WeGet letters

by Michael W Lucas

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The .0 Release is a Metaphorical Tire Change

BY MICHAEL W LUCAS

The *Journal* received a tsunami of letters this month. Once we composted the complaints about the We Get Letters columnist, that left two. Yes, your complaints are composted. This is a highly responsible publication, so I insist that all derogatory emails are printed for my personal meticulous perusal, edification, and education. I have reserved space on my office wall for mounting the most creative, well-reasoned complaints so that they may remind me to "do better." Only one complaint letter has received that honor, however, and I had to write it myself. You don't know enough about me to insult me effectively or eloquently.

Anyway. The two surviving letters both fretted about the freshly hatched FreeBSD 14. It's a brand-new release that you should have already been running for months in production, because open-source Unix is a community effort and if you touch the software, you catch community and must contribute, except you won't will you, no—you've waited for a .0 release and expect your application stack to work just fine atop it without a shudder or shiver. I won't retread that ground, partly because I previously ranted about it in this very column, but also because you didn't listen to it then, so you certainly won't listen to it now. Fear of a dot-0 release means you misunderstand modern system administration.

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System administration in a modern enterprise is like performing an oil change on a vehicle doing a hundred and twenty down the freeway. 120 miles an hour, or kilometers, you might ask? When you're lying on your back on one of those oversized mechanic's skateboards, clenching the oil wrench in your teeth and wishing you'd worn shoes with wheels on the heels so you wouldn't have to work quite so hard holding your legs up, it doesn't matter. Occasionally the driver gets bored with weaving between the desktop users guilty of the unspeakable crime of Using The Road While Obeying The Speed Limit Even Though I'm A CEO, so he sideswipes a pothole just to hear your skull bounce off the transmission housing. Wear a helmet. When the oil change is complete, you get to change the spark plugs and flush the coolant. From below, of course. Raising the hood would impair the driver's vision, and you can't possibly interfere with the corporate mission, whatever *that* is.

The .0 release is a metaphorical tire change, that's all. The trick is to wait until the driver claims there's a stretch of smooth road ahead and to place the jack snugly between your knees.

Doing any of this successfully means understanding your operating system. I don't mean the configuration files. Configurations change. You need to understand what the operating system is doing. That means you need a knowledge of DNS and the shell and virtualization and filesystems and debugging. If you want to truly learn this stuff, go read some of Julia Evans' zines. She knows what she's writing about and can communicate it clearly and simply, unlike certain bloviating tech authors staggering around this joint who confuse worthiness with word count and believe that artsy book covers can compensate for the insipidness beneath said cover. Copying a log message into a search engine cannot replace an understanding of how the software works. You still won't understand the error message, mind you, but the discussions around that error will make sense and that comprehension will guide you into making the problem less agonizing. Yes, less agonizing. In systems administration we don't fix problems, we patch around them. Everything is connected to everything in a churning pot of boiling spaghetti logic, and straightening out one section further tangles other sections. Fortunately, we're well along the way to replacing the operating system with the web browser, a course of action that will unquestionably benefit us all—*us* being system administrators, that is. Web developers will be the new system administrators, and as they're charging fiercely towards achieving "serverless" they won't know who we are other than "the people you must pay for no reason or our app stops working." It's a win all around.

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It's not all bad news. Not entirely. Your view of the potholes can be described only as splendid. You will accumulate complex traumas incomprehensible to the passengers, other drivers. This will drive you to develop eccentric coping strategies that render you wholly unsuitable for mainstream society. That might seem like bad news, at least until you meet people. The camaraderie amongst those who exchange pothole stories cannot be exceeded—if you can make yourself interact with them, that is. Plus, you can occasionally tweak something hydraulic to make the driver's seat shoot six inches straight up so the CEO bonks his head. "It's a known Oracle bug. Feel free to come down here and see for yourself."

Do try not to snigger when saying that.

The truth is, what would you be doing if you weren't a system administrator? We all know you'd go home, lie on your oversized skateboard, and roll beneath your own system to change its oil, wishing someone would drive it. Someone will. One day, someone will see your work and say "Hey, if I take that and destroy all that makes it clever or worthwhile, it will make my extremely niche problem less agonizing." Keep working!

In its purest form, systems administration is a disorder that benefits civilization, meaning that society has no interest in alleviating it or even developing a vaccine. Besides, your cop-

ing strategies are flat-out weird and make everyone else uncomfortable. They blame the repeated knocks to your head, illustrating yet again how people leap eagerly at explanations that are simple, elegant, and wrong. Everyone's happiest if you remain quarantined with your computers, separate from the uncontaminated population who are all busy anyway playing the latest phone game even though we know it's nothing but a knock-off of *Civilization* or *Doom* or *Solitaire*. Maybe Spacewar, if they consider themselves sophisticated.

Given all this, *why* are you worrying about a .0 release?

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

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MICHAEL W LUCAS is author of over fifty books, including the forthcoming *Run Your Own Mail Server.* He wants to quit all this and become a pencil smuggler, but his defective coping strategies won't permit it. Learn more at https://mwl.io.