

WeGetletters

by Michael W Lucas



**Dear Person Who's Been Running FreeBSD
for Longer than I've Been Alive,**

**Commercial operating systems are increasingly intrusive
and exploitative. I want a better life. How do I get started
with desktop BSD?**

—Avoiding Wasting One's Life

Oh AWOL, my succulent summer child,

You're the latest model of Human™, a digital native, theoretically enlightened by access to the collected wisdom of our species. Are your sources of wholesome, cogent, and actionable advice so limited that reaching out to a grizzled sysadmin seemed wise? True, this is an advice column. I offer advice. I also offer trepanning and experimental epidemiology, but you don't see people queuing for either of those, do you? The Internet has Captain Awkward and Doctor Nerdlove and Dear Prudence and Ask A Manager and Dear Abby, and you decided that no, you want to live abhorrently, so you're beseeching a grant of "wisdom" from a system administrator known for enhancing rat-operated vehicles with nitrous oxide boosters. If you're from a civilized country you even have health care so you could access counseling, or perhaps I should say intensive counseling because a few minutes into your first session the therapist would hit the big red button and you'd have a comfortable new home with three hot meals a day, your own bed guaranteed 98% free from arthropod infestation, and a meticulously personalized medication regimen because, after all, you think that sysadmins dispense sensible advice for a better life. Instead, you've requested guidance from a human(ish) creature who works on a split keyboard mounted at his hips because the sheer quantity of the computing he has perpetrated has wrought irreversible physiological changes in his meatsuit.

Very well. You want a better life.

Abandon computers. Learn subsistence farming, homebrew medicine, and chicken breeding. These will all be useful after the Big Crash. It's hard to say when the Big Crash is coming because even the combined efforts of every sysadmin on the planet with over two years of experience resist scheduling, though we're a stubborn lot, so we shall unquestion-

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ably complete the Great Work, but a few of us are using AI to accelerate the race to Permanent Downtime, so might I suggest you hurry? AI might be sewage, but if you seek downtime, it's unmatched.

Still here? Fine. You came to my advice column, so I must offer advice.

I advise suffering.

Get a clean, minimal install, without any fancy desktop environment. Get a console-based web client like lynx(1). That will get you access to mailing list archives and support forums without supporting videos, social media, or any of those time-leeching parasites. You want to play video games? Learn how to get a graphic console working. Or play Nethack.

It's uncomfortable. The discomfort is the point.

Pain is the greatest teacher, but nobody willingly attends her classes.

Snuggle the pain.

Living with a Unix desktop is much easier than it once was. Window managers like KDE and Gnome offer a pointy-clicky experience indistinguishable from the operating systems you purport to flee. Those are for people who want the commercial OS experience without the exploitation, which is rather like wanting rain without the damp. Starting with a classic window manager like FVWM will broaden your awareness of what's possible. Window managers like OpenBSD's cwm will liberate you from the mouse, leading you to understand just how much time you waste reaching for the rodent and plunging you down the mountain towards irreversible physiological change in your own meatsuit.

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After using different window managers for a few weeks, you'll wonder how you ever endured the pointy-clicky commercial wasteland.

Remember that as you approach other tasks. The narrow options presented by commercial operating systems are rails. They allow you to go one way. When you leave the rails and go by foot, you will discover a world overflowing with software written for innumerable kinds of brains. Try one program, then another. Yes, trying things is a pain.

You want a graphical mail client?

You want to watch DRM-protected streaming media?

You want to do something truly ridiculous and publish a book? A book that uses *multiple fonts*?

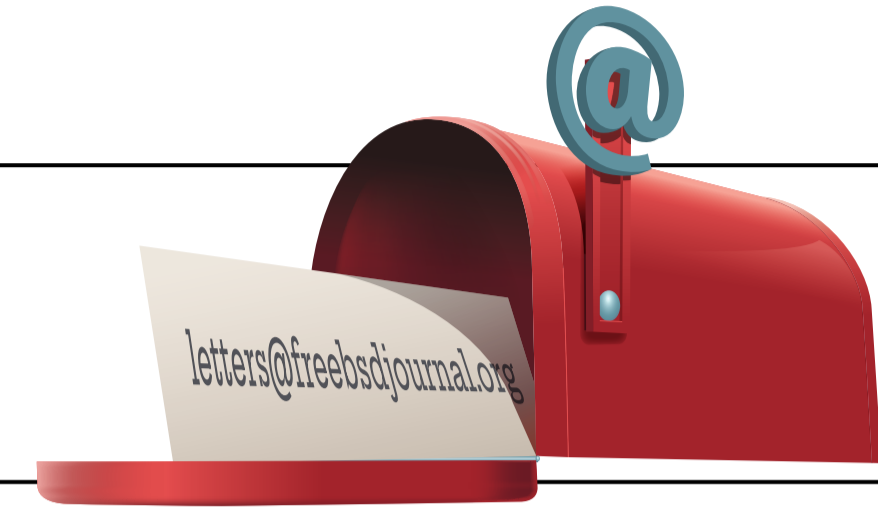
These are all pains. The pains will increase until you solve the underlying problems (Rule of System Administration #22). You overcome each pain by learning. The more you know, the more you become capable of overcoming pain. With enough practice, you can surmount all but the most exquisite insoluble agonies, and enduring those is excellent practice for the non-computing (aka "important") parts of your life.

I will, however, offer a few hints for your edification. If you're using a newish desktop or laptop, chances are you have at least 2GB of RAM and can thus use ZFS. If you care about the data on a single-disk system, give that important data its own datasets and set copies=2 on them. That will enable ZFS self-healing. Redundant disk setups like mirrors or RAID-Z already keep integrity data support self-healing. Use boot environments. If you're using a tiny

low-memory system, you're stuck with UFS. While UFS lacks the fancy features of ZFS, it has been knocked around like a stuffed bunny in a clothes dryer since 1983. All the sensible and most of the nonsensible bugs have been beaten out of it. You'll be fine.

Starting from the console and building up to a working desktop will teach you more than you thought possible. Specifically, it will teach you that you should have bought chickens.

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



MICHAEL W LUCAS is the author of *Absolute FreeBSD*, *Run Your Own Mail Server*, and *\$ git commit murder*. The hip-mounted keyboard thing is completely real. Learn more at <https://mwl.io>.

Books that will help you. Or not.

“While we appreciate Mr Lucas’ unique contributions to the Journal, we do feel his specific talents are not being fully utilized. Please buy his books, his hours, autographed photos, whatever, so that he is otherwise engaged.”

— John Baldwin
FreeBSD Journal Editorial Board Chair

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