

GETTING STARTED

THE FIRST FOUR YEARS OF HIS DAILY BULLETIN
COLUMN, 1997-2000



DAVID ALLEN

Getting Started by David Allen

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INTRODUCTION

Finding my way

By this point, it may seem as though I've always been at the *Inland Valley Daily Bulletin*, with 2017 marking my 20th anniversary at that august journal. But I haven't always worked there, or lived here. Hired as a reporter, I figured this would be like my three previous newspaper jobs, a gig to keep for three or four years before moving on to a slightly bigger and better paying paper.

But a funny thing happened on the way to fulfilling that plan — namely, I had become a full-time columnist, my original career goal, and there seemed no reason to give it up. No reasons have occurred to me since then either, and so here I am.

This book, my second, collects columns from my first four years at the *Bulletin*, 1997 to 2000. My first, *Pomona A to Z*, brought together columns from 2004-05 about Pomona. Chronologically, *Getting Started* is a sort of prequel, only without Darth Vader as a boy.

For background, I'm an Illinois kid who moved to the Bay Area after college for a job in comic books that taught me I didn't want to work in comic books; instead, I went into newspapers, having loved writing for my college paper at the University of Illinois, the *Daily Illini*, where I had

a weekly humor column, *Campus Scout*. It was, if you'll accept my word for it, very popular, taking an irreverent tone toward college life and institutions.

In the working world, nobody starts off as a columnist, arguably the best job at any paper, and so I learned how to be a reporter while at a string of small papers in Sonoma County: the *Santa Rosa News Herald*, where I interned, followed by full-time jobs at the nearby *Rohnert Park-Cotati Clarion* and *Petaluma Argus-Courier*.

I did contribute an occasional column at the *Clarion*, and the results were okay, but it was difficult transitioning from writing for a college audience, where everyone was about the same age and going through the same thing, to writing for an audience that might span 50 or more years, with me at the young end. I didn't have the life experience and, when I look back, I was so naive and ignorant about nearly every aspect of life it's a wonder I could button my own shirts.

Being a reporter, though, proved to be a lot of fun, even if my early assignments, like the mobile home rent control board, were not necessarily riveting. Local government became a specialty of mine as I covered first the city of Cotati, then Rohnert Park, then Petaluma, and as crafting stories, writing punchy sentences and injecting humor became my stocks in trade. My stretch at the *Argus-Courier* was probably the zenith of the news writing phase of my life as I competed for stories against the larger *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*.

Feeling stuck, though, after this series of low-wage jobs and knowing I needed to leave to move up a rung, I cast my resumes around the state and in 1994 was hired on at

the *Victor Valley Daily Press*. Its location, Victorville, was pretty much the precise opposite of the gentle hills and balmy temperatures of Sonoma County. The politics were opposite too, conservative and pro-growth where Sonoma's were liberal and anti-growth. It was a good lesson in perspective. The pay was considerably better, as newspapers go, and the cost of living lower, making for a modestly improved quality of life. (Living it up, I bought my first TV.) The landscape, scenically and culturally, was arid, but the move did put me in Southern California.

I covered government for the *Daily Press*, first San Bernardino County and later some of the cities. After nearly two years there, an idea for a humorous essay came to me — the first such idea I'd had in years. I wrote it and it turned out all right. A second idea occurred to me. I asked if I could write a column every week, knowing I'd be more likely to keep writing if forced to by deadlines, and the editor said sure.

After three years, the chance to move on to Ontario and the *Daily Bulletin*, which had double the circulation, presented itself, and I was among a wave of hires in early 1997. I liked the idea of continuing a column, now that I had a vague sense of how to write one as a grown-up, and the editors were receptive, although a regular spot was not available.

And so, amidst council meetings and other assignments, I would file an occasional guest column for our Lifestyle section. They ran one or two Sundays per month as space was available. By spring 1998, a regular Sunday slot was given to me, and that summer, a Wednesday appearance was added.

It might seem I was on my way, and I was, I guess, although establishing myself was hard. In that first year at the *Bulletin*, in which I went from covering booming Fontana to babysitting quiet Upland to being exiled to the Lifestyle section, I lost all confidence, concluded I might have peaked professionally and considered quitting the business or returning to a smaller paper. Thank goodness I hung in there. Things got much better.

The circumstances under which these columns were written were challenging. My Wednesday column was in the News section and my Sunday column in Lifestyle, not that there was any particular aesthetic reason for the split. Meanwhile, I was still writing stories for Lifestyle, and to avoid conflicting with that full-time assignment, I was told my News column had to be written on my own time. Uh, okay. So much for the prestige of being a columnist.

There wasn't opportunity, really, to go out and interview people, or attend council meetings, or research local history, all things that later became hallmarks of my columns. Instead, I wrote a straight humor column. Many were cranked out at my newsroom desk in a couple of hours on a Saturday morning, riffing off weird items in the news.

This split-personality life ended in 2001 when I became a full-time columnist, and the more universal approach to humor gradually faded as my columns became more about local journalism than whimsy. These would be the sort of columns to which *Bulletin* readers — are you one? — have become accustomed.

For this book, I considered simply picking up from, say, 2005, where *Pomona A to Z* left off in a sense, and ignoring the earlier columns. Then again, why ignore what Woody

Allen, in *Stardust Memories*, called “the early, funny ones”? My hope is to produce a series of collections that will preserve columns and other writings that seem worth the book treatment. And if that’s going to be the case, then I might as well go back to the beginning.

This required me to reread these columns for the first time in many years. In the meantime, I’d written nearly 2,000 columns. Taking a fresh look at the earliest ones was enlightening, and occasionally horrifying.

My influences were disparate and not entirely digested: Dave Barry and Robert Benchley, *Los Angeles Times* humorists Steve Harvey and Roy Rivenburg, the Bullpen Bulletins sections in old Marvel Comics and “Shouts and Murmurs” essays in the *New Yorker*.

Going back to these early columns was like reading the work of someone else, albeit someone whose outlook and sense of humor were familiar. Some columns were terrible, as I was clearly flailing around for a consistent tone or a worthwhile topic. Some were neither here nor there, bungled in some way or too dated.

Others were a pleasant surprise. When it came time to choose columns for this book, I went with my gut. If a column made me barf, I didn’t pick it. But if I laughed out loud at least once, it probably made the cut. Also, nearly any locally themed column, or item from a column of brief pieces, had an edge simply because it might, in a small way, document the era.

Roughly one in four columns was deemed worthy. They’re presented in chronological order but can be read in any order you choose. No item columns, as I call the ones made up of several short pieces, appear in full, but some

individual items appear in two groupings later in this book. A few of the columns seemed to need context or brought back specific memories, and those are shared in mini-introductions sprinkled in the relevant places.

A few other columns from this period have been set aside for possible topic-oriented book collections about music, travel and more. But this book does include a music-themed column from 1997 postulating a Rolling Stones tour in 2017 — a notion ridiculous two decades ago — simply because the timing was perfect.

It's doubtful that many of you reading this book recall any of these columns, even if you did happen to read them 16 or more years ago, which was another plus for putting them into a book. This material will be new for nearly all of you.

Even though these columns are quite different than my more recent and familiar output, I hope you'll enjoy their silliness and look kindly upon various late '90s references and instances of ineptness therein.

If you laugh out loud now and then, that would be cool.



BLAH BLAH BLAH YAK YAK YAK

February 13, 2000

Dear Ann Landers: My 16-year-old granddaughter (“Susie”) has a cell phone, which she keeps with her 24 hours a day ... Last month, she made 620 calls, and talked for a total of 2,800 minutes! ... We figure this is probably a record. — Proud Grandma in St. Charles, Mo. (letter to Ann Landers, published last Sunday)

Excerpts from the telephone transcripts of Susie:

6:06 a.m.

Tiffany? Susie. Ugh, I can NOT believe I am supposed to get up for school right now. My parents were, like, banging on the door: “Susie! Rise and shine!” like total spastics ... Oh, gawd, here they start again. Peace out.

6:32 a.m.

Tiff, you will totally not guess what my mom is trying to feed me. Blueberry pancakes. I’m like, “Hello? You KNOW I have to have my Frosted Strawberry Pop-Tart in the morning or I am no use to anybody.” Then she acts all offended because I don’t, quote, appreciate her. Like, it always has to be about her.

8:05 a.m.

Amber? Susie. I have to whisper because I’m in Biology. Jason Tompkins is my lab partner for the dissection. I could die of embarrassment. I can’t tell him apart from the frog.

8:17 a.m.

Amber? Jason is waving frog guts at me. I hate him.

9:20 a.m.

Hey, Bill, it's Suz. Whatcha doin'? You're taking a test? OK, I'll hold.

10:48 a.m.

Mom! I told you, NEVER call me during class. I'm trying to study! ... Oh, that's too bad about Dad's accident. He'll still be able to drive me to the mall after school, right? WHAT?!

11:05 a.m.

Steffi, you'll have to drive me to the mall after school. My dopey Dad lost his right hand in the meat slicer at work. They're trying to reattach it, but I don't think it'll be done in time.

11:38 a.m.

Dan? Susie. I'm at the next table. Are you gonna finish those fries?

1:12 p.m.

Hey, Jen, it's Suz. I need your advice DESperately. So I'm in the hall a few minutes ago and that hottie Trent walks by and he's all, "Hey." So I'm like, "Hey." So he's like, "Later." And I'm all, "Sure." Oh, I am SUCH a loser. I can't believe I threw myself at him like that! Can you ask Mandy to ask Jacob to ask around and see if Trent thinks I'm a total slut now?

1:18 p.m.

Hello? What do you mean, Trent doesn't know who I am?!

2:28 p.m.

Steffi, I'll meet you by your car, 'kay? Mall, here we come! I am definitely gonna buy that minidress.

3:12 p.m.

I'm still in the dressing room, Stef. Can you bring me in a size 6? There's something wrong with this stupid size 4.

3:22 p.m.

Um, how about a size 8?

5:15 p.m.

Hello, Mom? Stef and I are at the mall. We're just gonna grab dinner here, OK? Look, don't cry, Mom, I'm sure Dad will be fine. If they can't reattach his hand, maybe they can put in a hook or something ... I'm only trying to cheer you up!

8:43 p.m.

Lesley? Susie. WHAT a day I've had! Trent is totally after me. And I bought a peasant skirt at the mall. That minidress was all wrong for me. Oh, and my Dad had his hand chopped off and successfully reattached through miracle surgery. Thank god. If he had come home with a stump, I would have run away from home, I swear. Your day? Sorry, Les, gotta go.

9:28 p.m.

Hi, Grandma! How are things in St. Charles? You wrote to Ann who? She said I was a compulsive talker? Well! I am speechless! OK, not really. But I'd like to tell HER a few things!

3:41 a.m.

Tiff? I can't sleep.



The backstory to the column you just read came afterward. I mailed the column to Ann Landers with a short, hand-written note, something like this: “Thought you might enjoy seeing this column inspired by one of yours. Best, David Allen.”

Imagine my surprise when a business-sized envelope showed up in my mailbox, marked “Personal,” and with the return address of Ann Landers. Evidently whoever screened her mail had shown her my column and she liked it enough to respond.

“Your blah-blah-blah, yak-yak-yak column was a hoot. I loved it. Are you syndicated? If not, why not? Please respond to me at the above address. All best, Ann Landers.”

The pleasure of this bombshell was only slightly mitigated by her having read my signature as “Daniel” rather than “David.”

I wrote her back a few days later, explaining my job and that no, I was not syndicated, but that I would talk to the editor about it, and I enclosed three other columns for her perusal.

It wasn't clear if she had been suggesting she could help or was simply trying to encourage me. I didn't presume anything. I also didn't hear from her again. It's possible nobody showed her my second letter, or that she thought my columns stunk, or that she didn't have any advice or help to offer. But

it was awfully nice of her to write the first time.

After all, people wrote TO Ann Landers. I never expected her to write to me.

*Ann Landers
Chicago Tribune
435 North Michigan Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60611*

March 30, 2000

Daniel Allen
Inland Valley Daily Bulletin
2041 East Fourth Street
P. O. Box 4000
Ontario, CA 91761

Dear Daniel Allen:

Your blah-blah-blah, yak-yak-yak column was a hoot.
I loved it.

Are you syndicated? If not, why not? Please respond to me
at the above address.

All best,

Ann Landers

AL:cr


2000-03-30 10:00 AM

A bane of newspaper staffs is the “progress edition” or iterations thereof. These are “special sections” to which everyone must contribute in spare moments while maintaining their regular output, and which exist primarily for the purpose of selling advertising, which of course pays our salaries, thus making the nature of the assignment even more irritating to the idealists among us.

In the spring of 2000, we published a highly unusual progress edition, “Visions of the 21st Century,” with a series of news and feature stories about what the Inland Valley might be like in 2020. Did anyone out there save a copy?

I was asked to write a column, which in this case I did happily, because the assignment was so goofy. You’ll find that piece next.

Illustrating it required photos of me in a space suit in a public place, namely, a Metrolink platform, dressed like some clod from the future. Oh, the humiliation. Like most embarrassing experiences in life, it made for a good column, which I wrote for my regular newspaper appearance. That’s reprinted here as well, along with the photos for your snickering pleasure. (My regular column mug showed me with hand on chin, which is why I mimicked the pose in a space helmet.)



HE BOLDLY GOES WHERE NO COLUMNIST HAS GONE BEFORE – WORK, 2020 STYLE

photos by Tom Zasadzinski/Inland Valley Daily Bulletin

May 21, 2000

So they came to me asking for my thoughts on The Workplace of the Future — namely, what it might be like in 2020.

They came to the right visionary.

Because I see numerous differences in the workplace in 20 years — sweeping, structural, fundamental changes.

The top change I foresee in 2020 is that workplace vending-machine snacks will be even older than they are today.

In fact, in 2020 the No. 1 cause of workplace injury will be from chewing, and trying to digest, Fritos Corn Chips that were made during the Ford Administration.

Other than that, life may not change so drastically in the next 20 years. After all, the workplace is much the same today as it was in 1980, isn't it?

Well, OK, today we do have such wonders as fax machines, cellular telephones, e-mail, human resources departments and computer solitaire. We've done away with layoffs. Today, we have "rightsizing."

We have computers. Also, carpal tunnel syndrome.

Health insurance is no longer free — which is understandable, given that the cost to insure one employee is equal to the gross domestic product of Zaire.

And today's health care is provided by HMOs, or Health Mutilation Organizations.



So maybe I was wrong about the workplace not changing much since 1980. So sue me. (Please, don't!)

What might the workplace be like in 2020, then? Taking the idea seriously, I read the latest research papers on the subject. I consulted with leading experts. And I traveled the globe in search of “cutting edge” workplaces that might provide a glimpse into our future.

Unfortunately, I got drunk and left my notes in a bar in Istanbul, forcing me to make up the following story.

The workplace of 2020

It was a shaping up as a typical day for Adam-12. As usual, his robot butler awakened him promptly at 6 a.m. After a quick shower-and-buffing, Adam-12 allowed his butler to dress him, gulped down his breakfast-burrito pill, kissed his sleeping wives goodbye and rushed out the door of his Ontario Millsville home, fishing his *Inland Valley Daily Bulletin* compu-disk out of the front yard wading pool with a sigh.

Yes, another typical day, Adam-12 thought, tapping his sparkly boot impatiently as he waited on the CommuTube platform.

Soon the bullet car whooshed to a stop inside the clear, Habitrail-like CommuTube. Passengers jammed their way inside and the car sped onward.

Traveling under smog-free skies, Adam-12 was rushed past the Inland Valley's gleaming spires into the heart of Los Angeles toward his job with Acme Amalgamations, for which he worked as a drone.

Moments later, his office monolith in sight, Adam-12 pushed the red button by his seat, which ejected him a soaring 60 feet into the air. From there he used his jet-pack to swoop to the office, lickety-split.

Greeting the secretary-bots with a friendly smile, Adam-12 was soon at his desk on the 2,253rd floor. He plugged himself in and checked his unconscious for z-mail. He found an “Urgent” message from his supervisor, which he quickly uploaded.

“Adam, got a great joke for you,” the z-mail said with a chortle. “What’s the difference between dating an undersea-dwelling atomic killer pervert cockroach and dating an attorney? At least with an undersea-dwelling atomic killer pervert cockroach, you can take it home to meet Mom! Har-har!”

After rolling his eyes, Adam-12 blinked twice for “delete.” He sat back in his podchair and, donning his ether helmet, began amalgamating.

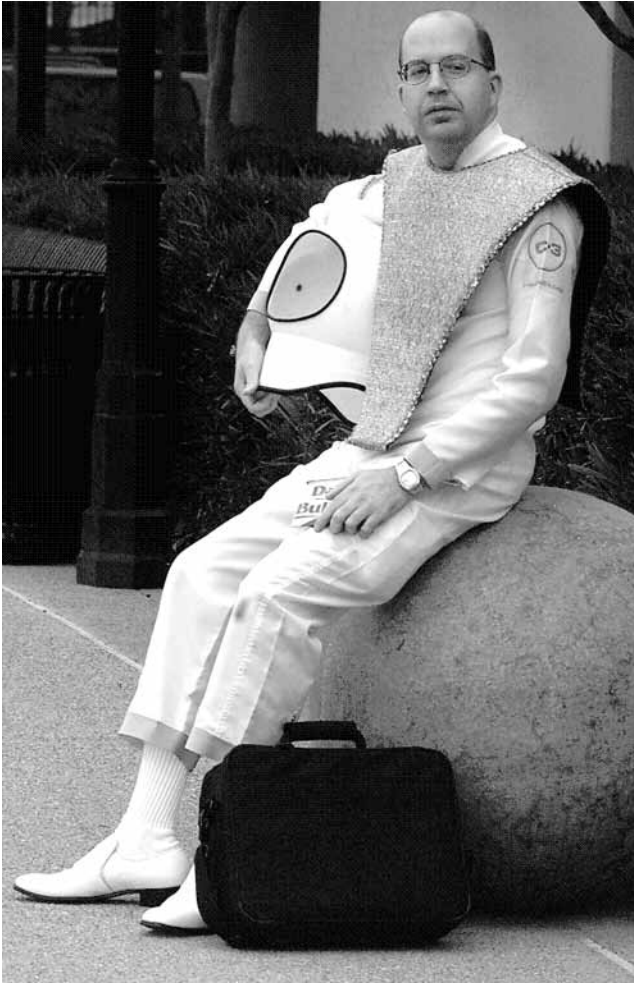
Ninety minutes later, Adam-12 took a break to visit the men’s room. “What’s new, Ed-9?” he asked a colleague.

“Same old, same old. Can you believe this weather?” Ed-9 said, shaking his head and chuckling. Turning to leave, he said: “Hey, have a good one.”

Adam-12 rolled his eyes so hard, they momentarily got stuck. Looking in the mirror, he adjusted his pajamas. These “casual Mondays” are nice, but still too restrictive, he thought.

Over at Mega Incorporated, he thought bitterly, employees get “clothing optional Mondays.”

Alter further amalgamating, it was lunch time! Adam-12



hooked up with Eve-3 and Henry-8 for a trip to Les Wok'd Taco, a fusion French-Asian-Mexican restaurant within easy jet-pack distance from the office.

Over his steaming escargot-and-eel-taco pill, Henry-8 complained about his wives. Eve-3 tuned him out, literally. Instead, she tuned in Adam-12 on the Thought Frequency.

>How about those Clippers?< Eve-3 asked.

>Can't believe they're in the playoffs a ninth straight year,< Adam-12 responded. >What a dynasty!<

>So get this, Adam ... Mary-16 told me 2,000 employees — the entire 3,511th floor — got “sent home early” this morning,< Eve-3 told him conspiratorially.

>Boy, I hate these buzz-words,< Adam-12 declared. >If people got rightsized, why won't the company just come out and say it? Let's call a shoveling implement a shoveling implement!<



“Adam,” Henry-8 said, pointing to Adam-12’s plate, “you’re just picking at your sweet-and-sour-refried-crepes pill.”

“Guess I’m not that hungry,” Adam-12 said, putting down his straw. He buzzed for the waiter-bot and asked, “May I have a doggie bag?”

Back at the office, Adam-12 plugged himself in again and got down to business. That morning he had amalgamated 8,000 Acme accounts. Slacker, he thought. That young turk Jones-5 can do that in his sleep.

Oh, well, Adam-12 figured. I’ve been out of college only five months. Why stress? Another seven months and I’ll be eligible for retirement anyway.

He linked with Acme’s best client. “Hello, Wile E.!” Adam-12 said jovially. “How’s life in the desert?”

“That roadrunner is driving me batty,” the coyote told him. “Can you charge another anvil to my account?”

Mid-afternoon rolled around. Adam-12 checked his z-mail, then strolled to the company opium pipe to hear the latest gossip.

“Employees used to ‘shoot the breeze’ around something called a ‘water cooler,’” said Alex-7, the company know-it-all, as he lay on the divan, puffing contentedly. “So have you heard anything new about the merger?”

Adam-12 lowered the Cone of Silence. “Just that Time-Warner-AOL-Viacom-Disney-Arco-Microsoft-Blimpie is still in negotiations to buy us,” Adam-12 said.

“Eh?” Alex-7 said, cupping his hand behind his ear. “What’s that?”

“Never mind,” Adam-12 shouted, raising the Cone of

Silence in disgust. Adam-12 took the conveyor belt into the cafeteria. Mergers, z-mail, pill food ... life sure had changed since he was a lad back in 2000.

Absentmindedly, he dropped \$5 into the vending machine for a bag of Fritos Corn Chips. He broke open the bag, grabbed a chip, put it in his mouth and bit down.

His scream of pain echoed throughout the 2,253rd floor.



ABOUT DAVID ALLEN

David Allen, a native of Illinois, has worked in newspapers for three decades, all in California, his adopted home. His career began in 1987 at the *Santa Rosa News Herald* and continued at the *Rohnert Park-Cotati Clarion*, *Petaluma Argus-Courier* and *Victor Valley Daily Press*, some of which are still in business. In 1997 he joined the *Inland Valley Daily Bulletin*, where he is a columnist. Find his work online at dailybulletin.com, or impress your friends by buying an actual newspaper. A resident of Claremont, he is the author of one previous book, *Pomona A to Z*, also from Pelekinesis.



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