

Chapter 4: Just Mainframes, and then a Huckster

01 - THE RUN

On Sunday, September 1, 1985, I drove west from my Pleasant Grove condo in southeast Dallas toward downtown and the Oak Lawn area for what I called “The Run.” I was going to spend the entire Sunday, in the middle of a holiday weekend, without compensation (even driving expenses) babysitting the first implementation I had done since 1978, almost seven years before. During my 32-year information technology career, this had become a milestone. History would show that this Sunday was pretty close to half way through my “Career,” which had started in 1970 and come to a cardiac arrest with a layoff notice, literally from a Netware security system, in December 2001.

There are still other images. Some center around wee-hour abend calls from operations, signing on to old-school dumb terminals, and later using products like Procomm on older PCs at telephone baud rates.

But my career had a prologue and an epilogue. Both help put a perspective on what a career in information technology was all about, and how it changed over the decades.

A glimpse of my first wage-earning job, in the late summer of 1963, is telling. I was working in the rheology laboratory at the National Bureau of Standards (Department of Commerce) at the old Federal City College site (now UDC), measuring viscosity of oil samples and calibrating viscometers, which had to be handled gingerly. I broke one once because I “didn’t keep my mind on what I was doing.” Regimentation, uh huh. That’s “learning to work.” At the same time, I was still a chemistry major and starting an organic chemistry course at night at GW. I got behind in the lab after I cut my hand in (another) accident. There were no lab makeups allowed. End of the idea of a chemistry career. I had to pull the plug. I dropped the course and that ended me as a chemistry major. Welcome to mathematics.

By the fall of 1964 I was back in school full time (and learning chess pretty well at the GWU chess club, getting into USCF tournaments). For the summer of 1965, I found a job in the Navy Department at the David Taylor Model Basin as a “mathematician.” Now the job turned to “computer programming” via FORTRAN, the “formula translation” language, on an IBM 7090. Most of that first summer we took classes in coding. I had the same job each of the next two summers. During one of those summers, we took a field trip to an IBM site to see the “new” 360 computer.

The mechanics of doing the job was slow. You coded statements on columned coding sheets, and sent them to keypunch, or keypunched them yourself. You desk-checked, and then submitted “shots,” taking several days to get rid of compilation errors and get the program to “GO” and produce eventually correct output from data cards. Other people there coded in a specialized assembler language, originating with a computer’s manufacturer.

In the meantime, I had two kinds of jobs in graduate school at Kansas University: assistant instructor in mathematics, and a research assistant, doing FORTRAN programming, this time on a GE machine. The

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experience teaching algebra to those who had failed it in high school was interesting, particularly in a draft-deferment sensitive environment. I talked about this in the first DADT book.

In the Army, I had an MOS of "01E20", which was "mathematician", a job category that would be phased out before I left active duty (but not affecting me). I was stationed at the Pentagon and Fort Eustis, as explained in the book. We didn't do much except code a reference list for Army documents according to a particular coding format, on coding forms. I studied the SIMSCRIPT simulation language and interviewed with Rand in California and the defense operation at GE in wintry Syracuse before going to RCA.

In those days, companies were paying interviewing expenses, including airfare, rental car, and hotel. This was my first taste of the autonomy of the adult world, at age 26. In retrospect, it seems an indulgent way to get it.

At the RCA Operations Research Career Program interview at the end of 1969, I actually gave a "technical talk" about my master's thesis. I think I gave one formal talk on the job in Dallas 20 years later, but the next big one would be about my book at Hamline University in 1998.

RCA had an "Operations Research Career Program" and an MIS Program, which paid less. In the MIS program, people were put three to a room in a Cherry Hill, NJ motel while they took ten weeks of ALC and COBOL for the RCA Spectra 70, which, it would turn out, really was very similar to the IBM 360. My own life seemed more pampered, but I had to live in a couple of different locations on a per diem that was inadequate for single people and implement a FORTRAN dynamic programming model, with very inadequate punched card, load-and-go technology.

After the year of assignments, you were supposed to get a job with one of the sites, but with the Nixon recession and social tensions, I had my only layoff prior to 2001, with severance. But fortunately, my contacts at the Navy (indirectly through playing in USCF rated chess tournaments) recommended me for a job programming in the Washington Navy Yard with no actual period of unemployment.

Here I was introduced to the Univac 1108, with Exec 8, and still FORTRAN. The method of work was the same: code, keypunch, submit, and get it back the next day. I also had to be processed for a top secret security clearance, which became inconclusive, given my history with William and Mary.

But I was interested in "leaving home" again, and went to work for Univac in northern New Jersey, working first as a site rep at a Univac 1106 installation at Public Service Electric and Gas Corporation in Newark. (By entering the commercial area of private enterprise, I could put aside questions about security clearances due to my "latent homosexuality" for good.) I was supposed to field questions on application languages (COBOL and FORTRAN), and I wrote a program in Univac Assembler to spy on the programmers' use of resources from the master log tapes. Pretty soon we started making trips to St. Paul, MN to benchmark an 1110 machine for Public Service. On the trips, I was pretty much a flunky, and it was hard to be productive. A typical "objective" for a systems analyst might be to get a machine at a customer site "on rent" in some specified time, or to achieve some transaction throughput in a benchmark. While a "rep," I wrote an Assembler application called "Big Brother" (BIGBR) to track the

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efficiency of client programmers' use of various system facilities, by analyzing system logs – almost a miniature predecessor of today's concerns about surveillance and monitoring of people.

During that time, I was going through my "Second Coming," with multiple evening trips to New York. It was a drag to have to make the last Port Authority bus for the burbs. I began to perceive that life might be easier if I moved into the City with a new job.

After the benchmarks, a new branch manager called me in and confronted me with the idea that he didn't think I had a "marketing profile." Well, I didn't. I would be better off, he said, in development. I took a COBOL course in Tysons Corner, VA almost immediately. In about three months, I secured a transfer out of the branch, and while it seemed I was still in site support, I was in the Bell Labs division instead, down around New Brunswick. I would wind up starting 1974 with 11 weeks in St. Paul on another benchmark. I still remember how we worked: huge decks of cards (which I was responsible for maintaining) ran mixes of fake transactions in DMS-1100 (a network database similar to IDMS). I would come back East for spring by working at an AT&T account north of New York City, and put out feelers for jobs in the City.

The "problem" was that by 1974 most commercial shops were running on IBM. Univac had around eight sites in Manhattan with 1100 machines; then there was also Burroughs, NCR, and CDC. Rapidly, competitors of IBM in the mainframe market were merging and going away, affecting the job market. Univac also had a smaller 9000 series machine which emulated smaller IBM 360s with DOS rather than OS (and eventually MVS) operating systems.

A young contemporary from RCA Labs was already in charge of the MIS department at NBC, an 1110 site, and invited me to come to work for NBC in August 1974. Shortly thereafter I would move into NYC.

The job was to replace an old Spectra and EAM general ledger system with a "modern" ledger on the 1110 in ASCII COBOL, purchased from a San Diego company named Infonational. The main part of the system turned out to be straightforward to install, test, and eventually implement live. One part of the process was a "preprocessor" program that would convert Spectra to Univac, and part of that ran in the Spectra environment, with punched cards.

But the work environment was much more productive. We had TTY-like terminals with paper feeds, so one could save a roll of all the work one had done. The 1110 had batch, real-time and demand modes, and because of workloads, the "friend" manager made a rule against compiling in demand mode! The paper trail could prove you had followed the rule. Working at a terminal was still considered a "privilege"; it wouldn't be until the mid '80s that most people could leave the "tube cities" for terminals at their desks.

There were other traps that could occur. In those days, programmers had update access to production files, which (in almost any operating system) were distinguished from test by a leadoff node. Once in production, it was possible that a production disk voucher register master could get overlaid accidentally, and no one would know until the closing started. It took some time before I really had the maturity to grasp how easily a programmer could cause a catastrophe in working with production files in

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the days before security packages. Slowly I would realize how dependable accuracy was critical to almost all professions.

But accounting closings gave me a taste of production support. Sorts ran slowly then (a voucher register of 300,000 records took about four hours to sort), and hardware failures could cause abends, usually “guard mode” in a Univac environment.

Another issue was coding standards. Structured coding in COBOL had not been that well established by 1975, and neither my own programs nor those of Infonational always followed it, so problems were harder to trace. Companies were just starting to get antsy about protecting their copyright on code, as I would find out in one particular incident when I wanted to borrow some code after I had left. It would take until the middle 1990s, though, when software licenses and illegal duplications would be regularly audited by external agents. All of this would foreshadow the battles over copyright and ordinary users’ downloads (inviting trolling and punitive litigation against ordinary people) from the Internet today. It would also foreshadow debates on software patents and even “patent trolls.”

By 1977, I was starting to get nervous about the stability of the job and not “having IBM,” so I solved that by going to Bradford National Corporation, to work on the New York State Medicaid MMIS. I worked on the MARS (management reporting) back end, and there was also a SURS (surveillance and utilization review), which used statistical algorithms. Everything in my work was batch COBOL with tapes.

The IBM JCL for MVS was verbose, but not as difficult as people think. It simply spelled out words that had been abbreviated in Univac. (In retrospect, Exec 8 seems to resemble Linux today.) Any step in a batch job in either system had “assign” (Univac) or “DD” (IBM) statements that enumerated the files that had to match names in the COBOL program. And the work environment was different. We had a “tube city” and did compiles-links and executes through an interface called “ROSCOE,” which let us store canned jobs in our own libraries, which in turn could be staged and moved to production. At the time, the promote procedure was somewhat manual and prone to human error, a loophole capable of provoking hidden security issues.

For personal reasons (sketched in Chapter 2), I desired a change and a move to the Southwest. In January 1979 I moved to Dallas and worked for the Combined A&B Medicare Consortium, where several Blue Cross and Blue Shield plans envisioned competing with EDS in the Medicare processing market. Now Electronic Data Systems, founded by H. Ross Perot in 1962 and originally located near the Oak Lawn section of Dallas, had tried to appeal to ex-military officers, and set up an organization running data centers (around IBM) with military-style culture. The original EDS job application forms (I had one back in 1969) asked about religious preference and marriage. It was also known for its strict dress code, where a suit was like a dress military uniform. IBM had a similar, if not quite so onerous, dress code, actually checking for long stockings and garters. A BCBS-run company would certainly be more moderate and mainstream. In time, EDS’s influence on the job market would wane, thankfully. (I would “earn” an “accidental” visit to their Forest Lane facility in the summer of 1979.) And in the 1970s to early 1980s, companies – financial, manufacturing, retail – were writing their own in-house systems, most often on

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IBM equipment with COBOL and ALC (sometimes DOS in smaller shops), with CICS as a teleprocessing monitor and most often the hierarchal IMS-DB as the database. (There was also IMS-DC.)

The project was to be done with a strict methodology in phases with a package called Pride-Logik. I was responsible for designing back-end reporting, and tried to propose a parameterized scheme where individual plans could tailor their own reports, much as would be done today. But this was difficult in a turf-protective environment. I did only design, no coding or implementation, and fell behind the market competitively, just acting as a “spec writer.”

In fact, “partisan” bickering among the BCBS Plans led to the project’s cancellation in early 1982. But I had seen the handwriting on the wall and gone to work at Chilton, a credit reporting company located conveniently in the Oak Lawn section of Dallas. Despite the conservative nature of the industry, I never saw so many LGBT employees in one workplace. Technically, the company had Amdahl, supposedly superior hardware to IBM, running both DOS and MVS operating systems. Many of the systems were in assembler, and in time I would work on the tail end of the OS conversion of monthly billing running in DUO mode. They were just getting ROSCOE. The company had ADR’s Datacomm DB and DC. At the time, Datacomm DC sounded like a credible competitor to CICS (with similar overall concepts of command level).

For three years, we worked in “analysis” mode of “Release 6” which would include a new daily and monthly billing. In the meantime, some of the other milestones of the field were turning up. A girl got fired for tampering with credit reports, and the company warned everyone they were responsible for their own logons and not to leave themselves signed on at terminals when away (a foreshadowing of computer security concerns 20 years later with the Web). Texas passed a computer crime law, and when we logged on to the mainframe we saw a warning about it. There had even been rumors that the company would give lie detector or polygraph tests to enforce it, but that never happened, and might have been illegal under federal law anyway. (If the polygraph isn’t reliable enough, why can the government still use it for high-level clearances?)

I would learn mainframe assembler coding, and my September 1985 “run” would put “consolidated billing across bureaus” into the DOS version of the program. On January 1, 1986, we’d put in the OS version. My father had just died, but I stayed one day for the implementation. I had learned to code out of addressability (the R15 temporary base trick). Later in January we would have a problem with “periodic fixed charges” in a few bureaus, because one storage item hadn’t been aligned with a word boundary. We’d have to do a Saturday rerun of a few bureaus. That was my first taste of production “problems” in seven years. I was lucky not to have a prepaid airline weekend trip!

Ahmdahl hardware at Chilton was indeed superior, it seemed. Now big sort steps were taking only a few minutes, unlike hours at NBC and Bradford.

During this period, the company started using more formal security packages, like Top Secret and Librarian, that managed elevations and prevented programmers from inadvertently updating production files. But the implementation of these measures was gradual.

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I would work there six and one-half years. During the last three years, I was back in the game, coding and implementing and on-call all the time for my own systems. Generally there were few problems – they weren't tolerated. (There existed a proverb: "If it works, it's production; if it doesn't work, it's a test.") But the implementation of daily billing in the fall of 1987 became harrowing. We ran a month of parallel in September and kept listings in a conference room, inspecting them manually. My previous boss had few coding skills (he had been a proficient programmer in Pakistan, where he said the number of times it took someone to get a job to work was monitored closely with "BIGBR" mechanisms), and worked as a project leader, but when expected to code and test during actual implementation, he "couldn't program" and wound up getting fired. Another project leader with a PhD fell from disfavor and wound up going East for another job, and not holding that job because he couldn't do everything for himself.

I had become the "super Indian" with a cubicle, off the beaten track, cluttered with test listings, but I was physically in a place to overhear all the political conversations about the budget (and "head counts"). We got sold to Borg-Warner, which was taken private in a leveraged buyout. There was more pressure than ever on management to deliver profits. I had the reputation already of being totally disinterested in "advancement." Nevertheless, I was made a "group leader" of daily billing, and eventually a project leader, which meant, against my wishes or "consent," I finally had a direct report, the only time in my "career." That could have created a "conflict of interest" in the sense I discussed in the last chapter, with speaking out in a self-publishing mode on issues in an unmonitored manner.

Chilton had been close to downtown, and had bucked the trend of moving further out into the exurbs. But all throughout the '70s and '80s, many corporate employers had done just that, moving north of 635 in Dallas ("to get away from the blacks", as workplace speech like this was still acceptable in the somewhat segregated South even in the 1980s), or into far suburbs away from major East Coast cities. Respectable people owned big houses and owned big vans for big families. They ignored the danger signals on energy from the rest of the world and took care of their own – even despite the oil shocks of the '70s. In the '90s, that would all gradually change.

02 - A PREMONITION ON TURTLE CREEK

After the first live day with the new daily billing system, on Thursday, October 1, 1987, I spent the night babysitting the new production cycle, and slept at home the next day. Around 3 PM I repeated the same drive to work for the "run," and met with my boss in his cubicle. He said this had been the best implementation ever, but, I had just missed an informal meeting in that conference room with all those listings – where a director announced the "down side" – the end of New Systems Development, and the gradual layoff of its staff over several months. I remember walking that sunny afternoon on nearby Turtle Creek Boulevard, contemplating renting the condo, going back to Washington, where many of the jobs were connected to defense, and wondering if the security clearance issue would come back. As I've noted in the previous chapter, it did, but in an ironic way no one could have foreseen.

After the implementation, the company learned that it would be sold to TRW, a major competitor, which might eventually merge data centers and eliminate a lot of jobs. That did happen eventually.

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Management made my position safer by (ironically!) declaring me “maintenance” (as someone who helped keep the place running, 24x7). I could have played for the “incentive to stay” and severance, but I felt I was pressing my luck. I downsized, and moved back to a smaller apartment in the DC area and took a job with a health care consulting firm, which provided one of the strangest episodes of my career.

I had actually interviewed with a minority-owned contractor working with the State Department, but still felt uncomfortable with the idea of dealing with security clearances (again). But in the Washington area, clearances typically were important in many jobs.

The position I took was with a small consulting group owned by the Virginia Blue Cross plan, which tried to compute Medicare operating margins and other statistics for clients, mostly for lobbying purposes. I took over a COBOL “Policy Simulation Model” and also worked on many SAS jobs.

We worked with a somewhat unstable link to BCBS Healthnet computers in Richmond. But the hardware was a 3090, which was very fast. The group hired as CEO a man who was also a CEO of “The Computer Company” in Richmond, where the consultant that I replaced and whose code I took over had worked.

The group fell under pressure to keep profits, and there was a crisis in January 1989 when one critical client claimed there were flaws in our numbers. After a day of meetings, I suddenly decided to look at the original government COBOL code and government mathematical formula, and noticed that the COBOL used one data element that did not match the specification printed in the Federal Register. Technically, this was a very simple fix of an oversight no one had noticed for months. I changed that, reran the model, and got the numbers the client believed. Perhaps I saved the business, even my own future career.

There had also been an effort to reduce “computer costs” to improve the bottom line. I had reduced CPU charges by converting VSAM accesses to sorting and sequential processing (it also ran faster). But for a while I was calling other mainframe installations in the DC area to see if we could beat Healthnet’s price. It seems incredible how much the pricing of hardware use mattered in those days.

But on a Monday morning in April 1989, the bean-counting CEO showed up from Richmond and met with everyone individually and told us he was selling the company. It worked out well in a way, because Lewin ICF bought us. On a weekend in early May 1989, I went down to Richmond to copy all the source and data to tapes, which I brought up to Washington up I-95 on a Sunday afternoon in my own car, to satisfy the terms of the “merger.” What if I had been in an accident and the tapes had been destroyed? What if I had missed any files? (I didn’t.) This experience certainly provided a preview of my life as a writer years later.

In the new environment, with offices closer to downtown DC, we had a baud link to ICF at Fairfax Circle in Virginia. (9600 baud then was a luxury.) ICF had an IBM 4341 with VM, which was linked to and used by individual analysts much like Netware later on PCs. You had your own “F-disk” which was like a virtual drive. Many SAS jobs had been coded by Lewin in VM. But the company also had IBM MVS (even DB2 and CICS) on a 4381. I copied all the data and programs to the MVS and used the MVS machine to

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meet client requests. This was still a political problem because it increased the phantom-of-the-opera “computer costs.” I saw the possibility to get CICS and DB2 experience, but very little of that happened. In time, I decided to move on, to a more stable and conventional “production shop” again.

During that time, I was playing more with PCs at home, having moved from a Radio Shack TRS-80 to the AT&T 6300 to an AST Research, and now had Microrim RBase, which had SQL. dBase III+ (at work) did not have SQL yet, but dBase IV (from Ashton-Tate then) soon would.

I started at USLICO Corporation in Arlington, VA on MLK Day 1990. In January 1995, the company would become part of ReliaStar in Minneapolis. I would transfer to Minneapolis as of September 1, 1997, as I explained in another piece. Then ReliaStar would itself be bought by ING as of September 1, 2000. I would get notice of my layoff on December 13, 2001, as I noted above. With that, at age 58, my IT career as I had known it would come to a cardiac arrest.

USLICO owned United Services Life, which focused on sales to military officers. But it also owned several other companies, most notably BSL, or Bankers Security, which focused on the salary deduction market for employers.

The company had a very interesting and mixed environment. It owned a Hitachi machine upstairs, fully equipped with an IBM MVS environment, with TSO (soon to be amplified with ROSCOE), Panvalet, IDMS (which was often used with a “VSAM transparency” option), Dun and Bradstreet Information Expert, and assembler. I remember the interview on a cold December 1989 afternoon, and almost didn’t get the job because of lack of VSAM experience. It ran an old 1962 Assembler administrative system called CFO, but had modern third party systems like VLn, to be replaced by Vantage.

One issue off the bat was “nightcall.” You got it about once every two weeks for most of the shop, and you took a terminal home. In the past (at Chilton in Dallas in the 1980s), everyone had been responsible for only his own systems. No more. In time, there would be issues: some people with lots of family responsibility sometimes let the buck pass (but others didn’t). Nightcall wasn’t compensated, since we were salaried (although being good at it was recognized in performance appraisals and raises). Some people took comp time, others didn’t do so very often. Doing nightcall was “paying your dues.” But if budget cuts ever came, it could provide an incentive for lowballing. It also could generate bigger raises for the people who really did it.

There were a few occasions where I took other people’s calls, and there was one weekend in late 1993 when I spent an entire weekend there because of someone else who had complications with maternity. Yes, I was capable of resentment sometimes. It seemed as those men who did not have sexual intercourse with women were supposed to make sacrifices for those who did have children. That may sound hyperbolic. In many other companies, it sounded much worse. Furthermore, I was hearing stories of several shops with antiquated mainframe systems facing hostile takeovers and layoffs.

Another issue occurred with the introduction of a formal elevation procedure. It had to be followed precisely, to be sure that the source code and load modules actually running in production “tracked,” or

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else there could be significant security problems, again a “foreshadow” of some serious vulnerabilities in much newer systems today.

I worked mostly on the BSL side (which tended to use “newer” technologies), especially the salary deduction system called “Epix.” I worked on stacking both commission statements and later Epix bills, which I did by writing them on an IDMS database with VSAM transparency. Once in production, we had serious throughput problems for a while because of the “random” writes (and some database contention issues). In time, the problems resolved, largely because in the 1990s disc access technology improved enormously. But the challenges in running the system proved to be a distraction which might have kept me from moving over to Vantage, where if I had done so my experience might have become much more marketable. But, really, by the 1990s, I should have already been much farther along even in mainframe specialization; the long period of not implementing anything (from 1979 until 1985’s “run”) had set me back.

Later, I moved over to the MSA area and worked on the Dun & Bradstreet system, which had its own 4th generation language called, ironically, “IE” (Information Expert).

In 1995, as I have mentioned, the company was acquired by a life insurance company in Minneapolis and the entire enterprise would be renamed ReliaStar. As I indicated in Chapter 3, I applied for and took a transfer in the summer of 1997, after finishing my book. The screening interview was by phone, and the easiest job interview I ever had. It was a slam-dunk, although they had to go through a formal posting.

In Minneapolis I worked first on finishing some mainframe replications for the integrated Customer Service Workbench, and then moved to a new project implementing National Change of Address, by talking to Group 1 (now Pitney Bowes) software that ran on a special PC under Windows NT, with that PC talking to a USPS computer in Memphis. As I’ve indicated on my blogs, NCOA could be an effective tool in fighting identity theft.

In 1999, I worked on the conversion of the Vantage PAU clientization modules from IMS to DB2. Part of the assignment comprised modifications to the CICS portion of Vantage NBU, but the assistance for that part of the project did not come until much later. I also worked on Y2K testing and the Y2K “wake” which turned out to be much easier than expected. During 1999, I was “distracted” by my mother’s situation, which I will discuss in Chapter 5; so I felt that my performance was lackadaisical. Nevertheless, I got a \$10,000 bonus per year from then on, probably because of the Y2K effort.

Y2K had indeed generated a lot of mainframe jobs short term, especially in old IBM Assembler programs. Macro-level command-level CICS programs had to be converted to command level, even in Assembler. Furthermore, many other older shops ditched DOS and DUO for good.

After 2000, I decided to “move” to “client-server” and migrated to CSW support, which involved responding to end-user calls (mostly from the service center in Minot, ND). The technical area included a Power Builder GUI, a Java data access layer (coded with a particular architecture with components called a “client context factory,” a “manipulator” and a “collector”), which parsed the mainframe

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administrative data from the COBOL replications; screen emulations in C, and a bridge in C++, and Unix servers (with TPX to communicate to the mainframe OS390).

It was difficult to respond quickly and effectively to incidental problems that I had not created, in systems I had not written and did not know. In June 2000, during random reviews, I was criticized (by a new manager, from China) for lack of “performance” but quickly squirmed out; nevertheless, I was asked how many “bugs” I could fix in a week. (This is a time for “Bugcrush” I guess.) Eventually I was a on a third tier with one other programmer to fix bugs. There were 14 of us who rotated on-call, but the night and weekend call pages generally were very light. Along in this time frame, ING would take over ReliaStar, and soon that would become important.

On 9/11, I was actually closing two production tickets with AHD (a production problem management system) when a woman appeared in my cubicle and told me about the attacks. That day, we went on a “team building” cruise on the St. Croix River near St. Paul. We didn’t cancel. But while we “enjoyed” lunch on the boat on a cloudless day, we had no information about what was going on (although Osama bin Laden was mentioned in conversation numerous times; it wasn’t hard to guess). We didn’t find out the details (and theories about Al Qaeda) until we got back in the cars to drive the 30 miles back to Minneapolis. It was a day to remember.

Why was the learning curve so difficult? With FORTRAN and COBOL and even Assembler and SAS, I had learned by doing projects from the bottom up. In support, there is no such opportunity. (I should have moved to Data Access at the beginning of 1999, when there would have been a real opportunity to learn Java by doing.) Perhaps I could have spent more time with the classwork problems in Java getting them to work. That would have been acceptable here, but at Chilton, there had been a policy against doing any course homework on company computers.

Actually, there had occurred a small ethical lapse at the beginning of 1999, a year before my move to client-server. My friend, who ran my ISP, worked across from me and was Telnet-ing to his own server at home to fix a Microsoft Front Page problem on my domain. The manager came by and asked what we were doing. I guess I had a rationalization – we weren’t busy and it was a good thing to learn any new technology, and I wasn’t actually working on the content of my domain from work. Yet, after all the business about “conflict of interest” a year before, it was risky behavior on my part. Still, you had to get out and learn.

Younger “kids” have a much better opportunity to learn object-oriented programs on their own by tinkering at home (a Geek Squad technician, actually from Minnesota, now about 23, told me he had started programming at 12). In college, people take formal courses and do huge projects and theses. One friend of mine who graduated from the University of Minnesota in 2001 has earned his living since by working on DMCA-related (and P2P and BitTorrent) issues. It seemed that professionals who “toyed” with things at home, setting up servers (as did one coworker who ran a Unix server on a 386 in the 1990s and then invented a floppy “Unix root boot,” and another who did my web hosting, as I described in Chapter 3), were ahead of the game, almost like daredevils (not hackers, though). They preached to me about the importance of risk-taking “curiosity.”

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In summary retrospect, some of my career moves seem subject to hindsight. Leaving Chilton may have been a good idea, to prevent getting stuck when the company closed at the beginning of 1990 (although I might have found the same job at USLICO). Leaving Lewin-ICF was perhaps too jumpy, because Lewin did very well after I left and became much more professional in its IT. Going to work for a company dealing with the military (USLICO) proved to be ethically dicey. But the other thing was that the time spent on moves and production babysitting around 1991 may have kept me from moving on to Vantage, which would have made me more marketable post-2001. I could have managed my work so there was less attention to babysitting and support and more opportunity to move on earlier and be in the game (as with Vantage) during more difficult times.

I would take two courses at Hennepin County Technical College during the fall semester 2002: XML, and C#. Although I did a pretty good project for the XML class, it's important to get real prolonged work experience.

03 – CAREER CARDIAC ARREST

After Thanksgiving 2001, management from ING started paying visits. On Monday, December 10 we were told by email to be in the office on Thursday, December 13 and not work from home (a dead giveaway). On that morning, I was working with a user on a GUI problem when I got a warning from Netware at precisely 9 AM that my account was disabled, and to please log off at once. My manager appeared in my cubicle in a few minutes and said, "We have a meeting." It was cordial enough, with a bay window view of downtown Minneapolis, as we went over my most generous severance and retirement package (which was quite fair to those over 55). It amounted to a buyout. (There could have been one squabble over ING's not following ReliaStar's practice of 60 days notice, but to get the severance, we had to sign a "release of all claims," very common in severance agreements throughout the workplace world.) I would also get my merit pay, even though I thought my performance had become rocky (according to new management) since my mother's illness. I would get outplacement, starting in 2002, with Right Management. After the meeting, the company Help Desk verified that my account had indeed been "disabled." The people who "survived" the "Fourth Floor Massacre" suddenly found they had more nightcall. We used to make jokes at the outplacement center about a popular sci-fi movie, "The Thirteenth Floor." The layoff actually did nab one person on nightcall for that week; giving away your time did not protect you.

I had begun to realize that when one is working, the world inside one's organization becomes a kind of universe. Once one has to contemplate the market, one has to deal with what other people do that we depend on and don't know about. I found myself contemplating interim jobs that might require a lot more regimentation, aggressive hucksterism, or some combination of both. In time, I would be approached about jobs with "sales culture" in which I would be expected to manipulate people and make them feel that "depended on me" or even looked to me as a "role model" in ways that I was uncomfortable with, and felt to be untruthful. Although some of these jobs were probably scams and obviously needed to be turned down (and were), some were valid, and my unwillingness to consider them raised troubling questions. People, it seemed, had to peddle things to support real families.

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I would work as a caller for the Minnesota Orchestra for 14 months. Everything was done by hand from lead sheets, and I found that, even at minimum wage plus commissions (which could be fair), there was sometimes work life without computers, and even real office “politics.” The evening job, with flexible hours, turned out to be a positive, stabilizing experience. My karma on this matter is not good today, as I find I just don’t take individual telemarketing or “telefunding” calls at all anymore. Yes, the Internet has made me “less” sociable – although social media now provide a paradox in sociability.

In the meantime, I had two close calls with IT interviews. One of them was on September 11, 2002, in Bloomington, and I thought was to be a slam-dunk, and it turned out that the client didn’t have the authorization to hire yet. (I was told that I had “tried too hard” and that doesn’t send a good message. I had also thought it was rude to want to interview on the anniversary of 9/11.) Another was arranged by phone in Richmond by a persistent and effective headhunter, but broke down because the client company had waited too long, and when it called I really was no longer ready for it. I also had an interview with Group-1 at the start of 2003, contemplating coming back, but never heard from them, even though the interview seemed to go well. Perhaps I didn’t sound like I really wanted to move back yet. I still wasn’t that hungry. Or perhaps Googling my unusual name had shown me to be sharp-edged (although this was still the pre-Myspace, let alone pre-Facebook, era).

I got a contract to write a business ethics multiple choice test with Brainbench (my teaching experience coming back). In May 2003 I got a job with RMA as a debt collector, and had my first official computer logon at work since the layoff (although onto a crude Unix system). The regimentation was an issue, as was the “assertiveness.”

I came back to the DC area for family reasons (next chapter) at the end of August 2003. I tried a job calling for subscriptions for the National Symphony, and found this much harder than getting contributions to a guaranty fund in Minnesota. I quit after a caller complained we were calling later than allowed by law, which we were. I would continue my tendency to have a short fuse and quit questionable work (or even school) arrangements that I thought posed too much risk. But the main thing I did during these years was substitute teach, on and off for about three years. I’ve explained elsewhere the Internet “implicit content” issue (Chapter 3), and the discipline issue (my blogs). It was a real problem for me to be expected to function as a substitute “daddy” for some kids. I’ll come back to this in a moment.

In fact, after my “conventional” and “mostly mainframe” IT career suffered its “cardiac arrest,” it never really came back to life. Some other “older” IT professionals in the “just mainframes” area did find short-term contracting gigs, and at least one or two found permanent positions. One experienced discrimination from a right-wing client. In general, the mainframe market, post Y2K, decomposed into short-term assignments where clients often had very specific needs for deep knowledge of and long-term experience with older technologies now in menopause (like IMS) or state-specific applications (like Medicaid MMIS). It’s important to note now that “Obamacare,” with all the legal requirements (and sudden difficulties with the official implementation and rollout on October 1, 2013), may bring back a need for “mature” professionals who have given up on the old-fashioned market, although this “ray of hope” had been predicted before for other needs, like the Euro, and HIPAA. Had this market held

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together for me better than it did, I might not have seen the “class warfare” that would soon follow. My “official resume” disintegrated into a series of interim jobs (the most recent being census taking) more or less “people centered,” while I worked more on my content and finally began to put together the elements of a future “Do Ask, Do Tell” movie. Yes, producing it would be my dream job – I just need investors. But, seriously, there was indeed a disturbing trend in the job “opportunities” that kept coming my way, some of them unsolicited.

I’m not referring just to the spam “work from home” gigs or the obvious Ponzi schemes. I found myself being approached by somewhat legitimate sources to sell people things and become their agents to take care of them (or even their kids) in some fashion.

The grungy job forays continued. In 2004, I was on the verge of getting a job as a letter carrier, but the Post Office couldn’t get my medical records from Minnesota on a hip fracture from a 1998 convenience store fall (from which I had recovered very quickly). I’ve looked at a couple of real downers: taxicab drivers (you’re self-employed and lease a cab – it works differently in various cities – and it’s dangerous); and even newspaper delivery (you get up at 2 AM, and use your own car). And I’ve filled out retail applications, to hear nothing. Nice and demeaning. But “overqualified” is too nice a euphemism. Maybe everybody should experience a little bit of Maoist “cultural revolution” to balance their karma.

I’ve talked about the substitute teaching, where on a few occasions I was confronted or ambushed with duties that could require surprising intimacy. One of my earliest assignments in May 2004 was a special education high school where, at the last minute, the assignment was “changed” to include accompanying a couple kids on a swimming field trip, “helping” them in the locker room, and manning “the deep end.” Well, I don’t swim. (I faked it in PE in college, where, unlike the whimsical setting in *Modern Family*, no one would want to “imagine me naked”.) And I hardly wanted to play papa, or pretend I could make a disability “all right.” Given my personal history, it had never been thinkable that I would be responsible for (other people’s) special needs children, and this was a sudden turnabout. (By the way, special education students are not treated with kid gloves. Typically, they’re kept very aware that they aren’t making it like “normal” kids and the pressure put on them by teachers must come across as being from a moralistic position.) Sometime later, I had taken a nine-day assignment in band at a middle school. The lesson plans were very incomplete and I had expected a “student conductor,” common in most classes. Not here. I needed to step up and pretend I could conduct *Prehistoric Suite*. I didn’t, and that helps explain some of the decline. Some of my “problem” is that I perceived that a certain emotional engagement was being expected that was inappropriate for my own life history, without marriage and children. There is a difference between supervision and parenting, and between parenting and fathering. Some kids needed the latter. Because of my lack of “patriarchal” experience, I could not function as a credible authority figure in an obedience-demanding hierarchy (oh, ultimately like the military). My performance could raise questions, as I noted in Chapter 2, about how much “other-centered” and familial or eusocial emotion I was capable of. Or was there a certain laziness or core indifference to the effort needed by the group?

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I discussed in Chapter 3 the “second conflict of interest” as it emerged between my substitute teaching (despite my own “theory”) and my self-published, easily discoverable writing on the Web. I have wondered, however, given the growth in the job market for teachers after 2001 because of “No Child Left Behind,” if I could have bee-lined right for teaching after the layoff, particularly if Right Management had come up with the idea (it needed to know that in many states subs didn’t need licenses to start). Could I have dealt with the extra graduate work (I did look at various options, ranging from 30 days of intense clock work to GWU’s ME degree)? I think I could have gotten back into the world of graduate school mathematics enough to become an effective AP mathematics teacher – but the real need was in the early grades, and with special education. Moreover, given the pre-Facebook Web 1.0 world I was in, I would have indeed had to take everything down, give up my public fights over COPA and DADT and keep a low profile. I just had come too far.

School districts were advertising for some jobs that would have indeed been challenging: school bus driver, for example. Imagine the situations I could have been put in with potential discipline or even violence on school buses. There is no way I could intervene physically.

While still in Minnesota, I actually went to a job fair in Minnesota for TSA screeners; developments since 2002 have shown how controversial and “intimate” (as well as uniformed and regimented) these jobs are (but they were aggressively recruiting then). As noted, I did work as a debt collector for a company called RMA for a little more than two months before returning to the DC area (and tend to my mother – next chapter) with moderate success. With another company nearby, I had not gotten an offer because the interviewer feared I could not be assertive enough. In fact, he asked me to tell him a time when I had been able to get people to do things “just out of authority,” because I said so. Despite the good intentions of the Federal Debt Collection Practices Act (FDPCA) and of the company, succeeding at telephone debt collection seems to be a matter of what you can get away with.

I’d work on election polls in Virginia three times (16 hours for about \$120 a day – a job that some people see as comparable to jury duty, deserving a draft). After Hurricane Katrina, I volunteered for the Red Cross taking calls for a while, but found that with most clients I just had to route them to FEMA.

Back in DC, I was approached at least twice in 2005 to become a life insurance agent, and with New York Life, went through a few of the interview steps. This would seem to come out of my karma, from having worked for 12 years as a computer programmer/systems analyst in the life insurance industry – so, could I (or would I) go out and “sell” it? (Can techies sell? – I had seen that question already back in the 1970s, working for branches in Univac with “computer salesmen,” and then later with companies that sold packages like Group-1 Software for National Change of Address.) The “conflict of interest” question came up when the branch office said that a new agent could not have any other outside income from work (that would include blogging and maybe even royalties from my books). Agency is a tough business, and new agents are challenged to get leads quickly. It’s clear that you turn your “public identity” (and remember, according to Mark Zuckerberg, you may have only one!) to your “employer,” and that was hardly all right, given what I had done with my own books and websites, to “tell the truth” in a “do ask, do tell” mode. But it was also clear that, as social media evolved, the “don’t ask, don’t tell” mentality of the traditional world of sales (“always be closing” as in the movie *100 Mile Rule*) would no

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longer hold water. Myspace was already passé, and Facebook was about to take over everyone's reputations, especially those of salespeople.

Indeed, when I worked in IT for the insurance company before the merger, I sometimes saw the literature on the life of an agent, who was encouraged to be aggressive and setup weekend kiosks in shopping malls to recruit prospects. Programmers felt smug about this; it was seen as a career for those who weren't smart enough to code. Later, I remember a sales conference in Minneapolis in 2001, a little before 9/11, where they asked for employees to be "volunteers." I declined. A paid speaker promised a 35000 Dow on the stock market. So much for "professionalism" in giving speeches.

Later, I would even be encouraged to take the HR Block course and become a tax preparer. You start out during tax season with the easy ones at \$8 an hour, after paying for the course. But this doesn't make sense to me unless you want to become a professional tax advisor (and learn how to interpret "the rules" to help families get out of things). Yet, this particular unsolicited approach (since I had the obvious intellectual "talent" for a retirement job like this) seemed to carry a dark message that I ought to return to the "real world "of" real people's games and not depend on preaching while keeping my ass over a cushion.

Actually, I had encountered another goofy overture in Minnesota, from Primevest, which approached me about the idea of getting clients to convert from whole life to term (it was hyped as a \$40 trillion potential market). His own sales pitch said, "We give you the words", when I was already a writer! Probably a good idea for a lot of people, but why would they need me? One thing that's curious, I got a call from them two days after 9/11, well before my layoff. What did they know and when did they know it?

You see where all this is heading, especially with careers like insurance agent or financial or tax advisor. You build clients, you "sell" to individual people, and you put on the air that you can "take care" of people.

But my reaction is, if I was so non-competitive as a "male" not to have a wife and children, why should other families welcome me into their home to prove I could "take care of them"? I realized that, whatever the spin on employment discrimination or how we usually see it, I wanted no part of it. The direction I had taken, partly out of my own truce with life, had precluded any social hucksterism and "playing family" with potential customers.

It gets even more "interesting." "One More Time" (by *NSYNC), in 2006, I think, I got an unsolicited call on a Friday evening about a "job" involving supervising minority teens raising money for charities in shopping malls. Why did I, of all people, get a call like this? I don't like to approach people in public, and I don't like to be approached. I went in for the interview anyway, and the ex-military interviewer reeked of cigarette smoke. How depressing.

You'll see other schemes on paid television programs, for example, cash flow management. You pay about \$3,000 for a weekend seminar; they give you the materials, and away you go. For some people, it works.

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There's something they talk about in these sorts of jobs – not just “always be closing.” It's “overcoming objections.” That's your job. The problem is, most of the objections from members of the public are legitimate.

Looking back over this period of my life since *The Layoff* (shortly after 9/11), it seems like I'm lucky to have been able to stay in the game as a self-speaker and publisher. Had I switched careers and gone into teaching or sales (at least in the conventional sense), I indeed would have had to take everything down (even try to remove it from search engines), and gear my Internet presence for “other peoples' purposes,” not my own.

There's a lesson about karma in all of this. If you broadcast yourself, and reach an audience, people assume you're accountable to someone and responsible for some people. Ultimately, that means taking sides. If people can't see where you're in the game, they'll test you. They'll try to assign you a responsibility. They may even test you with their own kids.

I get calls all the time from people seeking donations. As noted before, I find it hard to believe I did this for fourteen months. I find I don't have the time to take such calls. Although I have received personal visitors with respect to long-term care insurance in the past (and was taken to lunch by one in 2007), I can't imagine building leads (again, monopolizing my online life) and hustling people for business. But the “real world” (of “families to support”) does this all the time. Perhaps one can turn this around. People have gotten used to doing more for themselves online, and may not accept being personally approached by sales people as easily they did as in the past. Home security and privacy have been carried to such an extent that unsolicited visitors are considered a security problem, as are unwanted phone calls and emails. It is getting harder to make a living with “people skills” than it used to be. Maybe that's a sign that our social capital is getting weaker.

We're also hearing a lot more public calls to people for service than we did fifteen or so years ago. Campuses have days of service, and some high schools require community service for graduation. Churches often organize volunteer relief trips to disaster areas, and volunteers often find when they arrive that they are not allowed to do much, as with mold problems in flood areas like after Katrina – although some church youth groups were able to make charity or mission trips surprisingly personal, according to their own filmed accounts. As I related in Chapter 3 of my first DADT book, I have volunteered “on my own terms” at various times in life (as a “baby buddy” in Dallas during the AIDS crisis in the '80s). I looked into the Cuban refugee crisis of 1980, and did wind up housing someone for a while. In more recent years, most of the attention of volunteers seems to lie with disability and poverty. I find it very difficult to spend incidental time with someone who is not intact, and make the experience meaningful for either one of us. I think it is more productive to volunteer in less personal areas closer to what I've done in the rest of my life.

There would be one last spell of “real job” work, for the 2010 decennial Census (I had to turn down “supervisor” because of conflict of interest), and later, in a job that was starting just as my mother passed away at the end of 2010 (next chapter), on special census surveys. I would stop this activity to focus strictly on writing in August 2011. Again, I didn't want to have to wrench the arms of people who –

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this time – didn't like the government. There was a twist, which continued after the job: my auto insurance went up a little bit, because of business use. You can wind up paying to work! My "wage" career started with the Commerce Department in 1963 and may have ended with it.

04 – CONCLUSIONS

My life – both professional and personal – had been in a sump (or slump) in the early '90s, partly due to anxiety over a partially flubbed elevation at work, resulting in long-term babysitting, which I hate (as a pun). The issue of the military ban woke me up, as a writer, and that gave me a second wind as a "computer professional" for a while, particularly after I moved to Minneapolis in 1997. That started one of the best periods in my life. Even three weeks off because of a hip fracture in January 1998 didn't stop me.

My life plan would be seriously challenged by my mother's illness (next chapter), even before the layoff. After the layoff, it gradually became apparent that my self-promoted publicity would indeed create irreconcilable conflicts with any sort of job that required submission to the marketing purposes dictated by others. The constant unsolicited approaches that I got from people trying to recruit me to sell their "stuff" seemed to be an attempt to challenge me, and dare me to keep going, to remain outspoken without "paying my dues" and earning (by supporting other people) "the privilege of being listened to."

A more obvious effect of the layoff could have been the descent into grunt work, and the need to prove that I could deal with the regimentation of "the proles," as we called "them" back in my days in the Army. My own father had always preached the moral value of "manual labor," partly because he understood that the world can be a fragile place, and it's easy to get into life-threatening trouble if you don't learn how to fix things with your own hands. It seems curious in retrospect that my father didn't make me do some things like set furnace pilot lights, change oil, and even fire our 22-caliber rifle. (I did have to change a tire with a jack after all.) In 2003, I actually worked three shifts at the Metrodome as a "fast food worker" in fund raising for All God's Children Metropolitan Community Church in Minneapolis (shortly before I returned to Virginia).

Earlier, there had been attention to the "manual labor" aspect of IT – being able to code Assembler, being able to solve dumps without abend aids right from registers, being able to take full responsibility for nightcall. In the final analysis, this did not count for much. One of the guys laid off in 2001 had actually been up on call the night before. They just spread it out among the people that remained, without paying more, because they could get away with it.

Oh, some will say, isn't this an argument for unionism? Maybe. Unions can be as exclusive and exclusionary as employers. They certainly demand the loyalty that would be alien to my nature.

In my "conventional career," based on answering "what is my profession," I did not advance in a conventional way. I was formally "promoted" only once. I, instead, broke away and promoted myself as a self-publisher. I did find that when you "go it alone," you depend on how well others do their jobs. The level of customer service from telecommunications and utility companies becomes particularly critical. A

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small slip by a contractor can knock you off line and affect how you look, your public reputation. You feel like you're watching your back. In the long run, you have to get results through others, even when you go solo.

When I worked for a large stable company for a long stretch of years (surviving or even benefitting from mergers) the workplace seemed to become "the universe." After all, the workplace is "the hand that feeds you." Matters that seemed small in retrospect always became big deals at the time, with lots of social and political nuance, most of it internalized. I would often become preoccupied with the degree of perfection required in outputs that could go to users, particularly after elevations and then facing the prospect of running my work past millions of customer items. It was definitely on me, and a preoccupation with perfectionism in the present could cut down on learning new things – very important for future career challenges. But with time, the sense of crisis always passed. Once I retired, I was confronted with my "apperception" of how the rest of the world really lives, and how I depend on people to do things that I can't do, would find demeaning or distasteful, or physically challenging or too regimented (even though I "pay" them). There was certain a "moral" point to all this, harking back to the moralizing of my own father, about "learning to work." But what really ambushed me was the personal aspect of "real world" careers – particularly salesmanship. My flamboyant father (a glassware manufacturer's representative for decades) used to brag he could sell anything to anyone, a point that offended me, but I do get his drift. There seemed to be no ultimate truth, no "Theory of Everything," that one could prove; there was only faith, and the "relative" truth that lived in social and familial hierarchies.

