Rebirth and Renewal of my Author/Travel Journalist Website: The Joys and Challenges

By Lee Foster

My author/travel journalist website has undergone a rebirth and renewal that will carry me forward for the next decade. The process has been both exhilarating and traumatic.

It is likely that every modern communicator with a website will face this issue from time to time. This article is about both the technical issues and the human drama that will likely occur in some form in the transition.

See my new website at https://www.fostertravel.com.

There is a lot of cleanup that remains to be done on this new site, mainly the placement of correctly-sized photos and the adjustment of my photo slideshows for

articles. But the basic site and theme are now showing well.

There is a subtle change in the url if you have visited my website earlier. An "s" has been added. The old http is now an https. Don't worry about the link, however. The old link will redirect to the new link automatically.

This entire rebirth and renewal process has two sides. On the one hand it has been joyful and glorious. On the other hand, it has been stressful, disruptive, and traumatic. Allow me to elaborate on these simultaneous experiences.

Why website renewal is required

If you have a website, rebirth and renewal is required from time to time, as technology changes.

WordPress remains the best option for basic structure, in my opinion, for a modern website. My new upgrade is a 2017 improvement over my 2009 WordPress website.

Three converging factors made rebirth and renewal necessary for me (and possibly you) now:

-1 New "themes" for a WordPress website allow better presentation of content. My new website is "swipable" to show a lot of detail about my content, more than 300 articles with photos. The old website was menu-driven and had nothing to swipe. My new website uses the Newspaper theme, after I dallied over the Avada theme for several months, working with my design person. More on this later.

-2 The new website is mobile friendly, "responsive" as they say. This is good when Google Analytics tells me that 35% of my traffic is now coming from mobile devices. The great god Google has counseled me, saying, "We'll give you more Searches if you are mobile friendly." About 80% of my total traffic comes from Searches forwarded to me from the great god Google. Take a look at my site on your laptop/desktop and then on your phone to see what mobile friendly means. My site adjusts to your device.

-3 The new website is more financially and data secure, an https website rather than

an http. The website has a so-called SSL certificate, meaning that it is more encrypted secure when people are doing financial transactions or providing a range of other personal information, such as log in. I am not actually selling my books/ebooks now directly on my site, but might do so later. Google has said, "We'll give you more Searches if your site is https secure." I listened and complied.

My fourth website birth/renewal

There are many aspects to starting a website or rebirthing and renewing a website. All aspects should be anticipated and allowed for.

To put the current changes in context, this is my fourth major website birth/renewal. The earlier iterations were as follows:

-1983: I made a deal with the CompuServe online system to put all my travel journalism online in their system. My California and Western States travel articles went into my WCT (West Coast Travel) feature. My worldwide travel went into my AIT (Adventures in Travel) feature. CompuServe agreed to pay me 10% of the revenue from the $4/hour that folks were charged to access my kind of content, which was called Premium Content.

This relationship worked well until CompuServe closed down in 2001. They sent me a check each month for 17 years. I have no graphic of what this site looked like because there was no graphic. There was just text crossing a screen at a slow "baud" rate. This first effort of 1983 was an online system, and could not, of course, properly be called a "website" because the Internet as a public place had not yet arrived.

-1995: At the emergence of the Internet I set up one of the first travel journalism websites, with the same url and name that I use today, now https://www.fostertravel.com for Foster Travel Publishing. The 1995 version was a hand-built html-language system constructed by James Smith of Berkeley. I did all the routine work of uploading content, but I did not focus on the design skills and changing design opportunities. I still recommend that path for content creators today.

-2009: WordPress gradually emerged as the most suitable structure for author/content creator websites, so in 2009 a designer in San Francisco, Bradley Charbonneau, developed a new website look for me, using a Theme Forest theme. Bradley managed the website well, but in 2015 he decided to move his family to Europe and cease his website-building operation. This created anxiety for me and for the hundreds of other "creatives" who had been his clients. Bradley pulled back gradually, so there was time in 2016 to look for alternative designers.

Bradley's departure in 2016 created a high level of concern because "themes" were not so developed in 2009. Much of the work on my website had been "custom" development by Bradley. Who would be able to interpret Bradley's custom work going forward? Probably a totally new design, starting from scratch, would be best.

The disruptive process of this website rebirth and renewal

The departure of my designer Bradley brought forth the three main questions that everyone who has a website needs to address. The answers are not always easy:
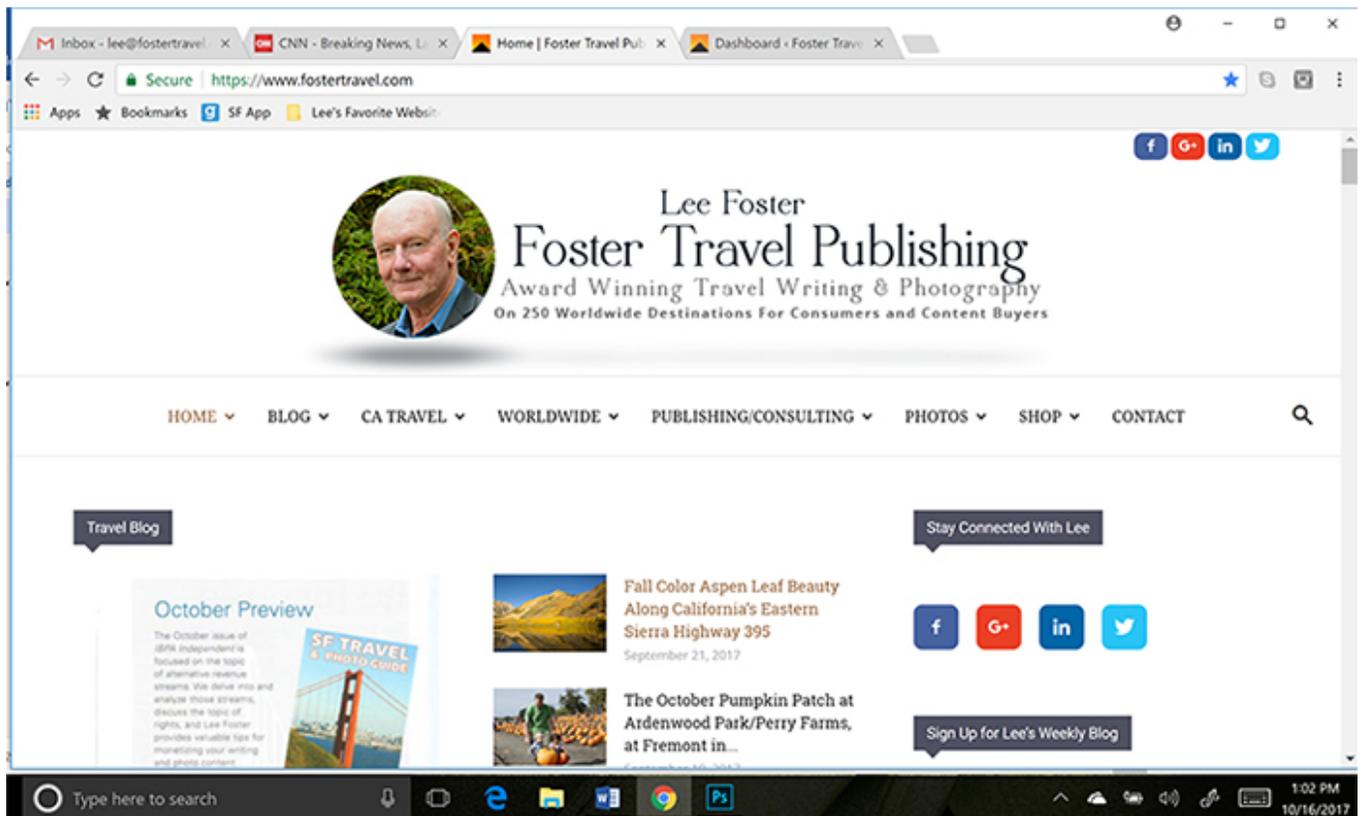
Who will be your designer/manager?

Some folks will say they can do it themselves, and more power to them, but I choose to concentrate on my content development and do the routine uploading myself. I depend on an informed designer to set up, guide, and protect the website. Bradley spent most of his waking moments following design advances.

Finding the right designer, at the affordable price, for a long-term relationship, is critical. The Bradley relationship 2009-2016 was good. As I searched, one friend with a competent website recommended his designer in Romania. Another friend with an excellent website had a designer in Scotland. The high real estate costs of the Bay Area made it difficult to find a competent local designer who was affordable.

One main issue was: what happens when your website goes "down" for some reason? Who will solve the problem? It did not happen often in the Bradley years, but when it happened, I was happy to have Bradley with his expertise to troubleshoot it, usually with the host, then Hostgator, or the registrar, GoDaddy. For example, on one occasion the numbers describing the website in the registration at

GoDaddy got messed up. GoDaddy said they didn't do it. Bradley said he didn't do it. I didn't do it. But something had happened. Bradley was able to analyze the problem and solve it.

I found it extremely stressful when my website was "down" and I was suddenly invisible. For the 2016-2017 transition I wanted to have a live person, readily accessible, to design and protect my website, plus provide some forward-looking guidance as the years would proceed.

I engaged an outfit in Marin County known as Entropic Studio, run by two guys, Todd Walker and Jeffrey Samorano, to take over my site and start the re-design with the Avada theme that Bradley had urged me to purchase, and which they were also enthusiastic about. They were WordPress specialists, which was good.

Jeffrey was the main designer. However, I had other projects going, such as a new ebook/app *SF Travel & Photo Guide*, and the design costs per hour were expensive, so I only committed to one hour of payment per month, and only a little development happened for about a year. However, the website was "safe" with Entropic.

Meanwhile, of course, the great god Google continued to send me admonishing thoughts, such as "We're cutting back on your Search gifts because you are not mobile friendly and are not https secure." I was experiencing a slight decline in traffic, despite my ever-enlarging content. Realizing that my site was not "swipable," I was also beginning to feel like a Neanderthal.

Finally, in September 2017, I decided to move full speed ahead. I contacted Entropic anew and learned that Jeffrey had moved up to Chico, CA and started his own operation [MakeChico](#) & [WPinOneClick](#). His operation is referenced in the lower right on my website pages. He was still an amicable part of Entropic with Todd Walker. But my design relationship would be direct with Jeffrey. We plunged ahead.

Who will be your website host?

One aspect of the move of management of my website in 2016 to the overall Entropic structure, which continues, even as I now deal with Jeffrey directly for design, was that Entropic required that I move to a new host, WP Engine.

There was some financial pain in this, but I believe it was a good decision, especially as I am a catastrophe-averse person.

Entropic would be my "new Bradley" as of 2016 only if I agreed to move my site hosting from Hostgator to WP Engine. The cost difference was from perhaps $5/month to $27.50/month, and this was a lifetime sentence.

The argument was that all Entropic-guided sites had to be on WP Engine because WP Engine had greater speed and greater security than my old Hostgator. In this hacking era, security is an increasingly important issue. WP Engine also assured me that I now had two sets of "live human beings" to contact if there was a problem with my website. I had Jeffrey/Todd and I had WP Engine. It is correct that Hostgator also has some live human beings answering their phones, but, understandably, you have to climb higher in the phone tree to actually locate the live human being in Hostgator. Given the monthly cost differential, the effect on staffing is understandable. I emailed Bradley about all this in Europe, and he agreed that WP Engine was better, for speed and security, though more expensive.

There was another critical and beneficial aspect of WP Engine. The system allowed my designer, Jeffrey, to build a new website, side by side with the old website, using the same assets. Then, at some point, I could order Jeffrey to flip the switch and the new website would go live.

It all worked out, fairly well, but there were traumatic glitches ahead. So read on.

A third issue is:

What will be your WordPress design theme?

At Jeffrey's suggestion, I made a major switch in the design theme, which was disruptive but wise.

Clear communication between the website content person (me) and the designer (Jeffrey) was critical on this theme choice and execution issue.

Bradley and Jeffrey/Todd were enthusiastic about Avada in 2016, partly because it

was widely used. That was comforting to hear. Many alternative design people might be engaged if something happened to Jeffrey. Plug-ins would be forthcoming. I had already purchased Avada late in the Bradley era and had it installed.

But I was never totally happy with Avada. A lot of sites use Avada. You will recognize them. There is a lovely presentation of photography. Bradley and Jeffrey/Todd anticipated that a beautiful presentation of my considerable photography resource (travel photos in more than 300 Lonely Planet books etc) would be my major goal.

But that was not my main wish. Each day I was reading online the San Francisco Chronicle, CNN, the New York Times, and the Washington Post. I liked to see on their websites a lot of content with many choices, each with some photo enticement. I was not going to these sites for their photos alone. I visited the sites because of their abundant news and insight. That was my vision for my site also.

I articulated this wish to Jeffrey and he began a search for a different theme.

He recommended Newspaper, and I went with it. My new site uses this theme. Sometimes it is necessary to make highly consequential decisions, rather quickly, without a lot of alternative information. This is where a content person needs to have confidence in the chosen designer. I also wanted to get the website done soon. Jeffrey said Newspaper had design components that would make his work efficient. That was good news because I was paying Jeffrey by the hour for his design guidance.

Regarding my payments to Jeffrey, folks will ask, "How much?" It would be imprudent of me to go into specifics, except to give you my overall judgment: Jeffrey's fiscal requests were reasonable. And he was highly competent. And when there were stressful moments (coming up soon) he soldiered on and solved the problem. The complexities of an author website will vary. The amount of design that the designer can accomplish per hour is a consideration. Jeffrey in Chico also appeared to me more affordable than Jeffrey in Marin County.

The moments of highest anxiety

There was one part of this journey with Jeffrey that easily ranks as the time of highest anxiety.

It occurred from a Friday morning to a Sunday night.

I mention this because things do not always go well in website rebirth. Resilience is required from all parties.

To Jeffrey's credit, and my own, no homicides occurred during this stressful period. Nor did either party walk away in discouragement. Both of us patiently proceeded in that dark time.

We launched on a Friday morning. Two systems went out together, the new design and the SSL https security component.

The effect was not good.

I checked for my site and got the disturbing prompt, preventing me from entering:

"This site can't provide a secure connection.

www.fostertravel.com uses an unsupported protocol."

Friends and viewers began to check in, saying, "Lee, your site isn't coming up. I get a bad prompt. What's up?"

My site was invisible. My Google Analytics showed zero traffic. My Google Adsense Ad revenue showed zero cents. Something was wrong with the SSL. Nothing was being re-directed. Nothing was coming up.

Jeffrey and I went to work on this with our best detective skills. There were a lot of possible variables. Chrome vs Internet Explorer? My Dell xps laptop vs my other Dell laptops? How about on my iPhone and iPad?

One disturbing aspects was that quirks then began to occur. I would do the Search for my site on my Dell laptop and get the bad prompt, then let that window remain

open for a half hour, and all at once my site would appear, as normal.

Anomaly is not a happy word when you seek computer certainty. I could see frustrated customers in my bad dreams during two sleepless nights.

There was some time pressure.

A couple of days later a major article by me would appear in the *Independent*, the magazine of the Independent Book Publishers Association. There were a dozen links in the article to my website. But my website was invisible.

I was scheduled to give a talk at the Society of American Travel Writers in Portland in two weeks about "monetization" of travel content. The subject involved my website. What if I had no website?

When I went into the site of the great god Google and Seached for myself, the prompt came up that my website was a problem. I knew it was not good to irritate the great god Google, who might have a long memory.

Could I go back to "old" website after we had flipped the switch? I wasn't sure.

Jeffrey and I communicated from Friday morning to Sunday noon on this. Jeffrey couldn't figure it out on Friday and on Saturday. But by Sunday noon Jeffrey felt he had located the code variable.

By Sunday evening my site was back up. I slept well that night. By Monday I was back to normal traffic.

I mention all this in some detail because some problem will happen to all content creators and web design people from time to time in some iteration.

Then a few days later there was another mini-crisis.

Newspaper theme alerted me that an update to their theme was now available and recommended. You always want the latest update, correct? Also, I asked Jeffrey to look into Page Speed Load time in my Google reporting. It seemed to me it could be better. Jeffrey undertook these two tasks.

Unfortunately, a problem resulted. My website would come up, but the photos from my WordPress Library were invisible.

The problem persists from the time I detected it at 6 p.m. and alerted Jeffrey until 10 a.m. the next day, when Jeffrey was able to solve it. That meant another night with a little tossing and turning. The website, my presentation to the world beyond, was not working, and I didn't know if or when this could be solved.

The next morning, after the solution was implemented, I asked Jeffrey what was the issue.

"Lee, it was a minification issue," said Jeffrey. "I tried to improve the Page Speed with Google yesterday. There were a lot of variables. There's your website configuration. There's your theme and its update. There's the environment in which this all goes out. I had to turn things on and turn things off until I figured out what wasn't working."

After I ended my phone conversation with Jeffrey on this, and breathed a sigh of relief, I realized once again that "I need Jeffrey." I did not want to assume the burden on comprehending "minification." There just weren't enough hours in the day. Beware, if you are a total do-it-yourselfer on your website, that these matters can be complicated.

My rewards from the great god Google

The week after I made these dramatic changes, mainly better display with the new theme, mobile friendly, and https secure, the great god Google began smiling on me.

The great god sent more folks my way to worship in my small church. It made me feel good about the restless path I have been pursuing.

This website drama may suggest to you that I am a restless person, and that is correct. I am restless because I want a great website for the next decade. I believe that my restlessness is constructive.

This new website renewal propels me joyfully into the future. I am energized. It will

be exciting to report to viewers my explorations in a structure that will display well, be mobile friendly, and be totally https secure for the user.