

The Bill Gates Experience

Thanks to a US Senator who is a friend of the president of the organization I work for, Bill Gates paid a visit to answer questions about ... well ... stuff Bill Gates would know something about. I decided I would attend.

I didn't really care what Gates had to say. I only attended to find closure. When I was in my teens, my parents offered to help me buy a used car, but I replied, "Will you buy me a computer instead?" That was in 1983, and they bought me a Commodore 64, because that is all they could afford.

Meanwhile, MS-DOS was a toddler at two years old and the idea of a personal computer had really just risen from hobbyist diversion to a practical reality for small business. It was the dawn of the PC revolution, and Microsoft, established in the mid-1970's, had just found the niche that would take it to dominance in the computing industry.

When I was a freshman in high school, I was the nice, smart guy, a little nerdy, but sensible. Great to say "hi" to, but really kind of out there, a misfit nobody really "got," and consequently mostly a loner. Sci-fi and fantasy book/movie fan with a penchant for computers, I was also a werewolf fanatic and obsessed with writing poetry and running through the woods by moonlight across the miles of empty space around our farm in the rural mid-west where I grew up. I also drove to remote, forgotten cemeteries way out on unlit country roads on eerie fall nights and would just sit quietly and listen and feel. I just didn't fit in with the multigenerational farm family kids in the FFA.

About a year after I got a computer, my high school bought some – Apple IIe's. The Apple IIe had the same processor as the Commodore 64, and since I had by then already mastered BASIC and had become more interested in coding at the assembly language, processor level, the IIe was an open book. By the

time I was a senior, the other kids figured out that I already knew everything and more they were trying to learn in their elective computer class. Suddenly, the loner was getting a lot of attention. Unlike in the movies, I really didn't care much. I just kindly helped people understand things they didn't and generally stuck to my habitual loner lifestyle.

When I got to college, computer classes were cake and I quickly got a job with the university's computer center as a computer lab technician, then a student programmer on the university's mainframe. My first full-time job was the first full-time university employee in charge of PC labs. And here is where Bill Gates enters the story and when he and I really began to cross paths, though he didn't know it, and still doesn't. MS Windows had just recently emerged from Microsoft R&D labs and one could install networking components to make it communicate with other stuff. Most of the computer labs by this time sported Windows PC's. Bill Gate's flagship product had been in development while I was maturing in the computing disciplines and just at the point that MS Windows and I were both ready to reach out into the world in earnest, we met, and were partners, growing up together for over a decade to come.

The point is, Gates was growing up Microsoft at the same time I was growing up a "computer scientist" (that's what my university diploma says). At the same time, networks merged and became the now ubiquitous "Internet" (which actually, properly ought to be capitalized. An internet is any network of interconnected networks, of which the Internet is just one.

But I digress.).

Two other events to note before I get to my impressions of the Bill Gates Experience: first, when I was in college, I considered changing my major to English and making a career as a writer. A grad student who had been my English Composition 101 instructor and who was feeling the financial pain of trying to support a family on a Masters in English, advised against it, saying that although he thought I was a talented

writer, it would probably be wiser to make my living as a programmer and write novels on the side than the other way around. He was probably right, and that is what I did, but the event underscores the importance of something other than computing in my life. The second event is similar: shortly after I was married, I came to a crossroads: I would have to give more to my career in computers and push writing further to the periphery or start reshaping my career from programmer to writer. Not two years married, wife pregnant with our first child and intending to be a stay-at-home mom and probably homeschooling, the responsible thing (and the right thing) was clearly to strengthen my computing career. But again, there was that "other" possible life lurking there, very real, very intense. Along with moonlight runs in the forest and werewolves, I put it to sleep.

So, now we come to 11/2/2015. Bill Gates has retired from Microsoft, and Microsoft is not nearly the pop star she used to be. She's kind of like Madonna. I won't expound. If you get it, you understand. If you don't, you never will. And that is the point.

I've become disenchanted with the computing industry. Something changed, shortly after Java (the programming language) was invented (I don't think it was mere coincidence). Prior to the late 90's, one could write a computer program for some task and it required real working knowledge of the rhythm of the machine: the silent tick, tick, tick of the clock generator and the lock-step shifting of bit patterns through the CPU and in and out of memory. "Object oriented" was barely a gleam in the eye. Whatever you produced was greatness because it was the only one of its kind and fit its purpose and the human user perfectly. Form resonated function and function, form. It flowed like water around its intended use cases. It was woven into the fabric of the processes it enabled.

But by the late 90's, most businesses already had some

computer program to do the tasks they used computers for. By then they were not looking for something new, they were looking for something to replace what they had: the new had to be faster, sleeker, more efficient, even prettier, and above all, just plain "better," though usually no one could tell you what "better" actually meant. They still can't. Eventually, people began to prefer to just buy generic shrink-wrapped solutions off the shelf and work around or just put up with the dissonance and frustration that approach inevitably produces. A cheap fabric with holes is apparently better than an expensive, custom tapestry.

Then came the World Wide Web. A boon. A sublimity. A scourge. A monstrosity. There is no more horrific kind of software development known to man than web development – even mobile is less nightmarish. Unruly, inconsistent, stateless, ambiguous, inefficient, the web is an entropic platform tending toward disorder in which subjective forms forever eclipse function. It is made in the image of money.

I worked for a while in a unit that provided IT services to the state Medicaid program. During that three year stint I saw the darkest side of information technology. Nothing brings out the worst than a handful of IT companies endlessly fighting over exactly, at best, 55 fixed customers (each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and each of the US territories) for millions of dollars of contract money. It was a horrific experience that eventually made me develop a twitch in my right eyelid. When the unit's director resigned I got myself transferred somewhere else to save my sanity, which by that point was questionable anyway. But the experience was a violent shaking that woke the sleepers in my heart. The wolves, the woods, and the writer roused.

And so in November 2015 I obtained a seat in a live audience before the iconic figure of personal computing, the richest man in the world, who made his fortune in the industry that I, during the same time span, began by loving and have come to

disparage. But both of us have turned a corner as we are well into the second half of life, Gates only about 10 years my senior. I entered the auditorium through a gauntlet of casual security checkpoints. "ID please." "Here's a wristband." "This way, through here." "No backpacks." Now I must reveal that I work at a university. "Faculty and staff in that section." The young woman's svelte index finger directs me toward a secluded, distant corner of the auditorium. A young man indicates I should take the seat closest to the wall in the next available row. They are packing us in deliberately, ensuring no gaps in between. I am looking down from halfway up the seats at an angle more behind than beside the row of three chairs on the stage far below. Others of my classification are ushered in. My custom crocheted stuffed fox, Prox Edward "Proxy" Fox, is peeking out of my pants pocket. I pick up my notepad and pen and title the page: "My Thoughts and Feelings While Experiencing Bill Gates". Here are my impressions, first given nearly verbatim except for some corrections to hastily scrawled grammar, each followed by some explanation as might be necessary.

My first impression – I notice the haughty attitudes of faculty and staff at having been seated in the remotest corner of the auditorium.

The event was advertised as a student event, with a few limited tickets available for faculty and staff, so I expected seating arrangements with the choicest sections reserved for students. This really should not have been a surprise to anyone.

My second impression – the elegance of the chrome-plated side tables beside the chairs, with water on them.

My third impression – the three young ladies seated next to me got up to go out for a bit and left their smart phones sitting out in the open unattended.

Our seats were over an entrance, so there was an enclosed rail in front of us about four feet long on which they set their phones.

My intent was to record my first three impressions thus, and then to make bullet-point notes thereafter. Here are the bullets:

- the muslim guy is wearing a bright orange turban and matching neck tie.
- the man behind me is obsessed with the seating arrangements
- the lady next to me smells artificial
- we all just got spread out into a more central, unoccupied section with two minutes to go before Gates is scheduled to take the stage. Prox and I are relatively alone now [Now that there is no rail in front of me, I seat him propped up in my lap so he can see the stage.].
- Photography is prohibited. A US Senator and the university President will join Gates on stage [thus, three chairs].
- Gates looks old. He's not aged as well as I. I guess he *is* ~10 years older than me, though.
- Gates looks a little senile [he looks a little bewildered at first and makes an interesting, gentle clapping gesture once while the President spoke. I thought of some old man I once saw, but whose name I cannot recall.].
- The Senator arranged for this visit from Gates
- The President is giving the Senator a very lengthy introduction [it is, seriously, at least five minutes of excessive praise and adulation before he sits].
- The Senator is now introducing Gates with accolades for work the Gates Foundation has done, especially work in Africa.
- Gates, a kind of parallel of me, is on stage, the

- richest man in the world, talking about helping third world Africa. I'm sitting here not really listening and holding a stuffed fox. The juxtaposition is profound.
- The front of the stage is thickly lined from end-to-end with ferns.
 - I wonder where Gates gets his suits and shoes and who makes them?
 - Back in 1983, Gates was worried about what to build into DOS. Now he worries about world health and federal entitlement programs. In 1983, I worried about wolves, moonlit forests, poems and stories, and computer programs. I still worry about exactly the same things. I did add kids.
 - In 1983, I wanted to be able to draw. A few years ago, I taught myself to draw. Now I just want to be better at it [I wonder if Gates can draw].
 - Gates taps his toe a lot while he talks [like he is gesturing with his feet as well as his hands].
 - This whole event is very controlled. All questioners were pre-selected and seated up front.
 - Gates thinks women should be "freed" to do work they get paid for [instead of spending the day freely working around the home for free]. He thinks they should have kids later and space them out. He thinks unpaid homemaking is bad [implying it is not as valuable. My wife would be fuming at this point].
 - [The Senator makes a claim that technology is enabling people to more easily change the world] Does electronic technology make helping people change the world easier, or has it caused problems it is now being used to rectify – that is, is the net gain of electronic technology really about zero?
 - I'm still in the place I was when Windows was invented and I kissed a girl in the Botanical Gardens down the road.

At this point the event was coming to a close, so I tried to

sum up my thoughts and feelings:

- I have no feelings about anything involving Gates. It's all meaningless. The most valuable thing to me here, right now, is Prox, sitting in my lap so he can see Gates.
- Out of time, so the President picked a student out of order to ask the last question [clearly he wants this question asked. I didn't record it or pay much attention to it. It wasn't a very good question].
- Gates' advice to young people is, ironically, what Jesus said to do [as recorded in the Gospels], though I'm not sure Gates necessarily sees that. He's not at all like Jesus, really.
- I wish I hadn't made that last point – it didn't come out right.

[Gates' wife, Melinda, is Roman Catholic and they have raised their kids "in a religious way". He has claimed to be involved with the Catholic church they regularly attend, though I don't think he is Catholic. I don't think he is strictly an atheist, but I don't get a sense he has a strong belief in God. This, to me, is the most telling quote: "I think it makes sense to believe in God, but exactly what decision in your life you make differently because of it, I don't know." On the other hand, he has said this: "The moral systems of religion, I think, are superimportant." And this: "There's a lot of merit in the moral aspects of religion. I think it can have a very very positive impact." I make this point only because I found his statements about the charitable works he advises young people to spend a lot of effort doing are very much Corporal Works of Mercy, which is why I made my point above.

This is all very interesting to me, because I was a self-proclaimed atheist from about age 13 until around 1987 and then agnostic (atheism was too religious for me when I really thought about it) until around 1993, when I had a personal

revelation experience that changed my perspective entirely, ultimately transforming me into a devout conservative Catholic. IMPORTANT NOTE: I will not entertain any religious/atheism debate comments. This is not the venue for that. I am merely explaining the impressions I had during the Gates event, contrasting and comparing facets of his life and mine.]

There were two other things that Gates talked about in response to questions that I did not record, but did make an impression on me:

- Vaccines: he was quick to praise the benefits of vaccines and scolded those who have come out against them in the US. My impression, however, was that he missed the point that the concern all parents I know, including myself and my wife have, is that kids are over-vaccinated. The Chicken Pox vaccine is a prime example: pediatricians push hard to get parents to get their kids the Chicken Pox vaccine, but why? The risk of serious complications from the disease is practically negligible for otherwise healthy children and the long-term efficacy of the vaccine is questionable. There just isn't a good reason for a low-risk individual to have the vaccine. Riding out the disease is a far more effective and understood path to immunity. That is just one example. The backlash is not a belief that vaccines do no good or that they are ineffective, its a reasoned response to a medical industry that shoves medications on every minor affliction by a public that wants a quick-fix to every problem and is feeling over-medicated because of it.
- Common Core: he was quick to praise the value of standardization on grade-level goals for science and math. But the problems people have with Common Core don't have a lot to do with goals for grade levels, but with the effects on policy, choice, freedom, priority,

focus, and individualization. The truth is that when the government legislates a common standard, a freedom is lost. We homeschoolers are particularly sensitive to these sorts of mandates as we are constantly in someone's sights for assault on our educational choices for our children. Common Core is bad because it is Common, not because the standards are necessarily bad in and of themselves.

I had intentionally avoided any of my colleagues all through the event and tried to after. I wanted to be alone with my thoughts. However, as we were all making our way out of the auditorium, a very nice fellow whom I had hired many years ago but now worked in a different unit, unfortunately saw me. He entangled me in a distracting conversation about work for some time. After escaping from him, as I was walking back to my car, I tried to summarize what the whole event meant to me.

Had I found some closure at hearing this aging billionaire technologist who lived his career as I was living mine and whose work, I had to admit, profoundly impacted the course of my life? All I can conclude is that it solidified and steeled my drive to make anthropomorphic animal art of sundry kinds, but most especially stories and fursuits.

As I reflect upon it now, as unusual and volatile as my meandering life has been, I've really just come full-circle, back to the moonlit forests, poetry, brooding, preternatural cemeteries, and mostly the stunning, silently roaring power of the "dearest freshness deep down things" that one in whom the spiritual senses are awake enough can feel and long forever toward. And in a circle there is perfect closure. What is most important is what is inside the circle and what is outside. For well over half my life, Bill Gates' circle and my own circle overlapped and intersected, but now, as we have both matured and discover who and what we are, our circles have become disconnected, barely intersect, and soon will likely not at all connect in any appreciable way. As simple

as I am, as unimportant as I am, I'm actually quite pleased by that. I aim to decrease that I may finally find and finally one day become a man of peace, a channel of peace in an angry world.