

Just another Thursday

This past Thursday seemed like another day. I wrote a response to an NYT story about the FCC and Google and sent it to a mailing list but wasn't ready to post it.

But was then distracted ... I had bought a nice bike for my younger son and saved \$400 by buying last year's model but it had to be shipped all the way from Peterborough NH. Should've been overnight but as it looked like far longer decided picking it up was a good idea and being the responsible father I got my wife to volunteer to make the trip.

At about 10AM I get a call ... the car died in Amherst NH. The day did not go as planned. Arranged to get the car hauled to Nashua and drove to pick up the crew and head on to Peterborough in blinding rain. The word torrential is not an exaggeration – please people, turn your lights on when you're driving the rain.. Fortunately the rain eased up during the times when I had to be out of the car.

The bike fit in the car (so we avoided dealing with a bike rack) and the return trip was relatively uneventful except we headed into the dread hour of rush. Google maps was sending me into the heart of I-95 even though it “knew” how badly traffic was backed up. When I saw the line of red tail lights I decided to try a route that avoided highways and it took about half the time.

Shouldn't Google do that automatically? Actually, better they don't – after all, if it did then my alternative routes would quickly fill up. Riding is a combat sport and I should get some advantage for my quick thinking.

Armed with a new route I headed off into the heart of deepest Lexington. Meandering the byways but not the highways of Waltham and thence Newton we made it back to the Highlands only to find all the lights out – the entire region had lost its power including my kitchen until I noticed that my wall switches were lit up and they actually worked. My block of houses in the Highlands was an island of power in a sea of power lost. So the day did end well, albeit not quite as planned.

Today (Saturday) I went to pick up my wife's car – a 2004 Volvo S80. The dealer found no problem with it. This is the second time we had a system failure but this time I asked for a print out of the diagnostic codes. The repair guy couldn't help me much beyond that because it's not a mechanical problem so all he could do is guess.

I drove back home (fortunately This American Life was entertaining so the time passed quickly) and looked at the diagnostic codes. Now I was in my comfort zone – a com-

puter problem. Unfortunately the diagnostic system, at least the 2004 version, didn't leave much of a trail since I didn't have the time stamps needed to piece together the exact sequence of events.

But one caught my attention “BCM-0148 Communications between control units Wrong configuration ID”. Hmm, seems like a dropped bit and the confused BCM (Break Control Module?) sent a message to all systems that things were falling about to send them in fail safe mode. Or, perhaps, the bus lost power momentarily and it was all modules for themselves.

All I know is that the car is working again but my wife doesn't like the idea of a car that can just shut down.

And there it stands – I'm trying to find out more about this kind of problem as it can't be very rare but the world of mechanical devices and software have an uneasy relationship so the useful information is scarce.

All the more reason for an open API so I can do my own monitoring. I'm encouraged with Ford announcing an open API and other ongoing efforts in Europe. How this will play out I don't know but increasingly software expertise is going to be a fundamental skill for understanding how things work. And once we have a population thinking abstractly the world will change.

For now my son is wise in choosing a bike over driving.