



I need more cloud time.

Some people need down time, and others need reading time, exercise time, shopping time, prayer time, practice time, writing time, WoW time, Wii time, me time, alone time, party time, Miller time. You name it, someone out there needs time for it.

And something we all could benefit from is a bit more cloud-gazing. I'm talking about the information cloud, of course, not the water vapor kind.

I honestly don't like the way "the cloud" has wafted its way into modern business and technology and pop culture discourse. The idea of it is so ... shifty and formless and strange and ephemeral.

But then again, clouds -- the white puffy kind -- are shifty and formless and strange and ephemeral, too. So I guess this whole cloud thing is starting to resonate with our psyches, permeate our mental models, and instigate changes in the way humans create and consume information.

The end result? Eventually "the cloud" will gain its rightful place in the pantheon of metaphors that, as they age, develop the patina of inevitability. Future generations will think us quaint and wonder why we felt compelled to encapsulate the term in quotation marks. And we'll take the cloud for granted.

For the time being, however, the cloud is more like a dismal miasma – like the bad air once thought to cause fevers. You can't see it, you can't feel it, but it has debilitating effects.

There are two ways the cloud can make you sick.

First, if you are the conscientious type who spends too much time on cloud maintenance, you can get stressed out, and we all know that stress is the proximate cause of all kinds of bad health stuff. Self-help tip: Recognize that regulating information flow is a never-ending task. Take it slow and steady, and you will decrease your risk of getting cloud-borne disease.

Second, if you are NOT conscientious, you will ignore the cloud as it quietly envelopes you. It will get thicker and thicker, and pretty soon you won't know where you are. People can't find you. What's worse, if they find you and recognize you, it might not be the you that you think you are. That's to be expected; it is how clouds behave when they are exposed to the human imagination.

This phenomenon is captured in a lovely song by Silvio Rodriguez, whose music is my favorite illegal export from Cuba. By the way, this whole illegal music thing is scary ludicrous. It's totally totalitarian. You'd expect something wacky like that in the freaky nation-cosmos of North Korea. But not in the squeaky clean free-speech United States. But that's a topic for another day.

"Como Esperando Abril" is one of Rodriguez's more popular pieces. Roughly translated the title means "Waiting for April." It's a charming, sweet song from 1970s that combines an uplifting rhythm with a memorable melody. Unfortunately it contains disturbing and subversive lyrics – words threatening to the sacred marriage of democracy and capitalism – regarding clouds.

This is part of the first verse:

*So much more beyond my window*

*The clouds of the morning*

*A flower reborn as a train*

*A watch becomes a crab*

*From an old man's hat*

*A white termite storm*

*So much more beyond my window*

*A garden of playful cotton*

*Waiting for April*

Speaking of April, the tourism season is close upon us. It actually starts in March, but the song says April so we're going with that.

In any case, that means that if you're in the tourism business – and pretty much everyone in this region is, in one way or the other – it's time to do some spring cleaning in the cloud.

Look outward: Does Google Places have accurate info? Is there accurate information on Wikipedia? How are things looking on Trip Advisor? Because if there are people saying negative things about your goods and services, you might want to take time to respond.

And look inward: Do your employees know how to use the free cloud stuff? Are there other tools in the cloud that can help you do business better? Do you have policies in place that can help to structure your cloud maintenance procedures? Have you tried to find cloud solutions that give your staff added flexibility? Are you doing what you can to make sure the cloud enables them to fulfill both their work responsibilities and personal responsibilities?

Because as a society, that's the direction we're moving in. As former Google CIO Douglas Merrill has pointed out, the old ideal of work/home balance doesn't work. It's an arbitrary boundary, the Berlin Wall of the industrial era. And it's going down.

But I'm a little cloudy about the cloud – what it can do, how it can help us shape our world, when we have to steer, and – this is the one most difficult to accept – when we have to relinquish control.

Eventually there will be more clarity. The song about looking at clouds from both sides now will take on new meaning. People will still lie on blankets in the park, looking up at the sky, interpreting the clouds, collaborating with their colleagues.

It's a different way of thinking about work, and it's going to take some work to get us squared away. It will even change our metaphors. How can anything related to a cloud be square, so can anything ever be really squared away?

In in the spirit of embracing this lumpy, bulging future of ours, I'm going to start hosting an ongoing Lowcountry Cloud Lab starting in January. For me personally, it's a way of creating cloud discipline. I'm inviting others because at times I work better and learn better when I'm in a room with other people who are working and learning. I just happen to think that 40 hours worth of that is overkill.

The format is like study hall, except there's wifi and you're allowed to talk and you don't have to ask permission to go to the bathroom. Use it like a Wikipedia workshop, a Google studio, a Trip Advisor meetup, a Constant Contact Kaffeeklatsche -- and yes, there really will be coffee.

Hope to see you there.

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