a university degree, so I was mixed in with the "unskilled" workers; there was a fairly small quota

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on the number of Aussies admitted each year [and rightly so, those bloody larrikins!]; and during the process I moved interstate and back again, which caused my records to be transferred twice to different regional immigration offices (and misplaced once).

Once I'd applied for permanent residency and my current visa expired, I no longer got a new visa stamped in my passport. For more than two years, if I'd left the US, I would not have been able to get back in. So, the price to pay while the residency application was "in process" was to stay in the US, although I pushed that to the limits by taking a vacation in Hawaii.

After being in the US for a year, I started to notice situations in which race seemed to be a factor. I remember well one of my first exposures to racial profiling and prejudice in the US. I had been on a vacation on the Amazon River in northeast Peru, followed by a stay at the capital Lima, and then time at the famous Incan city, Machu Picchu, high in the Andes. I flew back to the US 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 handling them 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!

5.3 The Little Green Card that Isn't!

A temporary visa is stamped in one's passport. When one gets permanent residency—i.e., becomes a resident alien—one gets a coveted green card. At one time green cards were actually—well—green. Mine was white, and I think that several years after mine was issued they went to pink.

A green card meant having the ability to live and work permanently in the US *without* restraint. However, green cards issued several years after I got mine had a lifetime of 10 years only.

I recall that for the first few years that I had a green card I had to report to a US Post Office once a year to register my current postal address. [Got to keep an eye on us foreigners!] Eventually, that requirement was struck down by the Courts.

I finished up having a green card for almost 25 years, and each time I entered the US I had to show that card plus a valid Passport (which in my case, was Australian). Around 2000 or so, I remember two separate, but identical, incidents when I came through immigration at my home airport, Washington Dulles International (IAD). In each case, the super-macho immigration officer said to me in a very gruff voice, "Isn't it about time you got citizenship?" He had no right to say that, of course, although he certainly could have invited me to do so in a friendly manner, but I deduced he was trying to impose his own immigration policy; you know, give someone a badge and a gun and a bit of power, and it can go to his or her head! Afterwards, I decided I needed to have a ready response should it happen again, but one that would not get me sitting in an interrogation room for four hours. It never did happen again, but my response was going to be, "That's an interesting idea. Could you please explain to me the benefits of getting US citizenship?" I'm sure the officer would have been angry for an instant and

would have told me to “Move along now” while muttering, “Well if you don’t know how great America is and why everyone wants to come live here then I’m not going to waste my time telling you!”

Interestingly, there must have been a lot of complaints about immigration officials’ attitudes because several years ago, there was a big campaign to introduce the new “kinder, gentler immigration agency.”

5.4 The Citizenship Application Process

Early in April 2008, more than 17 years after I was eligible, I applied for US citizenship. A month later, I received instructions to report to a Federal Center to be fingerprinted. At that Center, I was also given a book of American civics and history questions and answers to prepare for my in-person citizenship interview.

The application process was quite straightforward, but several questions are worthy of mention:

1. How many total days did you spend outside of the United States during the past five years?
2. How many trips of 24 hours or more have you taken outside of the United States during the past five years?
3. List below all the trips of 24 hours or more that you have taken outside of the United States since becoming a Lawful Permanent Resident. [This one took the longest to research. Unlike most people applying for citizenship, I waited 22 years after becoming a permanent resident, and I had traveled abroad extensively. Between cancelled passports and diaries, I managed to piece together my travel record with only a few specific dates unknown. The rationale to this question is to see if the applicant has visited “unfriendly” or embargoed countries.]
4. Do you owe any Federal, state, or local taxes that are overdue?
5. Have you ever been a member of or associated with any organization, association, fund foundation, party, club, society, or similar group in the United States or in any other place? If you answered “Yes”, list the name of each group below. [This one took a while, and I included everything I could think off from sporting clubs to professional associations to Parent Teacher Associations. The rationale to this question is to see if the applicant has belonged to “unfriendly” or extremist groups (you know, like the Judean People’s Front or the People’s Front of Judea).]
6. Have you ever persecuted (either directly or indirectly) any person because of race, religion, national origin, membership in a particular social group or political opinion?
7. Have you ever committed a crime or offense for which you were *not* arrested? [Say what! A trick question, no doubt.]
8. Have you ever:
 - a. Been an habitual drunkard? [A veddy Victorian question, what!]
 - b. Been a prostitute or procured anyone for prostitution?
 - c. Sold or smuggled controlled substances, illegal drugs, or narcotics?
 - d. Been married to more than one person at the same time? [That would mean multiple mothers-in-law!]
 - e. Helped anyone enter or try to enter the United States illegally?
 - f. Gambled illegally or received income from illegal gambling?

g. Failed to support your dependents or to pay alimony?

The rationale to these final questions is to see if the applicant is of good moral character. Specifically, lying on your application shows bad character.

5.5 Preparing for the Test

Part of the interview process involves taking a test on American civics and history. The booklet I was given had all the possible questions and their one-line answers, and that was all I was required to know. The booklet also gave some background details on each of the questions and answers. But rather than just remember the answers, I spent quite a lot of time researching the history of many of the questions. Some of the things I learned were:

1. In its 220-year history, the US constitution has been amended only 27 times, and one amendment repealed another (prohibition). Only six other amendments have ever been passed by Congress, but they were not ratified. Two of those (Equal Rights Amendment for women, and giving Washington DC full representation in Congress) expired due to time limits. The other four have no time limits and are still “on the books.”
2. The Bill of Rights is made up of the first 10 amendments to the constitution. However, these were Numbers 3–12 of a package of 12 that was originally submitted. One of the 12 failed to pass Congress, and the other took some 200 years to get ratified (by the required $\frac{3}{4}$ of the states then in existence). That became the 27th, and most recent amendment, which prohibits a Congressional pay raise taking effect in the same 2-year Congressional term in which it was passed.
3. While the big Election Day most often occurs on the first Tuesday in November, it actually is required to happen on the Tuesday after the first Monday (to allow voters to travel to the polling place on the Monday, avoiding travel on Sundays). So, if November 1 is a Tuesday, the election is held on November 8, the second Tuesday of that month.

While I was given the answers to learn, one question had an answer that was much more complicated than any of the others.

Question: Name the [constitutional] amendments that guarantee or address voting rights.

Answer: 15th (non-white males get the vote), 19th (women get the vote), 24th (state laws allowing poll taxes cannot be applied to Federal elections), and 26th (lowering the voting age from 21 to 18).

5.6 The Interview

I had no idea how long the wait for my in-person interview would be, but I guessed it would be at least a year. Ever since 9/11 and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, crossing the border into the US has become increasingly formal, and with the backlog of passport applications and such, immigration and state department officials were stretched to the max.

About 11 months after I submitted my application, I received instructions to report to my local immigration office in about two months. Meanwhile, I had booked a 3-week vacation to Slovenia and Croatia, and the interview date was right smack in the middle of that trip. However, there is no negotiating with Immigration; when they say “Jump” you say, “How high, Sir?” So, I cancelled the trip.

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The big day finally arrived, and I fronted up on a Wednesday afternoon. My interviewer was a young newly minted lawyer who appeared to be killing time in the Immigration Department until he could find a “real job.” I was his last candidate for the day and probably his only native English speaker. He was very laid-back. He started asking me some civics and history questions, and once I'd answered the first six correctly, he stopped.

If one has been in the US more than 20 years and is over the age of 50, the English proficiency test can be waived; however, I was asked to take it. I had to read one sentence from a piece of paper and write another sentence that the interviewer dictated. I was not required to comprehend either sentence.

After some paperwork, I was asked when I'd like to be sworn in. I replied, “As soon as possible,” so it was set for the following afternoon.

5.7 The Swearing In

The next day, I reported for the swearing-in ceremony where I surrendered my green card. About 50 people were sworn in as a group. We watched a video of President George W. Bush that was actually quite moving, and we each received a Certificate of Naturalization. Out in the lobby members of a volunteer organization were there to get us registered as voters.

From there, I went to a Post Office nearby where I applied for a US passport. [Previously, my green card was like a permanent visa. But since I had just given that up, if I left the US, I could only get back in again with a US passport.]

Here is the Oath of Allegiance I swore:

I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen;

that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic;

that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same;

that I will bear arms of behalf of the United States when required by law;

that I will perform non-combatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by law;

that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and

that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God.

[Applicants could get a waiver on saying the final phrase.]

I retained my Australian passport, which remains the property of the Aussie government.

5.8 On Being an American

July 4th, 2008 was my first Independence Day as an American. I joined friends at their house in Maryland where I waved my little flag, ate traditional BBQ and apple pie, and shot off fireworks. It actually did feel different.

I can safely say that I know far more of the American National Anthem than I do of the Australian one because the Aussies changed theirs since I left. Don't you just hate that when someone changes your national anthem when you are out of town! [Until 15–20 years ago, the Australian National Anthem was "God Save the Queen." Interestingly, there is a well-known American song that uses the same tune; it's called "My Country 'Tis of Thee."]

Then came Thanksgiving, the biggest American holiday, and that was followed by the big Presidential election when I was allowed to vote for the first time in 30 years.

Not being born in the US I am prevented by the US Constitution from being President or Vice President. However, I can run for office as a State or Federal Senator or Representative, but only after I have been a citizen for some years. Of course, I really could aim higher and work to get the constitution amended to allow foreign-born citizens to be eligible for the Presidency. When that happens, watch out for ze Austrian/Prussian Schwarzenegger/Jaeschke ticket!

5.9 Conclusion

Are most immigrants better off once they get to the US? If they are here illegally, the answer is very likely No! But even if they are here legally, I suspect the answer all too often is also No.

Now that I have my citizenship [he says tongue-in-cheek], we gotta put a stop to all this immigration. All these people coming over here taking the good jobs, undercutting our wages, mixing with our women, and generally carrying on like they belong here; it just ain't right!

Oh, and just in case you were wondering, the capital of Wyoming is Cheyenne, and you can learn the names of the UK counties here and the names of the Japanese prefectures here. Y'all take care now, ya hear!

6. May 2010, “Travel – Fly Me to the Moon”

In the first 10 years of my adult life, I flew on a private or commercial plane fewer than ten times. However, I made up for it in the next 30 years when I added another 1,100 flights: that's a flight every 10 days!

This article describes my flight log and provides some flying-related information. So put your seatbacks in a comfortable position, put your feet up, and come “Fly the Friendly Skies” with me.

6.1 My Flight Log

During a vacation in the Caribbean over the Christmas/New Year break of 2008/2009, I dreamed up an idea to use up some of my then copious free time. I would attempt to create a complete record of my commercial flights, the first of which I took in 1971 while living in Adelaide, Australia.

After having set up a spreadsheet and tracking down all the flight details from business and personal records and cancelled passports, I finished that task, and a summary of the results is shown below. I had to make some intelligent guesses for a few things (see “Estimates” below), but I believe that the result is very close to what actually transpired.

The period over which this travel occurred was June 1971 through December 2009 (38 years, 6 months); however, except for four flights all other travel was done between June 1979 and December 2009 (30 years, 6 months), so the latter time frame is used in statistics below.

6.2 Some Terminology

A *flight* is one take-off and its subsequent landing. [What goes up must come down, right?]

A *trip* is one or more flights taken together as a group with a single purpose, but not necessarily taken on the same day or connecting directly one from the other. (For example, a trip might last weeks and have several flights each on different days.)

Flying time is the time from pushback from the gate on departure to pull up at the gate on arrival.

Ground time is the time taken getting to an airport before departure of a flight, getting from an airport after arrival of a flight without a connection, waiting at an airport between connecting flights, and moving from one airport in a city to another between connecting flights.

Travel time for a flight (or trip) is the sum of the flying time and ground time for that flight (or trip).

6.3 Estimates

Not surprisingly, I didn't have all the flight information available, so in some cases I had to come up with a best estimate. Specifically, for my first five years in the US, I submitted all my expense/travel reports to my employer and my copies were long ago tossed away.

In some cases, I knew the city from which I departed or into which I arrived, but I didn't know the airport. For example, the Washington DC area has three major airports and I've used all of them from

time to time. However, the flight distances and times to one or the other would only vary by 20–50 miles and a few minutes flying time, which are insignificant.

For a handful of flights, I know where I started and finished, but not if I connected along the way and if so where I connected. The difference in times would be insignificant, but it might mean the airport usage count is a little off.

For all flights taken prior to 2008, I used an on-line database to find the direct flight distance between any two airports. Of course, when I actually took the flight the distance flown might have varied a bit. In a few cases, I had to estimate the distance from a map as some out-of-the-way airports weren't listed in the database. From 2008 onwards, I have the actual distance flown.

For all flights taken prior to 2008, I used some basic math to figure out the flying time based on the distance and type of aircraft. Ground time involved some guesswork, but I pretty well know how long I take to get to/from airports and many of the flights were repeated numerous times. From 2008 onwards, I have the actual flight times.

Some of the travel days and months are guesses; for example, I know I took a certain trip, but I couldn't pin it down with respect to the actual date.

6.4 Non-Goals

For more than a few flights, I don't know the airline or airplane type. I also didn't track my seat number or the class of service, but most of my trips were in Economy Class with more than a few in Business Class and a handful in First Class. I did not track which trips were taken using free or discounted tickets due to Frequent Flyer program participation. I also did not distinguish between business and personal flights although each flight I recorded does have a "purpose" field. In any event, I often extended business trips to include personal days or even weeks. I did not track the price of any tickets.

6.5 The Big Numbers

1. Total distance travelled was 1,545,515 miles (2,472,824 kms). (907,700 of these miles have been with United Airlines since they started their Frequent Flyer Program, so I'm well on my way to joining their Million Mile Club.)
2. Total travel time spent was 6,899 hours. This is 862 8-hour days, or 3 years and 4 months, full-time based on a 40-hour workweek, made up from the following two components (which are just about equal): Flying time 3,628 hours, which is 453 8-hour days, or 1 year and 9 months. Ground time 3,271 hours, which is 409 8-hour days, or 1 year and 7 months.
3. Number of countries (or distinct regions) flown into or out of was 42 (Argentina, Australia, Bahamas, Belgium, Bermuda, Canada, Czech Republic, Chile, Costa Rica, Denmark, Fiji, Finland, France, French Polynesia [Tahiti], Germany, Guatemala, Hong Kong [now a Special Administrative Area of China], Iceland, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Korea [South], Luxembourg, Malaysia, Mexico, Netherlands, Netherlands Antilles [Northern Group: Saba, St. Eustatius, and St. Martin], New Zealand, Norway, Peru, Puerto Rico, Singapore, Switzerland, Thailand, US Virgin Islands, United Kingdom [Greater London airports only], United States [including Hawaii and Alaska], Uruguay, and Venezuela).

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[I have been to the following other countries or distinct regions, but got there by car, bus, train, or ferry: Austria, Estonia, Lichtenstein, Macau (then a Portuguese territory; now a Special Administrative Area of China), Russia, Scotland, Sweden, and Wales. I have *not* been to any country in Africa.]

4. Number of airports into or out of was 146 (60 in the U.S., in 34 states)
5. Number of airlines used was 42 (based in 24 countries)

6.6 Flights

1. Total number of flights was 1,134.
2. Average distance/flight was 1,363 miles (2,181 kms).
3. Average flying time/flight was 3:12 hours.
4. With 1,130 flights in 30 years, 6 months, I averaged a flight every 10 days.
5. Busiest year (most flights) was in 1984 when I had 106 flights, in 27 trips, for 31,310 miles (50,096 kms).
6. Busiest year (most distance) was in 2007 when I had 41 flights, in 15 trips, for 109,657 miles (175,451 kms).
7. Shortest flight by flying time was 15 minutes; 31 miles (50 kms), San Francisco, California, to San Jose, California; and 19 miles (30 kms), St. Eustatius, Dutch Antilles, to Saba, Dutch Antilles.
8. Shortest flight by distance was 19 miles, 15 minutes, St. Eustatius, Dutch Antilles, to Saba, Dutch Antilles.
9. Longest flight by flying time was 15:24 hours, 7,787 miles (12,459 kms), Chicago to Hong Kong (there were six movies shown, with snacks between each). We flew north and south only, over the pole then over Russia and China.
10. Longest flight by distance was 7,920 miles (12,672 kms), 13:30 hours, Melbourne, Australia, to Los Angeles.

6.7 Trips

1. Total number of trips was 328.
2. Average number of flights/trip was 3.5
3. Fewest flights in a trip was 1.
4. Most flights in a trip was 12. Two trips tied for this. June/July 1979, a one-way trip, when I moved from Adelaide, Australia, to Washington DC. The complete itinerary was Adelaide, Sydney, Hong Kong, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Bombay, Rome, Geneva, Paris, London, New York, and Washington DC. That trip involved 12 airlines and 15 airports in 11 countries. (In two cities [London and New York], I departed from airports other than those at which I arrived.) June/July 1985 when I took a vacation to Australia, stopping off on the way out and back. The complete itinerary was Washington DC, Los Angeles, Honolulu, Fiji, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Alice Springs, Adelaide, Melbourne, Tahiti, Los Angeles, and Washington DC.

Next best were two trips with 10 flights each: October/November 1991, when I took a vacation in Chile and Argentina that involved hiking in the Patagonia. The complete itinerary was

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Washington DC, Miami, Santiago, Puerto Mott, Punta Arenas, <by road across South America>, Rio Gallegos, Comodoro, Bahia Blanca, Buenos Aires, Santiago, Miami, Washington DC. July/August 1997 when I took a vacation to Australia. The complete itinerary was Washington DC, Los Angeles, Auckland, Melbourne, Adelaide, Darwin, Ayers Rock, Adelaide, Sydney, Los Angeles, and Washington DC.

5. Average distance/trip was 4,712 miles (7,539 kms).
6. Average travel time/trip was 21:00 hours with the average flying time/trip being 11:00 hours, and the average ground/trip was 10:00 hours.
7. Longest trip by travel time was 89:45 hours, 24,282 miles (38,851 kms) the second of the 12-flight trips above.
8. The longest trips by distance were 28,266 miles (45,226 kms), 84 hours travel time with 56 hours in the air involving Washington DC, Los Angeles, Sydney, Singapore, Sydney, Gold Coast/Coolangatta, Sydney, San Francisco, and Washington DC. 24,642 miles (39,427 kms), 84 hours travel time with 55 hours in the air involving Washington DC, Los Angeles, Auckland, Melbourne, Adelaide, Darwin, Ayers Rock, Adelaide, Sydney, Los Angeles, and Washington DC.
9. The longest time taken to complete a trip was 7 weeks.

6.8 Countries

The country with the most flight arrivals and departures was USA (885 of each), Australia (44 of each), Germany (39 of each), and United Kingdom (19 of each), Canada (17 of each), and Japan (14 of each). (These involve travel between airports within the same country as well as to/from that country.)

6.9 Airports

1. Airport with the most flight departures was Washington Dulles International (222) [which is no surprise as I've lived 15 minutes away from it for more than 28 years]; Boston (193); Washington National (101); Bangor (87); Chicago (47), Seattle (36), Frankfurt (34), San Francisco (29).
2. Region with the most flight departures was Washington DC (BWI, DCA, IAD) with 325.
3. Airport with most flight arrivals was Washington Dulles International (222); Boston (193); Bangor (87); Washington National (76); Chicago (46), Seattle (36), Frankfurt (34), San Francisco (28).
4. Region with the most flight arrivals was Washington DC (BWI, DCA, IAD) with 325.
5. Most common flight was Washington National (DCA) to Boston (88 in each direction), Boston to Bangor (86 in each direction)

6.10 Airlines

1. Ever since United Airlines put a major hub at my local airport (IAD), they and their Star Alliance partners have been my preferred carrier. I've had 387 flights with United alone.
2. Prior to United, I was a regular passenger with Delta Airlines as they were the only carrier servicing a route I took frequently. I've had 363 flights with them.
3. After that, the numbers drop off dramatically. The next best is Lufthansa with 35 flights.

6.11 Luggage

I have *never* lost any luggage permanently, and I have had luggage go astray only three or four times, which is quite remarkable.

Unlike many frequent fliers, who want to avoid waiting for luggage on arrival I do not try to pack everything into one carry-on bag. In fact, the number of times I've flown without checked baggage would be only two or three. I like to take my time; "It's the journey, not the destination."

Not being a wearer of suits or jackets, I very rarely travel with a garment bag. And when I do, I have to find a way to remind myself that I have an extra piece of luggage hanging in a closet up front.

In March 1988, when I first traveled with a video camera bag, I was not used to having an extra piece of hand luggage. I accidentally left it behind on a mobile lounge that took me to a plane in Florida. Fortunately, I recovered it and all the video it contained from my just-completed vacation.

On more than a few trips, I've traveled with only a backpack.

6.12 Runway Designations

I usually sit in a window seat and I like to watch out the window while taxiing on and to or from a runway. Along the way there are signs marked something like 31R/13L, 21R/3L, or 4/22. And if you have listened to air traffic control on an audio headset, you might hear pilots and controllers use these numbers, which designate runways.

To explain their meaning, I'll use my local airport, Washington Dulles International ([IAD](#)). IAD currently has four runways. Three of them run in a north/south direction and going from west to east they are designated 1L/19R, 1C/19C, and 1R/19L, respectively. The fourth runway runs northwest/southeast and is designated 12/30.

Airport runway numbering uses an international standard. As you may recall from your geometry days there are 360° in a circle, with degrees numbered from due north going in a clockwise direction. Every runway points in a direction—called its *heading*—that is rounded to the nearest multiple of 10°, so Runway 09 points due east (90°), Runway 18 points due south (180°), Runway 27 points due west (270°), and Runway 36 points due north (360°, not zero). That is, "the runway number is one tenth of the runway centerline's magnetic azimuth, measured clockwise from the magnetic declination." But you already knew that, right.

Of course, a runway can be used in both directions, so when landing from the south on a runway that goes due north, the designation would be Runway 36. When landing on that same runway from the north, the designation would be Runway 18. Runways tend to be built in straight lines, which is very convenient for landing planes! [I just hate it when there's a sharp right turn midway along a runway!] As the angle of a straight line is 180, the two designators for any given runway differ by 180/10, which is 18.

So why do some runways have a letter suffix and others not? Many airports have two or more parallel runways, in which case these all have the same number. To keep them separate when taking-off or

landing, the one on the left has an L suffix, the one on the right an R suffix, and the one in between left and right has a C suffix (for Center). IAD has 1L/19R, 1C/19C, and 1R/19L, but the left-most runway is quite new. Prior to that, what is now 1C/19C was called 1L/19R, but with the addition of another runway to the left, what was left became center (except on Thursdays with a full moon in leap years). So, when you read a news story about a plane landing on the wrong runway it's likely it landed on L instead of R, or vice versa, as they are going in the same direction and might only be several hundred yards apart. Of course, you know that some airports just absolutely *have to have* more than three runways in parallel. In such cases, those beyond three are artificially "moved" 10° so they have a different designator. Of course, a runway designator without a letter suffix has no runways parallel to it at that airport.

The designation of a runway can change over time because the magnetic poles drift slowly on the Earth's surface causing the magnetic bearing to change. (Don't you just hate that when that happens!)

English is the language of international aviation and when a runway designator is spoken, all digits and letters are said individually, as in "runway zero six left" and "runway one four right," although a leading zero might be omitted.

6.13 The Spelling or Phonetic Alphabet

In this system, each of the 26 English letters is assigned a code word so that combinations of letters can be pronounced and understood by radio or phone, especially when safety is an issue. Here are the code words used in commercial aviation:

Alpha	Foxtrot	Kilo	Papa	Uniform	Zulu
Bravo	Golf	Lima	Quebec	Victor	
Charlie	Hotel	Mike	Romeo	Whiskey	
Delta	India	November	Sierra	X-ray	
Echo	Juliet	Oscar	Tango	Yankee	

6.14 Conclusion

The average distance from the surface of the earth to the moon is about 235,000 miles (376,000 km), so I've flown more than the equivalent of three round trips to the moon (or 60 times around the earth at the equator). Hence the title of this essay.

This is Romeo Echo X-ray signing off.

7. June 2010, "Australia and the U.S. – A Contrast"

[In the mid-90's, I signed up for a university-level English course. It was all about essays and I really enjoyed it. One of my assignments was to write a comparison/contrast essay. I present here a revised version of that essay along with a few other bits of related information.]

Australia and the United States of America are two modern, democratic, English-speaking countries both originally colonized by the British. For all their similarities, however, they have remarkable differences in their systems of government, law enforcement, taxation, education, and health services, to name but a few areas.

Australia was not settled by Europeans until 1788 when Captain James Cook led the First Fleet of settlers and convicts to Botany Bay, near present-day Sydney. [Almost all Australian states started as convict settlements.] The US had declared its Independence in 1776, and fought a war with the British to obtain that independence. For 40-odd years, the British had been transporting convicts to Georgia Colony (the present-day US state of Georgia); however, once the war started the British needed an alternate dumping ground. And although they might have settled eventually in Australia anyway, there is no doubt that US independence sped up Britain's search for a new penal colony.

Australia started out with a central government; states came later and, finally, local governments came into being. In the US, the process was completely reversed; diverse communities combined into territories and states, which in turn became the United States. Not surprisingly, many of the differences between these two societies can be traced to this fundamental difference.

7.1 Politics and Government

Australia became independent via a peaceful process and, like most other former British colonies it remained a member of the British Commonwealth. As such, it adopted the Westminster parliamentary system at both the Federal and State levels, and it added a few other twists. Voters elect upper and lower chamber representatives for their electorate (i.e., voting district) only. The party that wins a majority of electorates forms the government, the head of which (the Prime Minister at the federal level and the Premier at the state level) is chosen by the elected representatives, *not* the people. Unlike the US Congressional system, there is no Executive Branch. In the absence of a simple majority, coalition governments are possible. There is no such thing as a primary election; candidates are chosen by each party based on its own rules. Independent candidates are permitted. New parties can be created and, from time to time, they (or independent candidates) have held the balance of power. The government controls the parliament's agenda. Voting is compulsory; you must exercise your right or risk being fined! Voter registration is a once-in-a-lifetime process although a move from one electorate to another requires an address change.

Governments are elected for a maximum term [typically of three years] rather than a fixed term. [However, some states have moved to fixed 4-year terms.] The government can call an early election and often does so when its leaders project that it will be harder for them to get re-elected later on in their term, especially if economic conditions worsen. And if things are going well, they might call an early election to extend their time in office. They need give no more than six weeks' notice for a general election, and they can and do catch the opposition unprepared. There are no term limits.

Political appointments are largely non-existent because all government agency employees are civil servants and by law are prohibited from political partisanship. The only personnel appointed are the staffs of cabinet members and parliamentary representatives. Recently, however, some top public servants were appointed for a fixed term, which makes them beholden to the government.

Party politics is seldom seen at the local government level. Local government is by the local people for the local people and is generally not influenced directly by state and federal leaders. There is a ban on political advertising for the three days prior to an election, which allows voters to evaluate the information they've received and to make up their minds without further pressure.

The US gained independence by fighting a war. It created a unique form of government with an executive branch separate from the legislative branch. Citizens vote for their President and Vice President (almost) directly, and independently of their choice for federal or state representatives. As a result, the President may come from a party that does *not* control the congress. Voting is not compulsory and turnouts of 50% or less are common. Voter (re)registration is necessary under certain circumstances and considerable effort is spent on this process.

At the federal level, the President is elected for a 4-year fixed term with most State Governors having the same. Since 1951, the Constitution has prohibited the President from serving more than two full terms. Many states also have term limits on their Governor and/or state representatives. [My own state, Virginia, allows a Governor to serve two terms, but not consecutively.]

Political appointments number in the thousands with the top two or three tiers of many government agencies changing with each new administration, especially when a different party takes office. Party politics permeates all levels of government. State and federal leaders, especially those who are charismatic or good orators, are often involved in drumming up support at the local level; the President might campaign for a big-city Mayor, for example. Political advertising runs right through Election Day, which for many positions is "the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November." A congressional session runs for two years. The terms of all 435 members of the House of Representatives and one third of the 100 Senators expire at the same time. The term of a President matches two 2-year sessions of Congress. A new Congress is sworn in on January 3, and the President at noon, Eastern Standard Time, on January 20.

7.2 Law Enforcement

Australia has two kinds of law enforcement: state and federal. Essentially, police officers are civil servants and are never under the control of a political entity per-se. As a result, politically related police corruption is virtually impossible. To become a uniformed officer, typically, one must pass a strict entrance examination and then attend a police academy as a cadet full-time for three years. Cadets are trained in basic law, police procedures, usage of weapons, and traffic control. Non-uniformed officers either graduate from the uniformed ranks or have degrees in particular fields along with specialized training. Private ownership of most kinds of guns is prohibited without membership in a gun club or via some special justification. Until 25 years ago, most uniformed officers did not carry a side arm.

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In the US, law enforcement is largely run like most other aspects of government, at the local level. Different police forces exist at the city/township, county, state, and national levels. Then there are specialized police: Secret Service/Treasury Agents; Drug Enforcement Agency; Immigration; Post Office; State and National Parks' Services; Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms; sheriffs for various court systems, and District Attorneys' offices, among others. In many cases, there is considerable debate over which law enforcement agency has jurisdiction over a crime scene. The level of equipment and training is proportional to the wealth of the force's tax base. Opportunities for corruption are significant from within many forces as well as between the force and a controlling local government. Cronyism is rife. In some areas, locals vote to elect their sheriff who might not even have any law enforcement training. Some local judges are also elected. [See the April 2019 posting "[Law Enforcement in the US.](#)"]

7.3 Taxation

Australia has one form of income tax, namely federal. And it is relatively expensive. However, taxes are used to subsidize a number of important areas, such as tertiary education and health care. There is no overt sales tax; certain imported or luxury items do have taxes, but these are included in the published price. About 10 years ago, a national Goods and Services Tax (GST) of 10% was introduced, which is much like Britain's VAT and Canada's GST. From a tax point of view, there is no real difference in living in one county or state versus another.

The tax system is very conservative. For example, couples cannot file jointly nor can taxpayers use multi-year averaging. When the economy is strong, the government tends to increase taxes, which often stifles growth.

While the usual real estate property taxes exist, there is no personal property tax per-se. In fact, states and local governments are limited in their ability to raise money via taxation. [For a while, South Australia had a tax on bank transactions.] All licenses for business, driving, auto registration, and the like, are obtained from regional offices of state agencies. Home loan interest is deductible, once per lifetime and the deduction is inversely proportional to the applicant's income. And because the threshold is below most families' income, few qualify. Despite this, the home ownership rate is very high. Negative gearing is allowed on rented properties, where interest paid on the loan for a rented property is deductible from income tax.

In the US, not only is there federal income tax, but most states and some cities and counties also raise revenue from income taxes. Sales tax is levied by most states and in a growing number of cities and counties. Local areas also have hotel occupancy, rental car, and other "use" taxes often times to pay for new sporting stadiums to lure professional teams to the area. However, there are no federal sales or consumption taxes. The federal tax system, and those of many states, is quite progressive and for those with discretionary income, even generous. [For the first few years I lived in the US all interest paid on credit card bills was deductible!] It is a national pastime (and one that supports a substantial advisory industry) to try to legitimately avoid paying taxes. For many, the avoidance process begins at or before university graduation.

Local governments often raise revenue via personal property taxes. For example, in most counties near Washington D.C., residents must pay a tax on the book value of all privately owned automobiles and

recreational vehicles for “the privilege of housing them in the county.” Businesses in those counties also pay a tax on the depreciated value of all tangible assets owned or leased by their company, for the same privilege. In many regions, business licenses are issued by local government and are based on the business's gross income.

Home loan interest is deductible, on both a primary and secondary residence, forever! And because a residence need include only separate areas for sleeping, bathing, and food preparation, large yachts, aircraft, and motor homes can qualify. [What a system!]

State and local taxes can play an important role in choosing where one lives, shops, and sets up a business. And given that many major population centers straddle state borders, there is a constant flow of trade across state lines to take advantage of neighboring states' lower, or even non-existent, sales taxes. The differences in state sales taxes have resulted in a high sales volume by mail-order companies and internet sites.

7.4 Education

By and large, Australia is a land of well-educated, well-off, middle-class people. One of its cornerstones is the attention given to all levels of education. While private (mostly church-run) elementary and high schools do exist, the majority of students attend public school, which is free. And like all main services, education is controlled at the state level with funding from a federal education department. Each of the states and federal territories has its own separate, but equivalent, school system. Public school teachers are essentially civil servants and, for the most part, those with less tenure can be posted anywhere in the state. [South Australia now requires teachers in and around the state capital, Adelaide, to change schools after 10 years, although dispensations are possible.] Teachers are state-certified and, in most cases, state-trained. Being centrally funded, education is immune from the economic misfortunes of local areas. Yet communities having more wealth or fund-raising ability can make significant contributions of library books and equipment. Most schools have dress uniforms.

For 15 or so years starting in 1973, tertiary education was provided free of tuition fees. Students needed to pay only a nominal student union fee for on-campus activities, as well as for books and materials, and living costs. And in the case of the latter, many students qualified for a government allowance. In certain disciplines, quotas existed for mature-age students who passed an aptitude test yet who would not otherwise have qualified for university entrance. Now, all students must pay fees for tertiary study. This is called the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). Fees can be paid in installments once the graduate commences full time employment and receives a salary above the designated minimum. Most undergraduate degrees take three years full-time with the academic year running from March to December.

There is relatively little research and development, and what is done is largely funded or subsidized by state and federal governments. As a result, there is a small market for those with graduate degrees.

In the US, there are some 2,500 separate school systems each running its own Kindergarten–Year 12 program. While a few states have a statewide system, most are organized at the city or county level. Each system recruits its own teachers, performs administration, and funds its own building construction and repair. Like many other aspects of American life, the quality of education is directly

dependent on the local wealth. While some counties have an excess of computers, others can barely afford pens and pencils, let alone pay competitive teacher salaries. Many Americans view public school systems as providing significantly inferior education. Teacher certification varies considerably and a license from one state does not guarantee eligibility in another. Few schools, and then mostly private ones, have any uniform dress codes. More than a million students are home-schooled.

The cost of tertiary education varies from fair to outrageous. In-state schools are subsidized by their state government and may cost as little as \$6,000 in tuition fees per year. The most prestigious schools run more than \$40,000 per year. Such high costs often require students or their families to take on significant debt. Many students work part-time to help support themselves, or they take classes on a part-time basis. Most undergraduate degrees take four years full-time with the academic year running for two 16-week semesters, February-to-May and September-to-December. Community colleges offer 2-year Associate Degrees. These schools are very popular, much cheaper, and many offer a transition path to a 4-year university.

Given the considerable government- and privately funded research and development, there is a very big market for those with graduate degrees. In fact, considerable emphasis is placed on higher degrees. For example, teacher certification in many school districts requires the applicant either have a Master's degree or currently be working on one.

7.5 And for our Final Comparison ...

How many Aussies does it take to change a light bulb? In theory, at least 10. The process of changing a light bulb comes under the jurisdiction of the Australian Association of Associated Australians Union (AAAAU). Union rules require that an electrician be present, and that workers be in teams of two just in case one of them is electrocuted while taking a leak at the jobsite, right next to some exposed live wires. And if they are called in at nights, weekends, or on public holidays, they must be paid a minimum of four hours. Of course, hot tea must be provided along with frequent and long “smoko” breaks. And then there are the assistants, the supervisors, and so on. In practice, “Any way, isn't that why we bloody well have immigrants?”

How many *Septic Tanks* (Aussie [rhyming slang](#) for “Yanks”) does it take to change a light bulb? Well, we used to change the actual bulb, but one day the guy doing it cut himself when the bulb broke. Well, the lawyers got involved, a whole Court TV cable channel sprung up surrounding the case, and everyone involved got three College Credits for watching. So nowadays, we're much more careful. For the small bulbs, we shoot them out with handguns (which, of course, are lying by the dozen on every street corner). For mid-sized bulbs, we use shoulder-fired missiles from a discreet distance. And for the really big bulbs, we have small thermonuclear weapons. Oh, and in that rare case in which an actual person is needed, “Anyhow, isn't that why we damned well have immigrants?”

7.6 Some Interesting Facts

For Australia, WWII began in 1939, and Aussie troops served with distinction in North Africa. However, after Pearl Harbor, they were brought back nearer home to defend the British Commonwealth territories in South East Asia, from Malaya, Singapore to New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, and,

eventually, the homeland. When General Douglas MacArthur retreated from the Philippines, he set up his HQ in Australia.

Contrary to popular belief the US did *not* “go it alone” in the Vietnam War. It had two staunch allies that committed significant numbers of troops and quantities of materiel: Australia and South Korea. And like the US, Australia had a national lottery system of conscription (and subsequent anti-war protest movement). However, instead of its being at age 18, it was at age 20. [In December 1972, the newly elected Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, took office and implemented immediately two big campaign promises: to get Australia out of Vietnam pardoning all draft resisters, and to make tertiary education free.]

Ignoring Alaska—which is huge but largely empty of people—the size of the other 49 states is not that much bigger than that of Australia. However, while the US has more than 300 million people, Australia has only 22 million, the population of greater New York City.

7.7 Conclusion

Democratic systems and modern lifestyles come in many forms, each having their strengths and weaknesses. What is most interesting is that the Australian and American societies each have customs and laws the other simply would not tolerate. But, after all, isn't that their democratic right?

[Thanks to Kevin, Dave, and Frank for their help in revising the Aussie data, and especially to the AAAAU for keeping acceptably low the number of deaths of electricians leaking on live 240-volt wires.]

8. July 2010, “What is Normal? – Part 2: Writing Systems”

In the first installment (see §4), I introduced the general topic and posed some questions to get you in the “What is Normal” mindset. In this part, I’ll deal with writing systems. These days, as most of my travel is international the most obvious deviation from my normal routine is being surrounded by written communication in a foreign language, and sometimes with a writing system quite different from my own. [Should that be “different *to* my own”? British and American English vary.]

I started writing this article in a hotel in Stockholm, Sweden. [And I proofread it in a hotel in Helsinki, Finland, three months later.] Prior to that time, I had been to Sweden once, for three hours one winter’s afternoon in Helsingborg after a short ferry ride from Elsinore, Denmark. I know absolutely no Swedish, and have had very little exposure to Swedish people or culture. [I do have some CDs by ABBA and I’m familiar with the *Swedish Chef* from *The Muppets* TV show. So that probably qualifies me to be an armchair expert on Sweden on the talk-show circuit.]

From the moment I stepped off the plane at the airport, I saw Swedish writing all around me. Fortunately, some important signs were in English, but as Swedish is a Germanic language—and I have some basic competency in that—I could also understand or figure out some basics. And the fact that quite a few signs used international symbols for things like toilets, money changing, train station, luggage lockers, and such made it all straight forward (unlike when I arrived in Israel [Hebrew] and Jordan [Arabic] last November).

I’ve been interested in natural languages for many years, and have made a stab at Spanish, German, and Japanese. And I’ve picked up some basic vocabulary in a few other languages as well. Then I got into formal computer languages, and that led me to formal grammars. Along the way, I worked on specifications for computing environments to support different linguistic and cultural customs. And some years after I started writing for publication, I even managed to get a decent grasp on my first language, English. So, let’s just say that I’m an occasionally enthusiastic self-taught amateur linguist.

8.1 Introduction

To be *literate* one must be able to read, write, and comprehend what one has read or written. And in the general understanding, this is extended to include *numeracy*, the ability to understand numbers and basic arithmetic. So, when you hear that a person is *illiterate* that typically means they lack these capabilities. However, they may well be able to speak and comprehend, and even have an extended vocabulary. In short, they aren’t stupid! [Unfortunately, here in the US, we’ve had more than a few instances of professional athletes graduating from a 4-year university and still being illiterate. “How can that happen?”, you may well ask.]

Fluency has to do with one’s command of a language. I’ve seen references to the idea that being fluent in a language means knowing the basic grammar and having a vocabulary of 2,000 root words. Over the years, I’ve done my share of learning word lists in several languages, and each time after having learned 10 new ones, I’ve felt pretty good, until I realized that that was just the tip of the iceberg. While I may know the words for *bird* and *flower*, for example, I’m quickly reminded that doesn’t help me distinguish a crow from a sparrow, or a rose from a tulip. As a wag once said, “Those foreigners have different words for everything!”

When I started high school in 1965, only the students in the “A” stream (of which I was one) could take a foreign language, and we had to choose from Latin, Latin, or Latin. Yes, my friends, Latin was the only choice, apparently because some Education Department bureaucrats had decided South Australia was most vulnerable to attack from the Romans! And boys like me who didn't care for Latin had to take Agricultural Science instead, while the girls' alternative was Drawing. Speaking of Latin, you may have heard of the famous quote attributed to Julius Caesar, *Veni, vidi, vici* (I came, I saw, I conquered); well, the modern-day version is *Veni, vidi, Visa* (I came, I saw, I shopped).

Here in Fairfax County, Virginia, to graduate high school in the public-school system students are required to take one foreign language for three years, or two languages each for two years. Most schools offer Spanish, French, and German. The high school my son attended also offered Japanese, Russian, and Latin. And most American Liberal Arts 4-year colleges require students to take two semesters of a foreign language or to show proof of fluency to get an exemption.

In 1986, an excellent TV series called *The Story of English* was aired here in the US. It showed the evolution and distribution of the language as the British Empire expanded around the world. One aspect that I found most amusing was that in more than a few interviews subtitles were added so viewers had a chance of actually understanding what was being said. They may have been speaking in their normal form of English, but it certainly wasn't mine.

Let's move on now to how the written word is actually written.

8.2 Alphabet Soup

Simply stated, an alphabet is a set of letters each of which is represented by a distinct symbol. [For the purpose of sorting words alphabetically, the set of letters can have one or more orders; that is, *collating sequences*.] As I'm writing this in English, I'll use that language to start my discussion. English has 26 letters, which come in two flavors, lower- and uppercase. [Follow the lowercase link to see why they have these names. In Australia, I learned them as *small* and *capital* letters, respectively.] Not all alphabets have more than one case. And not all letters in one case have a corresponding letter in the other case (the lowercase ß in German being one such example). And to make it a bit more interesting there is an artificial third case, title case (or *letter case*). This comes into play when typesetting headings and titles in publications.

For most people using an alphabet, they think of it as *the* alphabet, not as *an* alphabet. However, numerous alphabets are in use. For example, the Greek alphabet has 24 letters and two cases. The Classical Latin alphabet had 23 letters (that from modern English without J, V, and W, and with U written as V) and two cases. [Nowadays, *Latin alphabet* is used for any alphabet derived directly from Latin, so the English, Swedish, and Spanish alphabets, for example, are Latin alphabets.] The modern Cyrillic alphabet has 33 letters and two cases. [Initially, the EU had two official alphabets, Latin and Greek, and if you look at any Euro paper money, you will see the words “EURO” (Latin) and “ΕΥΡΩ” (Greek) printed on them. However, now that Bulgaria has been admitted, Cyrillic has been added as the third official alphabet.]

In English, each vowel and consonant has a different symbol; however, the Hebrew and Arabic alphabets have letters for consonants only. They use other devices to indicate vowel sounds.

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Uppercase letters in English are used sparingly, such as at the start of the first word in a sentence, to start proper names, and to write acronyms. However, in German, *every* noun is written with a leading uppercase letter.

Some alphabets use what look like multiple letters to make a single letter. For example, Spanish has the letters ch and ll. And yes, they do occur in both cases, and if these letters start the first word of a sentence, only the first in each pair is capitalized. Spanish also has rr, but that is really two r's, not a single letter. In Dutch, ij is sometimes considered a single letter; I've certainly seen it as a separate key on a Dutch typewriter keyboard.

In the good old days, once we had mastered printing, we moved on to cursive writing. And we were told of the importance of penmanship. However, for many of us, as we grew older, our cursive needed no encryption to keep its meaning secret. Our handwriting bordered on the illegible. The interesting thing now is that with the proliferation of keyboards and keyboard-like interfaces, all electronic communication uses printed letters. As such, does the teaching of cursive still have a place in modern education?

Western European languages have mostly evolved from the Romance languages (Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, and Romanian) or the Germanic languages. As I have a basic grasp of Spanish and German, and a smattering of words in French, I manage to read quite a few signs as I travel through Europe and its former colonies. And having also studied Japanese for a while, I tend not to get bothered by seemingly strange or arbitrary rules. After all, perhaps English is the strange language!

Now what about all those dots, bars, and squiggles that we see written above or below various letters in European alphabets? Take French (please!). It has the same 26 letters as English. However, it adds diacritical marks to aid in pronunciation. These are the acute (´), grave (`), circumflex (^), dieresis (¨), and the cedilla (¸). The main combinations are: à, â, ç, é, è, ê, ë, î, ï, ô, û, ù, ü, and ÿ. The English word *facade* comes from the French *façade*; the cedilla clearly tells the reader to pronounce the letter c as an s, but as English has no such marks, that hint has been lost. You simply have to know that is how it's pronounced.

Spanish also uses the acute accent mark on its vowels, as in á, é, í, ó, and ú. Once again, these are not new letters, but marks to tell you where to put the emphasis when pronouncing them. In the absence of these marks, the stress goes on the penultimate syllable. These marks can also be used to give the same-spelled word different meanings. For example, *sábana* means *bed sheet* while *sabana* means *savannah*. Spanish also uses the dieresis, but only on ü. On the other hand, the word *señor* (meaning a formal version of *mister*) is widely known by speakers of other languages; however, ñ is a letter in its own right, not an n with a diacritic. Once again, when it was taken into English, the tilde atop it was lost. However, when English took on the word *canyon* from the Spanish *cañon* the letter y was added to retain the original pronunciation.

And what about them there umlauts in German, as in ä, ö, and ü? There is some dispute about whether they are separate letters or simply diacritical marks. In any event, they certainly indicate the pronunciation. My family name is *Jaeschke*, which when written in German is *Jäschke*, with the a-umlaut having the e sound in *egg*. [When I went to register the internet domain name www.Jaeschke.com, a German with the a-umlaut version of the name already owned it, so I went with

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www.RexJaeschke.com instead. Currently, domain names and email addresses have to be written using the English alphabet, so the German *ä* gets written as *ae*.]

Occasionally, in English-language typesetting you will see the dieresis (¨) used with English words. This mark is placed over the second of a pair of adjacent vowels to indicate that those vowels should be pronounced as separate sounds rather than as a diphthong. The most common word having this is *naïve*. Another one is the word *Noël*, which means *Christmas*.

The Norwegians and Danes have 29 letters in their alphabets, with the 26 English ones followed by *Æ/æ*, *Ø/ø*, and *Å/å*. [Two uses of these letters in English publications come to mind: *Æsop's Fables* and *encyclopædia*.] However, the Swedes like to be different, so their set of 29 letters ends in *Å/å*, *Ä/ä*, and *Ö/ö*. Finnish looks like Swedish with the *W/w* missing, but its roots are completely different, so the visual similarity is misleading.

Diacritical marks turn out to be very useful, and I can see why people have difficulty in pronouncing many words in English, which has no equivalent visual pronunciation guide. One letter pattern in English that has numerous sounds is *ough*. There is *ow* in *bough*, *uu* in *through*, *oo* in *though*, *au* in *thought*, *u* in *enough*, and *o* in *cough* (and probably others).

Regarding pronunciation in English, look at the front of a good dictionary to see the list of pronunciation symbols and their sounds. For example, *man* is pronounced *măn* and *plane* is pronounced *plān*. (The *˘* is a breve and the *¯* is a macron.) There is a whole phonetic alphabet used to describe how letters in other alphabets are pronounced.

Even the sounds of the same letter in the same language can vary from one country to the next. The classic example in English is the letter *z*, which in the US is pronounced *zee* while the rest of the world says *zed*. Of course, with the American version of *Sesame Street* being exported around the world, that is changing. [By the way, Big Bird is not always yellow. For example, in The Netherlands, he is blue.] Also, the way in which small children are taught their letter values varies between countries. For example, I first learned the short sounds *a*, *b*, *c*, etc. rather than the long names *aye*, *bee*, *cee*, and so on. That is, “the *a* and the *t* make *at* in *bat*”; not the “*aye* and the *bee* make *at* in *bat*”, which would obviously be quite unhelpful.

Each time I travel to a country that uses an alphabet that is somewhat new to me, I look at a local computer keyboard. At a glance, everything is the same, but on closer inspection, quite a lot is different. As many European keyboards have more than 26 letters and/or keys for diacritical marks, the layout is different, and some keys serve more than two purposes. The key sequence I have the most trouble finding and using is that to generate the @ symbol when sending email. And what's that *⌘* key for?

At one time, I studied a world atlas in Greek for several hours trying to see what I could figure out about that language. Having taken math and physics classes for some years, I knew most of the Greek letters, but still it was a challenge. Legend has it that Saint Cyril—for whom the Cyrillic alphabet was named—and his brother developed that alphabet from Greek and took it into Bulgaria from where it spread through the eastern Slavic countries on up to Russia. So, if you look at the history of those areas you can see where certain influences were made, by the alphabets used in those areas. One unusual

example of this is the Serbo-Croatian language. The eastern practitioners write it using the Cyrillic alphabet while the western ones write it using a Latin alphabet. As a result, you have two groups of people speaking the same language, but neither can read it in the other's written form.

I freely admit to having had almost no interest in history during my school years. [After all, as someone once said, "History is nothing but one damned thing after another."] However, having traveled to some of the places I learned about (the Tower of London, Runnymede, and the Waterloo Battlefield, for example) I started to relate to more and more of it. And now I actually like the subject, and I see its influence on language evolution and distribution.

One thing about other languages that can be confusing is their use of a letter that you have in your own language, but with the two having completely different sounds. One example is the Russian letter C, which is pronounced like the English S (except on Wednesdays between 10 and 11 am, and in leap years). And to make it interesting, the Russian P is like the English R. If you look in photos or films covering the Cold War, the Soviet missiles and space rockets always have the letters СССР painted on the side. These stand for "Союз Советских Социалистических Республик", which—as I'm sure you all know—in English means, "Soyuz Sovyetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik". Now "Soyuz" is Russian for "Union", so СССР in Russian became "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics" (USSR) in English. [Speaking of the Cold War, there is a story about how the US spent \$1 million to develop a ballpoint pen that would write in space. The Soviets simply took a pencil!]

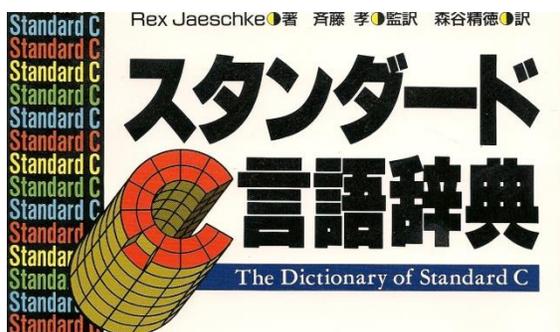
8.3 Putting the Em·PHA·sis on the Correct Syl·LA·ble

In Part 1, I wrote, "... my Japanese friend Misato would say that not only doesn't she have any lowercase letters—poor Misa—she *doesn't have any letters at all or even an alphabet!*" So, what does she have? As well as Kanji (which we'll discuss later) she has two *syllabaries*—hiragana and katakana—which together, are referred to as *kana*.

Where an alphabet has symbols for letters, a syllabary has symbols for syllables. Typically, a syllabary symbol has a vowel sound preceded by an optional consonant. Some examples in Japanese are *ah*, *kah*, *sah*, *go*, *zo*, *do*, *kyu*, *shu*, and *ryu*. [Note that *Tokyo* really has only two syllables, *to·kyo*, not the three that Westerners insist on using, *to·ki·yo*.] Hiragana and katakana each have 100+ symbols with almost complete overlap. And just about any word can be written in either. Having two systems seems redundant to me, and students of Japanese must learn them both. Loan words from foreign languages are always written in katakana. Hiragana is used to write particles, a curious language element that does not exist in English.

Speaking of loan words, Japanese words all end in a vowel sound or n. So, loan words have to fit this model and the syllabic pattern. For example, *hotel* becomes *ho·te·ru*, *taxi* becomes *ta·ku·shi*, and *cheese* become *chi·zu*. [While bread is also an imported idea, it came via the Portuguese, so it finished up as *pan*, which not only fits the Japanese model, but also comes from the Latin *panis*.] Rather than invent new words whose meaning is equivalent to foreign words, Japanese takes them literally with slight tweaks to "make them fit". My favorite is a·i·su·ku·ri·mu, *icecream*. Although these extra vowels allow the words to fit the spelling model when written in Romaji, they are unvoiced, so when spoken, the words sound very much like their English counterparts.

More than 10 years ago, one of my textbooks was translated to Japanese. As my first and last names were of foreign origin, they had to be written in katakana. However, there is no direct way to do that without adding some extra vowels to fit the required syllabic pattern. Here is the cover of that book:



[The same book was also translated to Russian, in which case, my name was written as РЕС ЖЕШКЕ.]

When one starts learning a language, one is told to learn to read and write as well as to speak and listen. In general, that makes sense, but when I started looking at Japanese, the idea of learning 200 kana seemed way too much work. [And that's without learning any of the thousands of Kanji characters!]

Other languages use a syllabary, but the Japanese ones are the most widely used.

Early versions of telex and telegram services were limited to as few as 32 symbols, which for most westerners was sufficient for a single-case version of their alphabets. So, did the Japanese have access to these services?

8.4 A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words (Or is it?)

It turns out that alphabets and syllabaries are latecomers in the written language stakes. At the beginning of the written word, we had pictograms, which used symbols that resembled the physical object for which they stood. [Even today, the Chinese and Japanese symbol for *entrance* is a mouth.] Of course, we have since invented many words that have no obvious physical representation, although *pain* might be symbolized by a picture of a dentist! Ideograms were also developed and they are symbols representing an idea or concept.

The best known of these kinds of writing systems are the hieroglyphics from Ancient Egypt and the characters used in Chinese, and which were adapted by Japanese (Kanji).

When I was dabbling in Japanese, I did try to learn the Kanji for basic numbers, and I had some success. So even though I could tell how much I was paying when buying from street food stalls, I still had no idea what I was buying. And to make it interesting, many vendors used a combination of Arabic and Japanese digits. For example, 100 would be written with a Kanji 1 followed by two Arabic zeros.

Although I've asked numerous native speakers how they know how to pronounce what I affectionately call "chicken scratchings," I am still none the wiser. In fact, I think they simply have to remember each character. As to how they look up words in a dictionary is a complete mystery to me. And to make it a

wee bit challenging, ideogram-based languages seem to have no concept of inter-word spacing, little or no punctuation, and no upper- or lowercase.

To survive in present-day Japan, a student must master the hiragana and katakana syllabaries, have a good grasp of the Kanji ideograms (some with multiple meanings or readings), and then be able to at least read and understand a good deal of English. Many advertising billboards and TV commercials use all four writing systems together! And as for how one enters these kinds of characters on a keyboard simply is fascinating.

8.5 Writing Direction

If you are old enough to remember typewriters, you'll recall that large arm on the right that you had to push to the left to return the carriage to the left side and down to start a new line. Of course, with computers this has come to be known as—surprise—a *carriage return*.

Standards for computer programming languages support the concept of one or more characters that cause a display cursor or printer to advance to the first position of the next line. Of course, for Westerners, that means, “go back to the left side and down.” That is, their writing systems are written left-to-right, top-to-bottom. I have no idea why those languages are written that way, but I know of no superior property it provides, so it is no surprise that some writing systems (such as Hebrew and Arabic) go right-to-left, top-to-bottom, and others (such as Chinese and Japanese) go top-to-bottom, right-to-left. I am not aware of any that go bottom-to-top, although that could be perfectly normal, right?

Most writers of Western languages are right-handed, which allows them to read easily what they have written as they write. Not so for lefties, like my son. In many cases, this forces left-handers to hold the pen at a very strange angle. [Speaking of lefties, back in the good old days (the Middle Ages) many people believed that those who wrote with their left hand were possessed by the Devil, and so they were considered evil. The word *sinister* comes from the Latin word of the same name, and means *left-handed*. *Dextrous* comes from the Latin *dexteritas*, from *dexter*, which means *on the right*.]

A few years ago, I made my first visit to the new [British Library](#) in London where I discovered its treasure room. [Among other things, it contains the first folio of Shakespeare's complete works, some very ornate Korans, and the lyrics of a well-known Beatle's song scribbled on an airline napkin. I highly recommend a visit if you have the opportunity.] Off in one corner was a room with computer terminals that provided access to a digitized version of one of [Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks](#). Now Leonardo (or “Yo Leo,” as his close friends addressed him) was never accused of being normal. In this notebook, he wrote left-handed, from right to left, and back to front. That is, you need to look at a mirror image of the writing to see it in its “normal” perspective.

8.6 Conclusion

We've barely scratched the surface of this topic. For example, we haven't talked about sorting order in word lists, punctuation, grammar, or even the spoken word, which is a completely new topic of its own. But, of course, we have to leave something for future installments.

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I'll leave you with the following anecdote from my travels in South East Asia in July 1979. I was in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, and *Superman: The Movie*, starring Christopher Reeve, had just been released there. The Malaysians loved movies and the ticket price was low, so each showing was packed. However, Malaysia has four official languages: Bahasa Malay, Chinese, Indian, and English. Although the soundtrack was in English, that was not the first language of most patrons, so they read one of the three sets of subtitles that covered the bottom half of the screen. At the same time, they were talking loudly amongst themselves making it difficult for those few of us trying to listen. For them that was normal.

9. August 2010, “Confessions of an Obama Volunteer”

In 2008, I did something I'd never done before. No, I didn't start enjoying visits to the dentist. I didn't start wearing women's underwear either. [That began much earlier!] And I didn't stop dreaming about a date with [Sigourney Weaver](#). What I did do, however, was to give money to a politician. Yes, Ladies and Gentlemen, I admit it. I actually gave a significant chunk of change to someone who was running for election. No one held a gun to my head. I did it willingly. And not only did I do it once, in the Democratic Primary election for the US Presidency, I did it again in the general election. So, what was in it for me? Well, in return I got a signed photograph of Candidate Obama and his wife, Michelle, which I promptly stuck on my office wall, after having torn off the half containing him and replacing it with a picture of me!

9.1 The Democratic Party's Primary

In the US, the final candidates for the main parties for many elections are chosen via a series of primary votes. In the case of the [Presidential Primaries](#), these culminate in each party's National Convention. For the Democrats, this was held in late August 2008, at which time my main man, Yo'bama, defeated Queen Hillary to become the Democratic candidate.

To vote in the US, one must have US citizenship, and I got mine in May of that year. By then, it was too late for me to register to vote in the primaries for my home state of Virginia. However, I was registered in time for the general election in November. [Unlike some states, when one registers to vote in Virginia, one need *not* give a party (or independent) affiliation.]

9.2 The Russian Connection

As the presidential campaign progressed, I got more interested in being involved beyond contributing money. And then, possibly by divine intervention, I got an email from a fellow member of the international hosting organization [CouchSurfing](#).

Mikhail was born in Russia and had emigrated to the US with his family some years earlier. He was attending the University of North Carolina where he was majoring in Political Science. He had taken a year off from school and had gotten a job with an organization that had been hired by the Obama campaign. He had been assigned to the northern Virginia area for two months; however, he couldn't find an affordable furnished apartment in the area and contacted me to see if I could give him a place to stay until he found his own place.

After a few emails and a phone call, I decided that apart from both of us being immigrants who had just gotten citizenship, he and I were on “the same page” regarding the Presidential candidates, so I invited him for a long-term stay. Most days, he left early and returned very late. However, on several occasions, we did get to talk at length over a meal about how the campaign was going. It was interesting to get an “inside” picture.

In the last months of the campaign, Obama was positively rolling in cash contributions. So much so that he could afford to send many representatives right into the Republican heartland causing the

Republicans to expend resources they could ill afford, to defend their own territory. As a direct result, after five weeks, Mikhail was reassigned to another area and he moved out.

9.3 The Local Office

The Obama campaign had an area office about three miles from my house, so I went there to offer my services as a volunteer. What they mostly wanted were people to phone voters or to go house-to-house. I was adamantly opposed to both those roles, and said so repeatedly. The campaign had set up a national database website, which tracked all known supporters and potential supporters across the country. With all the money that was pouring in, they could afford—and had—a very sophisticated system. I settled on a job scanning into the database bar-coded information from questionnaires filled out by the phone callers and doorknockers. So, for several afternoons each week I sat in a back room doing data entry.

Each day for the five days after I signed up, I got a phone call from the local office asking me when I could “come in and make phone calls.” The first few times I politely informed them that I had declined to do that kind of work, and they “promised faithfully to update their list so it wouldn’t happen again.” From the fourth call onwards, my replies were short to the point of being rude, until finally I said that if they didn’t get their act together, I’d consider going over to the McCain campaign. That seemed to fix the problem.

The local office consisted of several suites of rooms the use of which had been donated by a local business. Other businesses donated all the food and drinks consumed by us worker bees.

9.4 There were Three Young Ladies from Princeton

In the weeks leading up to the general election, the Obama campaign juggernaut picked up a lot of support, and people were falling over each other to volunteer.

Princeton University had a Democratic Party chapter on campus, and members were enthusiastic Obama supporters. However, New Jersey—Princeton’s home state—was very likely to “go Obama,” so they were looking for a neighboring “swing” state to which they could go and “make a difference.” As the state of Virginia was “in play,” they came here. [Virginia had last voted for a Democratic President in 1968 when Lyndon Johnson won.]

The local campaign office asked workers to provide housing for the Princeton students. I put my name on the list and was assigned three young women. They arrived on a Friday night and stayed two nights, and they knocked on a lot of doors. Each morning, I got up early to cook them a breakfast that would tide them over for the day, and we also ate together one night.

It was an absolute joy to have them around. They were smart, they had opinions that they could defend, and they were articulate. Unlike many Americans their own age, they didn’t use the word *like* in every sentence. After their visit, I had the distinct impression there might yet be hope for the next generation!

9.5 Vote Early and Vote Often!

My life in the US started in Chicago, a city well known for “interesting” political activities, especially during the time of its great Democratic Mayor, [Richard J. Daley](#). I first heard of the slogan “Vote Early and Vote Often” there.

In Virginia, voters can request to vote before Election Day if they have any one of a number of “hardships.” As I would be working more than eight hours on voting day, I was eligible to vote the week before, and I did. And I was very glad as that meant I did not have to stand in a long line for hours in the rain, as did many people on Election Day.

9.6 The Big Day

On November 4th, the Tuesday after the first Monday in November, as required by the Constitution, the big day came. I reported to my local office at 7:30 am and received my marching orders. Throughout the morning, I was to deliver bottled water and Obama-related promotional materials to volunteers staffing the desks at various voting places in my home county. If electronic equipment that relayed back exit-poll information malfunctioned, I was to bring back paper records. And if it started raining—which it did—I was to deliver rainproof [ponchos](#) to the volunteers.

For about five hours, I made numerous trips to different areas. However, as the day progressed, more and more volunteer drivers showed up and there was nowhere near enough work for all of them. So, I gave up my slot and helped in the office instead. One of the main tasks we'd been told to prepare for was that of picking up people without transport and taking them to their local voting place. However, I heard of no such requests all day.

The polls closed at 8 pm. Everyone in the office was upbeat and talking about attending a big function nearby; however, I decided that a hot shower and an early night were in order. Besides, the Presidential election results wouldn't be known until the next morning. [Apart from the Presidency, Virginia was choosing a Federal Senator for a 6-year term. The very popular and eloquent former Democratic Governor, Mark Warner, won that race handily.]

I was in bed by 10 pm and asleep by 10:01. What a day!

9.7 The Glow in the Aftermath

Two days after the election, I headed off to Japan for an extended business trip with some vacation days added as well. I flew to Tokyo and spent the night there in my favorite [ryokan](#) (inn) in Ueno Park. The next day, I boarded the [shinkansen](#) (bullet train) to Kyoto and got a window seat. Soon after, an older gentleman boarded and sat next to me. He had some English-language magazines including one with a photo of President-elect Obama on the cover. He was a university professor who still taught in Japan and who had studied and taught for some years in the US.

We started talking about the election and I told him of my activities as a volunteer. Well, his face lit up, he stood up in the aisle, bowed towards me, and shook my hand vigorously, all the while saying, “thank you.” Later that trip and during subsequent trips abroad I got a similar reaction as people “welcomed

the US back into the international community of nations.” The damage done by George W. Bush and his team, to US prestige around the world, was starting to be repaired. Yes!

9.8 Conclusion

At the time, I gave Obama my support and I even invented a slogan, GoBama! However, he seems to have forgotten about me. He doesn't call and he doesn't write. My guess though is that he hasn't forgotten my contact information, and that he'll come looking for me again in time for the 2012 Presidential election.

A byproduct of my efforts is that I seem to be permanently on the Virginia and national Democratic Party mailing lists despite the fact that I am *not* a member of the Democratic Party, or any other party for that matter. I'm one of those independent types who have the audacity to vote on the merits of the individual candidate.

The US has fixed-term elections, which means that we know the Presidential election will always be on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November every four years, and that the new President will be sworn in at noon, Eastern Standard Time, on the following January 20th. As such, the President-elect has about 10 weeks to put in place a transition team to get ready to take over the Executive Branch of Government. The President-elect and some of his team get to sit in on meetings at the White House and at various government agencies. They also start to vet and select their nominees for cabinet positions (which must be approved by the Senate). It seems to me that having 10 weeks to “get up to speed” before taking office in any country is not only useful, but also necessary. However, in many (most?) other countries it seems that the new leader is sworn in within days of winning the election. That is, they have next to no transition period, which I find very surprising.

So, now that President Obama's honeymoon is well and truly over, what do I think of his performance to date? I definitely think he was the right person for the job, and, frankly, I don't pay much attention to his ratings or the mainstream media. He certainly inherited some big messes and a few new crises have landed on his plate since the election. To be sure, he's made some missteps, but that's fine with me. No amount of preparation can get a President-elect completely ready for the job. He's a quick learner and he's not afraid to delegate to the good people with whom he's surrounded himself. And I am delighted that he can speak intelligently at length on any topic of substance. [When his predecessor was in office, I was constantly embarrassed by his lack of ability to talk “off the cuff.” Bush's supporters claimed that was fine with them because he spoke just like them. My response to that has always been that I think we should expect a lot more from a leader of the free world!]

Oh, by the way, as I was working for the campaign and “spreading the word,” people kept asking me why I supported Obama. I looked them in the eye and very seriously said, “Because he and I have one very important thing in common. We're both in love with his wife!”

10. September 2010, “Making Allowances”

I was first introduced to the idea of an *allowance* through American kids' TV programs broadcast in Australia in the late 1960's. It seemed that every week each child in the family over some minimal age got spending money for the next week, and that some sort of “work” was expected of them in return. Certainly, the idea of *pocket money* was well known throughout parts of the British Commonwealth. However, as best as I can tell, the idea of a regular allowance for children was made popular in the US.

I love the concept of an allowance; however, rarely have I seen it implemented in what I would call a long-term, coherent fashion.

10.1 My Own Experience

I spent almost all of my formative years living well outside any town, so I had no regular access to places to earn or to spend money. I had no on-going need for money, but got it from my parents as needed. For the five years that I lived on a 4,000-acre wheat and sheep farm I did, however, have a way to make some good money. I trapped rabbits, which were sold for both meat and skins.

At the time, all public schools in the state supported student banking, and except for remote schools each week an officer from the State Savings Bank would come to the school and take the money we'd brought for deposit. I believe our bankbooks were kept at the school. I distinctly remember leaving home on those days with a 2-shilling piece (equivalent to about 25 cents US) tied into one corner of my handkerchief. [My mother had opened that account on my birth with an initial deposit of £1, a lot of money back in 1953. When I finished school 16 years later, the account contained AU\$400, which was £200. Australia converted from pounds, shillings, and pence to decimal currency in 1966.]

During the summer holidays of my high-school years, I worked cutting and picking apricots for drying. I was into slot car racing back then and managed to accumulate quite a track layout, set of cars, and accessories. During the school year, I bagged groceries at a supermarket after school and on Saturday mornings. [At that time, Saturday shopping hours were 9–11:30 am only.]

I did not get my driving license until after I left high school and had gone off to live in the state capital. I did not own my own vehicle for another three years. Instead, I used public transportation and a bicycle. I had no financial help from my family once I left home. My expenses just about equaled my income, and there were times where I had to dip into that savings account my dear Mother had created for me and encouraged me to augment.

10.2 My Son's Early Years

From very early on, my wife and I read to our son on a regular basis. He also had several series of “read-along” books with audio cassettes containing the narrative and directions of when to turn the page. As a family, we traveled quite a lot, mostly by plane, so I soon developed the idea of getting him a portable cassette player, so that he could keep himself entertained en-route without needing much adult intervention. That worked very well, and he had the responsibility of taking care of, and operating, his own tape player. Of course, he needed batteries, so in return for small jobs he got enough money to pay for those. [I traveled away from home quite often, so was not able to read to

him many nights. However, by recording myself reading on tape he was able to hear me “on-demand.” Likewise, for his relatives who all lived abroad, but had visited and recorded stories.]

From time to time, he wanted some special toys and things, at which time he needed some income. However, he pretty much worked only when he needed money.

10.3 Something Borrowed

My son was about 11 years old and in 6th grade at elementary school when I started thinking seriously about a plan for his financial education. I talked to a number of other parents about how they handled allowances for their children, and much to my surprise, none of them had a plan. They simply gave their kids money “as needed.” Eventually, I discovered that a colleague of mine had been in the same situation several years earlier. When his 11-year-old daughter was out shopping, she kept asking her mother, “Can I have that?” Very quickly, that got tiresome. Their solution was to put the daughter in charge of much of her own personal financial affairs.

The plan was quite simple, as are most good plans. Each week, the daughter got \$1 per year of age, which at age 11 came to US\$11/week. From that, she had to pay her own personal expenses including clothing. The parents paid for large purchases such as a winter coat or shoes. If she spent all her money the first day of the new week, that was her problem, and soon she learned to save and plan her purchases, and to separate her needs from her wants.

10.4 The Jaeschke Plan

I found this approach very appealing, and I set about adapting it to my own situation. (Thanks much Tom, Pam, and Claire.) I asked my son to prepare an annual budget including everything from music CDs and computer games to haircuts. I agreed to pay for his music lessons and required sheet music, but he would pay for any extra fees or materials. I would pay for his martial arts lessons and required equipment and materials, but he would pay for any extras. He would buy from me reams of paper for his computer printer. I also asked him to include an average weekly savings contribution of \$5.

After several revisions of his budget, we settled on \$20/week. Each Sunday, he'd get \$20. He wasn't required to save \$5 every week, but he did have to save that much, on average. Initially, I opened a savings account for him at a local bank, and once a month he'd deposit his savings and any excess cash there. After some time, we discussed doing more with his money than just a savings account; besides, we'd been talking about a savings plan for college (AU: university).

One of his godmothers was in the financial planning business, so she got together with my son to discuss his options. And they did that periodically for some years. While he was prepared to be more aggressive with some of this savings, he also wanted some safety for a good piece of it. We agreed on a combination of a mutual fund and Certificate of Deposits investment program and labeled it as his “college fund.” I contributed a tidy sum to open the account, and each quarter my son would move most of his savings account balance to his investment account. I also gave him a financial reward for any A's he received on his report card. However, he understood that the investment account was for college, and that it was not available for him to withdraw for any other purpose.

The program worked very well, and he learned to plan and save. We reviewed it each year, but left it the same. There were no cost-of-living adjustments.

10.5 The High School Years

My son was 14 when he went off to High School. He attended a public Science and Technology school some distance from home and had to ride a bus 40 minutes each way. We continued the same allowance scheme through all four years.

In my state, Virginia, students can obtain a driving permit at 15½ years of age. In the year that they turn 16—the age at which one can obtain a full license—all schools in our public-school system offer 10 weeks of Drivers' Education. At the end of that time, students take four weekends of driving lessons either from private instructors or from Drivers' Ed teachers. Then they take a practical driving test and get their license.

My son's high school probably had more than the usual percentage of students driving cars to school every day. And some of those cars were rather expensive models. Students had to pay an annual fee of \$100 for the privilege of parking at the school. My son was never interested in having his own car, which was just fine with me. With all his studies and extra-curricular activities, he wouldn't have had time to use it much anyway outside commuting to school, and why pay to do that when the bus ride was free. In fact, two years into high school, he gave up his music and martial arts lessons, as he had no spare time. [At home, there were only two parking spaces per house, and those were already taken, so there wouldn't have been a place to park a third car. In any event, the most expensive car insurance in the US is that sold to cover single males younger than 25.]

When my son turned 16, I offered him his own credit card with me as a co-signer. The credit limit was \$1,000. If he was going drive occasionally, he'd have to buy his own gas, and rather than buying a few dollars' worth each time he would fill up the tank as needed, and at the end of the month we'd go over his statement and pro-rate costs he'd incurred that were shared with us. So, he got used to managing a small line of credit, and he had a source of funds if he had an emergency or during his school camps and trips abroad. There was one big caveat, however; he had to pay his credit card bill in full at the end of each month, or the card would be cancelled.

Halfway through his Junior Year (Year 11, before his 17th birthday), he was left home alone for a week. [This happened five or six times before he graduated high school 16 months later.] He had cash, a credit card, a driver's license, the use of a car, and the house to himself. He had to get himself up and ready for school each day, manage his time, prepare his own meals, and make sure he got enough sleep to get him through the week. He was allowed to entertain guests, but no more than five at a time. Basically, he got to be "independent with a safety net."

10.6 Off to College

My son attended a Virginia State University for four years and lived on campus throughout. I paid for most of his tuition, room, full meal plan, and books. He used his college savings account to pay for several semesters of tuition fees. He did not own or operate a vehicle during his time on campus.

When it came time to figure out his allowance, we started where we'd left off in high school. (Once again, we spoke to other families about how they had handled it, and once again, we found no one with a plan.) We soon settled on \$25/week, but rather than pay him weekly, \$100 was deposited into his account at my local branch of his bank each month, and he could access that from the branch at his end. In later years, I simply gave him \$400 at the start of each semester, and he managed it himself. He also had a checking account.

Once he got acquainted with life on campus, he decided to get a part-time job. When he had a regular and substantial income (as a front-desk assistant), we agreed to suspend his allowance. He didn't have to work, in which case, I'd give him spending money, but if he did work, he got no spending money from me. For most of his final two years, he was a [Resident Advisor](#), for which he was on-call 24 hours a day. His payment for that was a free single room and full meal plan. As he got no cash, he went back on the \$25/week plan.

10.7 Conclusion

I think the experiment worked very well. By the time my son got to university he'd been using a credit card for two years, he'd had to budget for at least six years, he'd been involved in decisions about where to invest his savings, and he'd been completely in charge of himself for some weeks—a week at a time—at home. [In contrast, during his second year, the university admitted the smartest lot of first-year students in its history, yet a large percentage of them went on academic probation after the first semester because they had no idea how to live responsibly away from home. And there is no doubt that many of them had been getting a weekly allowance of much more than \$20. In fact, I've heard of numerous cases of high school kids being given \$100–200/week plus access to a car! You reap what you sow.]

I'd like to hear from readers what has worked for them, and, of course, what didn't work. Remember, nothing is a complete waste; it can always serve as a bad example.

11. October 2010, “Books by My Bed”

Ok, I admit it. I'm a non-recovering bookaholic! They say that admission is the first step to recovery, but, frankly, I'm not at all interested in recovering. I hope I'll be addicted to books until I die. And after that, I may well be a librarian in one of those places that starts with 'H'.

11.1 The Road to Addiction

So how did it all start? Well, first there was the casual, innocent browse at the newsagent's comic book stand. That was followed by annual book gifts from various sources. That led to a library card. Sure, I told myself, these books were only for recreational use, and I could stop reading anytime I liked. But who was I kidding? I needed a chapter, sometimes two, on a daily basis. Eventually, I found bigger libraries and others who loved books as much as I did, maybe even more! There was a big wide world of addicts out there; there were others just like me. I was not alone. I moved on to harder stuff like history, geography, biographies, and, yes, animal husbandry, which contained lurid descriptions of the form and purpose of the naughty bits of the various farm animals that I studied in Agricultural Science. I knew it was wrong, but I was spiraling out of control. But what to do? [To all you fans of the Prairie Home Companion radio show, wouldn't this be a good time for some Be-Bop-A-Re-Bop rhubarb pie?]

11.2 My First Library

From age 7–12, I lived on a 4,000-acre wheat and sheep farm. The stone farmhouse was quite large, the walls were thick, and the ceilings were very high. Each bedroom has its own fireplace, and each fireplace had a long, high mantelpiece. I had a large bedroom all to myself.

Up to age 11, I attended two different rural schools. The first was three miles from my house and was run in the village hall. Besides that building, the village consisted of a general store with post office and house attached, a public tennis court, and a railway siding with storage sheds for bags of cereal grain. When we got down to four students, the school closed, and we were bused to the next town, a booming metropolis with not one, but two stores, a post office, a school and schoolhouse, a church, 10 houses, and a larger railway siding. That school had 25 students, in seven grades, all in the same room with the same teacher.

Each month, a wooden crate of books arrived at the local railway siding from the state lending library. In effect, they were being lent to the school, which, in turn, lent them to its students. Although the school had a few reference books of its own, half of the books available for borrowing were replaced each month. That is, the school library contents almost completely rotated every two months.

At the end of each school year, we students put on a concert involving acting and singing. [Due to their extreme lack of ability to carry a tune, certain students—no including moi—were told to “just move your lips” without actually making a noise!] And each student was given a book of fiction bought from money raised by the School Welfare Club. Similarly, each year at Sunday School, each kid got a book of fiction.

By the time I was 10, my collection of books totaled 20. [The only other books in the house were a set of encyclopedias and some penny-dreadful novels, of the western and detective persuasion.] Of

course, with such a large number of books, how would I ever be able to keep track of them? What I needed was an organized system.

After a long period of serious thought (that must have lasted at least 60 seconds) I had “a plan more cunning than the plan devised by the Professor of Cunning at Oxford University.” [There you go [Black Adder](#) fans!] I would create a library, complete with catalog. Undaunted by the magnitude of the task at hand and having no knowledge whatsoever of the [Dewey Decimal System](#) of Classification, I soon came up with a stunningly simple scheme. I would number my 20 books starting at 1 and going all the way up to 20! It was brilliant, and it worked. I arranged them on the mantelpiece of my bedroom.

[Some 45 years later, as I peruse my bookcases, I see four books from that original collection. They are:

- *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe
- *Bishop Jim* by Joyce Reason
- *The Racketty Street Gang* by L.H. Evers
- *Hanna-Barbera's Huckleberry Hound Giant Story Book*

11.3 Mr. Dewey Goes to Work

At some point during my high-school years, I had an epiphany: the gateway to everything and anything was through books. No matter what one's circumstances were, one could always go to a library and borrow a book. And the only limits to what one could learn by reading were the selection of books available and the extent of one's own imagination. [With the ubiquitous internet, the selection limit has been removed completely. And libraries have become places to get free internet access, so access to information is no longer a problem for those who truly are looking.]

My parents had no interest in what I was studying at high school, and so they never questioned my requests for education-related books or supplies. As a result, I always bought new copies, and to this very day, I have all my high school textbooks from Year 10 (1967) onwards and all those from my nine years as a part-time university student.

By the age of 21, I was well and truly addicted to books, and I owned more than 750 of them. My pride and joy was a spanking new [Encyclopedia Britannica](#) set. During the next few years, my collection increased to about 1,000.

I'd long ago abandoned my 1–20 numbering system, but having spent a lot of time in libraries and bookstores I was acquainted with several cataloging systems. As a result, I purchased the 10th Abridged Edition of the *Dewey Decimal Classification* handbook (1971). From among the various author-cataloging systems, I chose the *Cutter-Sanborn Three-Figure Author Table* invented by Richard A. Cutter. I set about figuring out each book's abridged catalog and author codes, and I typed them on small labels, which I affixed to the spine of each book. It took several months part-time for me to catalog the whole collection. Along the way, I built a 9-foot-by-9-foot bookcase set for my treasures.

Early in 1976, I started Computing Science classes at the then South Australian Institute of Technology, which gave me access to a card-punching facility. Eventually, I got all the book records “punched up” and I wrote some COBOL programs to print my catalog in different orders. [Later on, I moved the data

to a DEC PDP-11 system and rewrote the programs in Fortran. Much later, with the advent of PCs, I moved the data to my own computer and rewrote the programs in C.]

11.4 A Long Separation and a Joyous Reunion

In June 1979, I left Australia for an open-ended period to take up an initial 1-year work contract in the US. As you might imagine, it's hard enough to decide what basics to pack in two suitcases for a one-way trip abroad without having to think about any books I might want. In the end, I did pack several work-related books I thought might be useful. Finding a not-so-temporary home for 1,000 books was also an interesting challenge, but a friend came to the rescue. (Thanks very much Bill.)

A month before my departure—which was a totally planned 2-week trip across the Pacific via an Air New Zealand DC-10, through the US, and then on to Washington DC—an engine fell off the wing of an American Airlines DC-10 near Chicago. (Don't you just hate that when that happens!) In any event, all DC-10s around the world were grounded indefinitely, including my flights on Air New Zealand. Eventually, I traveled via Asia and across the Atlantic; however, that route limited luggage by weight rather than by size (or vice versa; I don't remember which), and I could take only one case. Fortunately, the ruthlessness of having to pack the important things from my life into two cases stood me in good stead when it came to halving them. Who needs pajamas, socks, and underwear anyway?

Five years later, I had settled permanently in the US and had bought a townhouse. It was time to bring my babies home. So, on my next trip to Australia, I packed all my books—and a few other things that had been in storage—and took them to a shipping office at Port Adelaide for the long sea voyage to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. [The port of Baltimore, Maryland, would have been more convenient, but that option was not available at that time.] Back home, I was notified when the container carrying my boxes had docked, and I rented a small, covered truck to pick them up in Philadelphia, a 3-hour drive to the northeast. Within several days, I had all the books shelved in my large basement office, and I had installed a comfortable sofa and reading light where I could read, admire, and caress my beauties.

11.5 "Out of Sight" is "Out of Mind"

Some years later, I moved my office two flights up, primarily to get away from the very cold temperatures of the basement, most of which was underground. As my new office was much smaller than my old one, I could not take many of the books with me. Whereas I'd seen my collection every day for some years, I no longer saw it unless I went to visit it specifically. Eventually, I put a bookcase on the main living area and rotated selections of books through that, so I'd be reminded of their existence.

11.6 So, What Books do I Really Have by my Bed?

Here they are in the order in which I picked them off the floor:

1. *Historical Atlas of the 20th Century*. Maps, maps, and more maps, with timelines.
2. *Philip's Standard Reference Atlas* [of the world].
3. *Reader's Digest The Bible Through the Ages*.
4. *Canada's Incredible Coasts*.
5. *Atlas of World History*.

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6. *The Atlas of North American Exploration.*
7. *Hammond Atlas of the 20th Century.*
8. *The White House: An Illustrated Tour.*
9. *America's National Parks.*
10. *The World: Afghanistan to Zimbabwe.*
11. *The American Presidents.* A 2–3-page summary of each president from George Washington to Bill Clinton.
12. *The Chronicle of World History*, a 670-page tome that covers events from 3500 BC to 2008 AD. Most articles run half a page, and many have photos or maps. Each major period starts with a series of essays.
13. *Countries and Continents*, 320-page book in which each country has photos and a page of text in the form of questions and answers. Each country's summary contains the flag, currency, system of government, capital, main languages spoken, area, population, religion, and notable features.
14. *Modern Mathematics.* It's a great refresher course on things such as logic; sets, relations, and functions; whole numbers, rational numbers, real numbers; probability, statistics; and geometry.
15. *The Old Farmer's 2010 Almanac.* "The Original Farmer's Almanac, useful, with a pleasant degree of humor, including weather forecasts for 16 regions of the United States, planting tables, and Zodiac sheets."
16. *The Faith Instinct: How Religion Evolved and Why it Endures*, by Nicholas Wade. I read a review of this in the *Economist*, and went and browsed a copy at a bookstore. Although I have yet to read it, it's one of the few books for which I paid nearly full price.
17. *Biting the Wax Tadpole: Confessions of a Language Fanatic.* It's a collection of linguistic trivia [and a gift from recent houseguest Felicity].
18. *Our American Government, 2000 Edition.* A book of questions with answers and information, published by the US Government.
19. *Paddington at Work*, by Michael Bond. I must say that I do like Paddington Bear. [Before Paddington Railway Station in London was renovated, I made the pilgrimage there to see him in a large glass showcase complete with his labeled luggage "From Darkest Peru" and a note from Aunt Lucy. Now, there is a much smaller homage to him.]
20. Maps of *The Caribbean, Central America, & South America* and *Fairfax County, Virginia.*
21. *The Constitution of the United States of America.* The Constitution, unratified amendments, and an Analytical Index, published by the US Government.
22. *How Our Laws Are Made.* A book of questions with answers and information published by the US Government.
23. *Earth: The Definitive Guide to Our Planet.* This fine Smithsonian publications runs 500 pages and is chock full of pictures, charts, and short pieces.
24. *The Complete History and Wars of Ancient Greece.*
25. *Life: Evolution Explained.*
26. *The Annotated Alice: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass*, by Lewis Carroll.
27. *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People.*

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28. *American Government: Everything You Need to Understand Our Democratic System*. Part of the “Essential book” series.
29. *Barack Obama: Words That Inspired a Nation*. Book and DVD [gift from friend Phil].
30. *Regional Cooking from the Southwest*.
31. *Economist*, Special Holiday Double Issue, December 19, 2009. Contains a set of great essays.
32. *Santa Fe Rules*, a novel by Start Woods.
33. *Portrait in Death*, a novel by J.D. Robb.

As you can see, almost all of these books contain reference material. Most cost \$3–10, and have many photos, drawings, and/or maps. Almost all have relatively short articles, making it easy to pick one up at random to learn or be challenged over a cup of coffee.

[Ten years after I wrote this essay, I find that six of these 33 books are *still* alongside my bed!]

11.7 Conclusion

While most of my books are more than 30 years old, they still have value. To be sure, a lot of new information has been discovered or developed in most fields since they were published, but the fundamental principles remain intact. In any event, most used bookstores wouldn't take them even as donations. And with the advent of the internet, most people under 30 seem to be little interested in books in general. But that's their problem.

So, what do I think about the new electronic book readers? For novels, they seem like a fine idea, but most of my reading involves reference works with lots of color photos and maps printed on rather large pages. Besides, I like the smell of most books (although I must say that, occasionally, I do come across one that simply stinks). Besides, if I really want to browse on-line material, I can always fire up my 10-inch netbook computer.

You may well ask, “Don't all those books take up a lot of space?” Of course, but I still have room to get in and out of bed, and room for more books too. And if I really run low on space, I can always get rid of some non-essential stuff like furniture, except for the bookcases, of course!

12. November 2010, "Technology, Unplugged – Part 1"

I've been involved in the computing industry for 36 years. As a result, more than a few people who know that assume I'm a gadget guy who has the newest technology. And while I do like to play with electronic toys, I have shown great restraint in not rushing into new technologies. In fact, I'm very often a latecomer, preferring to wait until a fad shows signs of lasting, and if so, to see if I can justify making the move at all; and that justification often has little to do with price. The question I ask is, "Given my situation, does it make sense?" [I have often said, "This is America. We do things because we can, not because it makes sense! Here, we spell *need* 'w-a-n-t'."]

In recent years, it seemed to me that everyday life was getting way too complicated. However, on closer inspection, I decided that the problems were pretty much the same, yet the tools available to deal with them were numerous and complicated. Now that every gadget has a computer chip onboard, it is capable of being programmed, and, of course, every toy has a different interface to learn. For example, a typical household has a TV, a CD/DVD player, an audio receiver, and a Cable TV box, all with their own remote controls. You need a coffee table just for the controllers! Of course, there are supposedly universal controllers, but they don't subsume completely all the functionality of the individual controllers they are intended to replace. [For many years, I've had a theory that I adapted from my buddy Al (Einstein, that is): "Problems are neither created nor destroyed; they are merely transformed." And technology seems to bear that out. Each new solution we invent seems to create a completely new set of problems.]

A watershed moment came earlier this year when I started evaluating my whole lifestyle. Just what did I *really need* to live comfortably, what could I do with the extra time I'd have if I gave up certain "necessary pleasures," and just how much money was I spending on those pleasures anyway? As a result, I set about simplifying things. It's an on-going experiment that I'm refining as I go.

In the late 18th Century, an Englishman called Ned Ludd supposedly broke some manufacturing equipment in a factory. His actions were inspirational to those whose livelihoods were threatened by the Industrial Revolution. Those Luddites started a social revolution that opposed modernization because of its supposed negative impact on society. Now I'm no Luddite, and I don't own a buggy whip either; however, on some issues, one simply has to move with the times or be left behind. My moves just happen to be deliberate and slower.

By the way, it's been 15 years since I've worn a watch. One day, the band on my \$10 watch broke, and as it was built-in to the watch, it couldn't be replaced. Then after carrying it around in my pocket for several months, I stopped taking it at all. I've found that people will tell you if you are late, and that when asked the time/date, "October" or "autumn" often are adequate replies.

The purpose of this essay is to tell you how I have dealt, or am dealing, with technology. I have no wish to be a missionary for any particular electronic faith. Make up your own mind, but beware of snobs and zealots.

12.1 Mr. Watson. Come Here. I need you.

Borrowing from Wikipedia, this “first demonstration of electronic transmission of speech by Alexander Graham Bell” ushered in a completely new era of communications, and one that—to my way of thinking—now has way too many options, most of which are solutions looking for problems. If you’ve tried to compare two phone companies’ services lately, you’ll know what I mean.

Ok, let’s get it right out there. I do not have a mobile phone and I have no plan to get one anytime soon. If I had one, I expect I would find uses for it, but I’m pretty sure I’d have it primarily for outgoing/emergency calls and would keep it switched off most of the time. And I’m certain its ring tone would not be a 100-decibel version of Beethoven’s 5th, and that I’d have some manners when using it among other people.

Once mobile phones became mainstream, all kinds of people simply assumed I had one and when I said that I did not, I sensed that they felt sorry for me. I realized I needed an offensive (as in, going on the offense) reply. And that reply now is, “You cannot simply call and interrupt me any damned time you feel like it. Call me on my landline and if I’m not there, leave a message. Or send me an email. And if I believe either warrants a response, I’ll make one in a timely fashion. As far as I can tell, you and I don’t have any business that is so important that it needs an immediate response any time night or day.”

The mobile phone scenario that sticks most in my mind occurred several years ago in my local supermarket. In the first aisle, a woman saw some item and called her partner. “Hi Honey, it’s me. So-and-so is on sale. Would you like that for supper tonight?” Two aisles later, she spied something else, and called Honey again. And this happened several more times, in subsequent aisles. All I could think was, “It’s called *planning*, damn-it! You make a shopping list before you leave for the store. It’s called *Making an Executive Decision*. Presumably, you know Honey’s eating preferences.” Unfortunately, we’re living in a time of “instant-on” and “gotta-have-it-now.” The marginally disciplined are becoming poorly disciplined and the poorly disciplined are becoming undisciplined.

So, what do I use for phone calls? Two cans and some string, of course! It’s very cheap, it’s low maintenance, I don’t get any unwanted solicitations, and I don’t need Caller ID; I always know who has the other can. But seriously, I have a landline with various extensions throughout the house (I work from home). And I even have an old-style phone that gets its power from the phone line. If the power goes out, I still have phone service! Back in the old days of dial-up internet access, I had a second line installed, and I shared that with a computer-based fax program. As part of my recent simplification, I discontinued that line and my fax support (almost all faxes I received were junk anyway). I also had *call waiting* on my primary line to alert me if another call was coming in while I was on the line. I found that I rarely used it, and as my good friend, John told me, some people consider it rude being put on hold while you take another—apparently more important—call. (And that applies in spades to mobile phone users and text message proponents who think nothing of interrupting a serious conversation to take a call or read a newly arrived message.)

My one surviving landline includes 50 local calls per month and has no long-distance or international call package. It’s a bare bones system and it suits my needs. Now, each month, I do make quite a few

international calls for pleasure and, occasionally, for business, as well as a few calls around the US, but I don't use my phone service (see later below).

My business model involves working mostly from home where I have ready access to a landline. And if I am teaching seminars, that's an all-day job, so I can't be interrupted then. Likewise, for when I'm traveling and when I'm sitting in daylong conferences and meetings, especially in time zones far-removed from home. I was an early adopter and fan of [Skype](#), and for \$3/month I get an unlimited number of minutes within North America. And for around 2 cents/minute, I can call landlines in most countries using Skype-Out. (Calls to mobiles are often 10 times that price, so I rarely make them.) And whenever my account goes below \$2, my Skype account is automatically topped-up from my bank account. That lets me make any call from my desk using my computer or from on the road using my laptop or netbook from my hotel or public wifi hotspot. For people like my wife who don't spend their days tethered to their desk/computer, I have another option. Via Skype, at no charge, I have a local phone number that can be called from any phone and used to place calls using Skype. I currently use a Bluetooth earpiece for Skype, and for the most part that works well. My netbook has a built-in microphone, and that always works, plus it comes with a webcam, which Skype supports.

I can count on one hand the number of times I could *really* have benefited by having a mobile phone. One that comes to mind was on a ferry from Helsinki, Finland, to Tallinn, Estonia. I'd tried to call my host family from the ferry terminal before departing, but was unable to figure out how to use the Finnish public phone system. Then once onboard, I discovered there were no pay phones. However, that being Nokia's backyard, everyone (literally) had a mobile, so I asked a businessman if I could pay him to use his mobile to make a call, and he said, "Go right ahead, and as I have an unlimited plan, there is no charge." The downside of mobile-phone mania is there is a growing shortage of public pay phones available, and I avoid using the phone in my hotel room due to the ridiculous fees they charge.

Answering machines are worth a mention. I have come to rely on them on my phone and on others'. Yet it is interesting to note just how many people hate talking to them. Of all the people I phone on a regular basis only one does not have an answering machine, and that took some getting used to on my part.

One question I like to ask mobile phone aficionados is, "Just how much time is 1,000 minutes?" They generally reply, "What do you mean?" To which I reply, "Just how many hours is that each month that you can talk? And what were you doing with that time before you had that mobile plan? Or did you not have a life previously?" [FYI, 1,000 minutes is 16 $\frac{2}{3}$ hours.]

12.2 Television: Is it Still the Idiot Box?

For years, I've subscribed to a Cable TV service, each month paying for the service as well as one or more converter boxes and remote controls. And each year it seemed that the price increased. At some point, I moved payment to an automatic debit from my checking account. However, that meant that the cost was somewhat hidden as the monthly bill no longer received any scrutiny.

Of the 100-odd channels I had, I probably watched programs on 10 of them, at most, and more likely five of them, on average. [All attempts to legislate a la carte cable TV programming in the US have failed, so one is stuck with an all-or-nothing program selection. Only premium channels are

unbundled.] My service provided no way for me to limit the channels in the selection list to only those I watched. What's more, that program list included all the channels available, including those for which I had no subscription!

More than 10 years ago, I was watching five hour-long series each week, but then I went abroad for six weeks without access to my regular programs. On my return, I simply stopped watching them, and I haven't watched any show on a regular basis since. I have to say that I don't miss them one bit. [Perhaps I don't need the escapism many of them provide.]

Fast Forward to the era of Digital/Hi-Definition TVs. I love watching movies, documentaries, and various other programs, and I like a big screen experience as much as does the next person. However, I don't view it as essential. As poor as the NTSC [sometimes pooh-poohed as "Not the Same Color Twice"] analog system used here in the US (and elsewhere) might be, it's been adequate for me. Recently, 18 months after I started looking at digital/HiDef TV, I stuck my toe in the water with a 40" screen that cost less than \$500. Then I did several heretical things: I experimented with a digital antenna and I looked at recording to DVD and, yes, even to VHS tape!

The cost of my cable service had gotten out of control, and I didn't even have any premium channel packages. It was time to re-evaluate the whole "being connected" thing, so I started preparing for the scenario of *not* having a Cable TV connection at all. In the process, I was pleasantly surprised at the range of (the more than 30) channels being broadcast over-the-air in my area; almost all of the ones I watched regularly via cable were available free of charge. Don't you just love that when that happens! [Interestingly, neither my TV tuner nor my converter box pulled in all of the local channels, and the sets of channels that they did find were not the same. One got some the other didn't, and vice versa.]

I have a big investment in prerecorded VHS tapes (which I continue to buy from thrift shops for 25–50 cents each), home movies on VHS, and I have several players and recorders, so I wanted to preserve that investment. The obvious argument against that is that the analog quality is lower, so why not simply record to disk using a Digital Video Recorder? As it happens, my Cable TV company would be happy to let me do that, but at a cost of \$13/month, and I'm trying to reduce my bill. Alternate services ran the same cost, and while there is software to allow this sort of thing to be done in conjunction with a computer, I'm not quite ready to go that route.

I am very happy to report that there is life outside of subscription TV. And in the case of my 90-year-old very vital friend, Jim, life can be full without having a TV at all! [Hmm, Jim might still own a buggy whip; I'll have to ask.]

12.3 The Omnipresent Internet

I live by email, and as I travel away from my home time zone at regular intervals, email is the best way to reach me. No matter where I am in the world, I deal with important email in a timely manner, typically within 12 hours. I also use Instant Messaging (IM) with a few colleagues and friends. As such, I have a tethered version of text messaging, which is adequate for my needs. However, I never did learn to type with more than a few fingers, so it's not my preferred medium.

As for browsing the web, I do very little of that. From time to time, my work requires me to upload or download (often-large) files. On occasion, I play a few puzzles at the USA Today newspaper site, I look at the headlines and sports scores in several Australian newspapers several times a week, and I visit [Wikipedia](#) and [Wiktionary](#) from time to time.

I was paying for some really fast internet service that came through my Cable TV connection, but, recently, it occurred to me that the extra speed was totally wasted. My in-house network uses an 802.11g protocol router, which is limited to wire connections of 100 Mbps with wifi at 64 Mbps. Unless I upgrade to an 802.11n router and matching receivers on all my computers, the extra speed means nothing. Yet, it is hard to get a slower service. After all, everyone must need the fastest speed possible, right? Yes, there are times where I really need throughput, but they are few and far between. All I really care about is not having to wait for web pages to refresh. Recently, I downgraded my service from 6MB to 1MB, and I'll try that for a month or so to see if it is adequate. I also recommended a friend use a DSL service instead of a much higher speed (and more expensive) cable connection.

I love the fact that I can get affordable, if not free, broadband internet access in all sorts of seemingly unlikely places. Running my business certainly became easier once I could do it while on vacation or business travel in some remote spot.

12.4 Play Me a Song, Mr. Piano Man

I love music, so much so that in my next life (yes, dear reader, I'm planning on coming back for another round), I plan on being a songwriter, composer, and musician. I probably own only 100 CDs and another 100 cassette tapes. I've also ripped 10–12 CDs to my computers, primarily so I can play them when I'm on the road. And when working from home, I have one favorite radio station I listen to for my regular music fix.

I don't download music and I don't have a portable digital music player. (Are my Luddite tendencies showing, again?) I look at the various music-player ads and I hear that a certain device allows storage for 5,000 songs. Even assuming I had 5,000 favorites, and I wanted to spend \$1 each to buy them—you aren't copying them illegally are you?—when would I have time to listen to all of them? 5,000 songs at 2½ minutes each runs 208 hours, or twenty-eight 8-hour days. That means that if I had no life, I could hear each of them once a month. Hold me back! Where can I buy such a useful device?

Much has been written about how more and more people are retreating into their own private world, and I believe it. That said if I had to sit on a train for 2–3 hours each business day getting to/from work, I could imagine having a music player, but I think 100 songs would suffice. I'd be more likely to load it up with [podcasts](#) of current affairs and entertainment programs from the radio, or perhaps listen to books being read. As for those who are using such devices to avoid contact with their fellow man, well that's their choice, but we already suffer considerably from the inability of many people to express themselves clearly, and becoming even more disconnected from the real world won't help. [In the US, the level of business English is 6th Grade, and fewer and fewer of us can say a phrase—let along a whole sentence—without using the word “like” inappropriately. Right? Like, yeah; that is really like true!]

12.5 Stay Tuned

In Part 2 ([December 2010](#)), I cover automobiles and GPS, still and video cameras, the written word, a digital data preservation strategy, and my right-hand gadget.

By the way, by dropping my subscription TV service and lowering my internet speed I'm saving \$73/month.

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](#)
- #88 March 2017: [Travel – Memories of Southeast England](#)
- #86 January 2017: [Travel – Airports](#)
- #85 December 2016: [Travel – Memories of Cornwall and Devon](#)
- #82 September 2016: [Travel – Memories of Poland](#)
- #79 June 2016: [Travel – Memories of South America](#)
- #76 March 2016: [Travel – Memories of Switzerland](#)
- #73 December 2015: [Travel – Memories of Germany](#)
- #70 September 2015: [Travel – Memories of Austria](#)
- #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