

/dev/random

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Make no mistake: I miss being a sysadmin. I did not truly realize to what extent that was true until the first job I had where I was a mere user. I couldn't install drivers, write scripts, change system options, put in patches, or much of anything else. To me, a computer represents something you optimize and manage so other people can use it to run programs and print stuff out. In the final analysis, I simply don't *like* being a mere user. It isn't really the sense of power that some sysadmins seem to crave; for me, it's more of an intimacy issue. I've been smitten by computers for all of my adult life and I like to be in touch with the whole enchilada. Being an ordinary user is akin to going to a museum. You can look, but you can't touch. Boring.

Being the system administrator allows you to meld with the computer and feel its innermost heartbeat. You can watch the packets skitter across the network interface, crawl up the stack to the application layer, and then spill out onto the user like so much confetti at a tickertape parade. (Some of you may need to stop and employ an Internet search engine such as Google at this point. I refuse to use "Google" as a verb.)

When you've got root you enter into "with great power comes great responsibility" territory: at once both intoxicating and sobering . . . which I guess would cancel each other out. Another evocative literary sloop dashed against the rocks of semantics. Anyway, sitting at the console with root access is like sitting at the helm of a great starship, the myriad galaxies glittering and twinkling in your forward viewscreen, all awaiting exploration. The process table is your ship's manifest, the processor is the propulsion system, the firewall and IDS are your shields, the router your navigation system, and the weapons bay . . . the weapons bay consists of your brain and your fingers, because if you weren't capable of doing damage that way you probably wouldn't be reading this. I hasten to add that this ship engages in purely defensive actions only. Really.

Your passengers are the users. You must keep them happy by avoiding rough seas (latency), noroviruses (malware), and running out of booze (inadequate quotas). You must also, of course, get them to their destination (process their data successfully) without running aground (crashing the system) or being intercepted and boarded by pirates (see malware, above). If the ship springs a (memory) leak, you must be ready to patch it immediately.

I was going to see how far I could carry the nautical metaphor but I'm starting to feel a little queasy, so it's time to tie off at the nearest dock and disembark. I hope you had a pleasant cruise. Customs should only take three or four hours; don't forget to declare that velvet mator painting and the six liters of tequila and rum you poured into empty shampoo bottles tucked away in your luggage.

I love looking at logs. To me they're like reading the daily news. System logs will show you which processes completed successfully and which took a dive. Security logs reveal who's been rattling your (hopefully locked) gates, casing the joint, or trying to slip malware under the door or through the transom. They can also provide a peek into the secret life of your machine: which applications play well with others and which don't.

Ah, what I wouldn't give for a return to the halcyon days when my mornings consisted of coffee and leisurely log scanning, instead of frantically trying to prioritize the huge stack of overdue tasks by which ones will engender the least abuse from my chain of command when finally completed. Had I known where I would be at this moment 15 years ago, I would have stayed put as a sysadmin. To quote Billy Joel, "if that's movin' up, then I'm movin' out."

Self-pity having had its say, let's get back on task. I must confess to being something of a network voyeur in that I've always been fascinated by using a sniffer to watch packets flitting to and fro. I don't mean reading their payloads so much as just witnessing TCP/IP in action. UDP is less engaging, because there's no flow to it: just the occasional incoming or outgoing datagram, like watching birds patronizing a rather unpopular feeder, or a slow golf game (if that isn't redundant). TCP/IP, on the other hand, is basketball, a continuous stream that experiences peaks and troughs of activity, depending mostly on what's going on at Layer 7.

I've always been the kind who enjoys helping people, so system administration was a natural for me. In contrast to the infamous "BOFH" (I'm using the abbreviation because I'm not sure how the editors would feel about my spelling it out), the powers of the system administrator may also be used for good. Solving problems for users can be very fulfilling. It can also be aggravating, but now that I have spent almost seven years as a user, I understand what makes some users act the way they do.

Speaking of that, sysadmins tend to get the impression that their users are somewhat intellectually challenged. I certainly did. Now that I have quite a bit of experience on the other side, I find myself constantly questioning the cognitive abilities of the IT staff. I suppose that's unavoidable, as neither side has access to the thought processes and priorities of the other. An alternate conclusion one might reach is that I simply think I'm smarter than everyone else, but I'm going to sidestep that one as uncharitable because it's my column and I can do that.

I've heard rumors that the sysadmin is a doomed species whose time on Earth is rapidly dwindling down to a few last chmod spasms. I don't believe them. Taking a human out of the loop may seem to streamline and normalize the administration process, but at least you can reason with a human sysadmin (chocolate and beer, for example, being powerful arguments). When your human-less network server tells you that your quota has been exceeded and your account will be frozen as a result, who you gonna call?