I never liked Windows. My Apple II+, which didn't have a hard drive and had only 48 Kilobytes of RAM, was a dinosaur by comparison to my first Windows machine but the Apple was an old friend who I understood and spent hundreds of pleasurable hours learning how to use. Windows, from the first, seemed unnecessarily complicated, adversarial, and difficult to learn. I learned it but there was little joy in the process. Maybe that's why Linux captured my interest and imagination from the first time I heard about it (back in nineteenmumble) but I was reluctant to just jump in and give it a try because it was difficult to imagine how anything free could truly be any good. After all, you get what you pay for; that's how the world has always worked.

When it became possible to buy a copy of Mandrake or SUSE Linux I avidly read every word I could find and agonized over which I should try and how was I going to get my hands on another computer because I wasn't letting go of my Windows machine until I knew how to use Linux. A few more years passed while I waffled and worried. In the end I resigned myself to becoming a competent, if reluctant, Windows user.

Things started to change when somebody gave us a Ubuntu live CD. Lisa and I enjoyed experimenting with it and later, after we switched from dial-up to DSL I learned how to download ISO files and burn my own live CDs. We tried over a dozen Linux distributions, decided that we both preferred KDE to Gnome and were especially fond of PCLinuxOS. Using Linux became a doable reality when I lucked into a nice used computer. I installed PCLinuxOS on it, set Lisa up with a KVM switch (sharing her monitor, mouse and keyboard with her XP machine) and went looking for another used computer for me. All I could find (that I could also afford) was an older machine and the nicest distro I could get to run on it was Debian Sarge (via the net install). Sarge required a lot of post-install tweaking but I actually enjoyed learning to use it. For 25 years I was an electronics technician; I enjoy fixing things. It's what I do.

A lot has happened since then. Etch replaced Sarge as the stable version of Debian and Etch doesn't require any of the 'really geeky' post install tweaks but it has it's own set of useful tweaks that enable it do all sorts of things I could never figure out how to do in Sarge. What was once my new Windows machine is running Debian Etch and I have a slightly older, slower machine next to it, running Windows XP (which I almost never turn on anymore). I won't stop using Windows altogether because I have friends, family and a few hundred ezine readers who still use it. I don't want to lose touch with them but I, finally, have other options and that makes me very happy.

If I had no other reason for preferring Linux to Windows, these two would suffice:
1. For the first eighteen months after I started using Linux I didn't know how to install a firewall or anti-virus software so I just did without them and never had a problem. I've since installed both but don't always remember to turn them on. When I do turn them on, they seem to consume only a tiny fraction of my system resources.

2. If I notice anything different after updating my Linux machine it's only that things seem to work a little better and none of my system settings are ever altered in the slightest by updates.

Linux has not only been free, it's paid me rich dividends. I've used Linux for a little over two years and in that time I've learned more about the 'insides' of a computer than I learned in the preceding twenty years. For me, learning something new has always been the best payoff of all.