# PROBLEMS GET SOLVED

## (from THE MANUSCRIPT)

### by Michael Stephen Fuchs

On the long walk home Monday evening, Miles had two meaty matters over which to happily obsess. The first was the late-morning invasion of his cube by the user support manager guy. User support guys *knew* how much Miles hated to see them in person. By now, they'd had his inviolable rule bludgeoned into them: "Put it in e-mail, and I'll take care of it." In case of imminent, dire catastrophe, phone calls were permitted. Miles even answered the phone, when he could hear it above his music. And he'd been known to check voicemail on occasion. But this coming down and buttonholing him in person business . . .

The impetus for this breach of vital protocol was a minor catastrophe with Lolita, TJC's primary mail server. Some unidentified bozo had gone in and screwed around with some configuration files he didn't remotely understand – and, shortly after, much of the e-mail to and from the tjc.edu domain had begun bouncing in various directions. This, of course, precipitated a tsunami of frantic phone calls to the support desk.

Possibly the nicest thing about Miles' position in the Unix systems group was that an entire user support apparatus stood between them and the bright and happy World Of The Clueless up above. A user had to stump three different sorts of support consultants and finagle his way through any number of blocking systems – voicemail labyrinths, e-mail auto-responders, highly obfuscatory "Frequently Asked Questions" web pages – before gaining an audience with Father Miles or any of his Order.

The Road to Enlightenment is long, and paved with user-support guys.

It may be imagined what an inexpressible comfort it is for people like Miles to sit in the dark, and write shell scripts, and do upgrades, and illuminate scrolls, and whatnot, without ever really having to deal with end users. And he had to admit the support guys did manage to run pretty competent interference, most days.

But on this particular morning, under an onslaught of complaints from those with e-mail withdrawal sickness, the user support kingpin had panicked and forgotten – if he had ever really learned – the *second* thing the computer industry teaches you: "Problems Get Solved."

When you first get into computers, you soon get presented with an utterly intractable technical problem, one that you haven't the vaguest notion how to solve. And you think to yourself, "I have no idea how to solve this problem. I'm completely screwed. Heck, my career's probably over." And then you bang on the problem for awhile, and some approach to it appears that you hadn't considered before and, highly unexpectedly, the problem gets solved. And this routine repeats itself soon after, and then again, and about 10,000 times more, and with each iteration you are initially convinced the problem is insoluble. Then, when the $10,001^{st}$ impossible-seeming problem comes along, you pause, and you scratch your head, and you think, "Hmm. I see no way to solve this problem. But, then again, maybe I'll think of something. It has happened before . . ."

The first corollary of the rule that "Problems Get Solved," is that "Problems Have Causes." Novice computer users are woefully oblivious to this one, constantly calling support hotlines, crying, "Well, it used to work, and then it stopped working." Well, what did you do to it between then and now? "Nothing. It just stopped working." No, you did

*something* to it – computers do not spontaneously stop functioning. "Well, it used to

work." Yes, everything *used* to work.

Miles expected this kind of crap from users, but it was depressing to hear it from

the user support manager, who should know better. "Who fucked around the with the

sendmail configuration files?" Miles had asked him. "No one," he'd replied with a straight

face. "Nobody touched anything." "You know," Miles replied, "susceptibility to

superstition is a great handicap in the computer profession."

Mores the worse for him, Miles had happened to do some work on Lolita the

month before. So – with the disappearance of the nobody who had actually broken it – he

got hit with the ever-popular "Last Person Who Touched It" method of work delegation.

Which means he got stuck at the office until 8pm, repairing someone else's disaster.

Walking home late, he recounted these events sullenly.