

A Journey, Not a Destination

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I remember my family's first computer. I used to spend my time playing Mickey Mouse Jigsaw puzzles and Oregon Trail on floppy disks. Given that I was three or four years old, that's all I knew how to do with a computer. Born at the beginning of the 1990s, I grew up as fast as technology did. But I still have fond memories of a time when we had "the phone" and "the computer". We knew to come inside by sunset, and that our parents would shout out at the door to reach us instead of calling our cell phones. If I wanted to reach my dad while he was at work, I called his beeper, even though I didn't understand why he couldn't answer it. As a child, I had no idea how rapidly technology would change my life, and, in a sense, perhaps most of the world didn't either.

In elementary school, we did not use computers daily; we had "computer day," where we would go to a computer lab and complete various tasks. Tasks might include learning to use web searches or keyboarding lessons, but most kids used the computer lab to find the latest proxy servers that let them visit flash game sites blocked by school administrators. But in hindsight, it might have been the moment I discovered the rules of the internet were not always clearly defined or defensible. The cat-and-mouse game was amusing. We would discover a new proxy, which would then be blocked, and we would need to use a different proxy to continue playing games. This was pre-Google, when the best search engines were "AskJeeves.com" or "Yahoo.com". The Internet was slow and typically tied up phone lines at home; there wasn't much internet gaming except for StarCraft or Warcraft. Our lives did not revolve around technology and the internet, but that would soon change in what seemed like an instant.

As I reached adolescence, I began discovering new concepts I hadn't encountered before. Home console video games were in 3D with crude polygonal graphics, and MMORPGs like EverQuest were popular. Every time the TV is on, it's a commercial for the latest tech gadget that

was exponentially faster than its predecessor. As the millennium approached, fears of the Y2K bug would collapse infrastructure. All the computers in the world were going to stop, schools would be closed, and planes would fall out of the sky. It was an eerie foreshadowing of the days when not only I, but our generation lost its innocence. I was in the fifth grade when suddenly, child after child was picked up from school. Those of us who were still in school had only rumors from other students about a possible bomb threat. Planes had fallen out of the sky, not from a computer virus, but from an attack on our nation. Until then, I had never heard the words “terrorist” or “national security”.

Life was different at that point, and not just how I saw society. My father was still having trouble finding steady employment after he lost his job during the dot-com bubble burst. His patriotism and duty to his family led him to re-enlist in the Navy. My dad spent his career in and out of the military, working in telecommunications and networking. The United States military needed his skills more than ever. During my sixth-grade school year, we moved back into my grandmother's house while my dad returned to Virginia to prepare for his first deployment in 14 years. We later moved from Hollywood, Florida, where I spent most of my life, to Virginia Beach, Virginia. As I adjusted to my father being out on regular deployments, I spent a lot of time on the computer playing video games. With the rapid expansion of online capabilities at the time, I was able to discover much of what shaped my identity. Like almost every teenager at the time, I used programs like LimeWire to download music and burn Mix CDs. One in every five torrents contained malware. Internet piracy was briefly addressed in television commercials and with ineffective warnings at the beginning of DVDs. To many kids my age, it was still considered a “victimless crime”, and we felt most of society portrayed it that way as well.

Middle school and high school were filled with instability. I used technology as a distraction to cope. The internet and video games provided me a lot of comfort and escape. Online, I could be anyone. I didn't need to be the child bullied daily, or the teenager with divorcing parents. Internet gaming reached greater heights, and social media was a new frontier where anything was possible. Current issues, such as cyberbullying and social media's negative impact on mental health, were not commonly discussed or questioned. The harmful effects of technologies were in a phase, much like before society knew how harmful smoking was to the human body. After I graduated from high school, I struggled to find my purpose and sense of direction. I coped by turning to alcohol, which developed into an addiction. My attempts at community college were never fruitful, as I lost interest and satisfaction in most things. After a few years, this all changed. I found a new purpose when I heard I would soon be a father.

Though it took some time to get back on my feet, I was determined to be there for my son. I wanted him to grow up having a better life than I did. My wife, son, and I moved to Illinois, where we would stay with my aunt to get a fresh start. I picked up a job and worked toward our 1st "Apartment," which was the upstairs of a house converted into a one-bedroom. I continued working in retail full-time. The inflexibility of retail work affected my time with my family and my recovery efforts. Sacrificing my time with my family was not something I was willing to do. I enrolled in Oakton Community College and decided to pursue an associate's degree in information systems. I went to school full-time while working a full-time and a part-time job in the evenings, delivering pizza. I knew that the hard work would pay off in the end, and I was determined. After many sleepless nights, I graduated and, shortly after, started my 1st job as a level one helpdesk technician for a company that assisted retailers with technical issues. My previous experience in retail, combined with my life experience, prepared me for this line of

work. I approached problem solving with logic, but also with an open mind. My personal struggles taught me to listen with empathy and relate to others' frustrations. Within a year, these skills helped me obtain a job with a reputable organization that put family first and offered my family and me real long-term stability.

After my first year as a Level One Helpdesk Administrator and my second year in IT, I earned my first Microsoft certification. My hands-on experience and heavy involvement in enterprise-level networked systems were beneficial. I noticed areas in which I could give back to my organization. In 2020, our organization was hit by a ransomware attack that brought business operations to a halt. Though we recovered quickly, I wanted to understand the flaws in our systems that led to the incident. In 2021, I continued to work for the organization remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed many new vulnerabilities. I decided that the most effective way I could give back to my employer was to study Cyber Security and apply the skills I learned to strengthen our security posture. While continuing my education at Old Dominion University, I became very interested in cybercrime and the societal challenges posed by rapid technological growth. Unlike my early childhood, my son grew up in a world blanketed by technology in every facet. I watched family members become victims of internet scams and disinformation campaigns. Seeing these injustices never settled right with me. I knew we could report the issues to either the platform or the state authorities, but there wasn't much that could be done beyond education.

My focus while working on my degree shifted from my organization alone to advocating for all of society. I recognized that I could use my knowledge to help and educate those who could not advocate for themselves. Cybercrime was of particular interest, which helped me explore ethical challenges and legislative gaps in protecting people. In the past two years,

artificial intelligence has only added to the ethical dilemmas and infrastructure challenges. I learned technical skills that help me achieve my goals and provide a foundation for addressing the issues I am passionate about. I have dedicated a total of seven years to my current organization and hold the role of “Infrastructure and Security Administrator.” I look forward to providing more value through my education.

In “Smith’s The Two Kinds of Stories,” (Emily Esfahani Smith) I have been able to use my hardships to give my life meaning. I have avoided my story becoming a “Contamination story” (Emily Esfahani Smith) and have rather made it a narrative of hope. My conclusion is not an end, any more than my bachelor’s degree in cybersecurity is a destination. My education has expanded my horizons. I am looking forward to using my knowledge to serve society and answer the hard questions. As new challenges arise, I am standing on a sturdy foundation of knowledge that will help me build toward solutions. My challenges in my young adult life have taught me meaningful interpersonal skills and wisdom. These skills have helped me advance my career, and my determination has helped me push through some of the most difficult times in my life and has guided my path toward a dedication to helping others. I am still active in recovery, and I spend time helping others looking to turn a new leaf. I get to use my knowledge to protect my family and friends from online threats. There were many times when I was compelled to give up during times of strife, but I’m glad I found my new purpose in life, and how rewarding it can be to pay it forward to others.

Works Cited

Emily Esfahani Smith. "The Two Kinds of Stories We Tell about Ourselves."

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