

2008 – End of Year Reflections

By William F. Slater, III

As 2008 ends and we look forward to 2009, I will share some of the more interesting things we experienced during this year, as well as some thoughts on life and the coming year.

First, as many of you know, this is the 9th year that I have wrapped up with a Christmas vacation to Poland. When I married my wife, Joanna Roguska, on December 3, 2000, I made a promise to her and her parents to always bring her back home to Warsaw for Christmas. I would soon find that I married into a great family that loves us treats us very well, and am so grateful for it. So each year, this annual Christmas Trip to Poland is how we end each year, and then ring in the new year, and it's something we look forward to all year.

So I am writing this letter to share with my friends and colleagues, from Joanna's Uncle's home in the southwest part of Poland.

The Big Move – 200 Feet South

On September 17, 2007 I was told by my landlord that he would be tearing down the building where I had lived for 12 years. (Joanna had been with me there a little over 7 years.) What followed this announcement was a scramble to find a new location to live. We found a condominium about 200 feet south of 1409 N. Ashland Ave, which is 1337 N. Ashland Ave. So since we both liked it, we rented it starting in November 2007. Joanna loves the place still, and has claimed the master bedroom as her office and dance studio, complete with large mirrors on the walls. However, with all the stuff I had, it took me from October 2007 until February 4, 2008 to complete the move into the new place. Sorting things, getting rid of things, packing and moving was a huge challenge and very expensive. But we got it completed.

A Year with Without TV

After the move, my JVC 19-inch TV stopped working. So I have had nearly a full year without watching TV with any regularity. I missed the news and a few shows and news magazines I used to follow (about 15 hours a week total), but for the most part, I relied on Chicago Public Radio and the web for news and entertainment. I did, however, decide on the Friday after Thanksgiving 2008, to purchase SHARP brand 42-inch flat screen TV. It took a while to arrive, just before we left for Warsaw, so I will have some work to do to set it up in January 2009. I think the good news from all this is that I know how to live a meaningful life without a TV, applying energies to being more productive in other areas. So even with this new TV, I don't plan go back to watching a lot of TV. I really do look forward to seeing favorite movies like "The Matrix," "2001: A Space Odyssey," and "Star Wars." on this 42-inch screen.

Career Update: Three Jobs, One Hiatus and the Development Continues

I started 2008 as a Program Manager, working for CSSS.NET, managing a 21-person team whose primary responsibility was supporting e-mail for 300,000 users at the Department of Veterans Affairs. In March, I went to Microsoft for seven months, to manage the world's largest Data Center, located in a western suburb of Chicago (<http://billslater.com/datacentermanager>), and in November, I started as a Data Center Consultant, working at an international manufacturing firm, as a consultant from a large technical staffing firm. While all these jobs had their challenges, I feel very blessed at the moment. I work in an interesting position for the best boss I have ever had, and got a significant raise and much less hours in the process.

In September 2008, after realizing the demands of my Data Center Manager position were consuming all my time and energy during my waking hours, I elected to take a hiatus from my part-time teaching activities with the Computer Systems Institute. This was very tough for me to do because I love teaching so much. But I could not continue my teaching activities under those extreme circumstances where I was working about 100 to 115 hours a week. And presently, with the demands and some schedule uncertainties of my new job, I cannot yet commit to return to teaching, but part-time teaching will remain in my near term goals for the future.

And yet, personally I still find time to continue learn and grow as an IT professional. This year, I completed the design and coding of a Windows-based Time Tracking application which helps track and account for the 40+ tasks related to the work life of a Data Center Manager at Microsoft. I wrote this in Visual Basic 2008. Since November 2008, I have been working on learning C# because I believe it is a hugely important languages in the world of application development. I think this will be my 31st programming language since I started programming in college in September 1973. Believe it or not, the more languages you know, the shorter the learning curve is for each new language. My intent is to write my Data Center Manager Time Tracker application in two versions of C#: one for Windows and a version for the web. Maybe there is a market for such applications. And if there isn't, I had fun working on these anyway. I am one of these IT professionals who has fun with technology, no matter what I am doing or learning, but I really do love designing and coding applications that use computers to do a good job of making our lives simpler and giving us a greater sense of control over our lives.

And career-wise, I ended year with a four page, 1500+ word article explaining Cloud Computing. What made it interesting was my perspectives were more based in reality from my experiences at Microsoft, having managed the Chicago Data Center, which is in fact, a Cloud Computing Data Center. This article will soon be published on a new website being by a visionary colleague. The general URL is <http://web2themag.com>, and I will also link to it from BILLSLATER.com.

Joanna's Interests and Activities

As most of you are aware, I am married to an incredible woman, Joanna Roguska, and I am so proud of her. Her talents, energy and interests always amaze me. Besides her day job as a gifted web developer, she is

- 1) A professional belly dancer in an 8-woman troupe called Fringe Benefits
- 2) A student in a post-Bachelor's degree program studying Graphic Design at Columbia College in Chicago
- 3) A student in Aikdo, which is a Japanese soft martial art

- 4) A student pilot, gradually working on her pilot's license
- 5) A gifted amateur photographer with an excellent Canon Digital SLR camera and a large photo portfolio at Flickr
- 6) A fitness-oriented cyclist and runner, who bikes to and from work to save money and because it is faster.
- 7) A great wife, my best friend, and soul mate

My life got infinitely better when Joanna first came to Chicago back in June 2000. Without her love, support, and inspiration, and that of her family, I wouldn't have accomplished a fraction of what I have done since they came into my life. I thank God every day for all of them, and especially Joanna.

Trips We Took

Besides the annual Christmas Trip to visit family in Poland, Joanna and I try to take trips on holiday weekends wherever possible. This year we traveled to the following places:

Boston and Province Town – Memorial Day Weekend

Highlights:

- Dinners and lunches at nice restaurants
- Informative Bus Tours seeing the Historic Parts of Boston, where no one forgets events over the past 400 years
- A day trip via ferry to Province Town to see the sights and scenes there
- Joanna took tons of pictures

Tampa, Florida – Fourth of July Holiday

Highlights:

- Reunion with a good friend from my days at Offutt AFB, Nebraska in the United States Air Force
- Dinners and lunches at nice restaurants
- A Fourth of July Dinner Cruise with Fireworks
- Joanna spent about 2.5 hours on a wave runner vehicle and loved every second of it
- Joanna took tons of pictures

Atlanta – Labor Day Weekend

Highlights:

- Breakfasts at Waffle House, which Joanna was wild about.
- Spending a day and evening at Stone Mountain Park, wrapping it up with this huge patriotic laser light show
- Touring CNN in downtown Atlanta, and getting to do a sample new cast and have it filmed and copied to DVD
- Touring the World of Coke Exhibits at the Coca-Cola Headquarters
- Joanna took tons of pictures

The World We Live In...

I realize that during the last several months, many of us have been fixated on the economy as well as its seemingly avoidable negative impacts to our financial well-being. I can tell you that briefly watching a few news shows while on business trips, and also after seeing some news videos embedded in web articles, it is easy to see how the media is playing a huge role in fanning the flames of the “2008 Economic Meltdown.” In fact, I think some ethical lines may have been crossed as the media has assumed a role of often continuing the hype rather than just reporting the facts. But I think the reverse is also true and that certain facts about various areas of the economy are, for better or worse, under-reported. I just want to state here that panic and bad crowd behavior are phenomena which feed on themselves. We are living in times where careful, thoughtful analysis by cooler heads will prevail. I am convinced of it.

On the brighter side, Barack Obama managed to get elected as our 44th U.S. President. Being in Chicago and having been a big, well-informed fan (read both of his books), it was very exciting to see this man elected. But with the present economic challenges (national and international), two wars, and a looming health care crisis, I think it’s a job that will require great vision and leadership to fix things. I sure he is up to the task, and I am also sure he has a lot of people praying for his success, myself included.

One final comment about the world we are living in. A book titled, *The Fourth Turning: What Cycles of History Tell Us about America’s Next Rendezvous with Destiny*, by Strauss and Howe (1997), gives a general description of the situation America now finds itself in. According to the authors, every turning presents itself as both a crisis and a crossroads, in which America can overcome the situation and rise to be a better, stronger country, or America can take the easier course of action and suffer the consequences. For more excellent information about the Fourth Turning and its relevance to the times we live in, please visit this URL:
<http://www.bullnotbull.com/archive/fourth-turning.html>.

In a worst case, that could, according to a Russian History Professor, Igor Panarin, who strongly believes that America, with a steadily worsening economy, has a big chance of disintegrating in the year 2010, and that the end result would look something like the map shown below.



In some ways, I think this is ridiculous, and that this professor and his colleagues have played too many board games, like *Risk* for example. In other ways, I think anything is possible with the more instability that is occurring everywhere in the world, and I sincerely pray that nothing like this ever happens to the U.S.

When Everyone Experiences Hardship

When it comes to this wave of government bailouts using tax dollars, whether it's big three auto makers or homeowners seeking relief from foreclosures, I do believe that the hardships people and companies face are mostly their own responsibility and that they need to face the music, so to speak. I speak from personal experience. In December 1991, I was hurting from a bad financial situation related to a VA-insured \$61,000 condominium mortgage I had made in 1982. Even after nine years of owning it and seven years of trying keep it rented, I had to let my condo go back to the bank in a foreclosure sale for \$14,400. It haunted me for years, and is one of the reasons I am a renter today. Yet there was no offer or help or any kind of assistance made available. I learned from that terrible experience and I am still learning. But one of the most awful things I learned was how badly homeowners will treat people that rent, whether it's any of their business or not. Being on the receiving end of this mistreatment so many times through the years has significantly shaped my feelings about responsibility and accountability when it comes to money, property ownership, finances, etc. In our society, the only guarantee against failure when it comes to money should be FDIC insurance on deposits for depositors placing their money in FDIC insured institutions.

Likewise, there are those, who after several years of ignoring the market's requirement to have relevant skills and credentials, they find themselves, for one reason or another, laid off or having their position terminated. You see, the job market is remarkably "Darwinian" in most places and it really is a case of survival of the fittest. And in many cases, there is financial disaster waiting for these people because they cannot get retrained quickly enough before their savings (if any) run out, to get the necessary skills and experience to re-enter the work force in a position that pays what their lifestyle requires. Through the past several years, I have decided that laziness and procrastination catches up with these folks, and many I have also found, if given the opportunity to get the necessary training, would go back to the same sense of blind complacency that got them into that difficult situation in the first place. Again, people need more responsibility and accountability when it comes to their present and future career opportunities, and they need to focus on themselves in this regard, instead of ridiculing those that are working on their own skills and credentials. For more related information, visit these links:

<http://billslater.com/secrets>

<http://billslater.com/career>

<http://billslater.com/certifications>

Fifteen Hours of Fame?

Andy Warhol was once quoted as saying, "Everyone in the future will be famous for 15 minutes." Well, it seems that during December 2008, I exceeded that 15 minutes by quite a bit. Thanks to getting that Illinois Vanity Auto Plate with "OBAMA" inscribed, it seems by the end of the year, it garnered the attention of media folks at the Chicago Sun-Times newspaper, Sun-Times Website, Chicago's WIND AM 560 radio station, and finally MSNBC TV. I like to explain the media attention as saying, "It must have been an incredibly slow news day if they found these OBAMA plates THAT interesting..."

Note that the Sun-Times, MSNBC TV and WIND 560 AM, each sought me out for this story. It was all literally unsolicited. I just don't have the time, money, patience, or influence to create this kind of publicity... Think Forrest Gump... Anyway, if you would like to view some of the media attention about my OBAMA plates, please visit the links below:

MSNBC TV

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21134540/vp/28141151#28141151>

Sun-Times Website

<http://www.suntimes.com/news/watchdogs/1319012.CST-NWS-watchdog08.article>

Chicago's WIND AM 560 radio station

The MP3 file of the Chicago WIND AM 560 Radio interview located in this online folder. Look for the MP3 file. It is the only MP3 file in the folder.

<http://cid-a83490a7292cf271.skydrive.live.com/self.aspx/OBAMA>

Other Media Links:

<http://www.google.com/search?source=ig&hl=en&rlz=&q=%22bill+slater%22+obama+plate&btnG=Google+Search&aq=f>

Thoughts about Life and the Coming Year

I am optimistic, as I always am, that this coming year will be a great year. I think as human beings, we need to realize that our own thoughts and attitudes can have a great deal about how we define success and in truth, whether we can be successful or not. One of my Mentors, David Mitchell, used to tell me, "When putting together a team, I'll take a guy with a PMA any day over a guy with an MBA." When I asked him what a "PMA" is, he quickly replied, "Positive Mental Attitude." And to illustrate the power of that statement, consider that one of the most famous Henry Ford quotes was, "Whether you think you are a Success or you think you are a Failure, you will be right." So given the conscious choice to enter the new year hoping for and working for and expecting success, versus being fearful or bitter about anything that happened last year, I chose the path of the success via the positive mental attitude.

For me, Life is a spiritual experience, a gift, and a privilege. In 1980 it was a rough year. I had a near death experience related to an illness, among other sad things that occurred in my life as a result of that. I made a vow to live my life more deliberately, in a meaningful way, if I ever got my health back. Part of my keeping that vow is that each day, as I go out into the world, I pray that I can help make the world a little bit better place, at least for one person, or a few. That outlook has added so much to the quality and value of my own life.

Without sounding too preachy, I am certain that God created us for two purposes: to bring Him glory; and to help one another. I really try to live my life in harmony with these purposes.

And one the great ironies in this life is that about the time we figure out our purpose, we also discover that we won't live forever, at least not in these bodies, in this reality. This is a segue to the next section, because we don't last forever in this world.

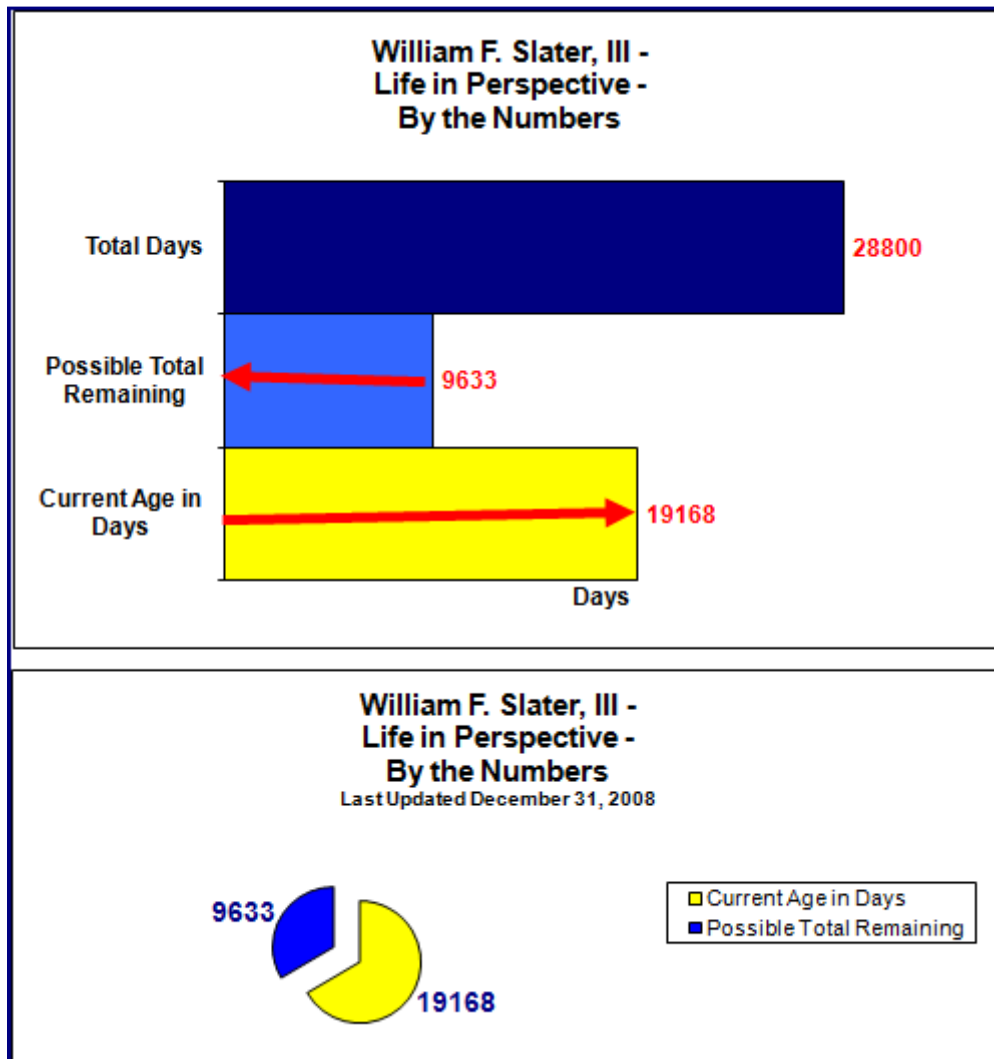
In This Life, We Don't Have an Infinite Time to Act...

In February 2008, I was playing around with Excel and decided to create two graphs to visually describe my life in a simple way, in terms of the number of days already experienced and the number of remaining days. The two graphs are shown below. The key assumption in this Excel calculation is that I know the date of my birth and the date of my death. Since most people do not know the date of their death, I took a wild guess and used my 80th birthday.

Anyway, the results are below. I call the second graph my "Pacman Graph."

Some of this may seem downright morbid, yet I think it is realistic. Practically every day we deal with situations in life where something we use is wearing out or that it is obsolete, and will have to be replaced. In a real sense, that includes our bodies. Of course, the goal should always be to maintain health and hope for as long a life as possible, but death is inevitable for all of us.

These graphs to me just serve as a visual reminder that we don't have all the time in the world to get things done. People like me need this and it has helped me because sometimes I have been known to procrastinate until I kick it into high gear. Special Offer: If you would want a copy of this Excel file to create your own graph, please send me an e-mail to slater@billslater.com and request the Excel file used to create those Life Graphs. Please note that because how Excel uses date arithmetic, these date calculations are based on consistent 360-day years, just as in Accounting.



Conclusion

In closing, I would like to thank you for taking the time to read this. I wish you each a happy, healthy, productive new year, and I hope to hear from you during 2009.

Your friend,

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