

THE OCD DIARIES

TAG: GRATITUDE

MARCH 26, 2020

COVID-19 Gratitude 3: Seeing My InfoSec Friends Fight the Bad Guys



The pandemic has kept me and a lot of friends in the information security industry busy, as attackers try to cash in on the hysteria over COVID-19. Watching friends in the industry come together to do their part has been a powerful shot in the arm for me.

We are truly in this together.

Mood Music:

Nine Inch Nails - We're In This Together



A couple quick examples.

The COVID-19 CTI League, for cyber threat intelligence. This group spans more than 40 countries and includes professionals in senior positions at such major companies as Microsoft and Amazon:

One of four initial managers of the effort, Marc Rogers, said the top priority would be working to combat hacks against medical facilities and other frontline responders to the pandemic. It is already working on hacks of health organizations.

Also key is the defense of communication networks and services that have become essential as more people work from home, said Rogers, head of security at the long-running hacking conference Def Con and a vice president at security company Okta Inc.

—Joseph Menn, writing for Reuters

Cyber Volunteers 19 (CV19). This group formed specifically to target threats to healthcare facilities:

Cybercriminals are doing all they can to exploit the fear and confusion that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it. This exploitation does not stop at the hospital, medical facility, or healthcare service entrance. Staying on top of their cybersecurity game might not be the highest priority within those organizations right now, but it is nonetheless vital. It only takes one successful ransomware attack to have a life and death impact on patient care potentially....

One newly formed group of information security professionals, including company CISOs, penetration testers, security researchers, and more, have vowed to do all they can to help provide cybersecurity support to healthcare services across the U.K. and Europe.

—Davey Winder, writing for Forbes

These efforts are additional examples of how the current crisis has brought out the best in humanity.

When my spirits dim and waves of anxiety wash over me in these difficult days, seeing things like this give me the strength to keep showing up.

Rock on, friends.

MARCH 24, 2020

COVID-19 Gratitude 2: Getting My Health Back



There are many things I'm grateful for amid this pandemic. My health is one of them. A year ago, I would have been at much higher risk of catching COVID-19.

Mood Music:

Breaking Rocks



I'm certainly not bulletproof. No one is, based on the limited science we have on COVID-19 at the moment. But mentally and physically, I have much more fight in me.

This time last year, I was hovering around 290 pounds. I was on blood pressure medication, the CPAP was struggling to punch through airways under pressure from a fatty throat and I was getting migraines constantly. Weight-control measures that had worked in the past didn't cut it anymore, especially the food plan and 12-step program I was following via Overeaters Anonymous (OA), which I wrote a lot about earlier in the history of this blog.

My experience is not a condemnation of OA or anything else that works for others. Many people need a 12-step program when addictive behavior is the root of their pain. It simply didn't work for me. OA felt too much like a cult. I don't like answering to people on a good day (except my wife), so calling a sponsor every day to report on everything I'd be eating didn't work. I abandoned the program but kept the food plan and didn't replace it with something better suited to my needs.

My health slid down and my weight shot up. It took me seven years to find something that worked better. My body paid a price in the meantime, as did everyone around me.

I had less energy, less patience, and a lot less clarity of mind. I fell into more frequent bouts of deep depression.

By May 2019, I hit bottom. My wife had found success using the Noom app and tracking her daily steps with a Fitbit, so I decided to give those things a try.

The combination has worked out because it's allowed me to use data to manage my behavior. The numbers on the Fitbit tell me when I'm not moving around enough and compels me to get up and take walks. Noom allows me to track my calorie intake throughout the day to stay in check and has helped me make better food choices through its green-yellow-red classification system.

Using that simple combination, I'm down to 213 pounds — my lowest weight in more than a decade. I can't remember the last time I suffered a migraine. I fit in airplane seats comfortably again (not that it matters at the moment), and I'm not getting winded every time I walk a few steps uphill. I'm at the point where I can maintain my weight and be in fighting form. I'm going to 210 just for the hell of it.

I had to turn things around under normal circumstances. That I have maintained it amid this unprecedented global crisis makes me feel grateful and lucky.

Life is always hard. Better to have more strength for the fight.

That may be obvious, but it's not always easy to follow. Times like these show us that we must try harder.

SEPTEMBER 9, 2015

Nana's Desk

It's been more than two years since Nana Ruth passed away. The other day, family went through her house, looking for possessions to be preserved. Like this desk:



Nana Ruth did a ton of writing at this desk. She was a prolific diarist and churned out a lot of letters. I'm going to keep the tradition alive by doing a lot more writing here.

I'd like to think she'd be pleased about that.

AUGUST 26, 2015

Surviving the Persistence of Time

Here I am at another birthday. I've been telling people I couldn't care less this year. It's been a rough summer with too much upheaval, too much grief. There's not much to celebrate. But the truth is, I'm grateful to be here.

Mood music:

That I'm now in my mid 40s is surprising – in my mind, at least.

When I was sick with Crohn's Disease as a kid, I lost a lot of blood and developed several side ailments. When the OCD was burning out of control, I often felt I'd die young. I had a fatalistic view of things and just assumed I wasn't long for this world and I didn't care. I certainly did a lot to help the dying process along.

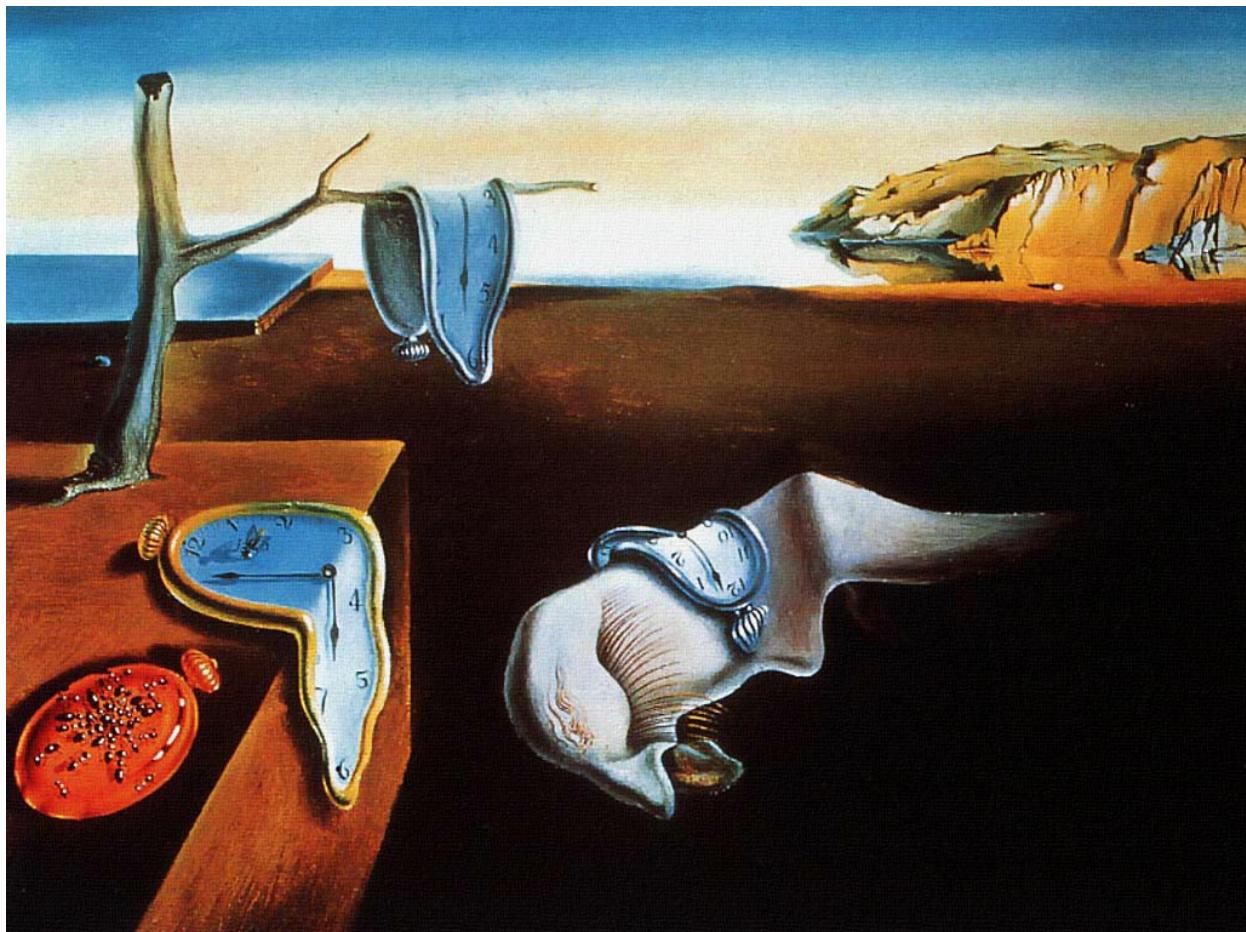
I also had a strange fear of current events and was convinced at one point that the world would burn in a nuclear holocaust before I hit 30.

When I was a prisoner to fear and anxiety, I really didn't want to live long. I isolated myself. I spent much of my 30s on the couch with a shattered back, escaping through TV. I was breathing, but I was as good as dead some of the time.

Despite all that, I'm still here. And while it's been a rough year, particularly since March, I'm grateful. I'm grateful for my wife, my children and my career.

I'm grateful for my faith, which has certainly helped me. I'm grateful for the army of friends and extended family that has been there in times good and bad. And I'm grateful for the good luck I've had.

With that in mind, celebrating might be appropriate after all. I think I'll give it a try.



"Persistence of Time," by Salvador Dali

JUNE 29, 2015

Dad Was a Survivor

Note: This is not Dad's official obituary — just my tribute to him.

Thursday we gathered by Dad's bedside to say goodbye. He lived for three more days. That was Dad. He was a survivor, tougher than leather and stubborn to the last. Around 3 this afternoon, his journey finally ended.

Mood music:

<https://youtu.be/bT7bbgsyzKc>

The last two months with him were a gift. By the end, nothing was left unsaid. He knew how I felt about him and I knew how he felt about me. We got to spend a lot of time trading wits and laughing about all the trouble I got into as a kid. He seemed satisfied with how I turned out.

His mind was sharp to the end, rattling off how he wanted his various business interests wrapped up, how he wanted money invested, how he wanted me to do things that were cheaper than other things.

Dad never had it easy. He faced crushing difficulties. He ran the family business from the time he was a teenager, when his own father fell ill. After the business burned in the Great Chelsea Fire of 1973, he rebuilt in Saugus, Mass. He and my stepmom expanded the business into a global enterprise and thrived.

He endured a tough divorce, lost his oldest child to an asthma attack, and helped my sister through long periods of crippling depression.

He had a lot on his plate with me, for sure. I was sick and hospitalized a lot with Crohn's Disease as a kid. I was an outcast who rebelled constantly. I saw his efforts to make me work and earn my money as tyranny and gave him a lot of grief. But as I grew older, my work ethic kicked in and I think he thought that his efforts with me had paid off.

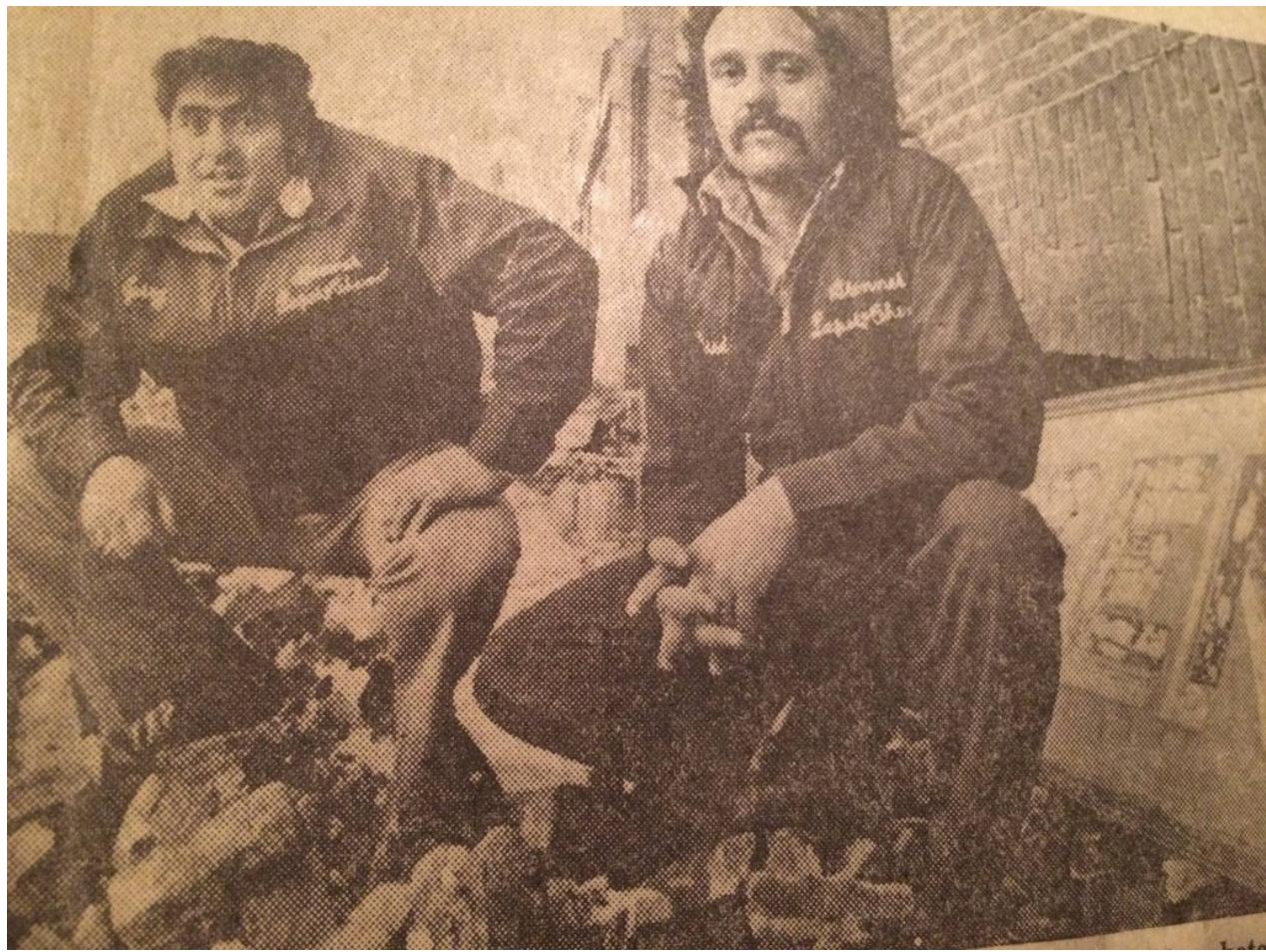
He was a man without a filter. He'd tell people exactly what he thought. If he thought you were getting fat, he'd say so. If you came to our house to find him walking around in his underwear, he didn't care. He was a human honey badger.

Under the tough exterior was a heart of gold. He took care of his family no matter what. He took care of his employees, too. One time, when an employee needed some extra financial assistance with a newborn baby, Dad quipped, "I'm paying for this kid and I didn't even get to have any fun."

He loved the little kids. He loved to push their buttons and be a tease. He lived life on his terms right to the end. It was a sight to behold.

I inherited the habit of loving and teasing the kids. I'd like to think I inherited his toughness, too, but I'll let others be the judge.

Thanks, Dad.



Dad and an employee stand over the rubble of Brenner Paper Company after the 1973 Chelsea fire. Within a year, he had the business back up and running from a new building in Saugus.

JUNE 23, 2015

Thanks for Everything, Aunt Marlene

Marlene Brenner died yesterday at the age of 68. She was my aunt — my father's younger sister — and I owe her a lot.

Mood music:

Aunt Marlene was a constant presence in my childhood. With my siblings and grandmother, we'd go on trips to the White Mountains and lakes of New Hampshire. Many a family meal was had at her house in the Point of Pines, Revere, which was a quick walk from my father's house at the southern part of the neighborhood and my mother's house from the northern section.

My parents divorced when I was 10 and I often hung out in that house to escape the difficulties. I loved that house. More often than not, it was a place for holiday celebrations.

At the family business in Saugus, my aunt had a needlepoint shop in the building for a time in the 1970s. I used to hide in her back room watching Saturday-morning cartoons on the little TV she kept in there. In later years my father put a shoe store in that space and my aunt managed it for many years.

I remember her checking the ingredients of every food package before letting me have it because I was often sick from Crohn's Disease and wasn't supposed to have milk.

Her family always came first. She focused on the family business at the expense of a social life.

She didn't have it easy. She would often isolate herself from the rest of the world and skip family gatherings later in life. As a kid I didn't quite understand that, but as an adult

it was clear that like me and other family members, she suffered from depression.

She suffered a stroke in mid-March and never really recovered from it. Her decline coincided with that of my father, who is still hanging on in hospice as I write this.

It's been a sad time for the family. But I've spent a lot of that time looking through old photo albums my aunt and grandmother kept, learning more about a rich family history I couldn't grasp as a kid. That's been a huge gift.

Mostly, my memories are full of family doing the best they could under often difficult circumstances. That includes memories of my aunt taking me to the mountains and lakes, giving me crucial breaks from my own personal demons.

I'll never forget that, and I'm forever grateful.

Rest in peace, Aunt Marlene.

MARCH 12, 2014

From Stress and Fear to Passion

A friend shared one of those inspirational memes with me yesterday, and it got me thinking about my approach to work — and how far I've come in general.

Mood music:

<http://youtu.be/MhtednkzJI4>

The meme says, simply:

Man, is that ever true. I know, because I've been on both sides of the equation.

Sometimes the job was intolerable. Mostly, my own demons were intolerable.

During my days as a newspaper reporter and editor, all I knew was stress. Stress over the next deadline. Stress over the backstabbing and petty squabbling often prevalent in newsrooms.

I used to hide by trying to sleep by day as much as possible — especially on weekends — and at night my sleep was pierced with the nightmares stress will generate deep in the brain.

My first job as a security writer was full of stress, too, but it was different. The job itself was good. My coworkers welcomed me from the beginning, and I was well compensated compared to what I had made before. But I was also full of self-loathing, anger and addictive compulsion due to a variety of issues.

I sorted it out, mostly during my time at that job. Then the next job came along, and I had a blast. By then I had pretty much come to grips with my OCD, depression and other issues, and I had a stronger spiritual foundation under me. I was more confident and finally had the ability to approach assignments with an almost child-like glee.

Now I'm at Akamai in a position that's quite different from those I've been in before. I'm inside a security operation instead of outside looking in. I'm part of a team of awesome people I learn new things from every day, and I have the freedom to swing for the fences with my ideas.

It fills me with a lot of passion. Sometimes the passion feels like stress, but that's usually when I fail to use the myriad coping tools God has given me.

All in all, it's a great station to be at in life. I'm blessed for sure. The equation started to turn when I faced down my fears, which brings me to another meme I'll end with:

JANUARY 18, 2014

The Friends Joe “Zippo” Kelley Left Behind

The fourth annual Joe “Zippo” Kelley Memorial show is tonight. Sadly, I can’t be there this year because of business travel. But I hope many of you will make it out to pay homage to a golden soul.

Mood music:

Joe died in August 2010. At the time, it had been years since I had last seen him, and I didn’t know people like Anne Genovese, Audrey Clark, James Melanson, Harry Zarkades and Gretchen Shae. Since then, I’ve met them at shows and through Facebook, where friends of Joe gathered to remember him in the months after his death. Along the way, old friendships have been rekindled and new ones forged. I’m a richer man for it. I’ve also gotten to know and grow fond of Joe’s parents.

My musical tastes have widened to include The 360s and a lot of punk. I’ve also gotten to know the other guys from Pop Gun (I’d already known the drummer, Greg Walsh, for years) and have a renewed appreciation for The Neighborhoods, who headlined the first benefit show.

This is how it happens: You go do something to honor a guy who is no longer with us. Then, from his perch in Heaven, he leads you to a bunch of people who become friends. It gives new meaning to the idea that someone lives on after death.

Details for tonight:

JANUARY 9, 2014

My Brother Lives on in the Nephew He Never Met

Thirty-one years ago this week, my older brother Michael died at age 17. I felt the need to write something to mark the anniversary. But to be honest, I didn't know what to say.

Mood music:

http://youtu.be/hEXpmYNgdB?list=PLLFxufQM_PMu0EJn7shfH34GFPkEBXE_f

Part of that is because I wrote the whole “how his death affected me” post three years ago in “[Death of a Sibling](#).” I also delved into the lighter memories — the outrageous and hilarious shit he used to pull — in “[Celebrating a Lost Sibling](#).”

Then yesterday, during my 45-minute drive to the office, I was chuckling over a crack my oldest son made at my expense a few days ago.

“You know, Dad,” he said, staring at the Superman S on the T-shirt I was wearing, “you look like Superman, 20 years after saving the Earth, with more gray hair and more than a few extra pounds.”

I have the same, serrated brand of snark. I’ll scold him to teach him manners and respect, but I’m usually laughing inside. More often than not, I laugh aloud, which admittedly defeats the purpose of scolding him in the first place.

Truth is, I also enjoy it because it reminds me of my brother.

It’s funny how life works. Sean is [named for a best friend and surrogate brother who died](#) some years ago. But he’s sounding and looking more like my real brother all the time.

Like Michael, Sean has a unibrow and the start of some whiskers above his upper lip. He’s tall and lanky, the way Michael was before he started weight lifting in his early

teens. His hair grows wild, the way Michael's did, though the latter tried to control it with frequent hair cuts. Sean prefers a shaggy head.

There are some distinct differences between Sean and the uncle he never met, however. Michael was studying to be a plumber at the time of his death. He enjoyed the art of putting pipes together in just the right formation, allowing water to flow. Sean prefers putting LEGOs and robotic machinery together.

Sean is a Boy Scout, a choice his uncle — and dad, for that matter — would never have made. Sean is also more cautious and refined than Michael was. Sean hates his braces but hasn't pulled them off with a pair of pliers like his uncle did the same day his mouth metal was installed. Years later, my brother's act of rebellion is the stuff of treasured family lore. But Sean knows better than to try such a thing.

Differences aside, the similarities are hard to miss.

That makes me happy.

DECEMBER 19, 2013

Paying It Forward

Lately I've been doing profiles on people who inspire me. Last week, it was [Trey Ford](#). This week, it's Microsoft senior security strategist [Katie Moussouris](#). I'm doing so because they deserve the honors. But it's all part of a bigger strategy.

Mood music:

As I've noted before, my emotions this time of year tend to tilt toward the negative, and I'm definitely feeling depressed and prickly lately.

Though I've overcome a lot, I still get a huge shot of inspiration when I see others getting through their own adversity and doing great things. Focusing on them instead of my own crummy mood makes me feel better. The people I write about remind me that there's still plenty of hope for humanity.

It also does you more good to hear about them than to read my annual grumbling about the Christmas dispirit.

A lot of people have told me that this blog has been helpful to them because it has made them feel less isolated and alien — and because I've focused on sharing what I've learned about living a better life and getting out of the hole. I'm glad for that. But if I don't point you toward the many others setting powerful examples, I'm only doing half the job.

And so I'll continue to pay it forward.

Who knows? You may soon find a post about you on here.

