

Who is Moriarty?

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Let me start at the beginning. I've made a habit the past year of missing everyone's birthdays, the big ones and even my own. I was on a business trip to California when I missed my own 40'th birthday and I was on another trip to San Jose when I missed Cathy's 40'th and CP's 19'th. So this time round I remembered and I scheduled a week trip out to Minneapolis between Philip and John's birthdays so I won't miss them as well. The week or rather six days over there was going to be rough, because I was trying to resolve all the issues that I scheduled to complete over 8 working days in four and on top of that I had to accommodate customer schedules to run wafers between software testing.

So Saturday morning, the day of my return arrived, and my flight was to depart at 12:00 and since I woke every other morning well before 07:00 I did not set my alarm. So at almost quarter to nine I woke up with a bang and flew out of the bed, skipped breakfast, checked out of my hotel and when I walked out the front door, I saw that the whole area was covered in fresh snow and layers of ice. The car windows were iced up and I literally had to use a scraper to get the ice off the car windows. Ten minutes later I crawled at five miles an hour to the plant to make sure that the two automated test runs completed successfully to verify that I left the tool in a workable and reliable state after all the software updates. The runs completed successfully and I was ready to be on my way.

Eddy, my colleague, missed his return flight two days before by not checking in two hours in advance of the flight and was forced to stay over another day, so I was not going to make the same mistake and with the roads covered in snow and ice this will be a slow process. Minnesota State is much better equipped to deal with these extreme weather conditions and once I hit the main roads I was well on my way to the airport. All the roads were cleared, snowploughs were busy through the night and salt and grit was strewn all over the icy patches and secondary roads and progress went unhampered. I had to refuel the rental car, return it to the drop zone and take the airport train service to my departure terminal.

Once again I was "randomly" selected for extra screening and once cleared after my shoes, belt, coat, laptop computer and every little piece of kit in the carry case was scrutinised and tested for any form of explosive material residue I was released and I could relax and enjoy a nice breakfast. Breakfast too did not go by without its peculiarities. In America you get options on everything. Whatever you order, there's a choice. If you order coke, you can have various flavoured option, like vanilla, cherry or lemon, with or without caffeine, with or without sugar, so to just get a coke you have to go through a combination of about ten choices. If you ask for tea, you have to ask for hot tea, otherwise you get unsweetened iced tea. So I ordered my hot tea when asked if I wanted coffee, and I was brought some camomile tea. I then asked if I can just get some simple black tea and was offered about ten other varieties of tea but black tea. My colleague, Ian Symington introduced me to Dajeerling tea and I eventually settled for that since that was the closest I could get to plain black tea.

After breakfast I proceeded to the departure area and killed the remaining time in the waiting area by hooking the laptop to the wireless network and using Skype to speak to Cathy and the kids in Dublin and my parents in South Africa and soon it was time to board.

Once on board we eventually started pushing back 30 minutes late after waiting for a special truck to come by and de-ice the plane. We taxied out to the runway and fell into the departure queue and while on the runway snow and rain started falling very hard again. The runways were opened and

closed twice and all the time we were waiting in the queue to depart. Eventually the captain announced that our de-icing now expired and we had to head back to the terminal to de-ice again and on our way to do that he announced again that the taxiways are now closed. Five hours later we were de-iced again and when the plane lifted off the runway everyone started applauding and clapping spontaneously and my new friend across the aisle, who works in Leather supply business and on their way visit toll suppliers in Italy, reached over and gave me a high five.

It's amazing how friendly people become under such conditions. You would spend an eight-hour flight across the Atlantic in total silence with the guy in the seat next to you, but spending time on a runway change the rules.

Next to me sat an elderly couple and during this time I slowly learned about the elderly gentlemen who sat next to me. He looked quite old and my experience during the day was a bit like Groundhog Day, except that it occurred about every half an hour. But it's not every day that you get to talk an 89-year-old man who in fact will be 90 in less than two months. He must've asked me the same questions on average about five times and even explained to me that at his age he sometimes drives the car and forgets where he is and where he's heading and that he is frustrated with the fact that he cannot get himself to remember things, but by repeating them he eventually does. So over time I noticed that some things he would remember that somehow his brain finds outstanding and I can tell that he remembers from the follow up question, but he must've asked me about my kids about 20 times. "So you have two kids?" And I would respond with, "No, four", holding out my four fingers, and he'd go, "Wow!" and turns to the second wife with her nose in her book and says: "Honey, he lives in Ireland and he has four kids." And turns back to me and ask their ages again or if they're all at school and then proceeds through the cycle of jobs and what I do and what we sell and telling me about his experiences and life.

Every cycle I learned more. The one thing he did remember was that I lived in Ireland, and he almost embraced me for living in Ireland, reached over and shook my hand as if to congratulate me on that and that he remembered that fact for the duration of our time together. His grandfather was Irish and came to the US in 1840 and he was part of a B45 bomber crew in the Second World War and he flew 18 missions and was released after that. They were based somewhere in the UK and had some run-ins with Irish soldiers and was in a fistfight, so much that his shirt was torn off his back. He tells that with a smile on his face and a sparkle in his old eyes behind round gold rimmed spectacles.

After the war he came back to the US and studied law and practised law all his life. He then invested in a TV production venture with a partner that made them a fortune and that company is now called Sesame Street Productions. Have I heard of that before, he asked? It is amazing whom you meet in life, but this last piece of information only transpired in the last half an hour. If I didn't make the time and the conscious effort to spend time and patiently repeating the answers to his questions I would've never learned to know Moriarty, the co-owner of Sesame street productions.

The highlight of this experience for me was this man with a lifetime worth of experience behind him, the knowledge of life and the sharp witty humour, more money than he can handle and trying to see the world before his time is over, but no one to listen to all his ramblings. His second wife, obviously annoyed with his behaviour and repetitive conversations, but very interested in his financial status. I felt cheated, walking away from what I perceived as a fountain of experience and I realised that we are surrounded by people, just like that, every day, but somehow we just don't bother. We're like high tech sports cars engaged in a high gear behind a vintage car impatient to overtake charging to reach our next destination and conclude the next important event of the day and no time to slow down and enjoy the beauty of life right in front of our noses. Not only do we lose out on valuable input into our lives, but we rob someone of treasured company.

The captain announce our descent after circling a couple of times until a slot was available for landing on the over congested runway and we fell into another queue to wait for an open slot on a docking bay. Moriarty shook my hand and wishes me well on my onward journey and sends his regards to my family and I promised to educate the world, or at least those I speak to, about who Moriarty is.

Then once docked and on the ground the airline customer service agent came on board and announced that all flights are cancelled and everyone will only be rebooked on Tuesday. The mood on the airplane changed and everyone started departing into a very congested terminal full of chaos and stressed people.

Everywhere I went I landed in long queues and decided that I might make more progress by heading to the Aerlingus desk to find out what the status is on my connections to Ireland. I hopped onto the airport terminal train service and got off at terminal five to find the desk deserted. The listed phone number rang through to a voice message service announcing that the desk will open at 2:30pm the next day or to use the online service. I the headed back to terminal one, fell into the queue at the United airline desks and tried to resolve my bookings. After queuing for what felt like hours I was informed that they cannot change the booking and I had to go to the Aerlingus desk. It was getting late and I made no progress, the snow was piling up and I had to make a plan, so I found myself a corner, set up my laptop, hooked up the power cable to a wall socket and set up my floor office, searched the web, found my travel agent office in the UK, with a 24 hour service and connect via the VoIP service back to my mobile phone and fell into another queue to be helped over the phone. Ten minutes later I was rebooked on the flight out for the next day at 18:00 and now I could start planning for the next 18 hours.

I then found a hotel through the airline booking service, again availing of the great VoIP service to dial back to my mobile phone to improve the voice quality over the over congested airport wireless web service competing with others using the same approach as myself to find a bed for the night. The alternative is a cold hard terminal floor and a laptop bag as a pillow and I'm definitely getting too old for so much adventure on one day. I found a room and then tried to get a taxi and with demand being higher than supply the taxi operators were caching in on the queue that went around the block. I enquired on the fee and opted for a rental car instead and climbed on a Hertz shuttle bus, fell into a slightly shorter queue and rented a car with a GPS device fitted, punched in the hotel address and took on the bad weather on the snow and ice drenched Chicago highways. At this point the snow was pelting down and everyone was slowly crawling down highways at 30mph and snow flying everywhere.

The windscreen wipers was on full blast flicking snow and ice off the front screen and the heaters fans pumping hot air onto the window to stop the ice from sticking to it. I saw several cars ran off the road into ditches filled with snow and tow trucks trying to get them out, big yellow snowploughs with flashing lights, battling to keep the roads cleared.

Strained and exhausted from the long day I arrive at my confirmed hotel to be informed that the place is overbooked and they cannot help me with a bed for the night. The receptionist referred me to another hotel 2 miles down the road and I was met at a reception desk buy a grumpy looking night porter who gave me a room with a king size bed and I fell into my bed at 01:41 and turned and tossed for the next 20 minutes trying to wind down from the events of the day and eventually drifted off to sleep.

I wake up before my alarm goes of that I've set for 09:00. I phone John to wish him a happy birthday and apologise for having missed it. He shares his excitement about Mr. Potatohead with interchangeable facial features. I've missed another birthday, not a good way to start a year.

Overnight the mechanisms of Chicago kicked in. There is only evidence of snow next to the roads and sidewalks, even the sidewalks are cleared, with mountains of snow next to the roads and the city is buzzing and alive as if nothing has happened. It is truly amazing what one can do when people work together.

I make my way back to O'Hare airport in 20 minutes, return the rental car, and get dropped with the courtesy shuttle bus back to my departure terminal, confirmed my flights with Aerlingus and ready to try again. It's still snowing, but at least we're above freezing point today. Snow can be handled, ice seems to be the issue. It's ten minutes to departure, we'll have to celebrate Johns birthday for Monday as well. I hope my kids will listen to me when I start repeating my stories.

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