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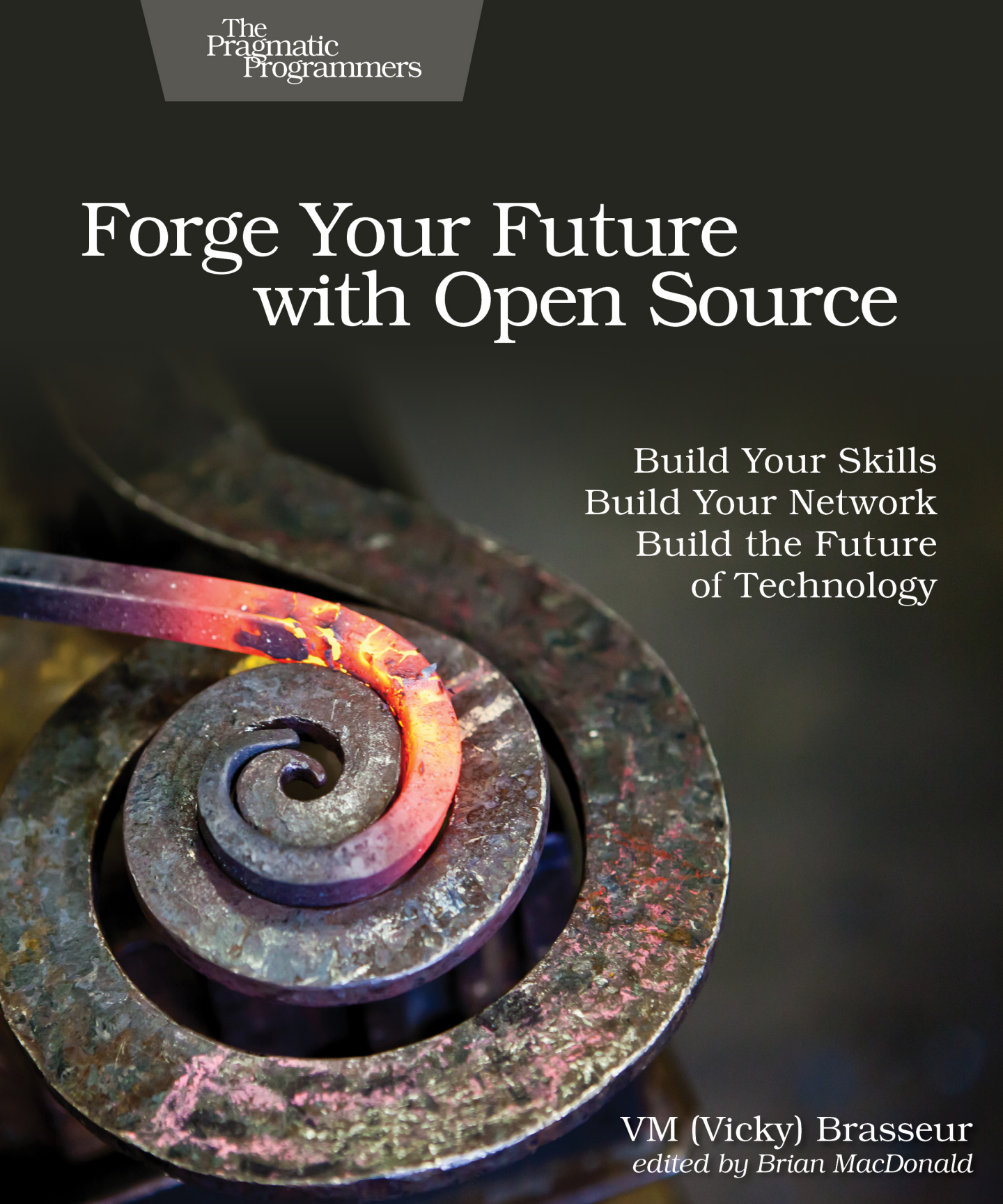
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FOSS Benefits to Your Personal Network

When you mention the word "networking" to many in software development, often they'll do one of two things. Either they'll start telling you about this one time they had to fix their family's router, run their own DNS server, or brought down the entire work subnet because of a typo. Or, if they realize that by "networking" you mean interfacing with other humans, they may blanch and start nervously scanning the room for the closest exit.

Unfortunately, much of our popular and technological culture has trained us to think of networking as an Intimidating Event: a bunch of people gather in a room, shake hands, introduce themselves, and then say smarmy things to each other to drum up new business leads or sell something. While, yes, this sort of thing can qualify as networking, it's more of the exception than the rule. At its most basic, just as computer networking is simply a method for computers to communicate, human networking is simply people communicating with other people. That's it. It doesn't require a special event and it doesn't require special skills or tools beyond what's required to interact with the clerk at your local shop.

Besides some of the negative connotations and misinformation under which many of us work where networking is concerned, there's also the problem that a lot of us are more comfortable interfacing with computers than with other people. Our educations are focused more around solving equations, diagraming sentences, or memorizing dates than about how to hold extemporaneous conversations with our fellow humans. Communicating well requires practice, intention, and attention. If you haven't had the training or opportunities to get that practice, then that communication can be a very scary and uncomfortable thing to approach at first. Don't worry: it gets better once you start getting that practice.

If it's so difficult and uncomfortable for many people to network with others, why should they bother? What's in it for them?

You've probably heard the old phrase, "It's not what you know, it's whom you know." This is networking in an oversimplified nutshell. As you progress through your career, the people you meet along the way can have a marked impact (hopefully in a good way). This doesn't necessarily mean they'll hand you a job, though that does sometimes happen. The most important benefits of these relationships are the discussions, introductions, and information sharing that happen in them. The information could be a pointer to a new technology that will solve a problem that's been vexing you, a what-if question that leads to the launch of a new product, an introduction to a new collabo-

rator or mentor, or a lead on a new position. These benefits and more can come from building and maintaining collegial professional relationships. More than any technology you will ever use or create, the relationships you foster will help you thrive in your career.

Free and open source project participation provides the opportunity for you to meet a broader variety of people than you're likely to in your day-to-day professional life. Many projects include contributors from all over the world and of all culture, skill, and experience types. Contributing to and becoming a member of the communities around these projects gives you instant and easy networking. Simply by listening to and respecfully engaging with the people in the community, you have successfully networked. Congratulations! That wasn't so bad, was it? That's because participation in a FOSS project provides a ready-made shared context and conversation starter. It's very easy to open a dialogue with a stranger when you know that they share an interest and are working toward the same goals as you.

The relationships formed through contributing to free and open source projects may be the most valuable and lasting benefit. These are people who can be there for you when you need advice, feedback, collaborators, or just a good laugh.

Benefit from Preparation

Now that you have a better idea of how contributing to FOSS can benefit your life and your career, there's one more thing to do before you can start looking for a project to contribute to: learn the lay of the land. Your project hunting will go a lot better if you know what files and social structures to look for. The next chapter will prepare you with everything you need to get started.