

Staying in the Moment with Home Repairs

by [Carl Nelson](#) (October 2022)



Man Seated on Bed, Edward Hopper, 1906

Every day I just sit on the edge of the bed mornings breathing slowly, until I commit to stand. That way, whatever fate arrives is my own fault. I try to adopt that same posture with simple repairs. I never caused the day to come up nor provoked the appliance which wants fixing. Nevertheless, after stewing on the alternatives sufficiently, (this can take days or weeks*[i]*), I find myself wandering to the garage yoked to the task and started.

On My Back

The outside power receptacle,
which tripped with every rain shower,
finally stuck fast, forever.

We ask a lot of our tech.
Save our lives? Check.
Save us money? Check.
Save our home? Check.

How many shocks can a ground fault bear?
Its removal looked easy; its replacement, swift.
Someone built it, so it can be fixed.
That's the thinking, but

you want to live in the moment?
Just try a repair.
The moment will grasp you by the balls.
The son of a bitch won't give up.
It's like trying to pass a stone.

Imagine a better world where nothing breaks.
A proper world wouldn't treat me this way.
Plead for a bourgeoisie Utopia! And sigh.
The contortions we must employ to repair trifles.
How much abasement will Murphy's Law require
before handing me a Mulligan?

Sisyphus's half-brother lies sideways
trying to tighten a small screw on a smaller
clamp on an smaller electrical lead in a dark box
with a flapping cover which must be held simultaneously
aloft.

The position is uncomfortable, the job physically taxing,
while the chore itself could not be more trivial,
like using a backhoe's blade to retrieve a feather
at the bottom of a hole.

My brother is an engineer. Actually, all the males in my family are engineers except me. And I will grant engineers have good reason for thinking the rest of humanity hopelessly credulous if not just stupid. The business of engineers is turning reality towards productive means. This is very hard. My own mind's first reaction when botching a fix is that the actual world is haunted by a mess of gremlins. Murphy's Law, that "if anything can go wrong, it will", would seem to me to be the Prime Directive of the Universe when dealing with anything real in the least. It seems somewhat in common with Michael Novak, of the Wall Street Journal's, statement that, "A system built upon sin is built on very firm foundations indeed." I'm not certain of the analogy, but I quote it because it describes so well the brutality of the actual.

Nobody reveres Murphy's Law like an engineer. My brothers were always quoting it to me as a regular chiding of the greenhorn seeking counsel. I couldn't imagine how they could enjoy this sort of thing. Except that life, in many respects, is "the pleasure of taking pains" (Frost). I mean, it must be... right? Do you have a more rational or persuasive explanation?

My older brothers are identical twins. One travels the country with his wife in a Marathon Bus, which utilizes four computers in its operations. It's a high end, premium motor coach with a pop out grill and TV. Nevertheless, each trip involves one or

two stops at the shop, (which Marathon has spaced strategically around the country). The first stop is preparatory to the trip. The other takes place somewhere along the route, in order to handle a problem whose fix had to be delayed due to the absence of the needed part, or which was better handled elsewhere due to their travel constraints. This does not include the other repairs my brother handles personally. (I get emailed details.)

The other brother browsed the oceans with his wife in his sail boat. If you love maintenance, a live-aboard fifty two foot sloop is the home for you. One story from his online communications, (which still create anxiety), is of being tossed about in high seas while blown by high winds on the Tasmanian Sea. He was nauseous below while struggling to locate a small part and fix a little widget critical for their survival. (I believe it was to keep the bilge pump working to prevent their working engine from drowning, in order to maintain a correct heading into the storm so as not to capsize.) In the crawl space with a high intensity pocket light gripped in his teeth and sweat stinging his eyes, he could all ... most reach it. (I got emailed details.)

On another occasion my brother endorses my thoughts, (which were likely originally his).

In reality important things break and you have to deal with that. Usually dealing with that involves a great deal of suffering. Which is why you had the thing that is broke in the first place.

Our reality is that we had a leak somewhere in the pressurized fresh water system. It was pumping our water over pretty fast; about every 12 minutes it dumped a teapot of fresh water into the bilge. 24 hours a day, every day, every 12 minutes. It had to be fixed, but there are

thousands of feet of plumbing in a boat. Where was the leak? Even looking for water means opening up the space, which is itself a lot of work. –Larry Nelson

I find reality very frustrating and don't much like it—unless it frustrates my enemies' ambitions. Then I view it all as an incredible failsafe. (Marxism? Ha! It doesn't work—try as you might, fool!) But even engineers fear reality like a mama bear and try their best not to get between it and any possibility of error. They place their tiny parts where they cannot be lost, use cloths onto which they might drop, take photos of the disassembly for later reference.

My bus owning brother's professional duties at one time included judging the progression of aspiring student engineers' projects. At the beginning of the challenge, perhaps half of them task themselves with engineering solutions involving actual materials. By the end of the process most of these engineers but for 2 or 3 had changed their challenge so to require software solutions. The realities of a software solution are simply much fewer and easier to fix and manipulate. Flawless mechanical solutions are harder to produce when vexed by unforeseen realities. These are those "unknown unknowns" as our onetime Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, described them.

We all high tail it into the abstract when we can. In order to have a life free of frustration we outsource most of our reality. We buy refrigerators, we hire mechanics and builders and doctors. Just about everything we would spend money on is done to escape the clutches of reality. Then we specialize in one fairly narrow bit of reality which with practice we can succeed at with marketable consistency. We select for a certain narrow set of problems we enjoy pursuing and can solve with enough frequency to put us in business. Much of the rest of the time we watch TV.

And even within this narrow corridor, the prudent are careful about the “solutions they enjoy pursuing.” For example, I like words and I enjoy people, characters especially. But live theater anymore is too large of a problem for me to tackle.

It’s a risk and effort (sanity) thing versus benefits. I’ve pretty much had the enthusiasm beaten out of me. Like a Broadway playwright once whined during production: “I want to be a carrot in the ground.” So in my dotage, I mosey about this tiny Ohio River town imagining this essay and poems.

My one brother still has his bus. But the other brother has since sold his yacht (but kept his wife) and now lives in Idaho. His ocean is now a pretty mountain lake. Myself, I’ve downsized to a less expensive home with a much smaller yard in among the Deplorables where handymen abound. This leaves me with a small window (or rather outdoor cellar entrance, perhaps) of repairs and maintenance which it is best that I undertake, personally. Some things like changing a light bulb, repairing a gate, fixing a leaky faucet, changing out a bad switch or receptacle seem too trivial to justify the repair bill. Plus, asking the plumber to fix our running toilet would make me feel like such a wuss looking on, that I can’t. The wife realizes this and uses it as leverage to get timely repairs. If the problem is not attended to in short enough order, she will threaten to toss money at it. My skill set is thin. But there is only one thing I fear worse than reality, and that is having our money frivolously spent. Because money is all that I have protecting me from reality.

Waiting with Beers for Divine Intervention

The idea was so simple,
yet its application so vexed.
“If anything can go wrong, it will.”

The screw was to go into the hole.

But it broke.
“When the going gets tough,
the tough get going.”
We stripped the threads.
We stripped the head.
It jammed on something.
We ran out of screws.
The drill bit broke off in the concrete.
The box socket for the ratchet wouldn't fit,
and we had no socket for the drill,
and the wrench was agonizingly slow.
Then we got them screwed down,
but had forgotten the washer.
“For the want of a nail,
a kingdom was lost.”
Then we finished
but had placed the thing wrong.
I just wanted to quit,
but we couldn't do that either.
It had to be done.

So we waited with beers for Divine Intervention.
We ran out of beer.
“Tomorrow's another day.”

The next day we got it done.
So life, as it were, comes down to platitudes.
You just need a good enough supply to persevere,
basically.

Do you want to live in the moment to better realize existence?

Don't sit cross-legged, palms upwards on your knees looking out over the sparkling ocean from a sunny veranda with a cool green tea and a slice of avocado toast. This is soy-boy bullshit. Instead, walk inside with determination, contort

yourself while straining to get the wrench around a hex nut about as far as can be reached, even after crawling through the cobwebs and rat droppings of the crawlspace while sweat stings your eyes and the wife is trying to say something you can't decipher, while your glasses keep falling off. You will be riveted to that moment until the problem is fixed. There's the dark beauty of it. Gremlins must have conjured it.

When you take a breather, lying in the muddy filth, you realize your wife has been yelling at you at the top of *her* lungs not to take the Lord's name in vain. "Quit it!"

The wife you were trying to appease is now pissed at you. Where's her white knight, now? Your shining moment has left the building.

More and more you realize that lying on your back against the damp soil in all of the lost articles, bird feathers, bones and rat shit is rather nice, when set against the task of fixing toilet, plumbing, or sewage line. Your wife isn't going to come and get you. The son has made his escape. The dog might endeavor to scabble down there by your side. It seems an almost timeless situation. What more can a man want? Perhaps a cold beer and some country music? And if by some miracle the problem does happen to get fixed?

The wife often surprises you with a delicious meal.[\[ii\]](#)

[\[i\]](#) "Or months, even years," the wife notes.

[\[ii\]](#) As it turned out, it was not the receptacle which was at fault, as believed in the initial poem, "On My Back". Rather the electric cord to the fountain pump was nearly severed and was periodically shorting whenever it rained. So, after replacing a perfectly good receptacle with another one, I determined to replace the fountain pump. This I did successfully, but as I rose from inserting wedges to level the fountain – I grabbed a deck railing to help myself up from my

knees. The railing gave way and I ended face down in the bordering lily hostas. After I struggled back up, I realized I'd broken our fountain in the fall. I hate to say I told myself so, but there it was.

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Carl Nelson has just finished a book of memoirs and poetry celebrating his current area of Appalachia titled *Become Remarkable*. To see this and more of his work, please visit [Magic Bean Books](#).

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