2019 The Year In review

Tuesday, December 31, 2019

This year I'm doing a more "small snippets of random thoughts" post. I justify this with the rationale that I'm the only one who reads it, so those of you who bravely read on will just have to suffer as collateral damage.

My Jura coffee machine (purchased 2nd hand 10 years ago) is starting to act strangely, needing multiple reboots to get started in the morning, so I'm in the market for one of those shiny Italian espresso/coffee machines – and an absolutely silent coffee grinder, so I don't wake up the sleepy people early in the morning. I have this vision of a mini barista enclave, but the size of our kitchen precludes that. I'll have to make it a nano barista enclave. I absolutely refuse to go with the disposable coffee capsule idea, figuring they are only one step above remote car starters in the scale of ecological nightmares – and also the bulk of them are from Nestlé, the worst corporate citizen Switzerland has to offer, with the same business model as inkjet printers i.e. we'll give you the machine if you buy our cartridges. Then again, I haven't opened up the Jura in ten years, so there might be a fix I can do to make it last another ten years. However, that takes time which I haven't got a lot of.

This decade is probably also a good time to start serious retirement planning. This involves hard questions like what's the budget, where to live, and what does it really mean to be retired. It's complicated because we're spread over two countries, and an accurate prediction of when one will die is not easy. I forced Jacqueline to buy Tesla stock, which, now in hindsight, was a good choice. She, of course, now wants to sell it, but I'm convinced it's like IBM or Apple stock in the early years and should be a keeper. I don't think we can retire on that alone: it's more a belief in "the way it should be" than a retirement solution. We get no help from Credit Suisse of course, who are still stuck in the stone age advocating investing in coal power and cigarette companies. If only I could find an investment fund that looks to the future instead of pandering to corporate interests.

Although I've been pretty strict around privacy matters in general, I've been tapering off Facebook as a social media due to its lax standards for third party access. Instead I'm using Twitter and Reddit. Those are maybe no better. I would move to Mastadon, but it has no easy way to find like-minded people – which is kind of fundamental to social media, no? LinkedIn continues to be useful as a place to look people up, but now that it's owned by Microsoft I get this icky feeling every time I use it. On that topic, all of the owners (Microsoft, IBM, AT&T, Oracle etc. i.e. the old wintel hegemony) of the Linux Foundation, Red Hat, and GitHub make me feel like I should be wearing a prophylactic every time I engage with what were once righteous organizations. Open Source is big business now and it's starting to smell a lot like unbridled capitalism, so I'm trying to distance myself from those eco-systems. But it's tough, like trying to buy a non-Apple or non-Android cell phone, and that's sad.

I've been going to the gym regularly now for a couple of years. I've lost eight of the ten kilos I planned on this year, but still have a cute pudgy belly and love handles so there is some work to do yet. I'm skipping (like with a rope) and switching to cardio machines to do that, and also to make climbing mountains easier. The usual schedule is to bike to the gym after breakfast and put in an hour before coming back home to work. I also go to Yoga class on Saturday, which only reminds me that my joints don't bend that way. The gym has given me the senior's discount, which gives me mixed feelings. Jacqueline and I joke about seats on the tram now, like "no way I'm giving up a seat for an old lady, she's just slightly older than me and that's the only exercise she gets – I'm doing her a favor". Heartless bastard, I know.

The girls are ostensibly back living with us, if you can call crashing at our place occasionally "back". Samantha has chosen to leave her architecture job in Lausanne and is working on a tiny house caravan, while Alexandra is taking medicine here at U. Bern. I help out where I can; some electrical engineering work for Samantha's solar power system, and Python advice for Alexandra. It's complicated, so I won't go into details here, but it's interesting work.

As with most people,I'm increasingly concerned about climate change. It's not much, but Jacqueline and I attended a rally here in Bern and I'm a big advocate of electric vehicles and changing the energy mix for electric power generation. Unlike others, I believe it is a solvable problem, and no more or less scary than the threat of nuclear annihilation that I grew up with. Each generation is challenged, and the future outcome is unknown. With the global advances in literacy, health and prosperity, there is a very high likelihood of things turning out all right. Just my 2¢ on a complicated and nuanced issue.

Our company is still in the "big data for electric utilities" space – so far we haven't needed to pivot again. On the plus side, the partner we are working with will expand their analytics group in the new year. On the downside that means I'm becoming more of an expensive line item in their budget. The work combines two of my strengths – electrical engineering and programming – so it's a good fit, and I've been adamant about keeping the core software open source, so I feel good about the work I do. Unfortunately, my ToDo list is 18 pages long. We're going to Berlin in the new year for an open electric model conference. Well, I'm going, and Jacqueline is tagging along as a tourist. Last year in Aarhus, Denmark was pretty good.

I started a paper journal (yes, actually writing in longhand, on paper, with a fountain pen) in 2018 following advice from Henriette Anne Klauser "Writing on Both Sides of the Brain". She recommended using a progress journal, and I have been faithfully entering a page a day, but so far, not much progress has been made. I suppose I should do it in German to multiplex two goals into one. We're thinking of applying for Swiss citizenship, which would happen if it weren't for the language barrier, the cost, and the immense inertia we have against change.

My collection of DVDs containing photographs is getting out of hand, so I'm looking for a solution. The usual technology upgrade to another media with ten times the capacity (like floppies to CDs, to DVDs) hasn't happened in a while. Maybe I'll have to go with a terabyte SD chip or something. It seems a bit scary to push all that data to a thumbnail sized piece of plastic and silicon, but I guess that's the future.

One downside of our lifestyle, ecologically, is we're still traveling. Last year included trips to Malaysia, Barcelona, Heidelberg, Paris, Calgary, Strasbourg and many, many places in Switzerland. A lot of those were by train, but there are no trains to Asia and North America. So far we have no further plans for long-distance travel, but we'll have to keep an eye on that.

I don't think I'll make any new years resolutions – I keep breaking them anyway. But I'll continue to draw, write and attempt to make and fix stuff, while accumulating more useless knowledge as I try to become a true renaissance polymath.

I love living in the future.