

Cultural Lessons From a Crumbling Pop-Tart

It begins with a blueberry Pop-Tart.

My friend John and I spent five days at his brother's house on the Outer Banks. There I wrote, read books, ate well, took walks to the beach and around the neighborhood, and slept. My one excursion away from the house was to the grocery store. Otherwise, no masks the entire time.

Weirdly, so much relaxation exhausted me. Another six weeks of such bliss, and I would have wound up in a puddle on the living room floor, a smile on my face but unable to move a muscle, a victim of rest and leisure.

Dropping John off in Richmond, I helped him unload his gear from my car and said goodbye. He asked me whether I'd like to take a banana and some Pop-Tarts. I hadn't eaten a Pop-Tart in years, but we also hadn't eaten lunch, and I was facing a three-hour drive home.

So I took a banana and two packets of blueberry Pop-Tarts.

Once out of Richmond and on the winding road to Front Royal, I opened one of the Pop-Tart packages. You know how it is when you're driving alone. You set the popcorn or pretzels, or in this case, the Pop-Tarts, on the passenger seat and nibble as you drive. There I was, charging up Route 522, picking at the crumbly Pop-Tarts, enjoying the Virginia countryside, and ready to be home.

Fast forward a couple days.

It was Friday morning, and I drove into town to write in the coffee shop and do some errands. Those missions completed, I visited the library, came back to the car, tossed my phone

onto the passenger seat, and headed home, where I unloaded groceries, library books, and the backpack containing my computer, paper, and pens.

Then I remembered the phone. Retrieving it from my car, I noticed a sticky substance on the top left corner. I stepped into the sunlight – even with glasses my eyes are not what they once were – and saw a telltale smear of blueberry and a few miniscule crumbs. I wiped that mess away and thought no more of it. I did go to my car and look at the seat, but found no sign of a Pop-Tart stain, though I had left the empty package there.

That afternoon I received a couple of phone calls where I could hear the callers perfectly, but they couldn't hear a word I said. I fiddled with the phone, turning it off and then back on, and looked for an hour online for help.

No go.

The next day, I visited two phone shops. In the first, the sales clerk encouraged me to buy a new phone. In the second, the owner declared I needed a new microphone, which he could order from Los Angeles for around \$100.

Declining both offers, I returned home, grabbed a magnifying glass, stood again in sunlight, and discovered a telltale purple smudge near the microphone.

Deciding I had nothing to lose, I wiped off the smudge, retrieved a tiny nail from the workshop, and inserted it gingerly into the microphone, swished it around, and tried calling a friend.

The phone worked perfectly.

Talk about a guy with a swollen head. I was ready to declare myself "Tech of the Year."

So what lessons did I take from this adventure?

First, I love computers and cell phones, but they are fragile. Long ago, I could have smeared landline phones with two Pop-Tarts, and they still would have worked. Spill a liquid refreshment on your laptop, as I once did, and you can kiss it goodbye. Spill that same drink into a manual typewriter, and you clean up the mess and bang away at the keys.

In many ways, our entire communications system is equally fragile. Knock out those satellites and towers, and we'd be kicked back 40 years.

Next, experts can be wrong. Neither of the phone people I visited looked to see if the microphone might be obstructed. Keep this in mind when experts appear on television and tell us what to do about a problem like the coronavirus. We should listen, but with a healthy skepticism. Like those techs, they miss stuff all the time.

Finally, my phone debacle reinforced a lesson I learned at age 55 or so – and yes, I am sometimes a slow learner: Only a few things are truly important in this world. The death of a loved one, loneliness, the loss of a job, a life well lived, joy: these are some of the things that matter.

That flat tire on the car mocking you as you race out of the house to drive to work, that time you forgot a luncheon appointment with a friend, that Thanksgiving when you and Uncle Billy got into a fight over politics, a broken cell phone: these incidents are small-arms fire, the everyday exigencies of being human.

Take it from Pop-Tart Grandpa: Some things truly matter, but most deserve to be brushed aside. It took me fifty years to learn that lesson. Here's hoping you readers are quicker and more intelligent than I.

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