

COUNTING MY BLESSINGS FROM ZERO TO ONE:

A Hitchhiker's Hysterical Guide to Technology

By Barbara Sehr. Excerpted from a speech presented before the Wisconsin Association for Systems Management on December 10, 2001

UNIX, plug-compatible hardware, CPUs, Hierarchical databases - these were NEVER a few of my favorite things. My comfort with technology was always wafer thin.

Now, after two decades of having bit buckets full of information dumped into my brain I accepted every challenge, climbed every mountain, and learned every acronym.

"It was a woman, who led me to drink, " WC Fields once said, "and I never got to thank her. Tonight, I am especially grateful for this invitation to address the Wisconsin Association for Systems Management. This has been a year where we've started to recognize those special heroes in our lives. Ladies and gentlemen all of you represent my teachers. As teachers, all of you are my heroes.

I'm not exactly old enough to remember changing the vacuum tubes on the Univac, but I have stowed away on your historic voyage for more years than I like to remember, sharing your wizardry with the world. Now, if only I could share in the royalties of J.K. Rowling, my life would be complete.

When you are not teaching folks like me, the people in this room answer the trivial questions every day that most Americans don't care about, questions like dot.net vs. a total Java solution, Solaris vs. Linux, and MIS vs. marketing.

I, on the other hand have been a hitchhiker on your Carnival cruise of technology, a media observer asking the dumb questions that reveal my ignorance. Still, in our "modern world," everyone has computer questions and they seek help from those of us who remain ignorant. My own 82-year-old mother recently asked me: "How come AOL keeps sending me all this e-mail on how I can increase my penis size?"

But I won't go there.

Before I begin to share my adventures with you, I should remind you that as a member of the press, I have certain privileges. I carry a press card that permits me to travel 20,000 leagues underneath the truth. Some of what I say tonight may have been reformatted to fit your sense of humor.

What a strange trip this has been. My ports of call have included Los Angeles, San Jose Seattle, and points in between - before the dot.com tsunami dropped me into Wisconsin. While all of you here plotted the numbers around virtual icebergs, I was re-arranging the deck chairs and attempting to make myself look busy. So, you're probably wondering, how DID I get my ticket to ride?

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

I was never oriented towards anything mechanical or technical. The only thing mechanical I ever learned was lifting my fork to my mouth - and you can see where that got me.

About all I knew about zeroes and ones were the entries I made in my daily journal when I was dating. Oh, what I would have given for a TWO! Never mind a 10!

I was a free thinker. I could not contain myself within a limited box of wires and transistors, coded by some predetermined instructions. Being a late-60's flower child, I kept the sound of algorithms at a distance.

"*We Shall Overcome*" meant different things to Bill Gates and his followers than it did to me.

To begin with, I had to learn a new language. How many of you have ever arrived in a new country where you didn't know the language?

I did.

I had learned English upon my arrival from Germany two decades before. Now, suddenly, I was being asked to unlearn everything I knew about English.

Scalability?

Portability?

Bangs for a buck?

Who writes this stuff?

When it came to learning technology, I felt like a Von Trapp Child being taught the basics of the musical scale by Sister Maria. *Dough, the cash, the bottom line, ray a light blast just for fun...*

Still, being of questionable mind and inquisitive nature I threw myself into this computer thing. I even invested in my very own first computer, a CP/M system. Imagine me buying a computer. But it was so pretty, and it clicked when it started, beeped when you goofed and whirred when it stood still...

At a time when everyone else was rushing to see *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* at movie theatres, I sucked on the brains of everyone I interviewed. I learned some fascinating new things.

How many of you in this room know what a development system is?

How many of you believe it is something you use to increase your bra size?

Was I the only one?

Apparently my development system was working overtime, because before long Bill Gates took me to lunch.

I don't know how many of you have ever shared lunch with Bill Gates, but it was quite an enjoyable experience. It was just like hanging out with your average young-looking 26-year-old son-of-a-lawyer computer geek that would one day be a billionaire.

He took me to this exclusive burger place, not unlike the Milwaukee institution forever memorialized in *Happy Days*. The restaurant featured carhops and burgers dripping in grease. Now, I know how he got his "fire in the belly. "

The restaurant was just a few steps from the second-floor space that held all of Microsoft's then-20 employees.

Somewhere under that geek surface, there was a would-be preacher. Brother Gates could deliver homily after digital homily, praising Microsoft and passing the evangelism.

Brother Gates did display a fair amount of humility. He seemed genuinely impressed that I came all the way from California just to visit him. He spent more than 90 minutes of his time cleaning his fingertips of information for my enjoyment.

Even the few, the energetic, the startup staff of Microsoft's office resembled the crew of *Up with People* on Speed. It must have been that glistening Seattle sun.

That same glistening sun was reflected in the eyes of Mr. Gates whenever I mentioned the phrase "operating system."

Gates already had money. He was the son of a wealthy and influential corporate lawyer -not a bad place to learn negotiation skills. Seattle Computer Products may have had the talent to produce a next generation operating system, but its marketing moxie wasn't ready to swim with the sharks. Tiny Microsoft and its founders Bill Gates and Paul Allen knew how to work the smoke and mirrors behind the Wizard of Oz curtain. Tradition was not a part of their religion.

Tradition? That was for the fiddlers on the roof - the companies trying to scratch out a living without falling on their butt.

Tradition was MIS painted in Big Blue. Tradition was a raised platform and lowered expectations. Tradition was a central processor belching out information to the unwired masses.

But the IBM PC booted up a new era of traditions. The gospel according to St. Gates united the heathens seeking release from the shackles of MIS protective custody.

For those of us who repressed our flower child heritage, the IBM PC gave our browbeaten, fiscally responsible reality a nano-second expression of independence. Then we could go back to our mortgages, our car insurance and our diaper-service payments.

Suddenly, corporate America was seeing a rich harvest of the little beige boxes that clicked when it started, beeped when you goofed and whirred when they stood still. "Give me liberty, or give me a PC," became the battle cry in corporate America.

As demand for the PC developed, the cost of entry dropped. Soon enough a middle manager could literally acquire a wide variety of PCs within his department without even notifying MIS.

If you believe the anti-trust advocates, IBM couldn't stomach the idea of bringing intelligence to the desktop. Information was meant to be kept in an air-conditioned room, not at your fingertips.

IBM's mainframes already faced performance competition with a new wave of mini-computers running Unix. In her dying days, Ma Bell had loosened the apron strings on its own powerful but unsupported operating system. PCs represented still another threat.

It was IBM's founder Tom Watson that once predicted the world would need at best only five computers. It was Bill Gates who assured us that 640K of random access memory would be as much as anyone would need.

It was MIS who predicted that the little square box that beeped and burped and belched would only be a temporary distraction.

Wishful thinking.

It was MIS' responsibility to service these strange new toys, even if MIS was not originally invited to the wedding.

Redmond, we have a problem!

When it looked like these desktop toys were reproducing like rear-end shots on the office photocopier, MIS folks had a meeting.

A lot of you are probably familiar with the typical MIS decision process. Legend has it that managers from around the country gather in an underground bunker somewhere beneath the San Jose, Calif. IBM facility. Here a coven of lackey programmers and engineers recite mantras around a campfire.

They speak in considered voices, in a strange language, uttering words like "*algorithm*," and "*aerial density*."

After many weeks of these recitations, a puff of white smoke is seen rising from Armonk, New York signaling that either a major change in direction has occurred or that the time of the next meeting had been set.

A stern memo that includes the minutes of the meeting is then composed by the "technical writer," a would-be engineer who failed every math class he ever attended.

The real wall of course was between desktop hardware and software. Desktop software tried its best to run on what seemed like 19th-century hardware. Finally, the 80386 chip would open the Window -so to speak - on a new graphical user interface.

Windows was ready - only seven years after its introduction at the 1983 Comdex show.

Finally, desktop hardware and software had achieved a harmonic convergence not seen since Paul Simon was introduced to Art Garfunkel. Up until now, most of America had been - like George Bush Senior - out of the loop when it came to computers. Only the few, the brave and dumb journalists like me were willing to confront messages like:

ABORT, IGNORE, RETRY.

We were ready for the graphical user interface.

We were ready for computers that promised us true multi-tasking and improved sound systems that could do more than click when they started, beep when you goof, and whirr when they stood still.

We just weren't ready for "*A general protection fault has occurred...*"