

## Chapter 12 | It’s Just Work

The first time I offered “It’s just work” as a phrase of sympathy, empathy, and motivation, I rather missed the mark. I sounded like a jackass, and likely pompous, and intolerant. Far from my intent, I desired to acknowledge the choices we make and the duties we assume.

This week, I am upgrading 74 webpages that interact with an Oracle database. Sometimes what needs to be done is just work. Rarely headline worthy. Rarely exciting. Rarely even noteworthy.

This winter, Oracle improved the security and integrity of how it manages data on webpages. I must go through each page, one at a time, make small manual changes, save my work, then test my work. I get about six done per day. The work goes slowly. The actions routine, the pace steady. The effort will take more than two weeks, given the normal interruptions of life and business.

And the normal interruptions of life in 2020 and 2021 seem heavy and harder than most other years. In a case of not-funny ironies, I published the episode “PST Baby: Primary, secondary, tertiary” in which I explore the importance of redundancy in planning and even the value of redundancy in systems. I discussed a major 2008 fire on a U.S. aircraft carrier, a plane crash involving a FedEx jet, and minor mishaps while sailing. The day after I published the episode our primary heating system failed. The January temperatures here in the southern Green Mountains of Vermont remain below freezing most of the winter. We have nearly a meter of snow. And our new propane furnace stopped working.

In the true spirit of ‘Primary, Secondary, Tertiary’, we have a backup heating system. When we bought the propane furnace in 2018, we also installed a series of mini-split or duct-less heating and air-conditioning system. This system is less reliable in the bitter cold as the heat-exchanging process suffers, the fins freeze up, and such. It also works better if it is on. I turned it off because of the icing. A week later, we’re still limping along on our backup system.

Yet another lesson reinforcing the discipline of PST. Let me admit that with a life-time in crisis management, I should prefer home systems to flow along without thought... oh, well.

Back to work, the very work that permits us to have heat, some heat, put food on the table, and endeavor onward.

Whilst upgrading my 74 webpages, I feel, I see, I measure slow steady progress. It is just work. It is the work of my chosen career. It is the work for which I get paid. There is it is, the mantra, the motivation, the rhythm, and reason for the effort. How else to celebrate and acknowledge the steady, even mundane, elements that make up our days. For me, I also write between 5 and 15 thousand words per week. I write software and spend hours updating our applications. What a surprise, I sit at a desk from 7am each workday, working. I often work short days on weekends keeping up with the pace and demands.

I have my Earl Grey tea during the morning. I listen to my classical music from my Boston station CRB.

The first time I said: “It’s just work”, I infuriated my audience. Oops. I honestly intended comfort and sympathy. Seriously, it is what I do each day. Up, breakfast, tea, work. All over the world, in all sorts of situations, and facing all sorts of calamity and chaos work serves as a steadying and stabilizing factor.

When I uttered the phrase: “It’s just work” aloud in the lobby of the Hyatt House in San Juan Puerto Rico, it all backfired on me. Most of the tenants, or residents, of the hotel came to the islands to aid the Government of Puerto Rico through the recovery of the twin 2017 hurricanes Irma and Maria. The government selected our software as the tool to track all of the U.S. federal funds, collect all of the supporting evidentiary documentation, and guide people through the complicated financial recovery process. Our software strives to detect and deter fraud. Many of the other people in the hotel worked for various consultancies who gathered and reported on the financial aspects of disaster recovery.

The U.S. Government, like so many other governments and aid agencies, require proof that funds support honest and productive efforts towards established goals – such as disaster recovery. Our goals during the months of October, November, and December of 2017 involved getting food, drinking water, power, and communication services to the nearly 4 million residents of the islands of Puerto Rico. There exists a cadre of professionals who respond to disaster with skills and expertise in financial recovery. We don’t swing hammers, pull wires, cook food, or deliver supplies. We facilitate the process of getting everything paid for. We are the bookkeepers and clerks of these huge messy operations. Honestly the least glamorous, least photogenic, least observed part of disaster response and recovery.

Chef José Andrés does amazing work feeding people through the World Central Kitchen. We all see him with his white coat and a skillet in hand. He, his team, his food, his resources show up then feed people. There is that sense of relief to those served by teams like World Central Kitchen. I know little more about Chef José other than what I see on television and the internet, yet I can infer, World Central Kitchen includes a logistics, financial, and fundraising division that pays the bills. Even charity organizations doing good works have to pay the bills and keep the books balanced.

Many, even most of us, have experienced that massive sense of relief and hope when rescuers arrive. As a paramedic, I used to show up to emergency calls in a big ambulance and then later in my chief’s car filled with medical supplies and communication gear. I had water, blankets, and carried hope for all. Sometimes people are deeply appreciative and deeply expressive about their feelings when rescuers and responders show up. I have retired from most of the uniformed efforts. I am no longer licensed as a paramedic and I no longer fight real fires. The work was difficult but people during crisis often showed the very best of themselves. I love that.

Before retiring from emergency services, I responded from Vermont to a crisis in Massachusetts. I drove my flashy chief's car with all of my flashy paramedic and firefighting gear to some town hall. I passed through several police checkpoints. Some waved me through, but one cop noticed the Vermont tags before stopping and asking the obvious question: "Where are you going and why?"

Clearly, I was not responding as a paramedic. They didn't need me as a firefighter. I spoke honestly: "I am part of the financial response unit for the incident management team." A lot of words that obscured the facts that I am a computer programmer doing bookkeeping.

It's rare that anyone gives emergency lights and a siren to chefs, bookkeepers, logisticians, computer programmers, and all of the other unseen services. Yet, that cadre always exists and always has. Some of the earliest evidence of writing on this planet is about keeping accounts and bookkeeping. The proof of Vikings trading in North America is shown with tally-sticks done in bone and antler. That means that some Scandinavian traveler did the math and bookkeeping while wandering the Canadian coastal waters. Odd to think of Scandinavians in their longboats with an accountant in the ranks. The evidence exists, they keep a tally of trades.

This professional cadre of disaster recovery staff gather each receipt and invoice. They gather payroll data and usage logs of equipment such as generators. Yes, these professionals dispense advice as well. The advice normally includes variations on how to record and keep the proof of the expenditures and a reminder of the risks when fund recipients fail. When grant fund recipients fail, the grant money goes away - or even gets taken back. These professionals counsel their clients on how to follow procurement law and make sure that the stewardship of federal or internal aid funds adheres to rules.

This is work. Normally, it is honest and hard work. It is work done under difficult conditions, typically, the teams fly into disaster zones. And when every civic and political leader wants urgent problems solved immediately, these people strive to remind these leaders to remain within the law. Regardless of location and culture, the pressure to solve problems during crisis often triggers leaders to seek shortcuts. These shortcuts sometimes run counter to the responsibility for spending federal funds. You can't just hire your family and friends.

Disaster response work is difficult and often thankless.

But that is true for a lot of work, isn't it?

I love watching videos of master crafts and master trades people do their work: stone carver, wood worker, chef, butcher. I love also watching videos of master musicians. In each movement, I am awed by the precision, efficiency, and skill. That came from years and thousands of hours of effort and mistakes and failures. Getting from here to there is work. Hard work. Dedicated work.

I sound like an Old New England Puritan. I do not mean to.

So when, at the Hyatt House in San Juan I said: “It is just work” I tried to convey something beautiful and rhythmic and routine in the effort.

People stood before me telling me that tracking \$5 billion dollars one dollar at a time was too much work, I agree, it is a lot of work. The roads are closed. 95% of the resident have no power and have no fresh water. Hundreds of thousands of homes have no roofs. The grocery stores have no food. And the only way forward for the people of Puerto Rico is push through the paperwork one invoice at a time.

Sure, me and my team are tool smiths. Our software improves the process. Our tool helps. Our software does not do its own data entry. And there is no one else coming to the islands to do the data entry. That is the job. While the citizens struggle, we are fed. While no one else has internet, we do data entry. Because the bills have to be paid.

Through out the hotel teams of individual sat on floors and sat on beds and sat at hotel desks typing from dawn to dusk. They’d text me and I’d help. Massive amount of data was being put into the system. During first eighteen months, these people scanned and uploaded over 400,000 digital documents. These documents took up 1.8Tb of space on our servers.

Here and there people said: There has to be a better way. There must be a faster way. You need to make these easier on me. Sure, we kept improving the software to help but as everyone knows (or nearly everyone knows), software is the tool. The software needs humans to make decisions and get the data into it.

I never really understood a billion dollars. I can kind of wrap my brain around a million. A few hundred thousand here and a few hundred thousand there... boom, you get to a million. I am not the nickel-candy-bar generation – that was my parent’s generation. There is no nickel-candy bar, anymore. A million dollars US is fewer than 10 modest homes. A million dollars US is about 20 or 25 new full-size pickup trucks. I can count to 25. And if I can count to 25 pickup trucks, I can count to 1 million.

A billion was always that number just beyond my understanding. I had been managing million and multi-million dollar projects for two decades. A billion pushes my understanding. The initial or emergency phase of Puerto Rico’s recovery cost FEMA about \$5 billion dollars, which means it cost the U.S. taxpayers \$5 billion dollars. Very roughly the same amount The City of New York received in support following Hurricane Sandy.

Gather invoices and time records and receipts for \$5 billion in expenses is tough work. Making it more complicated... working in two languages; working to support disaster recovery whilst living in the disaster zone; and more.

It is hard work. It is slow steady work. It is work few people can do. It is necessary work.

That’s true for so much of most of us, isn’t it?

In 2020, we all expanded our appreciation and understanding of essential workers. We've added the grocer and many others to the list of essential workers. The longer we try to live in locked down, the more we recognize how much we need our communities and each other.

The work we each do, some how supports another. I know I have 74 webpages to upgrade. No short cut utility is saving me time. I can't write a tool to simplify the job. I must, just like so many other tasks, do the work.

That's ok. My modest effort, my steady plod through the tasks is a tiny effort in helping some unknown customer avoid problems. If I fail, maybe I open a security problem. If I don't keep going, maybe I expose the database to a problem we don't need to. We've made a promise that we, our software, our expertise, can and will help others through their crisis. I'll do that by making a daily and even hourly investment in work.

Working inside a disaster zone, living for months in a hotel is a choice that individuals make. The job requires long, long hours in difficult conditions. The work involves chasing every bloody piece of paper possible to help prove that funds are being used honestly and in accordance to rules.

I guess I am lacking in sympathy, huh? I don't want to. I want the phrase to be sympathetic and empathetic. How or why? Because the phrase: "It is just work" echoes my inner voice. I say to myself, I can get through 74 web pages by working through each web page one at a time. I may not know how to write, record, and publish 33 total podcast episodes within a year. I do know how to write one, record one, and publish one. If I can do one, I can do two. If I do two, I can do three. And on. It is just work.

Hard work, work that requires focus (and heat). Work that requires skill and training. Work that required dedication. Work that may have no immediate or even apparent benefit. I don't know why Oracle APEX changed the database linky-stuff on these webpages. I am certain I can dig and find out. I could whine about the utility not working well. Ultimately, it is my duty to make sure that our suite of tools adhere to the highest standards - even when the standards shift.

"It is just work" serves our team as a polestar or guiding phrase. I insist "It is just work" is an empathic phrase because I am giving voice to my inner mantra. You and I are the same. And during some part of each day, we work. We get paid for that work. And the work is what it is. Work is humble. Work is often private and executed alone. Work is often repetitive. If we're lucky, maybe the work brings calm and focus and a Zen-like state. I like being absorbed into my work. That mediative state can relax me.

Certainly not every day or every tasks. But when I find that groove, I breathe, and relax. Things get done.

What am I doing? I am working. Join me? It isn't easy. It isn't fast. It isn't photogenic. It makes for terrible TikTok entries. Just another human being at a keyboard, or practicing their craft.

It is just work, baby.

Thankfully, my work pay bills and brings me joy and I am grateful that I also get to help others along the way.

It is just work, and I am thankful for it.