

Sunday, February 10, 2008

It was touch and go, but I survived my first week at the new job! Just kidding, I got through it just fine. But it was definitely a challenging week.

On Monday I started my "commute" a little after eight. It was a chilly morning, but once the blood got pumping I was comfortable. The walk from home to work is between 15 and 20 minutes, a little longer on the way back because it's uphill. Tomorrow I'm going to try biking it which should only take 5 minutes or so. When I got to the office I was surprised to find the front door locked, though I could see people inside. After a few minutes one of them noticed and let me in; apparently most employees come in the back door which requires a key code. I went up to the second floor where the software engineers sit and found my boss Jake, who showed me to my desk, complete with laptop and external monitor all set up and ready to go. He then handed me off to Ross, a fellow UI developer, who gave me the tour of the building and introduced me to pretty much everyone who was there, most of whose names I promptly forgot of course.

One in particular I remember very vividly though. I get a real kick out of this: as I was being introduced to the other developers one at a time, one of them turned around to say hello and we both immediately did a double-take. We couldn't figure out at first how we knew each other, but we knew we did. The reason that we were having trouble was that we had to bridge the gap between the two worlds of technology and music. After several seconds I finally figured it out: Darin and I both studied piano with Alvin Chow at CU at the same time, him finishing up his master's during my first year as an undergrad. Somehow we both managed to cross over into the technology world and ended up working at the same place, hired only a couple weeks apart! Very funny. We didn't have a whole lot of time to talk and catch up but we'll definitely do more of that as time goes on.

The Local Matters office is very nice, with lots of character; it's an old brick building, apparently originally a coffin factory, that has been renovated as office space. It has four stories, plus a basement which they're currently working on making into an employee lounge/recreation area. Each floor is completely open, and there's a basement-to-ceiling area in the middle with an elevator going up and a skylight at the top to let natural light filter down to every floor. The development area is set up bullpen-style, with no walls between workstations, which freaked me out a bit at first but I've quickly come to appreciate the feeling of openness and collaboration it facilitates.

After the tour we returned to my desk and I started setting up my machine with the necessary tools for development, most of which was nicely documented on

the department wiki. Thankfully all of the tools are ones I was already intimately familiar with: Java, Tomcat, Maven, etc., so the process went smoothly for me without any handholding.

Before I could finish setting up, though, Jake came and whisked me into a handoff meeting, which is their standard process for handing off a project iteration from the requirements/information architecture folks to development. Normally that's the forum where development asks the questions and gets all the information which they will need to perform the work, but of course I didn't have a clue what I was looking at so I wasn't any help. After the meeting I was told that I would not only be working on that project, but that I'd be the only UI engineer working on it and it would be due on Friday! Yikes! So I got busy right away, with lots of help from Ross and other colleagues, getting the project checked out and deployed locally and digging into the codebase to start familiarizing myself with how things work. It's an impressive system they have in place, with some really slick modularization/project inheritance structures so they can share a lot of functionality between products. (Maven automatically does overlaying of WAR dependencies? Wow, wish I'd known that before!) But it's also very big, which means I'd have a whole lot to learn in a very short time.

I'd say it wasn't until Wednesday that I finally had a strong enough grasp of all the working pieces to where I felt I could actually do useful work on the project. Fitting, then, that on Wednesday I was given work on a *different* project to be completed that day! Luckily, this one was really just another client implementation of the same core product, so I was able to get it checked out and deployed and start working on it without anyone helping. That much at least made me feel good. I managed to get the work done that day and released a build to QA the next morning, and then got back to the original project. Unfortunately the amount of work involved was just too much for me to finish by the end of the week, once all my ramp-up time and the time spent on the other project was factored in. It felt a bit disappointing to not be able to make the deadline and blow everyone away with being able to handle everything that was thrown at me like a magician, but I guess I have to be realistic. And everyone else seemed to be realistic about it too, so I don't feel like I let anyone's expectations down.

Friday afternoons the company has "Free Beer Friday", which is basically a company-sponsored and sanctioned happy hour where employees are encouraged to stop working at 3pm, grab a beer, and socialize as a way to wind down the week. The idea is to allow a sense of comraderie to grow naturally without forcing "team-building exercises" on people. It's totally voluntary, come and go as you please. Quite refreshing to tell the truth.

A lot of things about the company are refreshing, in fact. The biggest thing for me, though, is that I get the overwhelming sense that each and every person I work with is every bit as smart as me, or more so. It's abundantly clear that they are very picky about the talent they hire, and not just for their technical skills but also as a cultural fit. In that sense I feel very lucky to have been hired, and it's a real treat to work in an environment where developers are so highly respected. I'm a firm believer that when you get great minds together and give them the freedom to innovate, great things can happen. Very exciting.

So that was my first week. I'm not sure I've completely recovered over the weekend, but it's back to it tomorrow. My prediction for this week is that as I get even more comfortable and settled, I'll enjoy it even more.

Posted by Jason at [23:00:36](#) - [[0 Comments](#)]

Monday, January 21, 2008

This morning I put in my two weeks notice at Intrado.

It's been part of our plan from the beginning of this whole "lifestyle makeover" that we'd move to downtown, Julie would start up her consulting business, and I would find a swank job within walking distance where I could be a Web rockstar. It's happened a lot faster than either of us expected but we're now three for three.

I'd been keeping my eye out for job postings for a few months but hadn't actively pursued any. At November's [Refresh Denver](#) meeting I met Jay, a developer at [Local Matters](#) in downtown Denver. He told me a bit about the company and that it was a great place to work, and I took a look at their job postings and it sounded like exactly what I was looking for. Fast-forward two months and I got an interview.

I made the walk down to the Local Matters office on Friday morning -- brisk but not uncomfortably cold once the blood got pumping. I filled out an application and then met with Jake, the manager of the development team. He gave me a very thorough introduction to the company's business, internal development processes, and culture. Then he brought in Jill and Ross, two of their user interface engineers, who grilled me on my experience with various UI technologies, Web standards, preferred tools, and beer preference. I think I really realized the interview was going well when they started ribbing me about my affinity for Blue Moon.

The company seems to have a real startup-like atmosphere, though it seems very well established and successful so I don't feel the level of risk of a startup. The thing that stuck out most to me was that they really realize the value of brain power... they obviously have been extremely selective about the engineers they hire, so everyone there is very smart and brilliant at what they do. And they realize that smart people can come up with innovative, business-altering ideas if allowed the opportunity and resources to experiment. Basically it's exactly the sort of environment where I thrive.

They obviously realized the match as well, since they made me a very good offer only about an hour after I got back from the interview. I held off accepting on the spot so I could discuss the benefits package etc. with Julie (this whole marriage thing is a collaborative effort after all) but ended up accepting later that day.

So this morning I got to break the news to my boss Victor and the rest of my colleagues. Everyone has been very congratulatory but sad to see me go. It's definitely bittersweet for me, because Intrado has by and large been very good to me over my four years there. I've been given plenty of opportunity to grow and learn -- I came in not knowing a lick of Java but now consider myself a senior-level Java programmer -- and have enjoyed working with the people there. It's also rare to be able to know that the code you're writing is directly saving lives by making sure 9-1-1 calls get routed to the right emergency services.

But when I really think about what's important to me in my long-term career, both professionally and personally, Intrado just doesn't match up. The commute is long and grueling, but I want to be able to walk or bike to work. I'm a Web guy who's attracted to the freedom and sharing of information that the public Web provides, but Intrado's applications, while largely browser-based, are all private. I want to be able to work with cutting edge technologies, and even help invent them, but that doesn't fit in with a 9-1-1 company where technologies must be stable and proven for reliability. I only want to be limited by my own intellect and programming skills, but too often at Intrado I find myself limited by the processes of a large company. This all says that it's time for something new.

So two weeks from today, on my birthday, I will start my new job as User Interface Engineer at Local Matters. These next two weeks promise to be very full as I do my best to transfer as much knowledge to my Intrado colleagues as possible. I'm extremely excited about the new opportunities I will have, and how all the difficulty and frustration we've experienced with our lifestyle plans over the past year are coming together exactly how we hoped. Life is good.

Posted by Jason at [22:57:11](#) - [[1 Comment](#)]

Monday, December 24, 2007

Happy Holidays

We are currently in Orange, California visiting my family. My sister Melissa is also in town for the week or so we're here which is great since we haven't seen her much for a while. It's been a very nice visit so far, but a very interesting one. My parents have been doing major down-to-the-studs renovation over the past ten months of the house I grew up in, and it's still not finished but we're all staying here anyway. We've had to go rummaging through boxes in the garage anytime we've needed things like cooking utensils, but we've made do and had a very nice time at that. Just goes to show it's the family that makes a home.

Merry Christmas to everyone!

Posted by Jason at [19:36:10](#) - [[1 Comment](#)]

Thursday, December 06, 2007

2-Car Family

It's been over a year, but we're finally a two-car family again! Our trusty (or just rusty?) old Focus had been undriveable, sitting untouched on the street in front of the old house. A big part of that was just our laziness about taking it in to get fixed up, but we really haven't had a need for a second car. Even with our long commutes it's easier to carpool. There are occasions every few months of course, like when Julie had to go to Boulder during the day for a freelance client, where it would have been nice to have the second vehicle, but I don't know if that little inconvenience justifies the expense of a second vehicle.

But anyway, we sort of had our hand forced in that respect when we moved; I don't think the new owners of our old place would appreciate having their front curb be the permanent parking spot for our junker. So we had it towed to a local shop specializing in transmissions, since we knew that among its issues was the inability to shift gears. We were prepared for a huge estimate, fully expecting that the transmission was completely shot and would have to be rebuilt. We'd had discussions about how much we'd be willing to pay to fix it up and at what point we'd just decide to donate it for a tax writeoff.

Apparently the automotive gods were smiling on us, however, since it turns out there was nothing wrong with the transmission itself, but some sort of wire controlling the shifting had been chewed through, probably by the rabbit making its home under the car while it was parked on the street for a year. Replacing that wire, and putting in a new alternator to clear up some other electrical issues, and it's running perfectly smooth. We picked it up from the shop last night; it took some adjustment getting used to its relatively sluggish feel again, since we're spoiled with our zippy little Fit, but it's running as well as it ever did.

So now, of course, we need to decide if we really want to keep a second car around or not. We'll probably hang on to it for the short term at least, to see if Julie's new freelancing situation makes it more necessary.

Posted by Jason at [09:10:26](#) - [[0 Comments](#)]

Sunday, December 02, 2007

We made some good progress on unpacking this weekend. It's been a slow process, not helped at all by our feeling daunted at the enormity of it. We go in fits and spurts, alternating between being completely lazy and apathetic, and getting so frustrated at the clutter that we bang out a ton of boxes at a time. This weekend saw a lot of the latter. The garage is actually starting to look like we may be able to park our car in it sometime relatively soon. Preferably before we have a blizzard or something.

Friday night we got to spend a few hours visiting with [Jim](#) since he was in town recruiting high school students. We walked downtown in the sub-freezing cold, dodging the crowds for the [Denver Parade of Lights](#), and met Jim at his hotel. We spent the rest of the night in the hotel lobby bar drinking and talking about life. A good portion of the conversation was coming up with ways to convince Leia that she and Jim should move to Denver. Who knows if it's actually a possibility, but it sure would be fantastic!

Last weekend we drove down to visit my mother's family in Aztec and Farmington, New Mexico for Thanksgiving. We're really wanting to make that trip a yearly (at least) thing, since we always have such a great time there with everybody, and they're the nearest family to where we're living. This year my mother also happened to be visiting there at the same time, so we got to see her too. No dad this time, but we'll take what we can get! We'll be flying to California in a few weeks for Christmas too so we'll get to see them both again anyway.

Posted by Jason at [22:16:10](#) - [[0 Comments](#)]

Sunday, November 25, 2007

Greetings from our new residence in Denver!

After my last post things happened very quickly. We got an offer on the house which was close enough to asking price to break even, and given the increasingly difficult market conditions we decided to accept. That, of course, was the easy part. We found ourselves with a very short timeframe, just over one month, in which to either find the perfect place to live or find a place to rent temporarily and have to move twice. Luckily we managed to do the former. We found a newly-built townhouse condo unit with a layout and size that would suit our needs (finding places which would accommodate our grand piano was a chore). Its best feature by far though is the location; it's in the Lower Highlands ("LoHi") neighborhood, which is close enough to downtown to easily walk there, but far enough to be out of the Crazy, and of course more affordable.

It was a big chance we took, but so far it has totally lived up to our expectations. We've been taking advantage of our new walkable environment as much as we can since we moved in, and are absolutely loving it. There's just something about being able to get places on your own two feet that feels so much more fulfilling and natural. I like standing halfway across the pedestrian bridge over I-25 and looking down on all the cars zooming underneath and being so glad that I'm not one of them. It's much more "our speed" as Julie likes to say.

Of course the process to get here, especially the stress of finding the right place on a short schedule and the hell that was moving day (I won't go into details), made us wonder at the time if it would be worth it. And the condo is still a complete mess of unpacked boxes and random stuff piled everywhere, so it'll be weeks or months before the place feels truly like a comfortable home. But in the long term I think we're both convinced this was the right decision for us.

Posted by Jason at [08:08:03](#) - [[0 Comments](#)]

Saturday, September 08, 2007

Catching Up, Part II: Home

Last year sometime Julie and I got the idea in our heads that we wanted to move out of the 'burbs and close to downtown Denver. There are a lot of motivations behind it, including a desire to be able to walk places, easier access to cultural events, and a simpler, less wasteful lifestyle in general. It's definitely not been an easy decision, and we've gone back and forth on it many times. We do love our house -- I mean, we hand-picked most everything about it to suit us when it was built -- and there are a lot of things about the suburbs that are convenient and appealing. But it comes down to the fact that when we imagine our life five or ten years down the road, this isn't the lifestyle we see.

So we finally got up the guts to go for it, and after several weeks of decluttering and organizing and cleaning and decorating we put our house on the market. We chose a listing price that would allow us to break even, and have had what I understand is a decent number of showings for this area and the current housing market. Unfortunately we haven't received any offers in about four months. It's been a bit frustrating, not so much the lack of offers itself but more just being in a state of limbo; not knowing if we're going to be able to sell and move or have to stay put for a while has really been difficult to deal with.

We actually tried a few weeks ago to take it off the market but decided to keep it listed at least through October to ride out the contract with our realtor. And just this past week we decided to try dropping the asking price, just a little bit so we won't be taking a big loss, to try and spark some last-minute interest. Personally I'm still feeling hopeful but not very optimistic; it's no secret that the housing market is, well, sucking pretty hard right now. We'll know pretty quickly if this price drop makes any difference.

And even if nothing comes of it and we have to stay here for a while, we've still got a beautiful home in a decent neighborhood with lots of open space trails nearby, and if nothing else this process has forced us to get the house cleaned up and keep it that way. And that's no small thing.

Posted by Jason at [23:48:05](#) - [[1 Comment](#)]

Wednesday, August 08, 2007

Catching Up, Part I: Health

It's been fifteen months since my pleurodesis lung surgery. Last summer after the surgery I really didn't do a whole lot in the way of physical activity ... went on a

couple easy hikes, maybe a short bike ride or two ... but for the most part I took it easy to make sure I was good and recovered. Julie also had her surgery last July so I was motivated to stay inside and help her recover rather than getting out.

This Spring, however, I promised myself would be much different. Once fully recovered, the lung surgery practically eliminated the nagging chest pains I had been living with for the prior few years, and as that pain disappeared my appetite improved drastically. I made a conscious effort over the fall and winter months to put back on the weight I had lost due to my poor health, and even more. I feel now that I'm at a much healthier weight for my build, and I have more energy as a result.

I didn't just want to put on weight, though... I needed to get my strength and stamina back up too. Julie and I both bought inline skates since it looked like a good way to get exercise and enjoy being outside without a lot of impact on knees and ankles and such. Julie never really got past the oh-crap-I-can't-keep-my-feet-under-me phase, but I stuck with it and pretty quickly became comfortable enough to really enjoy it. I also quickly discovered that Broomfield has a great network of wide paved paths that are perfect for skating. I can skate all the way from our house, down through the Broomfield community center with its ponds and recreational fields, all the way to Hwy 287 (and probably beyond), roughly a six-mile round trip, almost entirely on concrete paths. It's a great overall workout and has helped a lot with my strength and endurance.

The other thing I did was to finally splurge and buy myself a very nice mountain bike, a [Gary Fisher HiFi Plus](#). I had always enjoyed biking as a kid (many of my fondest memories are of riding along the [Santa Ana River](#) trail with my dad) and also in more recent years, but the poor old bike I'd built from parts and kept from disintegrating all these years was showing its age and was no longer very enjoyable to ride. Buying a new bike had been on my short list for a few years but always got pushed to the back burner for other more pressing needs. But finally I saved up the money and decided to treat myself to something that would not only replace my old bike, but would also be able to handle actual mountain bike trails since we've got so many here. I had never done that kind of rough riding before, but I had a strong feeling I'd like it. I haven't been disappointed either; I've taken it out on a few trails and it handles amazingly well, and is nice to ride even on our local gravel and concrete paths. Julie also got a new bike recently so we've been doing some early-morning rides together which are lots of fun.

With all this rollerblading and biking, my strength and endurance are the best they've been in years. It feels great to be healthy, *really* healthy, again.

Posted by Jason at [19:47:47](#) - [[2 Comments](#)]

Sunday, August 05, 2007

Is this thing on?

Wow, it's been so long since I've posted here that when I first opened up the admin interface it looked completely unfamiliar. I'm not sure why I stopped posting for so long... things were pretty boring and rutted during the winter so I guess I felt there wasn't anything of interest to spend time writing about. Spring and summer, though, have brought plenty of news and excitement around here so that excuse just doesn't hold up any more. So I suppose I'll start making an effort again, though I'm pretty sure practically nobody bothers to read this thing anymore. If nothing else it'll get Julie and her "Update your blog or take it down!" off my case.

Also as part of my "renewed" online presence, I've recently opened a [Twitter account](#) for more day-to-day tidbits. And in addition I broke down and opened a [Flickr account](#) for posting photos which I've been making an effort to take more of. My previous home-grown photo gallery, though full of potential, had remained without an admin interface with no end in sight so I figured I should give up and go with an established service. And Flickr does a pretty good job with the things that matter to me (managing and maintaining useful metadata mostly) so I've been happy with it, especially in combination with my new favorite photo manager [KPhotoAlbum](#) and the Flickr export plugin.

Plans for today: drop off the recycling which has piled up, go see the new Bourne movie, and a small grocery trip.

Posted by Jason at [10:51:13](#) - [[0 Comments](#)]

Wednesday, November 15, 2006

New Recital Recordings

Thanks to George letting me borrow his recording equipment and time, I have managed to get the recordings of my [freshman](#) and [sophomore](#) college recitals

transferred off of cassette tapes into digital format, and finally posted on this site. The audio quality isn't the greatest, but is decent considering the source.

There are still several other recordings to get digitized, but these I felt were the most important since they are milestones in my musical career. Here are what I consider the highlights:

- [Samuel Barber - 'Fuga' from Sonata for Piano](#)
- [Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No. 1](#)

Posted by Jason at [21:49:33](#) - [[2 Comments](#)]

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