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Down Time--Nightmare at the Library

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The Systems Librarian

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Diligent backups are critical, but they need the online catalog to work

I started slowly, like a bad dream, and then became a full-fledged nightmare.

One Sunday afternoon, my assistant called me at home and told me that our online catalog was starting to do some funny things. He called the company in California for technical support, and they were doing some fixes that should get things working again. Later on, just to be sure, I called California to speak with the technical support myself. "It looks like your CPU may be starting to go. Make sure to follow up on this with the regular technicians on Monday."

On Monday, things started to unravel. Files disappeared. The system lost circulation data. It was impossible for the people in acquisitions to print purchase orders. We called about each of these problems all morning. The people in California treated each of the symptoms. Thursday. We put signs on the terminals for trying.

We started considering that this was something more than a lot of isolated cases of flaky behavior. They looked at the disk drives and tried different kinds of fixes. By the time I caught the train home, I was back on the phone with the company—this time to upper management. I told a colleague that this was no exception. Mark Twain's "We always try to take something positive out of an adventure to make us yearn for the good old days of the past," and it was being overnighted for Thursday.

I got to work on Thursday morning. By 11 o'clock, we had swapped out the disk drives. What I wasn't told was that this drive was in an unconfigured state, so it would take all day to get the system up. Meanwhile, we started working on ways to provide some emergency access to our patrons at the former OPAC machines. What we provided was a telltale link to Columbia, the library system we were using, in terms of content. We reasoned that they would have a lot of the same recent books we owned, and the call numbers would be the same. We put up new signs explaining the situation. The students and faculty, while not thrilled, gave us points for trying.

I worked late that evening so that I would be around when the system came back up. The telephone rang. "Hi, Terry. Just letting you know that we're thing right away to cover the problem with the new disk drive."

"Problem?" I said. "This is the first hour about a problem."

"Oh, yes. The disk drive we sent you failed. These things happen. We'll get you our new equipment as soon as we can, but it's pretty late in the day."

Once again, I took a long train ride home. This time, my life flashed repeatedly before my eyes, complete with new scenes like the colleague who informed me, "Nothing like this ever happened before you got here." Once again, I faced a higher court. This time, I had a large list of demands. "I want a complete set of equipment—CPU and disk drives—sent via special courier, and I want a technician to go with them."

Something was very wrong here, and a real human being should take a look.

I got all of the equipment that I asked for, and the promise that they would send an East Coast representative if this situation didn't work. On Friday morning, I sent an assistant via cab to JFK airport to meet the package. We set up the CPU with the original disk drive to see if it was a CPU problem all along. The machine did not light up the way it should. We took it apart and found that there was a loose piece of metal rattling around inside. We took that out, and it started right up.

By Friday afternoon, everything was running just fine. I sat in my office with my assistants, and we compared our adventure to Apollo 13. That afternoon, there was a going-away party—complete with wine—for one of our staff members. I was able to relax for the first time in a week.

The Aftermath

I always try to take something positive out of the jaws of the worst disasters, and this was no exception. Mark Twain's advice, "Put all your eggs in one basket, and watch that basket," from Puddnhead Wilson, could not be followed. We had to have an alternate plan. I told a colleague that we needed to determine which of the 150,000 records in our system were the most important, then make a backup file that we could store in word processing. "That will be very difficult," he told me. Yes, it was difficult, but when we had the down time, we were able to make the determination in about 10 minutes. I made lists of books added to the system in the last five years, the complete serials list, and the complete reserve reading room holdings. I made ASCII copies of the lists, which were mounted on the law school LAN and on individual hard drives. Now we are covered for anything short of a power failure.

Coincidentally, just a short time later we had a planned power outage. I shut the OPAC down in the evening and came back the next day after the outage. The machine would not boot. I called the vendor and got the same technician who had worked with us during the great disaster. This time it was something simple and we had things up within a half hour. However, that night I looked in the mirror and noticed a number of new gray hairs.

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