WeGet letters

BY MICHAEL W LUCAS

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Mr. Lucas,

Your love of FreeBSD is obvious and lifelong. This issue of the FreeBSD Journal has turned into a trip down memory lane, so the editorial board asked me to write you and ask how you got started. Why do you do keep hanging around us? Why do you write all these books?

—John Baldwin,
FreeBSD Journal Editorial Chair

Dear John,

I never expected to write a "Dear John" letter, but life is a bottomless font of disappointment. You do realize that this is the thirtieth column I have provided to your Journal, do you not? Thirty of these meticulously reasoned clear-sighted epistles over five years. People get shorter sentences for abusing kittens. Your question provides abundant evidence that you have not read a single one. Fortunately, for your tenure as Editorial Chair, your remit is filling the pages with technically accurate information and not ensuring the quality of editorial blather. It doesn't matter how erudite the Letters column is, so long as you *have* one.

Are you aware that I have previously been asked this very same question by many organizations and publications? Including your own Foundation, so that's at least one group that's not directly tied to international law enforcement? People keep asking. Presumably that's because nobody reads the answers, in each instance liberating me to provide tissue-thin lies if not outright calumny. I accepted the Lawrence Technologies interview to challenge my ability to maintain a straight face while improvising whoppers. Wonderland Press has interviewed me repeatedly, but only in the spirit of marketing. Everyone understood that honesty would interfere with selling books. The story about the monkeys? Utter fabrication. This time, however, with an entire editorial board of the greatest esteem and probity exercising their usual immaculate oversight, I feel compelled to at last reveal the truth.

Yes, the truth!

Pinky swear.

My life-long love affair with FreeBSD had to begin at birth, obviously. Fact-checkers might note that was years before Dennis Ritchie and Ken Thompson came down off the mountain to prophesy the holy word of Unix, but the potent concepts already stirring within their minds lured my vacuous, unformatted brain into their radiance. Contemplations of a simpler multitasking operating system were quickly brushed aside by life's disgusting necessities, however, and I wasn't able to turn my attention to computing until I got my grubby paws on a secondhand Sinclair ZX80. No, not a ZX81 or one of those fancy Timexes. A ZX80.

That's where I learned how to program Perl. Fact-checkers will also note that Perl was not yet a language, but everything I know about algorithms I learned from the ZX80 BASIC interpreter, so I figure Sir Clive owes the world quite the apology. That's also how I acquired my knowledge of C and shell, and the ZX80's 1K of RAM provided quite the education on memory exhaustion. Adding the ZX80's esoteric peek() and poke() operators taught me all I need to know about interpersonal relations.

Meanwhile, I learned how to write. Grammar school teaches trivialities like syntax and spelling, but these have nothing to do

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with proper writing. My teachers pointlessly obsessed over getting me to draw my Zs and the Ss the right way around, when all I cared about was learning to express my inner self. Working on my own, I figured out the "inner self" business in the fifth grade and promptly got to work closing that mess right back up. My reputation was already soiled, however, condemning me to become either a writer or a television propagandist. Fortunately, I have a face for radio and a voice for paper, so I was spared the indignity of broadcast media.

Then it's just practice, the same as any other stupid career. A college classmate would say, "Hey, I'm throwing a backyard barbeque Friday night and inviting a bunch of folks of the gender and orientation you find attractive, and they all have poor taste and lower standards so you should show up" and I would say "thanks but no, I'm working on this piece that will get rejected by a hundred thirty-six markets before I bury it in the Box of Failure. I'll pay postage for every rejection, of course. By the way, the crate the stove came in is filling up, so I need a new Box of Failure, let me know when you buy a fridge."

Stuffing the Box of Failure to overflowing is its own reward. You don't get paid for it.

I needed a job.

In 1995, one of my "friends" was the DNS administrator for one of the brand-new Internet backbones. They needed a disposable body to answer phones, yell at the phone company, and run poorly documented commands as root. It paid terribly, but my experience consisted of running "trn" and "elm" as well as the occasional failure at FTP so that seemed fair. It was even on the night

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shift, which meant I didn't have to spend extra energy debugging why my peek() and poke() operations failed to provoke people correctly. People are buggy and have no interface for dispassionately accepting bug reports. I did learn to find the joy in making callers dump core, however.

Nobody explained the dangers of having the root password before handing it to me—specifically that if you break it, you must fix it. In their defense, warning me would have ruined their fun. I needed to actually learn this FreeBSD thing before I yet again wiped a server and had to reinstall 2.0.5. Walnut Creek CDROM, FreeBSD's earliest commercial backer, had published Greg Lehey's *Complete FreeBSD*. I acquired one and began studying.

Scope creep is not only for projects. It is also for junior systems administrators. The "friend" who got me hired taught me how to do her job and promptly departed for an employer that still offered hope, which showcased her wisdom until she emailed and asked for help finding yet another job and I cheerily avenged myself. By then I had learned about NNTP and ldd(1) and realized that systems administration was the closest thing our society has to black magic and if only I understood library versioning I could become the modern Aleister Crowley. It's not that I wanted the endless wild parties, nor the ability to borrow vast large

sums without consideration of repayment, but the thought of absorbing that much public vituperation made me believe I could make a difference in people's lives. Fortunately, time has beaten that youthful foolishness from my heart and left me my present happy wholesome self, perfectly well adapted to the carefree work of network and systems administration.

Back in the exciting days of the early Internet, we had these things called "print magazines." They were like printed-out blogs, glued together with a shiny cover. One was called "Sys Admin," demonstrating that spelling is an optional social convention. My quest to understand the pit I'd ignorantly dug myself into led me to subscribe, which was like RSS except they show up at your house every month even when you forget to check the feed. I fondly remember reading an article that contained useful information, once I deciphered the appalling writing. My gut reaction was that I could write better during a colonoscopy. I turned the page to see a *Write For Us!* box. Annoyed that I was working on my third Box of Failure while some doofus who could barely nail a verb to a noun had gotten published, I spewed something about CVS, CVSup, and building world and sent it to the editor.

Spite is its own reward, yes, but sometimes it offers special bonus rewards. They sent me a contract, a check that covered that month's mortgage payment, and a request to be permitted to send me more checks. They even printed that article in their September 1999 issue and put my name on the cover. Every few months afterwards, I would indulgently spit out a couple thousand words on some topic that annoyed me, polish it into formal magazine text, and let the editors send me money.

If your writing is less awful than other people's, strangers will appear out of nowhere and ask you to do more of it.

In the late 1990s, tech publisher O'Reilly decided to branch out into web-based publishing. They convinced one Chris Coleman to collect articles for the brand-new online *BSD DevCenter*. I'm sure it sounded simple when they proposed he take the job, but Chris quickly discovered that the world contained about two FreeBSD authors and Greg Lehey had learned better. Chris introduced himself and offered to exchange words for cash. Fortunately, Chris persuaded Dru Lavigne to join us, or the *BSD DevCenter* would been renamed *Lucas Whinges Like A Frustrated Toddler* and nobody would click on that.

The Big Scary Daemons column was basically "what program is annoying Lucas this week, and how can it be bludgeoned into submission?" Since the column was on the web, it wasn't like my articles were *real*. It freed me to write random gobbledygook, including daft things like the "sharing swap space between Linux and FreeBSD on multiboot systems" column that people still try to discuss with me even though multiboot has gone the way of the 5¼-inch floppy.

I established the O'Reilly column just in time for Sys Admin magazine to implode. Sending me those checks wrecked the publisher. Oh, well.

In early 2001, Bill Pollock asked Chris if he knew anyone interested in writing a FreeBSD book for No Starch Press. Chris threw out my name and fled before Bill could sucker him into it.

I signed the contract for *Absolute BSD* just in time for O'Reilly's BSD DevCenter to implode. I'm not saying I am frequently seen fleeing publishers going down in flames, but it's not uncommon.

Absolute BSD led to *Absolute OpenBSD*, then *Absolute FreeBSD*, *Cisco Routers for the Desperate*, *Network Flow Analysis*, and more. I had innumerable other book ideas, but my experience

with PGP & GPG showed the warehoused oblivion awaiting unpopular books and the market for a book on PAM, sudo, or ed(1) was minuscule. My notes languished in my scrapbooks, surrounded by conference call doodles: obscene occult sigils, solitaire games of tic-tac-toe, pleas for euthanasia. You know, the usual. When self-publishing became cost-effective, that let me put out the less commercial books like *SSH Mastery* and *FreeBSD Mastery: Jails*. No commercial publisher will touch niche novels like *$ git commit murder* and *$ git sync murder*, but I now have the tools so nobody can stop me from trebucheting these BSD-themed works into the public eye. My fifty-second book will escape into the wild about the time this issue appears. Fortunately, that's insufficiently notable for Wikipedia. I don't care if I have an entry therein, but I would object if said entry contained even a soupçon of the precious truth.

There. The truth. You have it.

I consider my obligation to the editorial board fulfilled.

The aforementioned "truthfulness" compels me to mention, however, that I did notice the question hidden within your letter.

Why do you do keep hanging around us? Why do you write all these books? I cannot conceive a more obvious disguise for asking *how can we make you go away?* In that regard, I must again disappoint. I am not only aware of the sunk cost fallacy, I embrace it. Besides, someone warned the Linux folks about me. I fully expect to remain here until this esteemed Journal pays off the debt of gelato it promised me in my first column. And promptly implodes.

Have a question for Michael?
Send it to letters@freebsdjournal.org

MICHAEL W LUCAS (https://mwl.io) has been scribbling this column for five years. He's currently writing a book on running your own mail server and scratching his back on the doorframe. *Letters to ed(1)* collects the first three years of this drivel.