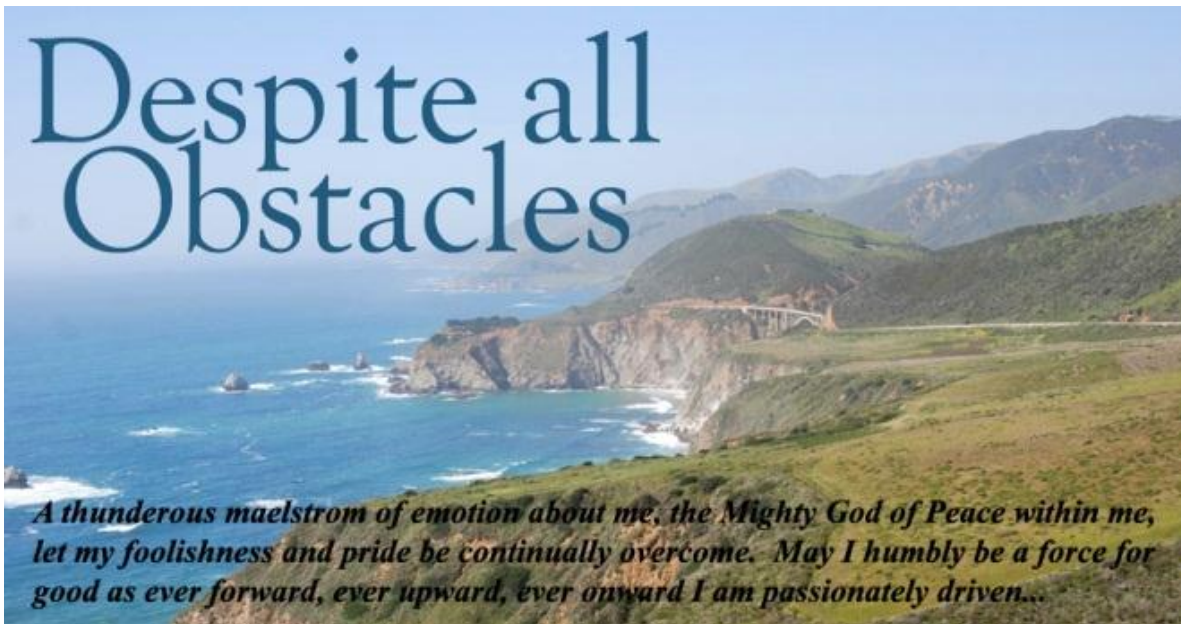


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First Fruits

January 1st, 2010

There is Judeo-Christian law which we know today as tithe, or the giving of 10 percent back to God. If you are Jewish or Christian, you believe that God supplies all your needs, so you're giving 10 percent of what He already gave you, and will give again.

It is not a punitive, cloak-and-gavel law like running a red light or smoking pot. Rather, it is likened to the physical law of gravity, except that it's a spiritual law. What goes up must come down. What you give in faith and obedience to God will be returned to you in greater measure.

I have known of this concept my entire life, and have not followed it to the letter when it comes to money. I believe that our financial struggles may be attributed to that. On the flipside, I have always followed my Jiminy Cricket when it comes to helping people and giving my time to others, wanting nothing in return. God has in turn blessed me with a wonderful, beautiful, and healthy family and a great outlook on life. Money can't buy that.

Here's the gist: it's not just ten percent that you're giving to God. You're giving Him your first and best ten percent. Also, we are not merely talking about money. We're talking about time, talent, and the fruits of your labor. In biblical times, this literally meant fruit, vegetables, sheep, cows, etc. These days, it can mean volunteering, giving blood, or going out of your way to do whatever God requires of you by putting it on your heart. People sow money into a church so that it may be used to finance all aspects of church operations, such as outreach ministries and soup kitchens and

missionary construction projects. And yes, churches have to pay people and bills, too. I personally believe that your monetary tithe to God may also be in the form of charity, either directly or through an organization (Red Cross, Childrens' Hunger Relief Fund, Salvation Army, etcetera).

In 2010, your tithe to God may stem from a number of things. As for me and my wife, we've accepted the challenge from our church to read portions of the Bible for the next 21 days, in an act of giving the first part of our year to God as a church body. Petra and I have taken it a step further by reading in the morning, to give the first part of each day to God.

As for me, I love to write. This is my first post of the year, and God, this Blog's for you.

Our Favorite YouTube Wedding Dance

Okay, maybe it's because it's been a long time since we've been to a wedding, but we totally missed this train in the last few years. Apparently, American weddings are changing. They're becoming more exciting than ever. I'm sure this is no surprise to many of you... but it was a first for us to witness. My sister called and told us to check out a few links on YouTube. My wife and I loved watching them. Without further adieu, our favorite:

(Links to YouTube video, "The Coolest Wedding Entrance Ever")

Challenging the Law: The Rosa Parks Model of Reshaping Policy

These days, the government seems to be an impenetrable fortress. I was recently informed that I owe the Treasury Department thousands of dollars, simply because the Department of Defense continued to pay for my family's life and health insurance long after I got out of the Marines (unbeknownst to me). The Department of the Treasury, FYI, acts as the federal government's collection agency.

I wrote, I called, and I stated in perfect honesty that I had absolutely no control over the government's mistake. I had no access to such knowledge. The representative on the phone informed me that she was sorry, and that she'd heard hundreds of stories like mine... and that I still owe thousands of dollars. Myself, my family and friends have experienced similar hang-ups with the IRS, the INS, State DMV offices, and even simple traffic court. Everything is automated. Individual voices are quelled. Challenging the law is not only faux pas; with so much government opposition to

individual questioning, it's practically becoming illegal.

History is rarely made in an instant. It is the embellishment or promotion, over time, of a singular event or series of events (that may have occurred in an instant). We all know the story of the resolute black woman who got fed up one day on an Alabama bus, refusing to relinquish her seat to a white man. The date was December 1st, 1955. Rosa Parks was 42 years old. Her righteous indignation was not spawned overnight, nor were the legislative changes that would forever alter the progressive course our nation.

The events that led up to that moment--short of re-writing *Roots*--were as follows: The Civil War ended in 1865. The 13th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified to abolish slavery in the same year. In 1870, the 15th Amendment was ratified, allowing blacks to vote. *Harper's Weekly* urges the breakdown of prejudice in America. The deep South, scarred from the Civil War, still fostered racism against blacks by-and-large. Pockets of the South continued to enslave blacks and threaten their existence. A new series of "laws" emerged in the South, to segregate blacks and whites under the false colors of a "separate but equal" existence. These laws were known as Jim Crow laws (so named because crows are black). Hatred wore a new mask.

In 1900, Montgomery laws were changed to incorporate city-wide segregation. Schools, public places, public transit, and pretty much all locations were subject to this ordinance. Now, fast forward to the mid 1940's. Public transportation is in full swing. Public buses are largely used by blacks; the majority of whites have cars. The first four rows of each bus are automatically reserved for whites, with moveable placards that allow each bus driver to reserve more rows for white passengers. Some bus drivers even place an empty buffer row between the black passengers and the white passengers. As more whites enter a bus, blacks are forced to give up their seats; if overcrowding occurs, blacks are forced to exit the bus. Buses are manufactured to include a second entrance in the back, specifically for black use.

Black passengers were not allowed to walk past a white passenger, rather, they had to pay the driver, exit the bus, and re-enter through the back door. Often, the bus driver would drive off after being paid, leaving the black person stranded, crying, chasing after the bus... you get the idea. A girl in her early thirties (that would be Rosa) dropped her purse on the bus floor. As she moved to retrieve it, she briefly occupied a seat set aside for whites. She was thrown off the bus, forcing her to walk five miles, in the rain, through a bad area.

Evil is not a respecter of persons. Young or old, male or female--all blacks were tormented and the bad got worse.

The NAACP was formed to empower blacks through thorough education of laws that directly affected them. A 15-year-old girl named Claudette Colvin was arrested for

failing to give up her seat to a white man... the NAACP taught her that the law stated that no passenger can be forced to give up their seat on a bus. She was found guilty in court--the NAACP did not help her appeal because she was pregnant out of wedlock, making a poor poster child for the organization.

In 1953, Rosa joined the NAACP. In 1954, she secured a job at Maxwell Air Force Base. As a federal installation, segregation was illegal there. She later states that Maxwell "opened her eyes."

The year: 1955. White crime was out of control, and local/State legislators and authorities were completely crooked. A fourteen-year old black boy named Emmett Till was murdered for supposedly whistling at a white woman. His skull was bashed in, his eye was gouged out, he was beaten to a pulp, shot in the face, wrapped in barbed wire, tied to a cotton gin fan, and thrown into the Tallahatchie River. His mother ordered an open-casket funeral, to put a spotlight on white brutality.

This act might be the straw that broke the camel's back. Four days later, on December 1st, Rosa Parks was arrested and jailed for failing to give up her seat to a white man. She was found guilty of violating a city ordinance, and of disorderly conduct. Within 24 hours, she was bailed out. She appealed the court's decision, citing a constitutional rights violation.

The black community was informed of her situation overnight, by way of a 35,000-flyer campaign. Black churches spread the word of a Bus boycott. This included school buses. The strike happened immediately. Black owners of personal vehicles contributed to the carpooling effort. The police reacted, filling the jails with blacks arrested for loitering while awaiting carpools. They ticketed black drivers for anything. False speeding violations. Overcrowding of vehicles. Tailgating. Improper tire pressure.

The boycott worked. The bus companies were hurting financially. Black community organizers rallied to target other businesses and laws to boycott. A young reverend, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. emerged to lead the effort. He urged passive resistance. The boycott ended after a year's toil, when the bus companies were all but entirely broken. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of Parks in 1956, ending segregation on public buses. It was one solid victory in the battle for racial equality.

It's never wrong to be right, but standing up for what's right usually hurts. After the Supreme Court ruling, violence became rampant. Shooters fired into buses, the Klu Klux Klan went into overtime, and black churches and community centers were burned to the ground. The fires prejudice and segregation in public laws and ordinances were not fully extinguished until just inside of forty years ago.

Rosa Parks had balls. More than me. More than anybody I've seen in today's America. Her story, and the conglomerate stories of black Americans struggling for

equality during her era, highlight the fallacies and loopholes in American law. Keep in mind that this story is still fresh in U.S. history. The law, as applied to other areas, is still imperfect and malleable. When the time comes to initiate a change, we can follow Rosa's experience as an exemplary roadmap: there must be (1) organized communication, (2) a common determination, and (3) a strong resolve to endure the opposition. This is becoming increasingly more difficult in the fast-paced future we're living in--everyone has a cause, which deters from a common ideological bond (and voice) that is proportionally greater. What that means is that we as Americans need to reclaim our nerve. We need to toughen up to overcome such hurdles.

Wake up, America. Something is happening here. Constitutionally-guaranteed rights and freedoms are being challenged like never before. Some have been subtly removed under the clouded guises of "security" and "order." The Nazis played that card, too. Look, I'm not trying to stir the pot with some astronomical future prediction, and I'm certainly not anti-government. I'm just trying to keep you on point, so you know how to affect the laws of this nation, and so that you know what to do when the poop hits the fan. Be a Rosa Parks.

Defeating Smokeless Tobacco

I have always been of the opinion that addiction in any form is a crutch. An excuse for the weak-minded to be blindly controlled by a habit-forming substance. That's right, I said habit-forming and no, I'm not contradicting myself. Being addicted is much different than having a habit. A habit is something that you do--a norm if you will--that you still have control over. The word addiction implies that one is forced to desire something against his or her will.

For 9 of my 11 years in the Marines, I did not touch tobacco with the exception of pulling a chaw off of somebody when a brick or plug was presented. Eventually, this led to an occasional wad of Levi Garrett or Red Man chew, or a dip of snuff when on patrol or to stay awake in a classroom.

As with any habit-forming drug, I made excuses. It is no lie that dipping a fat pinch of straight Copenhagen in your lip is the most effective way of staying awake when you've been operating beyond 48 hours with no sleep. That's why 'dip' appeals to so many military operators, stakeout cops, and truckers. The social hook is that smokeless tobacco users are part of a small brotherhood of hard-tac nicotine abusers (Skoal brothers, e.g.). It is also no lie that the first time you attempt to dip, you will be so incredibly sick for a day, even if you're a lifelong smoker. The reason is that a high dose of nicotine makes a straight shot into the bloodstream through the soft thin tissue between your lower lip and gum. It is a much more effective way to kill yourself than with cigarettes.

Ironically, I didn't start using smokeless tobacco full-swing until I got out of the

Marines. I always had a pouch of Levi in my pocket. I'd go through a pouch every other day. Then I started chewing Levi Garrett plug tobacco, which was not as sweet. I liked plug tobacco. There was something satisfying about tearing off a chunk with your teeth. From time to time I'd chew Black Maria, Cannonball, or Day's Work plug tobacco.

After about a year, I noticed that my lower teeth started getting really sensitive on the side of my mouth I primarily chewed on. I tried to consciously switch sides, keeping the tobacco on the left side of my mouth instead of the usual right. It wasn't long before the same thing happened on that side. I also noticed that my gums were rapidly receding. Now, besides the physiological affects, chewing tobacco is really nasty. It kicks your salivary glands into overtime, creating a copious amount of very dark, very slimy spit within minutes. Tobacco users like to perpetuate the saying that swallowing this stuff kills stomach parasites. Never checked up on it, but who cares! It also stains your teeth.

I found myself dipping more and more, because the spit produced is not as ample or as slimy, and because it would give my teeth a break on the left and right side of my mouth. Snuff, or dip, is more addicting and much more dangerous. It is milder in "long cut" form than in "straight" form, and it is fast becoming more socially acceptable with the advent of Camel brand "Snus," which is in pouch form and has flavors like bubble gum and marshmallow. Snus is marketed as "spitless," and digestible. Sounds like a friendly, fruity case of stomach cancer.

I got to the point where I was dipping two cans of Copenhagen Straight snuff a day, the rough nicotine equivalent of six packs of cigarettes. When you dip this much, the inside of your bottom lip gets sliced up pretty badly, and the nicotine from a new dip stings enough to make your eyes water. Snuff has one other major side effect. It keeps you awake and alert all day, but in the evening, when you're done working and done dipping, you'll eat your dinner and pass out from exhaustion--physically unable to stay up any longer. Lights out, meatball.

What happens is this: your heart gets overworked all day (more nicotine = higher heartrate), then in the evening, as the majority of nicotine leaves the circulatory system, your heart crashes. I've traditionally had a very low heart rate anyway (sinus bradycardia, or sub-60 bpm)--averaging 38 to 40 beats per minute during my military career.

Then came the big enchilada. I had a mild heart attack at age 29, which caused an irreparable irregular heartbeat. I stopped using tobacco (and coffee) altogether, but only long enough to get over the scare and catch up on some much-needed sleep. Secretly, I started dipping again, not quite at the rate or quantity that I used to, but regularly nonetheless. I'm not a very good liar, and my wife would catch me from time to time. I refused to say I was addicted, rather that I had a bad habit and I liked it. I tried to justify it. Tobacco was really straining our marriage. Finally, after a pretty

big fight with my wife last fall, I asked her to help me overcome this through encouragement instead of negativity.

Well, to make a short story long (which I do pretty well), I have been tobacco-free since October. No going back to that way of life... though I do like the rare taste of a pipe or a decent Cubano. I thank my wife for the positive reinforcement, and thank God for giving my willpower an extra push. I still believe that addiction is a crutch, and every person who is burdened with a bad habit has the power to overcome!

The Ice Cream Dreamer

Thursday, January 7, 2010

I am a violent dreamer. That is, on the rare bedtime occasions that I actually do dream.

I can still recall vividly how, over the years, I've been buried under an avalanche in my snow cave, been surrounded in the water by ten hungry alligators who were closing in on me, and had my son Caleb kidnapped while shopping at the mall. Once, I lost my grip and fell off a cliff that my wife and I were climbing, pulling her off as well. Oh wait... the alligator story really happened. Tell ya later.

Two months ago, I dreamt that our daughter Lily disappeared from under our noses as we were buying snacks at a movie theater one evening. When we couldn't find her, I ran outside, yelling like a lunatic. Some bystanders said that a black car just pulled up and snatched her from the sidewalk. "They headed that way!" I jumped in my truck and frantically fumbled 9-1-1 with fat thumbs on my phone as I was screaming out of the parking lot. The 911 dispatch said that they already got a call about the little girl that was killed. "Wrong girl," I said. "This one was kidnapped less than 5 minutes ago." She had me hold and then I was on the line with a cop, directing me to drive around to the strip mall on the backside of the theater... to examine the body. I did, and it was her. I remember how real that dream felt, and all the emotion that went with it, and the look in my wife's and boys' eyes when I went back to the theater to get them.

Last night, everyone was dying. The entire world. I dunno, just collapsing and dying somehow. My buddy locked us inside of a room inside of some hospital so that we wouldn't be affected. Great theory--he died and I couldn't figure out how to get out. I finally busted down the door, ran into a Smithsonian museum, and into the basement for some reason, where a weird dino-monster thing was being recreated with plaster-of-Paris replacement bone segments. It took some muscle, but I snatched one of his teeth from a brittle piece of skull (hey--the whole world was dead, so who would really care?) Then I heard crying. I went to investigate, but the adjacent room where the whimpers were coming from was small, and clean, and

dead empty. As soon as I walked out, I heard it again and bolted. Apparently the basement was haunted by a crying little girl voice or something. I got freaked out and headed back out of the museum, excited to see two people who weren't dead! Person one shot person two twice in the chest, then he turned and shot me twice in the chest and I woke up.

The bad news is, these dreams are eerily real and they fool me every time. What's weird is that I don't watch horror or thriller movies--never have. Heck, even action flicks are rare for me these days, and stories like Les Miserables, the Count of Montecristo, and the recent movie Taken fire up my anger meter too much.

The good news is, I have nailed the source of my dreams. Ice cream. Yep, sounds weird, but ice cream does it every time. Even my wife has noticed it. If I eat my ice cream earlier in the afternoon, or not at all, I'm good. But if, when the sun goes down, I eat a big bowl of pralines 'n' cream, or mint chocolate chip, or a king-of-the-midnight-snack loaded double banana split, you can bet your bottom dollar I'll wake up sweatin.

And after all this, at 10:00 PM, I'm signing off to go snuggle up on the couch with my wife to watch a movie, and eat... yeah, you guessed it.

Fighting, Marriage, and Winners

In a race, the title "winner" is awarded to the individual that is the first to cross the finish line. In life, the crossing of a finite line does not hold the same deference. Instead, a winner is someone who CONTINUOUSLY stays at the head of the pack.

Lately, my wife and I have been fighting. A lot. Now granted, I'm a bonehead, but I hate fighting and in my defense, go to great lengths not to fight. Why am I writing about this? Because everyone fights, and all the more frequently with their significant other. Besides, I started this blog with one goal in mind: to prove that a positive attitude and positive actions can facilitate victory over any situation, even one that is seemingly impossible or one that's charted toward a crushing failure or defeat. My hope is that you can relate to my stories, and judge for yourself whether the steps I take toward overcoming an obstacle constitute a viable method or approach in remedying your own unique situations, respectively.

Did I lose you? Sorry, a lot of words, I know. Just trying to say it right.

So we fight a lot. My first instinct is and has always been to jump in my car, drive around, and come back in an hour or two. Petra's first instinct is to keep me from

leaving at any cost. In our first year of marriage, I punched my wife in the face and knocked her onto the ground. Put that in a Marine Corps recruiting commercial. She threw a full pot of hot coffee at my head. I smashed her piano into a million pieces. She head-butted me twice and nearly broke my nose, giving me two black eyes. It was a violent year, but the make-up sex was great, and every week we'd receive compliments at church regarding how great a pair we made. O, the irony. We were a model couple.

Since this is not only my story to tell, I had to ask Petra to read this story, and give me the okay to post it. The major change that she wanted me to make was the coffee pot story, which she has sworn was the other way around. She might be right, but I remember where I was standing when she threw it at me. She remembers too, in reverse, and she says the pot was empty. Hmm. My mind DOES exaggerate things from time to time. I still think she did it. In fact, it might have been a jug of muratic acid that she splashed in my eyes... it's all coming back to me now... I guess we'll never know. Or maybe we already do.

Our second year, we bought a house. We spent a lot of time apart because I was flying all the time. Absence makes the heart grow fonder--it's true. The separations continued for weeks and months at a time, even a year on two occasions. During all this time, when I wasn't on the road, we clung to each other. Fights went the way of the white buffalo. There was one year I remember when we didn't have so much as a 30-minute spat.

2009 was not that year. After bottoming out financially and losing our home in 2008, things got out of control. The fights increased in length and intensity. Gone were the days of being physical. I'd just leave. If forced to stay and fight (i.e., she takes the keys and bars the door), my explosive mouth would fire off every expletive in the book at the top of my lungs. Verbal abuse is a more effective, yet more intrinsically harmful, weapon to both the victim and the abuser.

One month ago, we had a meltdown. We were firing off words of hatred in apocalyptic proportions, and the kids were caught in the crossfire. There was no way for us to communicate even the most simple of concepts to one another, without blaming and maiming. In an act of desperation, an emergency meeting was coordinated on our behalf, with a family friend, Pastor Teddy Lee Fortenberry. He is a man whom Petra and I both know and respect. We separately arrived to meet with him. He prefaced our guided mediation with the fact that only Petra and I can truly fix our marriage, and only with God's help. He provided a perfectly impartial outlet for each of us to speak our minds, then provided some rather insightful guidance for both of us. I found this surprising because of my all-too-often apathetic and sarcastic attitude towards receiving counseling.

Something clicked. Changed. I don't know how, but for better or for worse, my wife and I are coexisting at a much more mature and understanding level than can be said of (even our best of) years past. In our future, there may be fights, and there will certainly be disagreements, but we will continue to find new ways to work through them without causing further damage, by the grace of God.

If we win, we don't get a cookie. No amount of "being the better person" will put a gold medal around either of our necks. In order to be Winners, we have to stay at the head of the moral pack, keeping on top of all selfishness, bitterness, and blame that would try to impede the healthy growth of our marriage. We will flourish, and we will win!

And Petra wants her cookie, dang it.

Two Minutes

Monday, January 11, 2010

He was a highly-decorated SF soldier, and they somehow managed to cram the highlights of his heroism and life's accomplishments into a two-minute segment. Very respectfully submitted: Colonel Robert Howard.

(Links to a YouTube Video highlighting the life accomplishments of Col. Howard)

Citation:

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty. 1st Lt. Howard (then Sfc.), distinguished himself while serving as platoon sergeant of an American-Vietnamese platoon which was on a mission to rescue a missing American soldier in enemy controlled territory in the Republic of Vietnam. The platoon had left its helicopter landing zone and was moving out on its mission when it was attacked by an estimated 2-company force. During the initial engagement, 1st Lt. Howard was wounded and his weapon destroyed by a grenade explosion. 1st Lt. Howard saw his platoon leader had been wounded seriously and was exposed to fire. Although unable to walk, and weaponless, 1st Lt. Howard unhesitatingly crawled through a hail of fire to retrieve his wounded leader. As 1st Lt. Howard was administering first aid and removing the officer's equipment, an enemy bullet struck 1 of the ammunition pouches on the lieutenant's belt, detonating several magazines of ammunition. 1st Lt. Howard momentarily sought cover and then realizing that he must rejoin the platoon, which had been disorganized by the enemy attack, he again began dragging the seriously wounded officer toward the platoon area. Through his outstanding example of

indomitable courage and bravery, 1st Lt. Howard was able to rally the platoon into an organized defense force. With complete disregard for his safety, 1st Lt. Howard crawled from position to position, administering first aid to the wounded, giving encouragement to the defenders and directing their fire on the encircling enemy. For 3 1/2 hours 1st Lt. Howard's small force and supporting aircraft successfully repulsed enemy attacks and finally were in sufficient control to permit the landing of rescue helicopters. 1st Lt. Howard personally supervised the loading of his men and did not leave the bullet-swept landing zone until all were aboard safely. 1st Lt. Howard's gallantry in action, his complete devotion to the welfare of his men at the risk of his life were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit on himself, his unit, and the U.S. Army.

Racism in 2010

As black Americans increasingly celebrate diversity, I bear the brunt of racist tags for the sins of my proverbial fathers. I point back at the unethical practice of reverse racism. How do we finally break the nasty cycle of racial blame and prejudice?

When I was a young tweener, I was roughed up pretty bad by a group of black guys outside of a movie theater in Indianapolis, simply because I was white. I was by myself, keeping to myself, and hadn't uttered a word to cause this to happen. Stuff just happens sometimes. One bad fruit does not mean the tree is poisoned; it is wrong to judge an entire race based upon the sins of individuals. EVERY PERSON IN THIS WORLD WAS CREATED UNIQUE AND INDIVIDUAL, capable of forming his or her own thoughts, responsible for his or her own actions.

I've spent my lifetime soul-searching over racism. I've drawn conclusions in 5 major areas. The first is about racism itself. It is a form of evil which has been, is currently, and will continue to be a major human factor. No amount of equality "marketing" will remove racism from the earth, because it silently thrives in the safe confines of the human mind. It can be mitigated, but not without common sense, tact, and a sincere desire to do what is morally and ethically right. After those steps have been achieved, a viable solution for curbing racist thinking presents itself (see area 5).

The second, third, and fourth major areas of my conclusion are interchangeable by individual person, relative to their respective geographic location on the earth. These areas are the black race, the white race, and all others--in no specific order. In this case, I'm a white guy living in a black and white microcosm in Suffolk, Virginia; with whites being the visible majority race, blacks being the visible major minority race and all others making up the conglomerate lesser minority. Recent demographic info has led to a widespread announcement that Hispanics have become the major minority; I'm not sure whether that is completely accurate for this area, so I'm basing my viewpoint purely on what I see in my community and what I've generally experienced up to this point in my life.

The second part is my conclusion about blacks. Blacks grow up under strong expectations by other blacks to represent their race. As a result, more and more black organizations that emerge cater primarily or exclusively to the black population. Black colleges, black magazines, black rights groups, and black television. In 2010, in an "equal" society, whites cannot have any of those things, to celebrate their whiteness. Any way you slice it, it is a point-blank double standard of segregation; an imbalance that overtly fosters and subtly promotes racism between both blacks and whites. This all takes place under the misleading and well-meaning banner of "celebrating diversity."

Blacks are the disadvantaged party in a vicious cycle of crime and punishment. While blacks are convicted of more crimes, they are also more often targeted. Police forces that are predominantly white do not help. Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Take a look at my post from last week, concerning the 1955 Bus Boycott. The white cops were the antagonists. In all fairness, America's police forces have made some great strides toward ethnic diversity in recent decades, and I know that it's tough to be a cop no matter what color you are.

The third part is my conclusion about whites. By and large, whites are publicly tolerant and privately prejudiced--a dangerous duality, considering the overwhelmingly pale skin color of law-makers (Congress, e.g.). History has proven one too many times that racial tolerance in legislative and judicial seats is only skin deep (no pun intended). Furthermore, black criminals on the nightly news make more and more white people feel unsafe, causing them to keep a segregated mentality. Equal rights? Absolutely. As long as the riff-raff stays on the other side of the tracks. That's the thought process, as I see it.

There is a deep racial hatred that the devil has seeded into white people. From slave-owning 'heroes' of the history books, to the attempted decimation of the Jews, whites have a lot of garbage to work out of their system. Racists, you know who you are. At school, you hang out with an explosion of melanin... from the ghostly white to the charcoal black, and every shade of every color in-between. Then at home, it's nigger this and nigger that around the Thanksgiving turkey with your uncles and grandpa. Shame on you. Grow some balls and stop that generational hatred before it's passed to your kids.

Speaking of balls, whites lack the balls to stand up against reverse racism. They typically backpedal, tap dance, and skirt around the issue. What's worse, it is not socially acceptable to speak about reverse racism, probably because many minorities consider it a joke. For the sake of justice, all allegations of racism should be investigated according to a true zero-tolerance policy.

In the fourth major area, I've concluded that the less populous minorities face the exact same issues as blacks and whites, depending on where they live. In my little

corner of the world, they are wall flowers. In most parts of the States, whites are the majority. In the far southern and western States, Mexicans are the top minority. In Alaska, the natives are the predominant targets of racist bathroom libel. Most Americans are quick to jump on the racist bandwagons when fear is in play (the Native Americans in early U.S. history, Japanese Americans during WWII, (North) Koreans and Vietnamese, the Chinese after minor incursions, the Arabs after 9-11), regardless of how decent or upstanding their ethnically different neighbor may be.

My fifth and final conclusion is that there is a viable solution. As previously stated, the steps that precede this solution are common sense, tact, and a desire to do what is morally and ethically right. The next logical step is to THINK FOR YOURSELF. This goes for everybody! Stop subscribing to groups that tell you how or what to think about another race. Don't be a social mama's boy, believing everything that you're told. Formulate your own opinions. Stop looking for racism where it doesn't exist. Get out, experience life, experience people, and look for the good. I think you'll find it.

Whistle-While-You-Work-Ethic, A True Story, Part I

The year is 1998. Your name is Angelo. For five long years, you have lived like a pauper, collecting every Peso in a Montecristo cigar box that belonged to your father. Your younger brother and cousins have been doing the same. Rosa has been nursing for three years, to save money, and your regular subsistence comes from grinding the dried horse corn that is left in the neighboring fields after harvest. The oil for the tortillas, and the bacon, lard, and beans for frijoles charros, were a good trade for two week's worth of cornmeal cakes.

Your goal: 25,000 Pesos. Roughly \$2000 American. That is the price of one ticket to Arizona, i.e. Mexican college. You will reach your goal in three weeks, and then you will help your brother and cousins to reach their goals as well.

Flash forward. The big day arrives. An altogether sorrowful, exciting, and potentially dangerous adventure awaits. You and your family have accepted the risks. The money you will make in one year in the United States, will keep your family alive and healthy for the next decade. It will be tough to leave your wife and baby behind, but it is a sacrifice you must make for your family.

Fourteen hours you've been cooped up in the back of the truck. Many stops have been made, and you don't know whether you're still in Mexico, or across the border already. Sound sleep is a luxury you cannot afford. Clinging to a photo of your baby, you have been prepared to run at a moment's notice. What you don't know is that you are already in the States, and as soon as you're out of Texas, the driver will be dropping you at the first suitable field he comes to, in the middle of the night when the traffic is low. He has made many, many drops in this same field. Once your feet

hit the ground, you're on your own from there.

The truck stops and the diesel drops to a lower idle. The doors are opened. After a brief conversation with the driver that you cannot hear, forty of your countrymen spill out of the truck and scatter. It's nighttime, but the stars are many and the moon is high on a cloudless night, illuminating the sand and the recently cleared fields. The truck pulls off the road and onto a driveway that seemingly leads to nowhere, and after botching a three-point turn, returns down the road in the direction from which it came, grinding the gears as it is shifted. As the red lights fade away, a deep feeling of fear and emptiness sets in.

You, your brother, and your four cousins are travelling across a field toward a small mountain of boulders, to climb and survey the area. You are joined by four others. The sun has not broken the horizon, but the world around you is light enough to distinguish everything. Arizona is not altogether unlike Hidalgo del Parral, which is located about two hundred kilometers South of Chihuahua. The sandy soil is nearly the same color, the horizon looks... "KA-RACK!!!" "KRA-KRACKKKKKK!" Three quick puffs of dirt in front of you were rapidly followed by the unmistakable sounds of long rifle shots. "KRACKPSSHT!" **"JOSE!!!"**

Before your party could react to the initial shots, your brother was shot in the chest by a high-grain, soft lead-tipped bullet that left a 6" exit wound. The landowners of the fields adjacent to the truck dropoff point have been privy to the last several drops at this location, and have been picking off illegal immigrants with their buddies for at least three years, like it was the opening day of whitetail gun season. Angelo, Welcome to the United States.

Whistle-While-You-Work-Ethic, A True Story, Part II

It's the year 2000. For two years, you've been moving across the United States with your cousins, travelling light and working to make a few dollars wherever and however possible. You have met some good people, both Chicanos and Gringos alike. Conversely, you've met some shady individuals, and those encounters have ultimately prodded you onward. Chasing the greener grass from State to State, your journey finds you now in Southeast Virginia.

There is a Mexican restaurateur who you've been told about, who will keep you all fed and housed for a meager rate; he will also find you work. Your repertoire of skills has in recent years has expanded to include almost every facet of U.S. residential construction. You've stopped questioning the practice of building for comfort instead of fortaleza--while U.S. homes are well insulated, they do not hold up well in adverse weather conditions. In Mexico and most other parts of the world, only the poorest families build their homes out of wood.

The single most disturbing thing that you've learned about Gringos is that they are so disconnected from family. Their lives are devoted to working and staying busy. Even their work habits are strained. No camaraderie, no chanting, no singing--at best, they might play the radio. But there is so much back-stabbing and selfishness, that you wonder how any of these people can build lasting relationships.

Mexicans are all about family. Your own family is faring well but misses you desperately. You write and call each other often, and you and your cousins continue to faithfully send more than half of your earnings home. You have also found family here. Once you know your way around this country, it is entirely possible to be wholly supported in the by Mexican families and commonly-known sympathizers of illegal immigrants.

It's Thursday night, and your crew has just finished working on the Hilton Conference Center project. You've been installing sheetrock for almost three weeks, and you're in the finishing phase. "Buenos noches, Maria! Nachos e tomatilla salsa, por favor." "Cervezas?" "Si, cinco Modelos." You look up and notice a middle-aged white couple, staring at you and talking to each other. Finally, the lady stands up and approaches you. "Do you speak English?--I mean, habla Ingles?" "Little bit," you reply. Then she motions toward your clothes, still covered in drywall dust. "You do drywall work?" "Yes, yes, drywall crew."

This family offers your crew a month's worth of work, at great pay, with a motor home on site to live in. You end up working there for two months, then are given the use of the motor home during the construction of a neighboring house. The couple that you met befriends you, and after the course of another year, has fully learned the story of you and your cousins. They offer to sponsor your immigration. Around the same time, you receive the news that your mother has just died back in Mexico. It is time to go home.

THE CONCLUSION.

This is the true story of a 22-year-old man who worked for my parents when they were havng their house built. I changed his name for the story. Sweetest-spirited guy you've ever met. He and his crew would sit outside of that motor home each morning before work, and each evening after work, wrapped around a fire pit singing and joking. The singing and joking would continue throughout the work day. I had just joined the civilian workforce, and watching these men work helped me to formulate my own opinion about illegal immigrant workers. You know, to this day, I've yet to find harder and more honorable workers than these gents and their kinsmen... and if you stop and pay attention to a Latino construction crew, you'll get a kick out of their whistle-while-you-work-ethic.

We lost contact with Angelo and his cousins when his mom died. I hope we see him around again someday.

Sandals Grande, St. Lucia



A few years ago, my wife and I took advantage of an off-season promotion for Sandals all-inclusive resorts. The promotion was for 40% off of a \$7000, 1-week stay at Sandals Grande Resort on the island of Saint Lucia. There were packages originally priced as low as \$3800, but we wanted the Deluxe Honeymoon Concierge Suite, so that we could step directly into one of the amazing swimming pools directly from the comfort of our room. No, we couldn't afford the vacation; but yes, we needed it... and yes, we had a fantastic time.

St. Lucia is among the last in the chain of Caribbean islands (when embarking from the United States). The culture is largely African with a splash of French Caribe. It is one of the only places on earth where you can drive into an active volcano, and the locals boast its world-renowned jazz festival.

The first thing you have to do as a traveler to any unknown destination, is lower your expectations. Even the finest and most exotic locations on the planet have pan-handlers, pickpockets, and stoplight criminals. You will not see them or hear about them in a travel website or brochure.

Sure enough, we encountered a handful of scam artists the minute we stepped foot in Hewanorra airport. For their guests, Sandals offers gratis, continuous shuttle service between the airport and all three of their St. Lucian resorts (the Grande, the Regency, and Halcyon). Sandals sends special tags in their initial vacation confirmation packet, for passengers to affix to their baggage so that they may be recognized by the resorts' shuttle drivers. Unfortunately, there's nothing to stop a non-Sandals taxi bus from posing as one, complete with fake uniformed drivers and baggage handlers. We caught the scam just before swallowing the hook.

The drive to our resort took around 45 minutes. The environment blended the population and housing of East Africa with the terrain and flora of Hawaii. If your budget allows it, take a private helicopter to the resort--you can probably finagle a \$400 per person ride down to about \$150, and you'll spare yourself the quasi-depressing shuttle ride.

Once we reached the resort, everything changed. The drinks were quickly poured, tips were adamantly rejected, the staff was extremely accommodating, and the off-season crowd made for a pristine beach and ocean view. The weather was perfect.

Over the course of a very long, very relaxing week, we sipped margaritas in and out of lush and lazy interconnecting swimming pools, enjoyed fine dining at numerous posh restaurants, we set off on our own shelf-snorkeling adventures, went water skiing, danced and sang karaoke. I followed two freedivers on a spearfishing excursion. One of the best decisions we made was to link up with another couple for shared adventures and symbiotic photo opportunities. We even became lasting friends.

Our snorkeling adventures led to encounters with baracuda, squid, octopii, a variety of colorful fish, different types of starfish and sea urchins, and large snails and crabs with beautiful shells. I tried to pick up a black sea urchin that had 12" spikes, and the beautiful creature shot the tip of one of his large quills out and embedded it deep in my hand. We stumbled upon a large, active bed of conchs, and I took one back with us to one of the resort's restaurants, where I asked a chef if he'd prepare the snail in a meal for us to take back to our room. He put a lot of professional pride into those two plates.

The only Sandals amenities that cost extra are their Red Lane Spa services and group outings / activities that leave the resort area (such as horseback riding around the island, group scuba diving trips, and transportation to any place other than another resort or the airport). We did not partake of any of these activities, instead

opting to cross-chillax between three child-free, stress-free resorts that are antipathetic to heckle, hustle-bustle tourism. We can't wait to go back.











Birds Prefer Splenda

Sunday, January 17, 2010

These days, we're all familiar with the colors assigned to sweeteners. Sugar usually comes in white packets. Pink, the color of breast cancer awareness, is used for packets of Sweet 'n' Low--which ironically contains carcinogenic sachharin. Baby blue is the color of Equal brand sweetner, and (drumroll) yellow is the color of Splenda, which is comparitively new to the sweetener arena.

As is the case in most restaurants, all types of sweeteners mentioned above (or their generic knock-offs, in the same-colored packets) are stacked sideways in holders atop each table at Bayside restaurant in St. Lucia's Sandals Grande resort. It's an indoor/outdoor restaurant.



I don't know how well you can make out this picture, but as an accoutrement to my last story, I'd like to tell you about these black birds. They would fly to the empty tables each morning and pull out only the yellow packets, tearing them open and pecking at the contents like cokeheads in candyland. As it turns out, nature has a preference. When it comes to sweeteners, birds prefer Splenda.

Oodles of Geep, Spy Planes, and Smokin' Hot Big Etna



Many of you know Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats. Interestingly, Jesus didn't mention the geep.

Sicily is the largest island in the Mediterranean, and is also one of two Italian islands with regional autonomy from mainland Italy. Once an independent nation, It is best known for its food and wine exports (to include Marsala wine--from the Sicilian city of, um, Marsala), and as the home of Europe's most active volcano, Mt. Etna. What you may not know about Sicily, however, is the existence of a little-known animal called a "geep." Geep are basically a goatish-looking, mangy breed of long-haired sheep.



Just off the southeast slopes of Etna, near the coast, is Sigonella Naval Air Station, a U.S. military base that is of great tactical importance geographically. Sig's exchange sells bumper stickers that say "I Brake for Geep." The critters are well known for being herded across roads all over the area, holding up traffic at a moment's notice. The U.S. equivalent to a herd of geep is a mile-long, slow-moving train between you and your destination. The crossings and subsequent hold-ups are very unpredictable, and many a troubled sailor has blamed his tardiness on a herd of geep.

Besides the geep, there are a lot of interesting tidbits packed into Sicily's culture. Sicilians do not like to be called Italians. This is probably because their history in intermingled with so much culture that is not Italian. Sicily was once a part of ancient Greece, and was later under Spanish rule. The cities of Palermo and Siracusa show strong juxtaposition of each culture. One of Sicily's best wines bears its own name, Sicilia. It is surprisingly found under a not-particularly-sexy label that you would expect to see in a Spencer's novelty store.

I've flown to Sicily seven or eight times, but only twice to stay. If you visit Sicily, you have to ascend Mt. Etna. A tram will take you most of the way up, where you can hop on a Land Rover. The Land Rover will take you to a scenic mountaintop area, where you may opt to make the steep trek / climb about four hours to the summit and actually look into the crater. I wasn't able to do the trek because of time (and flight crew recall) constraints, but the tram views alone are amazing. Unfortunately, I cannot locate the few pictures I took at Etna.





If you venture near NAS Sigonella, you may be fortunate enough to encounter the takeoff or landing of a U2 spy plane, as I once did. The plane's wings are very long, and before a takeoff, each wing is outfitted with a wheel that falls free as the plane lifts off. To assist in locating and collecting the wheels, two two-men ground crews trail the plane at top speeds--one in a souped-up Pontiac Firebird, and one in a Chevy Camaro. I got to go check out the fleet of chase cars because one of the guys that worked on the flightline, named Sanders, was a buddy of mine from Aircrew School. Chase cars in the past have also included GTO's and Mustangs.

Whatever you decide to do while visiting Sicily, there is one precondition: you've got to have plenty of time built into your schedule... to account for jeep crossing.

A Wireless Prediction

First the white buffalo. Then, the VCR. Next: every appliance you now own. Blast these wires! For a few years now, I've held a prediction: that the decade following 2010 will show forth an era of wireless. That is to say, that conventional receptacles or plugs that we use in houses, and the wires /cables that attach to them, will be replaced by remote or magnetic stations that are variably placed among households and businesses alike. Apple is leading the charge in magnetic power transmission, while Sony is has finally developed an experimental cordless TV.

You know what would be cool? I mean, besides sharks with friggin' laser beams on their heads-- If wooden framing for residential houses was replaced by safe, grounded, conductive metal framing; and if it could, in effect, transmit electrical charge from a magnetic station located at the point where power is already entering the house (at the meter base), then one's house could be a virtual brushblock for magnetic appliances.

Once we have achieved freedom from wires, we can get to work on the inevitable recapturing of everyday energy expenditures (i.e. harnessing piezoelectricity or human-motion power).

Smart people, get crackin.

My Favorite Place on Earth, Part I of IV

Children and travel go together like biblical pearls and swine. I could choke myself today, for not having the presence of mind to recognize and appreciate the cultural wealth that I was surrounded with in the days of my youth. While my parents were enjoying Viareggio Carnevale, or appreciating the architecture of Venice, or sipping Asti in its own acclaimed DOCG region, I was eating boogers and licking the windows of our puke-green Volkswagen van, named Kermit.

“Hey dad, check it out!” That’s what I said after we left the Sistine Chapel, as I held up a carefully marked piece of the original painted ceiling that I stole. The year was 1989, and as National Geographic will tell you, it was the year that the chapel was completely restored. Original pieces of Michelangelo’s famous ceiling mural were positioned on the floor while crumbling portions of the masterpiece were being restored. Even as a kid, I knew the history of the ceiling. My home school teacher, aka Mom, would cater our history lessons to our travel adventures. In this case, that meant making an eleven-year-old boy pay attention through the entire movie *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1965, Charlton Heston, Rex Harrison). The only obstacle that stood between myself and the artifacts was the same type of post-and-rope barrier that channels you to a teller inside the bank. To answer your question, I don’t have a clue what happened to the piece of ceiling. It’s in a small, long-lost box that also contains brass rubbings from Westminster Abbey, a rock chip from Stonehenge, the blood-stained tip of a bullfighting spear, and a piece of the Kon-Tiki.

My favorite part of Rome? The USO office’s coke machine... it took slotted tokens and dispensed bottles. I thought it was cooler than two fans. Likewise, when watching *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, I would brag about the pigeon that I caught on that same small bridge in Venezia’s Piazza San Marco. I was such a turd bucket... it’s like missing the forest for all the trees.

My Favorite Place on Earth, Part II

Sunday, January 24, 2010

The Adriatic coast of Italy is my favorite place on earth. Over the next few posts, I’m going to tell you why. I’ll try to dig up some photos as well.

When I was between the ages of eight and twelve, my family would take annual trips to the U.S. Army garrison Camp Darby, where we would literally camp out in a big tent for weeks at a time. Getting there was fun... we’d usually drive our vehicle onto a train in Switzerland, and the train would carry us through tunnels in the Alps for several hours. The tunnels were long, dark, and smelled heavily of both natural petroleum and train exhaust. Mom would freak out if we would roll down the window



or talk too much, citing CO poisoning. “KARL, STOP JOKING AROUND!” She’d tell dad, who’s alternately pretending to hyperventilate, gasp for breath, and pass out. “We need to conserve oxygen!!!” We lived through the horrifying public transportation experience every time.

From there, we’d drive Kermit (or our blue Volvo station wagon, aptly named--you guessed it--Gonzo) off the train, and hit the open road of Italy. Watch those drivers on the cliffs of the Alps! We hit the usual touristy stops a couple of times, including mainland Firenze, Roma, Vatican City, and towns across the Appenines. Dad used to complain about the Agip gas stations. They were pretty much the only gas stations to be found around Rome; this hurts the military tourist because you can only use gas coupons (which offset the high cost of European gas) at Esso and BP stations.



For most trips, our usual hangouts were Venezia and Pisa. We would drive the coast and swim the beaches from Trieste to San Marino. We learned why people would yell at us when swimming under a black flag (shark breeding seasons). In Venezia’s Piazza San Marco (as briefly mentioned in my previous post), the rest of the family would shop while I would perfect the art of pigeon-catching, using pieces of my ice cream cone for bait. In that city, I couldn’t help but be successful at my art. Pisa tower was fun because the floors had no safety rails. Because of its famous lean, it felt really weird climbing the spiral stone stairway to the top.

During these--my adolescent years, a seed was planted. There’s something very magical about Italy, specifically on the slightly removed, simple, beautiful Adriatic coast. Experience the growth and development of that seed over the next two posts.

My Favorite Place on Earth, Part III of IV

It's tough to write about your favorite things. You feel like your words alone will not reflect the adequate portrayal of your feelings. Man, that sounded gay. But you know what I mean, right?

So we're back on the Adriatic coast of Italy. This time, we're much farther south and I'm all grown up. Well, slightly grown up. There's trouble in the Balkans, or the "ia's" as I like to call them (Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Albania, Macedonia, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia... and Kosovo). I'm in the Marines, and I'm a First Mechanic on KC-130 refuelers. We're tasked with providing aerial refueling support for the NATO bombing campaign on Slobodan Milosevic's Serbian war machine (Operations Allied Force and Noble Anvil, March through June 1999. We set up camp just across the water, in the sleepy coastal town of Bari Palese, Italy.

It's amazing what an impact this small community had on its American visitors. More than a few Marines brought girls home with them to be married. The Italian language, of all the romance languages, seems easiest on the American tongue, and it was apparent in the adaptation of my comrades. Our crew stayed at the Hotel la Baia, located on Via Nazionale at the intersection of Via Vittoria Veneto. The building catty-cornered across the intersection was Mama Pena's Pizzeria, which sported a sign that simply read, "PIZZA."

In the mornings, I would lace my running shoes, crank up the techno song "Insomnia," by Faithless, or Fatboy Slim's "Going Out of My Head" and take off down Via Vittoria Veneto to the sea. One of the houses to my right was adorned with a rooftop bathtub and sitting area. The road dead-ended into the water, and I'd turn right. All of the fishermen would be returning from the sea just as the sun was coming up. They'd shake out their nets and empty their boats, and begin cleaning fish and beating octopi on thick planks of wood. The fish waste was emptied next to a common building, which seemed to be an unoccupied house with a broken wall around it. It was here that the mongrel stray dogs would consolidate in hopes of a handout. They didn't like runners, so the building also marked my turnaround point.

I'd loop through the neighborhoods and finish up my run, going back to my room to shower, and soak my clothes in a hot, soapy bath. Returning downstairs to the lobby, I might catch the late shift old man receptionist snoring in his chair. Another floor below, Giuseppe would be preparing a spread with his assistant, a boy named Alessandro. Fresh Mediterranean fruits, goat cheese, bread, and figs--figs, figs, figs, in their own fruit category. Of course, most Americans ask for cereal, so he'd usually have a silver pitcher of UHT milk placed next to a glass serving bowl full of generic rice crispies and corn flakes, mixed together. After breakfast and good coffee, I'd link up with the Great Gordo or Tom Tripp, to see if there were any changes to the flight schedule.

If I was not flying--and I recall flying a minimal amount of missions during this det--I would walk West down Via Nazionale, admiring the ornate gardens and simple homes within the large gated properties to my right. To my left, an old gentleman has his bicycle parked in a field. He's collecting something, and it piques my curiosity. As I cross the busy street and approach, I note that the basket on the front of his bike is crawling with large-shelled yellow snails, similar to the ones I used to catch in Germany as a boy. He's fervently plucking them off of the waist-high grasses in the field. "Mi Scuzi," I say to the man, then motioning at the snails... "Mangare?" He looked at me like I was a freaking ee-diot. Of course you eat them, stupid. "Si, si," he replied excitedly. "Mangare!!!" His 'mangare' sounded so much more enthusiastic, passionate, and Italian than mine.

A few blocks and the next town over, in Santo Spirito, there was a little store on the right. Of course, I say "was," but nothing in Europe changes that fast. I'm sure it's still there. I'd buy my day's bread and cheese, and return to the hotel intersection. If you go straight past the hotel, there's not a whole lot going on. If you go turn right, it eventually leads to a small shopping square, the gym, the post office, and the bank. Along the way, there's the movie theater on the right, the gay bar on the left, followed closely by Maria's tattoo parlor and the shop that sold me an \$80 pair of black stretchy boxer briefs, before I knew the exchange rate. The gay bar wasn't really gay, we called it that because they served beer and ice cream from the same counter. It was called Lo Svizzietto, and it was our crew's regular hangout outside of Mama Pena's. On Wednesdays, I'd join the reggae band from Morocco, and they even dragged me with them to another town to play.

By day, the locals of this town can usually be found at the beach. There's no real beach to speak of, rather a rock jetty that curves out to the right, covered with sand. Folks lay out on the sand, clothed or otherwise, soaked in the tanning aid of choice: olive oil. When in Rome... yes, I was among them most days, sportin' the short shorts, slathered in EVOO. At that time, I could boast the best tan of my life. I would get up only to occasionally dip off on the seaward side of the jetty, where the water was usually a beautiful azure hue and remarkably clear, ranging in depth from ten to fifteen feet. You could catch small octopi for an al dente snack by sticking your hand into virtually any dark crevice or hole created by the large rocks. Went swimming at night a couple times too, along with others in the crew.

In the end, we apparently had an impact on the town, too. Our crews were the first regular American visitors to the area in decades. Today, Hotel la Baia is Best Western La Baia Palace Hotel, and Mama Pena's 'PIZZA' sign was replaced by one that now reads "Corner American Bar." Mama Pena's daughter, Barbara, was whisked off by Rob Blehm to the States. Maria, the world-traveled tattoo girl, married Chris Carlson. Both relationships dissolved over time, but not before Maria became one my wife's (and my) close friends, a relationship that continues today. She's also on Facebook. Lo Svizzietto? I can't seem to find proof that it still exists.

Three parts down, one to go. Thanks for following along.

Thirty-two Minutes of The Sound of Music

Wednesday, January 27, 2010

32:29, to be exact. That's when the last of my four kids lost interest in the movie. So you've got me pegged: I put my kids through some sick social experiments for the sake of nostalgia. I mean, come on, The Sound of Music? Gag me with a spoon! Here's how it went down.

I'm working on the second edition of my recon handbook. I dedicated the day to it well in advance. Half of my morning was eaten up using crude logs to help get Aunt Norma's van un-stuck from a huge, water-filled ditch... I've got a big 4WD truck, but it's not much help when the tranny went out on Friday. Petra's church singing practice changed from tomorrow to today, so that leaves me with the kids. Mama grabbed Taco Bell on the way home, so...

"Rally in mama's bedroom!" Woo-hoo! The kids pile onto our bed. I peel back Petra's precious Roxy down comforter, and lay out the sacred Bell spread on a Little Mermaid towel on the bed. "What do you guys want to watch?" "Lilo n Tich!" "No, Lily, no Lilo & Stitch, Barbie movies, or Barney." No Cinderella either. The boys have no preference. I'm going through one of the books for something fresh. "How's about Sound of Music?" "Yeah, okay." What, no fight? No whiny opposition? Score dad!

I press 'Play.' Here's the commentary: Caleb: I like nuns 'cause they're godly, but not the suits. Josh: They look like clones. Bodyguard clones. Caleb: They look like a bunch of Baris-Sophies (apparently some girl Jedi from Star Wars). It would be cool if they had light sabres.

[The kids are sharing a big Pepsi from TB. Lily's chewing on the straw] Caleb: Lily you been suckin' on that thing for hours! Let ol' papa have some. [He takes the drink, she objects] Lily: Hey, I wanna pop it! Caleb: No, I said "let papa have some." I didn't say 'pop it.' Lily: Oh. Okay, papa had some. Now give it back! Dad (that's me): Lily, that's not just yours. You're sharing with your brothers.

In the movie, Maria runs back to the Abbey. The nuns are just finishing the song, "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?" As she runs in, Josh says, "Go. GO. GO! GO!! GO!!! GO MARIA!!! TOUCHDOWN!!!!" [Dad fast-forwards boring Reverend Mother speech]. Josh: Hey, isn't this the one when they were in the rain like dancin' in that gazebo and fightin' Nazis and stuff? "Yup." Did they have Nazis when you were a kid? "Nope." Is this a true story? "Yup."--(It's the only way I'll get him to watch the whole thing again... then I'll "remember" at the end. "You know what, Josh? I

don't think it's a true story." I know, sick.)

And now introducing the Von Trapp kids, marching to a whistle. [All my kids perked up, even the baby] Caleb: Looks like they're lining up for a firing squad. [Josh rewinds] Dad: Dude, what are you doing? Don't fast-forward it... Josh: I'm not! I wanna hear the names again. Lily: Daddy, I gotta go pee! Dad: Then go, girl! Lily: Okay! [Baby chews a big chunk of fuzz off of Lily's pink teddy bear, starts choking] Caleb, nonchalantly monotone: Dad, baby's choking. Dad: I know, I got her. ["Hack, ack...turn blue-ish" squeeze cheeks together, locate the wad, finger sweep, no joy, invert baby, back slap, repeat, clear obstruction] Dad: Okay kids, FOD walkdown! Lily, returning with little undies around her ankles: YAAAAAY!!! I wanna fob waltown! Caleb: What's a fob? Dad: FOD. Don't worry about it. Just sweep the floor with your eyeballs and hands to locate chokeables... and throw them in the trash.

Help Lily get her pants on. She leaves, then comes back covering something with her hands. It's talking. "Hell, hell, hell, hell, hell, hell, hell, hell, hell, hell, hell, hell, hell, hell, hell, hellllllloooooo, gorgeous!" Oh, it's a plastic talking Alvin toy from McDonald's. Josh: Hey dad, why do they spin around when they're singing like that? Dad: It's a musical. They dance and spin and stuff, for no reason, really. Josh: Can you tell everybody to be quiet? I'm trying to watch this.

Then everything fell apart and the kids stopped watching. But now, amazingly, they started watching again! I think the puppet scene got their attention. Or maybe it was the "Raindrops on Roses" scene.

I'm back on the computer, trying to analyze the finished findings of the Quadrennial Defense Review for use in my Worldwide Threat Brief Sitrep. The baby pooped all over herself again. And she's hungry. By the way, the kids love the Intermission. "You don't even have to pause the movie!" Says Caleb. "That's so cool." Next stop: Cecil B. DeMille's The Ten Commandments... MOO-HOO-Ha-ha-ha...

My Favorite Place on Earth, Part IV

Friday, February 5, 2010

I'm convinced that some things in life can never be adequately expressed in words; I'm equally convinced that it is still our responsibility to try.

In Giovinazzo, some Italian friends invited me and two other Americans to a private dinner, hosted by the owner of a beautiful castle-like structure, which over the course of at least a thousand years, was gently eroding into the sea. The old man, once a proud career military sailor--as emphasized by some of his large, framed black & white photos on the stone walls inside the castle--now lives to host small, private get-togethers in which he is the Chef. Over the course of the night, he would astound us with stories of high-sea adventures, and of visits by Mussolini and (later)

John F. Kennedy.

The first thing you experience when stepping into the dim, candle-lit castle, is that you're standing on a thick slab of blue-hued, rough hewn glass. The old glass, which is translucent at the edges but polished in the middle by decades of human traffic, covers a wide-spanning vertical tunnel. The tunnel (looks like a big well) leads straight down to the sea, which is splashing in below the castle. The tunnel is lit up, and the soft yellow lighting reveals deteriorating iron ladder rungs that protrude individually from the stone. There are also rings that serve as presumed torch holders, all the way down. At the bottom, some thirty feet below, the fading evening light shines through between splashing waves, where rowboats were once anchored. The upper walls of the tunnel had arched alcoves in the design, for keeping wine chilled. Similar arched alcoves were incorporated in the walls of the main room where we would eat, and are filled with stacks of dusted wine bottles, which one-by-one are quickly cleaned with a towel before each bottle is opened and set at our table. In this part of Italy, among friends, you never pour your own glass. Your friends pour for you, whenever your glass gets low. It is a beautiful gesture which adds to the ambiance of, and attraction to, this magical place.

The food arrives. Roasted pepperoni (peppers, not sausage), bruscetta, and caprese comprise our antipasti. Because this experience pre-dates the explosion of Italian-American restaurant chains like Olive Garden and Carrabba's, these flavors were all new to me... I was floored by the better-than-sex combination of sponge-like fresh mozzarella, tomato, mint, and balsamic vinegar. In the years that followed, I became a 'psycho ex-girlfriend' connoisseur of sorts, aggressively seeking the type of lightly-salted, olive oil-browned peppers that seared their flavor into the memory recesses of my mind. The main meal that evening was a huge community bowl of chilled spicy tuna linguine--al dente, of course. As in the manner of all Mediterranean nations, Ouzo assumed the dual role of the aperitif and digestif bookends to the whole dining experience (naturalmente), followed by singing and dancing to the music of a \$20 radio.

Over the course of my visits to Italy, only 150 miles of coastline have eluded me on the Adriatic. This singular incident I described to you envelops everything I love about the region. Largely unspoiled by American influence, this humble, simple part of Italy represents the best of Europe and the world. The attitude, the culture, the cuisine, the natural beauty and general aura here are all astounding, and are sure to leave a lasting impression on any visitors or through-travelers.

The Great Seat Belt Scam

Friday, February 5, 2010

Foreword: I am not anti-seat belt, or anti-government. I've written the following story to show how We, the People--a free-world, educated society--have been fed statistics that are manipulated to incite a certain response. Though seat belts ARE safe, our government has employed IO (information operation) propaganda tactics to force a mandatory seat belt agenda, regardless of the constitutionality of such a campaign. The big picture here has nothing to do with seat belts. It is that we are not "sheeple," and that third-world tactics in use by our government should be recognized and quelled by the citizens of our great country. Understand that no government is perfect, and that it is also becoming increasingly more difficult to affect government policy; but a knowledgeable, righteously angry people should not be afraid to peaceably address their nation's leaders... and be heard.

And now, playing devil's advocate, I will theorize (using statistical citations) that seat belts are, if not cold-blooded killers, absolutely worthless. Stay with me here, folks--in real life, seat belts ARE NOT WORTHLESS. I'm simply "proving" that they are, through the crafted presentation of TRUE, UNALTERED data. Okay, here goes...

Do seat belts contribute as much to driver safety as we've been led to believe? The United States has been waging war on seat belt violators since 1984. Last week, the Virginia Senate passed two new bills relating to primary seat belt violations. I would like you to open your mind to the following possibility: that the monetary scam of the century took place right under our noses in the last two decades.

Did you know that in 84% of motorist deaths in 2009, the victims WERE wearing seat belts? It's true. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) reports that 84% seat belt use in 2009 is a FACT [NHTSA, "Traffic Safety Facts," (by NHTSA's National Center for Statistics and Analysis, September 2009)]. That means that for every random sampling of 100 people that drove to Wal-Mart each day, or drove their kids to school, or died in an automobile accident... 84 of them were, IN FACT, wearing their seat belts. Give or take a few, I'm sure.

When former president Clinton launched his seat belt initiative in 1996, he cited a report that 60% of all people who died in automobile accidents the previous year were not wearing seat belts. Note the careful wording of that report. He didn't say that they died because they weren't wearing seat belts. It was simply a sign of the times. A new study might suggest that 76.2% of Americans that die in automobile accidents are computer owners. That's not because computers are linked to auto deaths. It's simply because 76.2 out of every 100 Americans own a computer [International Telecommunication Union data, from "Pocket World in Figures," (The Economist Online, 2009)]. We could further stipulate that in 1930, 100% of all automobile deaths were by drivers or passengers who did not wear seat belts, because they didn't have seat belts back then.

The real fact is that the use of percentages can be misleading. Perhaps you've heard the joke that 81% of all statistics are made up. Hard numbers, however, don't lie. The NHTSA also maintains a Fatality Analysis Reporting System. This database lists the actual numbers of annual deaths between 1975 and 2008, to include population and per capita info. In 1975, there were 30,601 auto occupant deaths [Highway Loss Data Institute data, from http://hldi.org/research/fatality_facts_2005/motorcycles.html, Jan 2010], meaning 14 out of every hundred thousand Americans died as the result of occupying a passenger vehicle involved in an accident. In 2008, 26,689 nationwide vehicle occupant deaths occurred [NHTSA, "Fatality Analysis Reporting System," online at <http://www-fars.nhtsa.dot.gov/Main/index.aspx>, Jan 2010]. Compared to 2008's population, 8.8 out of every hundred thousand Americans died under the same circumstances.

The year 1982 marks the beginning of accurate statistical recording of U.S. alcohol-related traffic fatalities, or ARTF's. 57.3% of traffic fatalities that year were attributed to the consumption of alcohol [MMWR, "Annual and New Year's Day Alcohol-Related Traffic Fatalities--United States," (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Dec 1991)]. The numbers have steadily declined over the last 28 years. In 2008, 37% of all traffic accidents were alcohol-related [AlcoholAlert.com, <http://www.alcoholalert.com/drunk-driving-statistics.html>, as viewed 29 Jan 2010, p.1, Fig. 1]. After subtracting alcohol-related incidents from the numbers in the last paragraph (using the generous 1982 data substitution for the year 1975), we find that in non-alcohol driver or passenger accidents,

13,067 fatalities occurred in 1975, and 16,814 fatalities occurred in 2008. Per capita, 6 people died per 100,000 in 1975, while 5.5 people died per 100,000 in 2008. If the 1975 ARTF rate was on course with the last three decades, the logical increase would put the number of U.S. alcohol-related traffic fatalities at 65%, a per capita rate of 4.9 per 100,000.


What this all means, is that in 1975, nine years before the first state-mandated seat belt law took effect, there were virtually the same amount of non-alcohol related, per capita, passenger vehicle occupant deaths as today... if not fewer. Yes, seat belts save lives. But how many? In the last thirty-some years, have we not also greatly improved driver education? Vehicle safety standards? Could these not account for the majority of lives saved? No, the seat belt alone is praised, and the honest American is choked with laws that detract from his or her personal freedoms.

So then why all the hype? Seat belts are important for keeping humans from becoming airborne projectiles during an accident, true, but how many drivers or passengers are burned, or drowned, or killed by oncoming traffic when their vehicle becomes contorted and they can't unbuckle? I think that the American public will never read or hear of those statistics. I hesitate to give a personal example, because

it resembles the common lie of all seat-belt-bashers... but I escaped from a burning, upside-down pickup truck with only a gash on my arm. The bench seat had become disconnected inside the cab, and had I been wearing a seat belt, I would not have had access to the buckle to release it, and would have been burned alive.

The bottom-line reason is that seat belts are a big money maker for corporations and government bodies from the municipal level to the federal level. Graphic photos, threatening radio ads, and legislative proposals with professional names like “the dumb driver bill [Julian Walker, “Seat Belt Bills Passed by Virginia Senate,” (The Virginian-Pilot, January 28, 2010)],” these are the tools of a pro-money agenda. It’s subtle propaganda in the name of safety and security.

I want my family to be safe and secure. We all do. But not at the expense of being tricked with statistical number plays and cunning speeches. Being forced to submit to a law that may be inaccurate... a law that no one can challenge... it’s tyrannical. Such unethical government strongarming is a back-of-the-bus maneuver on our civil rights.

Posted by mj at 6:51 AM 

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2 comments:

Anonymous said...

I loved this article and couldn't agree more. Revenue from the backs of hard working Americans is something the government continues to do. The same tactics are used for speeding tickets, and the use of radar enforcement. Every accident on the highways the report will contend that speed was a contributing factor, to maintain the need for speeding tickets. This also makes it easier for the officers of the law to prove they are doing their job by how many tickets they write, instead of patrolling neighborhoods to keep people safe. That's another topic. Getting back to the seat belt laws, I drove tow truck for 14 years in Oregon, and My boss believed that seat belt saved lives, and I disagreed because of the many variables applied in every accident. Let me explain. If you are going to rear end a car or hit a tree or building head on, have a seat belt on, it will save your life. Samples of accidents I worked, In Crater Lake National Forest a convertible Ford Mustang went off a 15 MPH corner too fast, overturned in mid air and landed on the upside down on a rock that made it look like an orange juicer. 4 people were in the car, the two in the back were ejected and survived, with minor injuries, one of them had back injuries from the way he landed on the rocks, but the two in the front were both dead because the seat belts held them in perfect position for the pointed rock they landed on, and it wasn't orange juice that was squeezed out. So for the cars we towed in a years time I kept track of all of the cars

that that crashed and if the people lived because they had seat belts on or not, and there were many accidents that beyond a shadow of doubt, the people are here today because they weren't wearing seat belts. My statistics showed it was a 50 50 chance with or without seat belts. My boss thought that proved that seat belts were better, I still disagreed. What I do know from all the accidents that we saw is that poor drivers will be in more accidents, not because they speed, or don't wear their seat belts but because they don't pay attention to their driving or the people around them. Falling asleep at the wheel in my opinion is the most negligent accidents I have seen, and there are more people killed by that than drunk drivers, which could be disputed by statistics as well, but a lot of people who fell asleep I am sure used the excuse that an animal ran out in front of them. The statistics are also skewed for the simple numbers aspect. If you have 1000 deaths in 10,000 accidents, they never give you the statistic that the car had 6 passengers, one died that had a seat belt on and one died that didn't, and that 4 others survived. So they only keep track of the number of car crashes, and the number of deaths. These numbers can be skewed also by one vehicle in which 10 people died, then 9 deaths are then attributed to 9 cars that didn't have any deaths. So let's get the real statistics. By the way I choose not to wear seat belts, My choice is to be a careful driver and always pay attention, I have never been in an accident that was my fault, and the accidents I have been in were in tow trucks, and other people not paying attention hitting them, and I was lucky not to be hit by the drivers, because if I were killed would it have been because I didn't have a seat belt on? Or would the statistic have stated that I was out of my vehicle at the time of the accident? So it is my choice to not wear seat belts, and this is based on some pretty compelling life experiences and personal knowledge, but the government does know better than I, so I keep paying no seat belt tickets.

June 9, 2011 10:33 PM

Anonymous said...

I am an American as well as I am an Adult.
Being that we are living in a supposedly free country... the choice should be mine in whether or not I choose to wear a seatbelt that can just as easily take my life as it can save it.
"Click-it or ticket" is nothing more than a money making scam.
As far back as I can remember...
Stealing was always against the law.
In this day in age, and in a society where every nickel and dime counts... forcing people to pay high fines for not wearing their seatbelt is not only a sin, but it's highway robbery.
I never really was a religious man, but if there is a higher power looking

down at us from above the clouds... I surely do hope He's got a certain plan for those who steal from others to better suit themselves.
As far as being concerned about my safety...
How about passing a law that you can no longer be a gun carrying gang thug and all radical muslims must be escorted out of the country.
In all actuality... there are a lot more of them running around than there are true blooded Americans who are sick and tired of their freedom being constantly diminished.
So... what law am I breaking if I'm not putting anyone else in jeopardy?
NOTTA ONE!

-Joeylyrics, September 14, 2011 11:47 AM

The Frassa Tree

Autumn time in Zero Three
My Joshy liked to walk with me
To find a root from something special
Called the Frassa Tree.

Cinnamon and wild ginger,
Sprigs of mint and lemon grass--
None of these make tea or candy
Quite so fine as sassafras

I would teach my oldest son
Exploration could be fun
Likely ending with a treat
Made from roots and granules sweet

I have noted many times
He would urge me out and we
Would go walking through the woods
To find the Frassa Tree

He's now older, and I find
His many sayings left behind;
With age, his speech has become clear
And what I wouldn't give to hear
(Taking my hand) him say to me,
"Let's go and find the Frassa Tree!"

Respect for Life: Words to a Soldier Son

Kill the spider quickly, son
But only if you must
Because, like you, by God it was
Created from the dust.

We often fail to understand
By ignorance or choice
The reasons for all tiny 'pests'
Because they have no voice.

Kill the buck directly, son
Because you're not the sort
Of man who kills but for the meat;
And death is not a sport.

I've made some bad decisions, son,
I've killed for hide and rack
But once you've lost your innocence
You cannot get it back.

Kill the soldier smartly, son
And rapidly reload
Knowing that you same may reap
If hatefully you sowed.

Wisely choose your battles and
Take heed to all around,
And if you have to, please shoot first
To come home safe and sound.

Motivation to Move

In 1994, I kept a book. It was a plain green GI-type record book, and on the cover I had simply written "RUN." It was a statement, a title, and a command to myself all at once. Inside this book are a thousand motivational magazine clippings, quotes, and kickass jam lyrics, all serving to get me off my butt and into a pair of running shoes. Into the gym. Sparring ring. Pool.

I left myself few choices each day when it came to running. I could run base housing stairwells, the circuit course, up/downs on O' Club hill, or alternating telephone pole sprints. No matter what my choice, it was gonna suck. The good kind of suck, though.

Anyway, I came across my favorite running quote, which until today, I had completely forgotten. Perhaps you've heard it, perhaps not... either way, I hope it gets you on your feet.

"Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up. It knows that it must run faster than the fastest lion in order to survive. Every morning a lion wakes up; it knows that it must run faster than the slowest gazelle or it will starve. It doesn't matter if you are the lion or the gazelle, when the sun comes up, you'd better be runnin." - Maurice Greene

Throwing a Fight, Merrill Style

The Seventh Round

Give it to him!
To you, they mean
As always (mezzanine
Gone dazzling dim,
Before you stands
The giver with clenched
Hands. Drop your own.
Take.

--James Merrill

watch the plane disappear in the direction of Predazzo. They noted that it wobbled a little, and exuded a trail of black smoke once it left the valley. They didn't give it much thought and continued on their walk.

Meanwhile, at Hotel Rio Bianca in Panchia, members of the Green-White [German] Ski Club relaxed on this their fourth annual vacation to the Cavalese ski area. Three ladies were laughing and talking about their husbands, who had gone ahead to ski without them that day. "At least mine has a chaperone. Two, to be exact," joked Maria Renkewitz. Maria's husband Uwe was accompanied on the slopes that afternoon by their daughter Mandy and her fiancé Michael Pötschke. While looking through her purse for something, Rita Wunderlich stumbled upon a bottle of iced tea. "Jürgen leaves these things everywhere," she says, holding up the bottle. "He's so messy!" The gesture draws chuckles from Maria and also from Bärbel Blumenfeld, who could relate with stories of her husband Dieter.

Maurizio Boscolo was driving along Valley Road 232 towards Predazzo Molina. He glanced at the speedometer, reading 90 km/ph. The clock read 3:08 PM. As he reached for his radio dial, he felt the thunderous scream of a military jet aircraft. He slowed down and looked up at the aircraft, which was flying low, hugging the ground. Then it pulled upward, trailing black smoke, and headed toward Trento Predazzo. Maurizio focused back on the road. Suddenly, a landslide of large stones began to fall from the cliff, onto the roadway ahead. He stepped on his brakes just as the thick steel gondola cable slammed down onto the road, less than fifteen feet in front of him. He looked to his right, and didn't see the cable car in its usual place. He dialed the Cavalese Carabinieri on his cell phone.

Sebastian "Sebbe" Van Den Heede boarded the gondola car with his fiancée, Rose-Marie Eyskens; his best friend, Stefaan Vermander; and two other friends, Stefan Bekaert and Hadewich Anthonissen. Stefaan was trying to have a good time despite the recent loss of his father, who died in a car accident just months earlier. More than anything, he was concerned for his mother. This group of five twenty-somethings had an impressive list of educational accolades and talents... each played multiple instruments and spoke multiple languages, and each held one or more prestigious degrees in business, law, or scientific research. Stefan was a Ph.D. Sebbe and Rose-Marie were deeply in love and planned to marry in the forthcoming year.

As the gondola began moving, Uwe felt his ears pop. He was admiring his daughter and her fiancé. They made a fine couple. In fact, he saw at that moment a perfect photo opportunity. The lighting was such that the colors were vibrant--her violet skis, matching clothes, the way he was standing and the placement... wait a minute... All eyes at once were toward the sound of an extremely loud jet plane that was flying toward the cables. Two or three others had passed over earlier, but much higher in the air. The cable-car's passengers, which moments before were carrying on separate conversations in four different languages, were completely speechless. All

of a sudden, they felt an unnatural “pop” reverberate through the car, followed by a rocking motion and finally a weightless pull--not directly down, rather at an angle toward the ground, and gaining speed--at which point everyone fell sideways from their standing positions. The silence turned to screams and they held on to each other, gripped with fear, for their short and final moments on this earth.

Mario and Giuliana had approached a point where they would often look down the slope at the valley. They instantly noticed a large yellow object on the ground, surrounded by people. Giuliana gasped, in realization of what must have transpired.

Carlo Demattio and his girlfriend heard and felt the entire sequence of events, right down to the violent crash and rumbling ground beneath their feet. They had been walking the Marcialonga Track in Masi di Cavalese. Immediately, they ran through the trees to the presumed location of the crash. The sight was horrific. The gondola cable-car impacted the ground so violently that it had flattened. Blood stained the surrounding snow. Carlo started yelling to see if anyone would reply. No one answered. Other people started arriving at the grim scene. There were no survivors.

Of the 20 victims, eight were German, five were Belgian, three were Italian, two were Polish, one was Dutch and one was Austrian. The flight incident had apparently been videotaped from inside the cockpit, and the tape was subsequently destroyed. Consequently, the aircraft’s black box was damaged as well. The pilot and the three other air crewmen were each charged with 20 counts of involuntary manslaughter, 20 counts of negligent homicide, damage to military property, damage to private property, and dereliction of duty. The back-seaters were eventually cleared of all charges. The navigator, Captain Schweizer had charges eventually dropped as well. The original charges against the pilot, Captain Ashby, were dropped and replaced by a guilty finding of “Obstruction of Justice” for his role in the destruction of the video tape. He served five months in the Camp Lejeune brig. The families of the victims received a total of \$1.9M for damages by the U.S. and Italian governments.

I was a live-in translator/escort to the victims’ families, assigned to this case along with 11 other Marines and one Sailor, for two separate seasons during the trials. We housed the families inside comfortable accommodations (newly-constructed, spacious, well-furnished condos) at North Carolina’s Emerald Isle, and lived among them night and day. I was assigned to the Belgian families, and later to the German families as well. At that time, my wife Petra worked at the Swiss Chalet, an authentic Swiss/German/Austrian bakery; I would make it a point to deliver fresh Siebenkorn Brot, Brötchen, and Süßigkeiten to the families as often as possible. I and the other translators were fortunate enough to share in the lives and the stories of those mentioned herein.

Note: At the request of one victim's family member, and with utmost respect to the deceased and to their loved ones, all photos of victims' family members have been removed from this site.



Disney or Bust

Tuesday, February 16, 2010

THERE ARE advantages to having oodles of young children. Early airplane boarding. Constant chuckles. An eclectic palette (more meal options for Papa at the restaurant--he's the plate cleaner) Least of all, fat income tax credits.

What to do, what to do... Petra and I talked Friday night when the money hit. Bills... yeah, there are always bills we can pay with the money. That would be the sensible thing to do. Then there's the first of a long list of vacations just waiting to happen... Disney World. It's an easy two grand, and then some, gone in a matter of days. It wouldn't be sensible by a long shot. Or would it?

The way I figure, some of our fondest memories were born of unwise financial decisions. To restate that, THE fondest memories were usually unwise in some way. So, releasing all inhibitions into the atmosphere, we set off Sunday evening to make The Great American Pilgrimage, to the Mecca of parents with school-aged children. We made an overnight stop near Charleston, SC. As an added bonus, Aunt Edie hooked up two days at Universal Studios (she used to work there). Right now we're in our hotel, in the middle of everything, and we're out the door!

The Road to Disney

In all the times we've made the 10-hour trip to Ohio to see Petra's folks, it never occurred to me to stop. The screaming babies, the potty breaks, the I'm hungries and are we there yet's. Well, enroute to Florida, we stopped. Not only did we stop, we took our sweet time from point to point. Yeah, okay, we were doing 90 most of the way. But we took long breaks and didn't rush the kids.

From start to finish, it was an exceptionally nice trip. We finally stopped at South of the Border, which is not worth the stop, by the way... and we found the birthplace of all firework outlets, where we didn't buy so much as a sparkler. The oranges on the northern Florida border taste awful, but the kids were impressed by their size and so we bought several of them. One week later, they still haven't been eaten! Go figure. Don't act surprised, I know you've got leaves growing on your potatoes.

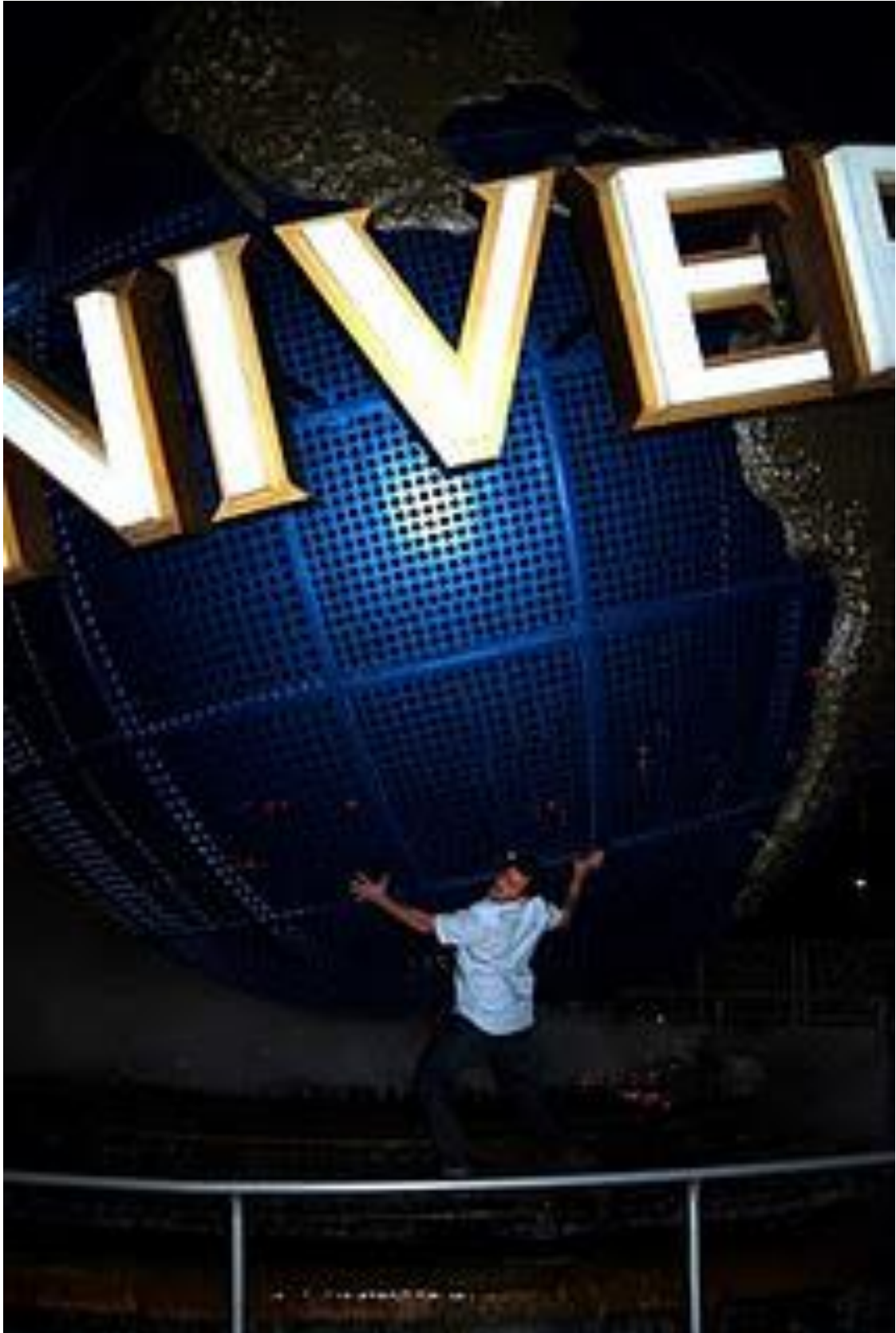






Universal Studios in Twelve Photos













The Barney Experience

The world is filled with Barney-haters, amongst whom, my wife and I are chief. We're chief. Our boys never caught Barney fever. Barney was for those OTHER families. The warm smiley sunshine families. Then our daughter fell for the Purple like a raved-out New Kids on the Block groupie. Then, our other daughter. Barney has become a part of our happy family.

The amazing part is this: Lily has always had a deathly fear of mascots. The Chick-fil-A cows, McGruff, even Big Bird and Elmo. After she freaked out in the presence of every mascot at Universal last week, we absolutely couldn't believe it when she ran up to Barney and told him a secret and held his hand and gave him a huge hug. The Barney experience made the entire trip worth it.









Above: Petra and Barney, 13 years ago.
Below: Petra's daughter, same place, last week.



Disney in Thirteen Photos













Islands of Adventure in 10 Photos









Choking on Chicken and Tattoos for Babies



"My hot dog has a first name, it's C-H-O-K-E..." I was listening to the radio last night, and the show hosts were discussing the new labels that will soon be appearing on food packaging, indicating potential choke hazards for children. Hot dogs, grapes, apples, etc. All at once, the future flashed before my eyes. For some reason, when laws get squirrely I always think of the Stallone/Snipes/Bullock movie from the 90's, Demolition Man. In the movie, randomly-placed public machines issue citations for the use of foul language. Foods are genetically altered to be bland and "healthy," and are served in birdlike proportions. Sex occurs only through virtual reality, because fluid transfer spreads germs and diseases. Huh, imagine that. Makes sense.

I see a future loaded with food labels: warnings, cautions, side effects, all the bells and whistles. Stamping "choke hazard" on a popsicle is like marking a puddle as a drown hazard. First off, as a father of children who chronically choke on all types of food for no apparent reason, and as a freaking human being who has choked on things my entire life, I can say with a certainty that no amount of labeling will stop kids, or anyone, from choking on food. Secondly, no amount of control will stop people from being stupid. Food 'choking labels' are obviously for stupid people... and stupid people do not pay attention to labels.

Any time there is an initiative like this, it creates jobs. "Yay!" It also dumbs down our

society. "Oh." Here's a thought: instead of marking every stinking piece of food that sits on a shelf, why don't we tattoo babies with warning labels at birth? Right on the bottom lip, like a prison tatt. Circumcision, "Check." Hepatitis B shot, "Check." 'Don't Choke Your Baby' lip tatt, "Check." People are SO incredibly stupid.

2010 MS-150 Ocean to Bay Ride

On June 5th, 2010, we're off on our annual 150-mile bike excursion to help stamp out MS. It's a really great event that takes place on Virginia's Eastern Shore. Matt & I first rode it in 2008, then he rode alone when I was in France last year, and this year, we started a team, "The Snot Rockets." We'll be joined from Orlando by Matt's Buddy Carl, who we ran with last summer in the Diamond in the Rough triathlon.



I'll be riding for Aunt Norma, who was diagnosed with MS in 1997. She currently resides 5 minutes from me, at a care facility in Suffolk, VA. Last year, I illustrated her first children's book, Grammy Hits the Road. Before her bout with MS, Aunt Norma was a die-hard road warrior and uber-fanatical baseball fan (she used to take me to games with her loud girlfriends). For several years now, she has been bedridden--requiring full assistance to perform basic motor functions.

This is a call for donations. Just like the last time I rode, five bucks buys you a spot on my arm, written with a Sharpie, for the duration of the ride. I don't foresee a ton of donations, but if there are, I'll scribble on my legs and neck. The top donation gets their name on my face! You can check out the photos on this blog or on Facebook after the race. We're trying to raise a meager \$1000 as a team, which puts the individual effort at \$333.34. You can donate by clicking [HERE](#), which takes you to the Snot Rockets page of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. Click on Matty Speights, or on the name of one of my teammates, to help us reach our team goal.

You may also join the team! Registration is \$37. Understand that there are strict requirements. First, it's not a race, it's just a ride. You must be able to ride a bike, and you must have a bike to ride. Nobody cares what kind of bike. You can even ride your kid's bike. We did see a few beach cruisers with banana seats in '08. We ride for 75 miles, snacking and hydrating roughly every ten miles, then we camp overnight in tents at YMCA Camp Silver Beach. Food and showers are provided, free beer and swimming pool. We ride back the next day. It's fun! And it sucks, in a fun way. You gotta wear our Snot Rocket team shirt, and fork out another \$20 for that; and each individual that competes in an MS event needs to raise a minimum of \$250, which you can do through the team website. Take the Challenge! Stamp out MS! Tattoo my Face!

Thanks in Advance

--MJ

The Value of One

No, this is not a Dollar Menu ad. It is not referencing an algebraic equation. This is simply a reminder of how important "one" can be.

"Is Rome worth one good man's life?" That was a poignant statement--in question form--posed by the character Lucilla, at the end of the movie Gladiator. The Bible tells a parable in which a shepherd with 100 sheep loses one of them. "Doth he not leave the ninety and nine, to try to save the one?" The difference between winning and losing a race is one person. History has shown that a single person, act, or idea can turn the tide of an era, a civilization, or all humanity.

At a Betterliving conference in New Orleans in 2008, a powerful theme was introduced. "212: the Extra Degree." The opening statement was as follows (not verbatim): "At 211 degrees, water is hot. At 212 degrees, water boils, producing steam that can power a locomotive, a ship, or a factory." What an eye-opener! That singular degree Fahrenheit makes the difference between potentially-harnessed steam power and, well, hot water. Of course, the breadth of the topic was expanded to theorize what might be done for a small business if ONE extra sale was made each week. If ONE corner was cut quarterly to prevent wasteful spending. You get the idea. Ones add up. Today, I'd like you to keep that in mind. If something you do can impact one single person's life--even if the intended target was a massive grip of people--it's worth it. If you lost "only" one pound toward your physical goal, congratulations. If you've only got one day left with someone you love, make it worth it... the memory can last a lifetime. A single compliment can change someone's day. And, yes, one dollar will buy you a most excellent spicy chicken sandwich at Wendy's.

In the Shoes of Francis Scott Key

Sunday, February 25, 2010

I was listening to The Star-Spangled Banner somewhere the other day, and it prodded my mind down a familiar trail of thoughts.

I memorized all four stanzas of the national anthem when I was a kid, and I never forgot them. More oft than not, the one I sing in my head before any baseball game is the last stanza. Like the last stanza of the Marines Hymn, it's the one that seems the most poignant and--if indeed it may be likened to the Marines Hymn, it's the one that is sang the loudest and with the most emotion. I believe its writer intended it that way. So I have often theorized on what exactly F.S. Key was thinking and feeling when he spawned our national anthem.

Setting the scene: Francis, who we'll call Scott so that you can relate to him better, is sitting on a British war ship, *HMS Tonnant*. He's a lawyer and a silver-spoon gentleman with an impressive rolodex, and he's a guest on the enemy ship during negotiations for a prisoner exchange. As a result of being on the *Tonnant*, Scott becomes privy to British plans to attack and invade nearby Baltimore. To avert the compromise of military intelligence, his British hosts will not allow him or the other men in his party to return to their ship until after the operation is well underway. So now, Scott and his guys are forced to watch a nasty bombardment of their fellow countrymen by British ships at Ft. McHenry. Pssst! I'll tell you a secret though. Ft. McHenry's fortress was the model for our current pentagon. Constructed like a five-point star, it was literally built like a military brick chithouse. Between you and me? ...She wasn't goin' anywhere!

Now let's set the mood: Have you ever stood next to a deafening, thundering waterfall? Perhaps Niagra while aboard the *Maid of the Mist*? Or stood on the edge of the Grand Canyon--in all its awe-inspiring splendor? I assure you, whatever your belief system, that either encounter will stir your soul. If the air is cool, it will almost certainly amplify the emotion. Now, some of you are diehard sports fans--perhaps you were avid followers of the Olympics in the last few weeks, or you were recently cheering your team in the Superbowl or an earlier playoff game. Think of the emotions that stir over a ball.

My parents live on a lake. Rather, a large chain of interconnected lakes in southeast Virginia, peppered with forested islands. For the 4th of July over the last few years, we would jump on canoes and join the neighborly small boat horde to watch the fireworks over Suffolk. Accoustically speaking, it's a grand location to experience the fireworks. It's like watching the celebration in Dolby Hi-Fi surround sound. For every "Boom" in the sky, there's a reverberating "bu-bu-bu-bU-BU-BU-BU-BOOOOOM!" The sound of each burst echoes off the islands and the scattered surrounding shorelines and envelops your body so that you can feel the sound. Sends chills.

Back to the *Tonnant*. Scott's sitting--or likely, standing (I couldn't imagine being able to sit while watching all that), on a wooden ship in the end waters of the Chesapeake Bay, at the southeast corner of modern metropolitan Baltimore. In 1814, 65 years before Edison's light bulb, Baltimore at night left no more of a glow on the sky than the fires of a KOA campground would today. We know because of Scott's tidal location, and by notes in his song, that the wind was likely blowing, and being September this probably meant a cloudless night. So a very dark sky, perhaps seasoned with stars, and a chilled September wind were nature's order for the night. There were fires lit at Ft. McHenry when naval shelling began. The rappings against treed shorelines in all directions caused echoes, and shudders, and goosebumps. The rocket's red glare? It was very bright against a very dark backdrop. The teams were playing for keeps. This was no bowl game. British success did not mean that the pubs would be brawling afterward... it meant that Scott's city would be stormed and set ablaze, and he might lose friends and family. With each solid blow, he would cringe. The foes on his boat would cheer. Voices--yells and commands, screams of desperation and agony--were carried on the wind. Every hair on Scott's body stood on end, his every emotion piqued, and I'm sure that tears were not outside the realm of possibility.

All eyes were on the flag. If the fort was compromised, Old Glory would be quickly replaced by a British flag, with no less effort and fervor by enemy troops than we ourselves would later display on Mt. Suribachi, as beautifully captured by Joe Rosenthal in WWII. For the enemy, capturing the McHenry flag had an added bonus... it's impressive size. 30 feet by 43 feet! A trophy too big to hang on the wall! That's 1290 SF; there are residential floor plans smaller than that. The flag at Ft. McHenry was not illuminated. The airbursts gave temporary illumination, and Scott ends the night with a question... "Is our Star-Spangled banner still waving?" His tone leading up to that adds the unnecessary "I sure hope so."

The story continues! When Scott wakes up in the morning, after 25 hours of fighting had finally ceased, he looks for the flag. Now, he's up early, right around the time that old BOB is poking over the horizon. Scott is straining his eyes to figure out what's on the flagpole. He writes--in what would become the second stanza of the *Star-Spangled Banner*, "*On the shore, dimly seen, through the midst of the deep-- where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes (our American soldiers at the fort are awfully quiet). What is that which the breeze, o'er the towering steep, as it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses?*" So the wind's kickin', either directly toward or directly away from his line of sight as he views the flag... and that huge flag is whippin' baby! Every once and again, the wind shifts and the flag turns broadside, but his ship must have backed off a bit, or the settled gunsmoke has left a thick morning fog, or Scott needs some vision aids, or a combination of these. "*Then it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam, in full glory reflected now shines on the stream!*" Aha! he just recognized it for sure. "*Tis the Star-Spangled banner, O long may it wave, o'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!*" His heart just skipped a beat. He ran below decks to tell the American prisoners.

Now he and his party have left the boat, giddy and celebrating the victory of their countrymen. Now he's talking a little trash-- "What happened to the big bad Brits who so vauntingly swore to smash us into itty bitty pieces...?"

*"And where is that band, who so vauntingly swore
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion,
A home and a country should leave us no more?"
(I'll tell you what happened to them!)
Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution!
No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave
And the Star-Spangled Banner in Triumph doth wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!*

Because we are now staunch allies with the British, and have been for over a century, that last stanza is often omitted. The reference to servants and slaves being killed certainly doesn't make it attractive either...

So he started the song with a question (does She still wave?), then in the second stanza he gives his blessing (long may She wave!). I love the last two lines of the third stanza. It's written in "matter-of-fact" style, as a statement (in triumph she waves!). Better still, a good old classic American "bold prediction" brings home the bacon in this the fourth stanza:

*And thus be it e'er, when free men shall stand
Between their lov'd homes and the war's desolation!
Blessed with vict'ry and peace, may this heav'n-rescued land
Praise the pow'r that hath made and preserved us a nation;
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just
And this be our motto "In God We Trust"
And the Star-Spangled Banner in Triumph shall wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!"*

When in the future, free men fight to keep the war from coming to their families on the homefront, may they always win... the way our boys did at Ft. McHenry last night! (AAOOOOW!) God has rescued our nation from the hands of our enemies, and blessed us with victory and peace. Because of this, and in recognition of God's power, let us praise him for creating our nation, and for preserving it! This doesn't mean we won't fight wars in the future. If we must take the battle to the enemy, and conquer him in his own backyard, so be it. We should not sweat the world's opinion, so long as our cause is just. And by the way, may this be our nation's motto: "In God We Trust." Once we have done all these things, adopted this way as our standard, then and only then *"The Star-Spangled Banner in TRIUMPH shall wave, over the land of the free and the home of the brave."*

Francis Scott Key Lite

Monday, March 1, 2010

In the words of Francis Scott Key... if he had been hip to our lingo.
(Short version of the long blog that precedes this one!)

The Fourth Stanza of the Star-Spangled Banner

When in the future, free men fight to keep the war from coming to their families on the homefront, may they always win... the way our boys did at Ft. McHenry last night! (AAOOOOW!) God has rescued our nation from the hands of our enemies, and blessed us with victory and peace. Because of this, and in recognition of God's power, let us praise him for creating our nation, and for preserving it! This doesn't mean we won't fight wars in the future. If we must take the battle to the enemy, and conquer him in his own backyard, so be it. We should not sweat the world's opinion, so long as our cause is just. And by the way, may this be our nation's motto: "In God We Trust." Once we have done all these things, adopted this way as our standard, then and only then will our Star-Spangled Banner wave --IN TRIUMPH-- over the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Peace.

--Scott

Snow Makes Sense

Wednesday, March 3, 2010



Ever notice how much slower people drive in the snow? Or how much more cautious they are when walking down stairs in the snow? Snow kept me from my job today, which required working outside—and made me stay home with my family. These days, some schools have done away with recess breaks. Play is important! Snow shuts down schools and forces

children and teachers alike to play. Heck, it shut down our nation's capital for a while. Tell me the government didn't need to cool off a bit. Snow overrules the painted road lines in often convoluted traffic areas, forcing drivers to generally follow the same set of tire tracks—usually in the most logical direction. I believe that snow is one of many ways God uses to slow us down, when we're too busy for our own good. In a way, snow forces us to do what is logical and important, and in fact creates or enforces common sense.



Reminders of Keukenhof

Sunday, March 7, 2010



It never fails--every year around this time, when the tulips are 'in bloom' at local flower stores here in the States, my mind takes me back to Keukenhof, Holland, the world's largest flower garden. It is here that one can find, among other flowers, a world-famous collection of thousands of types of tulips and hybrids... arguably the grandest tulip festival in the world. The park is open for two months each year, and each season, boasts an excess of seven million new bulbs planted. If you find yourself in the vicinity of Amsterdam, travel southwest to the city of Lisse (about three towns away), where Keukenhof is located. When you're finished, make the trip farther southwest to Den Haag, to the town of Scheveningen, where you will find one of the world's finest miniature cities, Madurodam. Don't forget to pick up your porcelain windmills, wooden shoes, and cheese samples along the way!

BJ's Hero: Honoring a Fallen Unknown, Flugtag '88

Monday, March 5, 2010

August 28th, 1988—Ramstein Air Base, Germany. I was a young Boy Scout in the Transatlantic Council. My troop met weekly at Landstuhl, the Army base with the infamous hospital that all critically-wounded U.S. troops are flown to from the Middle East. Today, our troop was manning a booth at the big international airshow at Ramstein: "Flugtag '88." As far as airshows are concerned, this one was a big to do... and had over a quarter of a million spectators.

Mom helped me the night before; it was my turn to bring snacks to an event so we made a ton of chocolate chip cookies. Okay, let's be real here—mom made the cookies and I contributed by licking the mixing paddles clean. Dad did a little binge snacking that night, which meant that mom had to jump on a punctuality grenade the following morning, working overtime on a couple batches of cookies to fill the unexpected void that dad left.

That's why we were running late. The drive to Ramstein from our house in Weselberg was a solid hour (nowadays, there is an autobahn route that makes it a 20 minute drive). By the time we descended into Landstuhl, we could see the show's first formation flights on approach. Now we're on the main entrance road to Ramstein. The main gate is within sight, and the airfield is to our immediate right. We'll be at the booth in 5 minutes.

Just ahead and to the right, a thick black cloud of smoke billows high into the air. An eerie explosion shakes the ground. "NO..." mom & dad say together, "Sweet Jesus, no!"

In what today is known as one of the worst airshow accidents in history, three Italian jets collided in midair, showering the spectators in burning fuel and debris. One of the jets, and half of another, slammed into the crowd—of all places, it crashed into the only on-site emergency Blackhawk helicopter, in an area where the flightline perimeter fence angled. This fence configuration created a cornered-in pocket of roughly forty defenseless bystanders, who were burning alive. Among them was one of my Boy Scout buddies, BJ.

BJ was completely engulfed in flames, when an unknown man snatched him up and launched BJ over the 12-foot concertina-topped fence—saving his life. The selfless unknown, and about thirty others, burned alive. In all, 67 spectators and 3 pilots were killed; 346 spectators were seriously wounded, and more than 500 sustained injuries that required medical attention. We watched the horrific scene unfold--like many others--from the safety of our car, less than two hundred feet away.

BJ bore the scars of a survivor in the years that I had seen him following the accident. His entire body was melted and smeared, but he was fully mobile. The last

time I saw him, my family and his met for dinner. It was there that they told the courageous story of BJ's unknown hero, as they expressed thankfulness for his selfless ultimate sacrifice.

Why Caleb Refuses to Play Star Wars with Dad

Wednesday, March 10, 2010

The fact is, it's not only because I usually choose to be Darth Vader's mom. Here are the most recent reasons that my son banned me from playing with his Star Wars toys:

Reason number 1: Droids do not figure skate, especially as couples. And most certainly not to the song "I've Had the Time of my Life."





Reason # 2: Star Wars characters do not dance to "YMCA." *Let's get this straight, dad. They just plain don't dance. Period.*



Reason # 3: Clones don't laugh.



And the # 4 reason: Star Wars guys don't play Twister [It's not fair, anyway, because the storm troopers can hardly even bend their knees, let alone anything else].



Memory Dump on General Early Road

Driving down the road, minding our own, my dad and I came across a pile of junk. We slowed down. Photo albums, military uniforms, a wedding dress, jewelry, deeds to properties, marriage certificate, diplomas and certificates, yearbooks, a folder filled with death certificates and old family photos, children's personal items, all blowing away in the middle of the road. We collected the stuff and called the cops. To the Suffolk police officer who arrived at the scene, I asked how thorough of an investigation would be done to find the rightful owner (fearing suicide, or at least a nasty marital spat). I told her that I have taken on several human interest stories in recent years and that I would like to investigate further, if they would allow. She made some calls, then gave me a case number. She said that they will conduct a thorough investigation at their office, and then informed me that after 30 days, if the items had not been claimed, they would be considered abandoned property and that I can claim them. Wow, okay.

Now, I don't want anybody's personal belongings. What I wanted, as I've done several times in the past, is to return the items to their rightful owner(s). First, you've got to find them... and that takes a little research. Well, a month and a half passed, and when I called the 'evidence holding sergeant' with the case number, she told me that the items were still in holding, that the owner or owners could not be contacted, and that the items would all be destroyed. I was upset, because I had the sneaking suspicion that a thorough investigation was not conducted, and now someone's valuables would be destroyed and taken to the city dump. What about the jewelry? And what of the property deeds? Surely those won't be destroyed. What's procedure on legal documents? "Sir, that's none of your business." Now, mind you, I've seen federal agents 'cast lots' for confiscated goodies. I know the deal. So I asked, as the rights of any citizen allow, what oversight elements are in place to deter the pocketing of valuables by police officers? Again, "That's none of your business, Sir. This property is not yours."

Now, I get pretty angry sometimes. Not over 'stuff,' but over PRINCIPLE. Stupidity, clouded by secrecy. Blatant wrongdoing under the cover of justice. I said as much. "Next time I find a pile of someone's personal belongings abandoned in the middle of a public thoroughfare, I'm taking the items, and giving them back to their rightful owner myself." "Sir, if we catch you, we'll arrest you for larceny." I was livid. This conversation is going nowhere. Finally I let my guard down, and said, "Look, Sergeant. I'm sorry if I'm getting mouthy. I just want to know what happened to the owners of this property... and what will happen to their stuff. I'm a very nostalgic individual, and I cannot fathom a rightful law that allows all these inherently valuable familial items to be destroyed before some family member can be contacted. I mean, between all the certificates and paperwork, you've got fifty names to go off of. Did these people all drop off the face of the earth? I suspect that no one in the Suffolk Police Department has given this case much effort." With that, we closed the conversation and hung up. "We'll be in touch," she said smugly.

I got a call less than five minutes later. “We just found the owners. They’re coming to get their stuff.” I don’t know whether that call was meant to slap me in the face (just to get rid of me), or whether it was simply that easy to make a phone call and contact the owners. In either case, it was a sorry way to handle a police matter, however trite.

Man, I got hot just writing that story again. Time for a huge bowl of mind-numbing ice cream!

A Small Surprise

A few months ago, I was intrigued by a true-life love story. I thought it might make for excellent inspiration for a story by my favorite author, Danielle Steel. So I wrote to her, tipped her off on the story in a nutshell, and had absolutely no intention of hearing back from one of the world's busiest authors. She wrote back! Is that cool or what? She couldn’t use the story... her publisher won’t let her... But she wrote back, in three brief but priceless paragraphs—she was very kind, and it was very cool!

Missing Charlie Heston

Thursday, March 11, 2010

Last Saturday, Natcher and I bumped into each other on Facebook. Then we linked up on the phone, and had a few drinks together... he in Texas and I in Virginia. As usual, we talked about all kinds of stuff. Somehow, the topic fell on Charlton Heston.

Of course, there were his movie roles--more than eighty of them--and countless television roles. He was El Cid, Judah Ben Hur, Moses, John the Baptist, Marc Anthony, Michaelangelo... He took the star role in Earthquake, and in the *Planet of the Apes* series. Natcher loved his cameo appearances... in the new *Planet of the Apes* with Mark Wahlberg, *Wayne's World*, and even on the TV show *Friends*.

He was the awesome manly voice on numerous commercials and short clips (loved his Bud Light radio bits). He was the President of the NRA. He was a staunch supporter of human rights and personal freedoms. Natcher points out that he was a social icebreaker in the remake of *The Last Man on Earth*, remake entitled *Omega Man*, wherein his girlfriend was African American. Both were remade recently by Will Smith, in a film that went back to it's original book title roots, *I am Legend*.

Feeling uber-nostalgic the next day (Sunday afternoon), we busted out *The Ten Commandments* and I made the whole family watch it. That's right, I made them

watch it. They can tell the stories of their horrible father later in life, but they'll remember some classic movies. 20 minutes into the movie, the boys were hooked.

The film greets are dying at the cyclic rate. We'll keep the legend of Heston alive in our house, though.

Sex and Tapeworms

Had the sex talk with the boys the other night, when mama was at singing practice for church. It wasn't too difficult, because I'm pretty blunt with them anyway. I've always wondered how to determine what the correct age is to broach the subject... my boys are 9 and 7... and I think I figured it out. You know when to tell your kids about sex, the moment you feel that they are in the near danger of learning about it the wrong way from someone else (kids at school or on their sports teams, accidentally through TV or radio, etc.). These days, the age bar is getting lower and lower... but generally, factors that affect your decision will come down to each particular kid's environment.

I prefaced the conversation with a pulse-check, to see what they "knew" about the subject. They were as close to knowing as I had expected. I let them know what kind of physiological changes to expect in the forthcoming years and the affect that girls and kissing and touching will have on them. I stressed that sex is something that married couples do when they want to have a baby. "It feels great, to both a man and a woman," I told them. "But God made it to be a special bond between a man and a woman after they are married, when they want to have kids." Not wanting them or us to feel awkward in the future, I made sure to separate kissing and touching from sex (as far as they are concerned, Petra and I have had sex four times, producing four children... this keeps them from wondering whether this is a regular occurrence for mom & dad--for now, anyway).

Not wanting to leave anything out, I made sure to touch on the subjects of peer pressure, what they can expect their friends to say about sex, fertilization & the pregnancy cycle, teen pregnancy & abortion. I touched VERY BRIEFLY on the subjects of rape, incest, kidnapping & the sex trade, sexual abuse, and most importantly, how to recognize precursors & indicators, and what to do and who to tell if they suspect any of those things may be occurring with themselves or someone else. Finally, I taught the physical and moral implications of having sex with someone other than their spouse, and left the bridge of communication open for two-way traffic between us now and at any time in the future. I figure the cooler I am about it, the more apt they will be to keep me in the loop.

So after I dropped this A-bomb of information, I figured they might be feeling a little queasy or wierded out. I asked for feedback. Josh said, "Yeah, It was a little gross, but it makes sense. Now I know why kids look like their dads sometimes." Caleb, my

7-year-old, said this, "Yeah, that's not really gross. But dad... [Yeah?] When do we get tapeworms? Do we get those after we're married? Cause I saw them on Animal Planet and they're like a billion feet long and they're **SO** super gross. So when do we get those?" I couldn't help but bust out laughing.

Then we had the tapeworm speech. It was equally as long and ended with a lame joke. In the end, I was left with the impression that my boys would rather have bucketloads of unprotected sex, than have a tapeworm. Maybe I did something wrong. I think the three of us will be having a milder 'Part 2' of the sex talk again soon.

— — —

Just for shniggles, the tapeworm joke (Cliff's Notes version):

Guy goes to doc. Doc says, "Hey, you've got a tapeworm. NURSE! Bring me DAY 1 TAPEWORM TREATMENT!" Nurse appears with a suppository and a piece of cornbread. Doc pushes pill where the sun don't shine, chases it with cornbread. Guy feels wierd. Comes back next day (doctor's orders). "NURSE! DAY 2 TAPEWORM TREATMENT!" Same thing, butt pill & cornbread. Day 3: "NURSE!" The nurse shows up with a suppository & a scalpel. Dude gets nervous. Doc pushes pill, waits a second, tapeworm pops his head out and says (with a Dangerfield accent) "Ey, where's the cornbread?" Doc whacks his head off. The end.

Brandenburg Gate, Berlin

Sunday, March 14, 2010



I haven't been to Berlin since we helped tear down the wall in '89. I did stumble upon two cool pictures though, one taken by my folks during one of our visits in '87 or '88 (photo above), and another taken by grandma and grandpa Speights when they were stationed back there in the 60's. The photo they took is of President Kennedy's visit (the "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech), on 26 June, 1963 (photo below). They actually got a good photo of Kennedy in his motorcade, but I'm going to have to do some Photoshop restoration, because it's badly faded.



OH, CRAP.

Monday, March 15, 2010

We forgot Chuck Norris' birthday. It was five friggin' days ago. Should we (gulp) still send him a birthday card?

MJ's 10 favorite Norris Facts:

- (1) Every night, the boogeyman checks under HIS bed for Chuck Norris.
- (2) If at first you don't succeed, you're not Chuck Norris.
- (3) Chuck Norris does not believe in Germany.
- (4) Chuck Norris can win a game of Connect-4 in three moves.
- (5) If it looks, tastes, and smells like chicken, but Chuck Norris says it's beef, then it's beef.
- (6) Chuck Norris can pop a wheelie on a unicycle.
- (7) When Chuck Norris does push-ups, the earth actually moves.
- (8) Superman wears Chuck Norris pajamas.
- (9) Chuck Norris can play the violin with a piano.
- (10) When Bruce Banner gets angry, he turns into the Hulk. When the Hulk gets angry, he turns into Chuck Norris.

— — —

I read some blog posts from a friend. One of them points to a really funny Chuck Norris "fact." Go to Google, and type in "find Chuck Norris," then click "I'm Feeling Lucky." See what pops up, and read the words at the bottom of the screen as well.

My Running and Racing History: 1992-1999

1992 -- I tried out for the track distance team at Greenon H.S. in Springfield, OH. I ran my first mile. Later, thanks to Coach Williams, I achieved a 4:49 PR in the event.

1993 -- Ran the Fort Belvoir 10K (just outside of Washington, D.C.). It was my first foot race (not related to school). Good lookin' shirt. Ran it in 42 minutes and some change.

1994 -- Ran a regular killer 5 mile hill route at Robinson Barracks, Stuttgart, Germany. Ran a regular 10 mile wooded trail route between Patch Barracks and Panzer Kaserne with my football training partner John Martinez. Ran it barefoot from time to time. John's dad was my racing inspiration... a dedicated senior enlisted Air Force athlete, he kept several of his race bibs under a large framed piece of glass in their hallway.

1995 -- Joined the track team at Patch H.S. in Stuttgart, Germany. Ran the 800, the mile, and 2-mile event. Best time in the mile was 5:12, much slower than in 1992. To my credit, I weighed 178 at this point... and maintained that weight until I joined the Marines.

1995 -- Ran the Stuttgart 24-Hour Marathon. Under cover of darkness during the nighttime portion of the event, I terrorized other runners with items supplied by my sideline buddies (jello, squirt gun, water balloons).

1995 -- Ran the Munich Marathon, my first internationally-sanctioned race event. I needed an "Under 18 Parental Consent Waiver" to register. Introduced for the first year at this event was the "Champion-Chip," a device that laces into a runner's shoe to give accurate digital times (start/halfway/finish/splits). Of course, this device would eventually be replicated by numerous companies, and the technology has since evolved to incorporate easily-removable velcro anklets, and most recently, disposable strips that can be attached to one's shoe or ankle. The night before the race, thousands of runners slept on towels, blankets, and bags on the hard concrete floor of a warehouse-turned-hostel. I purchased a brand new auto-reverse Sony Walkman on the drive to Munich, along with the Bruce Springsteen tape, "Born in the USA." I resisted the urge to listen to music in the hostel, so that the batteries would be fresh for race day. I ran 26.2 miles with an empty Walkman, because I left the tape in the car. The run itself was good/average, the sport drink of the day was freaking disgusting, and the ending was phenomenal. A two-mile incline with a finishing lap inside the 1972 Olympic stadium. On the way up the hill, a keg truck was driving slowly and runners were being showered with beer. I ran under the amber rain all the way to the top! For the last 200 meters of the race, I raced a man who had unfurled a huge Italian flag. I was holding a tiny American flag on a stick that my dad handed me when I entered the stadium (along with a little chocolate donut, which I traded for an empty, sweaty, beerish Walkman)... John Belushi would've been so proud). We were neck and neck, until a crowd of 50 Americans rose up from the stands near the finish line, yelling and waving flags for me. Some lady stood up and screamed "YEAH, GO AMERICA!!!" As cheesy as it sounds, it was enough of a boost for me to burn the guy I was running against. First marathon time was 4:02:23..

1995 -- Lisbon Marathon and Glaskow Great Scottish Run both flopped. The formal due to scheduling, and the latter due to travel delays that made me miss my packet pickup!

1995 -- Awarded 750 Mile Certificate in the "Run For Your Life" Army fitness program

1996 -- Paris Marathon, or "Marie de Paris." Took a train from Stuttgart with no game plan. Couldn't find a spot at a hotel or hostel that night, so I just hung out.

Barilla hosted the pre-race pasta party, which was a good time. I drank beer and cheap wine all night, then met some kid outside Lido's that pointed me at a house where I could rent a room for the night for like 80 Francs (at that time, less than \$20 USD). I slept in the closet-sized room for about three hours, woke up to a monstrous mechanical alarm clock, and walked to the start line at the Champs-Élysées. Nobody was there yet. I grabbed some McCoffee and waited until the racing horde started to build back towards l'Arc. I slipped right in near the front of the line. I hardly remember the course, except that there was very little human motivation along the route (high-fives and cow bells, e.g.). The start was really cool because they played Vangelis "Chariots of Fire" after the gunstart, and it rumbled so loudly through the large, raised roadside speakers that you could feel it for the entire first two kilometers. The marathon shirt for this race became my favorite workout shirt, because it had a quality elastic neck. I wore the last stitches out in 2009. The shorts that they gave away in the race goodie bag were so short, you could call them bikini bottoms. I kept them as a reminder of how gay I'll never be.

1996 -- The K-Town German / American Half Marathon... Me, John, and Pat Francescon ran this one, along with Pat's dad Pete, a looks-the-part Marine who I have always simply referred to as "The Colonel." The Colonel smoked our bags that run.

1997 -- Marine Corps Marathon, aka "The People's Marathon." Radisson Hotel packet pickup. Got the gray shirt. Haynes Point sucked. The final hill sucked. Otherwise, great race. Tons of high-fives, low-fives, orange slices, public beer servants, and kids with tootsie-rolls... everywhere except Haynes Point... you're on your own for those few miles. Usually occurs late October, just when the temps drop in D.C. Park at the Pentagon, metro to Arlington, walk through bushes to start point. 16 or 17 thousand runners that year. Ran it as a Marine. Started beside The Colonel.

1998 -- Marine Corps Marathon, again. First year for online registration, and it filled up its 20,000 slots in two days. Couldn't even access the registration page (and back then, everybody had dial-up internet). Didn't get a seat. Drove to the packet pickup anyway (now at the Crystal City Hyatt), having heard through the Corps grapevine that Active Duty members would not be denied a bib. Got a free one. Saw the same two old geezers running with the huge American flag and Marine Corps flag. Saw the same big Uncle Sam and Devil Dog hot air balloons. Same dog-tag-shaped medal. Got the black shirt. Still a great race. Started next to The Colonel again.

1999 -- Marine Corps Marathon, again. Missed out on the online registration again, even though it was extended to 22,000 participants plus 4,000 "Active Duty-only" online registrants. Hung out at the Hyatt until the end of the race expo, like a bum, and paid \$50 for an unclaimed race bag with some lady's name on it. I think this was the year that they took away the Haynes Point stretch, and modified the route to go down by the National Zoo instead. John ran it too, because I kept pushing him. He

wasn't ready. He passed out at 14 miles, mumbling something before hitting the ground hard. Some guy yelled something as he half tripped over him. I yelled something back at the guy, probably not worth repeating. First I dragged John to the side, then I fireman's carried him back to the half, where there was a Corpsman aid station / tent. That was the year I ran a 28 mile marathon. We couldn't find John after the race, and Petra and I drove hospital to hospital to finally find him in a wheelchair and a buttless smock. John! You okay? "I can't feel my nuts," he said. Turns out he had an icepack in his shorts for over an hour and didn't know it.

My Running and Racing History: 2000-2010

Monday, March 22, 2010

2000 -- Ran the 5th Annual Laura Griffin Memorial 5K in Charleston, SC. Great area, great weather, great people, great race.

--Ran the Recon Challenge, which is an annual event at Camp Lejeune, NC for both civilians and military competitors. It was hosted by my parent unit in the Marines.

--The Cooper River Bridge Run, also in Charleston, SC. Ran it with John as a training run for his MCM redo. The MCM flopped, we completed it the following year (2001)

--Ran my last rabbit run with the Hash House Harriers in NC. On, On!!!

2001 -- Competed in the Recon Challenge again. Always a good time. As with most PT events when Recon was back at French Creek, plenty of beer, swine, and wrestling afterwards.

Ran my 4th Marine Corps Marathon. Ran it with John. He finished this time. Can't remember if we saw the Colonel. Race was still great, as always, but for me, it was an emotional one. I was heavily burdened with the loss of my close friend, Stephen P. Gaffney, just days earlier. The turnout for the race was strong, but not as strong as the previous year... you see, this race took place just a month after 9/11. The first few miles of the race encircle the Pentagon, which was still freshly scarred. Anthrax scares were prevalent. People were nervous about gathering in a crowd of 20K+ people, apprehensive of a terrorist attack. For us, the racers, it was a great time. I ran behind a guy with a T-shirt that read, "Yo Mama, Osama!" Thousands and thousands of American flag temp tattoos were passed out at the race expo, displaying the words "United We Run."

2002 -- Recon Challenge

2003 -- "26.2 Miles to Nowhere II" The second treadmill marathon aboard the USS Nassau, somewhere between Africa and Iraq.

--Ran my 5th and final Marine Corps Marathon. Great race, but I put the bookends on it. Ran under some girl's name again, got the race bib last minute. Time to find

new adventures to race to.

2006 -- Ran 5k @ the Navy Annex in Portsmouth, VA w/Petra

2007 -- Ran the Shamrock Marathon, Virginia Beach, VA. Had a blast. Like Charleston, SC, Virginia Beach is very race-friendly. I just learned that the Tidewater Striders is the biggest running club in the States. Shamrock is half fun, half ho-hum. The sideline support is fantastic in the popular areas. Elsewhere, it's pretty dry. Flat course. Good finish on the boardwalk. My boys joined me for the last 1000 feet or so, and got medaled as well. Great experience.

2008 -- Shamrock 8K, Team BetterLiving. This was the first race with Matt LeBlanc, my racing partner these days. Our team placed in the Corporate Division, but I forget which place (2nd? 3rd?).

--Virginia Duathlon w/ Matt -- Smithfield, VA. Rainy, cold as crap. My first time on a road bike. Heck, my first time on any bike since I was probably 10. No, 14, with Lance Gionanne in mountainous East Tennessee. That race sucked hard. My bawls froze to the seat, and it was hailing. We literally were riding and running with chunks of ice in our hair... and I was wearing my usual silkies (short shorts). Ipod Nazis! It was miserable.

--Nashville Country Music Marathon... This trip made us fall in love with Nashville. Petra, me, and the kids stayed with Melissa & Mark & their boy E. The race, one of the musical marathon series of races (Rock & Roll events), was well-attended, and had probably the best breakfast spread and support tent metroplex on race morning. Hilly course, all over the city, very cool and in no way boring. I missed the big sign that split the Marathoners and half marathoners, so I finished the Half. Got the medal. Confused, I tucked my medal under my shirt, jumped the orange silt fence, ran back to the split, and ran the rest of the marathon. Feeling great for that race, I set a marathon PR with a chip time of 3:18:24, and I lost ten minutes with the halfway fumble. Got a second medal when I finished the marathon.

--Cradle of Liberty Sprint AR. This race was awesome! Our first adventure race, it was just North of the Poconos in PA. Ran it with Carrie and Carin from Penn State. We kept bounding each other, finally deciding to just run it together. It was a good teaming. They placed first for the women's two person team, Matt & I placed third in the men's. One of my favorite races.

--"Ocean to Bay" MS-150 bike ride on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Ride 75 miles to Camp Silver Beach (YMCA Summer Camp hotspot), swimming pools, free beer and eats, camp out. Just bought a single man sleeper. Good time. Great time! Girls in tent next door were crying all night because their tent leaked and they were in a swimming pool of water. Extra dry socks was all I had to offer. Ride back sucked hard, in the best possible way. This ride is not a race, but we were riding in the lead pack. Bumble bee riders were funny, on the downhills, they'd all bunch together and pedal backwards, producing a humming "Bzzzzzzzzzzzz."

--Ft. Story Run for the Blind 5K -- Ran it with Petra, Matt, Christine, Erica. Running at Ft. Story brings back unpleasant memories of, um, running at Ft. Story. Ate sand

and swamp and sea for three months there during Amphibious Reconnaissance School.

--Rock & Roll Half Marathon, Virginia Beach... Ran it side-by side with Petra! She did great and we had a blast. Good race, great weather, great photo of a guy with nipples bleeding heavily through his shirt on the final mile. Once again, VB is a great place for races. Matt and Christine ran it too, for the second or third time I think, along with Jim, Alex, and Pete.

--Little Creek Mud Run... With Matt...Huge turnout for this 10K event at the beach (Naval Amphibious Base Little Creek, VA). Lots and lots of free beer and pizza while hanging out in the surf afterwards. Great mix-up of terrain... pavement, hardpack on the beach, soft sand pig trails, and of course, mud.

--Turkey Trot... at Mount Trashmore, Virginia Beach. The most boring, pathetic, miserable excuse to ruin my Thanksgiving morning, running through neighborhoods full of happy sleeping people when I should have been watching the Macy's Day Parade in my underwear. Yeah, I might do it again, but it's a BIG might.

2009 -- Rode from Blois to Orleans in Central France, and to every town between, along the Loire River.

--Diamond in the Rough Triathlon, Matt's and my first Tri. Olympic distance. Ran it with Jon and Carl. Jon got hurt in the swim and couldn't complete. The race was fantastic, but for crying out loud, somebody have that hill at the end of the bike portion removed! The tape on the ground coming from the first transition area, spelled "SMIW" (for lysdexic swimmers). Great race. Very cool experience. No swag, though.

--Allen Stone Memorial R/S/R. This run-swim-run started and finished with a bang. Bruce and his wife picked up Matt & I in the "Blackhawk!" (tactical products) bus. We got to park it right next to Neptune's statue on the boardwalk. Beer and snacks and a private bathroom aboard... right at the Start & Finish. How cool is that? The swim was horrible. Felt like a full 1 knot current! I was going nowhere. Lost my goggles at the first buoy turn. Swam blind.

--Little Creek Mud Run again (with Matt). Just as cool as the first time. Must do again. I suggest getting there really early to avoid traffic while waiting to park in the muddy fields. Leaving is even worse... for the first hour anyway.

2010 -- Shamrock 8K. Just ran it two days ago. Good race. Really fast and flat. Good weather. Very green.

The Beatings Will Continue... Virginia Duathlon 2010

Wednesday, March 31, 2010

Virginia Duathlon: A race for serious athletes. The race is strictly MP3-free, and there are no grab-assing 'good gamers' that run this course. The sideline volunteers all agreed with me when I'd joke about how serious the competitors are in this race. Two years ago, I remember someone trying to non-chalantly sneak an earphone into their ear at the start line. The guy behind the ipod sneaker, notably perturbed, turned around and said to us, "I can't believe that. Why would anyone want to run with music in their ears in the first place." It was a statement. Okay, Ipod nazi.

Nevertheless, I run. Matt and I hit VaDu again this year. No sleet or hail (thankfully); no loose, mean Rotweillers; no wind... HAHAHA!!! Okay, there's a whole lotta wind on this open field bike course on the water.



Funniest thing I've ever seen in a race--I come around the corner and some bike fag has had a blowout. *You can always tell a bike fag. Like any sport fag, they're uber-hardcore, and you're not cool enough to talk to them about their sport without impressive lingo, stretchy threads adorned with logos, and smokin' hot PR's. Okay, so I have bike fag envy. I look like a manatee on wheels--and my wife doesn't disagree.* Anyway, so this guy's changing his tire, and there are three vultures, 20-30 feet above him, circling. I mentioned something as I was passing him, laughing. Par for this course, he had no sense of humor and said simply (regarding the vultures) "I know." Wish I'd had a camera!



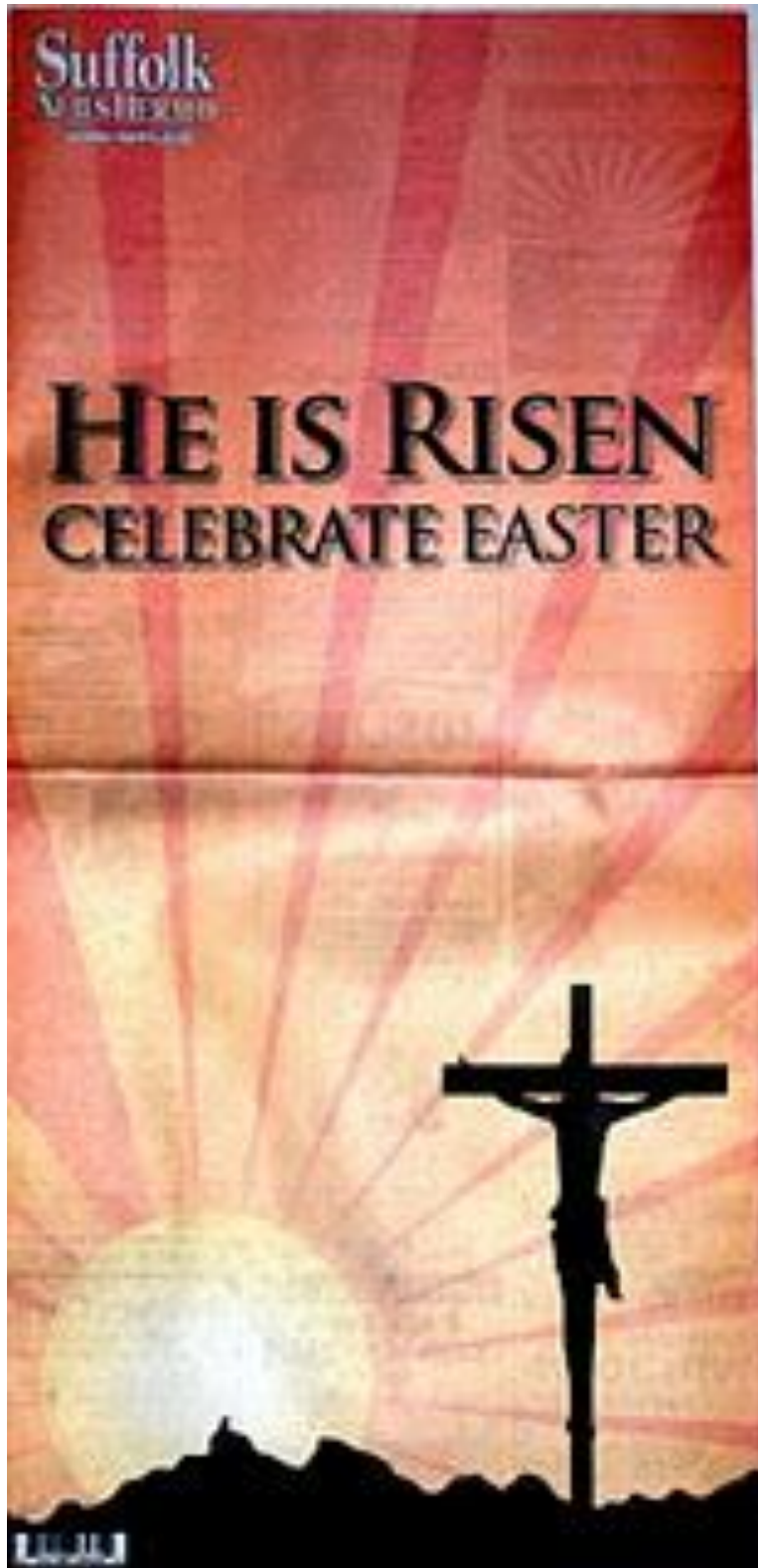
So I'm riding around another bend, when I notice something written in the road. "Pedal FAST! Bad dog ahead on right!" It should have been written much sooner, as I had barely finished reading it when a huge German Shepherd ran alongside me in his fenceless yard, barking like crazy. Thank



God for underground fences and/or good dog training.

Outside of that, the race sucked hard in a good way, so it was a good race. Matt said that the energy drink was horrible! I don't think I had any, unless it was really watered down at one of the drink stations. Anyway, for whatever reason, we'll be running it again next year. Should suck just as bad and we'll keep on lovin' it!

Still Making Headlines



More than 2000 years ago, a 33-year old man died on a cross. The rest, as they say, is history. I'm proud to say that today, in a largely anti-Christian society, Jesus Christ made the front page of our small town paper... and it wasn't in the form of libel; rather, it was a fitting tribute--He got the entire first page.

Also, just for shniggles, here's my all-time favorite public tribute to Jesus... perhaps you've seen it... it doesn't get old to me!

(Link to YouTube Video, "Steve Harvey Introduces Jesus")

A Rare Photo Worth Forwarding

Saturday, April 10, 2010

This is why I love Marines.



HONOR

The difference between the good guys and the bad guys is whether they use human shields or make themselves human shields.

Unborn Children are Not Republicans

Saturday, April 10, 2010

It's a hardline subject politically. It's a difficult decision for many, a cardinal sin for others. Conservatives typically cite morality issues in defending the rights of the unborn. Liberals defend a mother's right to choice. Middle-of-the-liners hold that abortion is an ethically acceptable choice only under special circumstances, such as rape, incest, and physical duress (mother's life or long-term health is at stake). I fall into the latter category, and have a problem with the liberal-conservative contention, for the following reasons.

I am a pro-lifer...not simply in terms of abortion, but in all aspects of the word. This

means animals, trees, bugs, and unborn children. Though I am both a meat-eater and a respectful hunter, I can relate to liberal tree-huggers and animal rights activists in many ways. I catch and release the spiders and bees that fly into the house. I save worms from drowning in puddles. I have raised baby birds, shrews, and other critters whose mothers were killed. In a bull fight, I'm rooting for the bull. I am the person most likely to attempt saving a baby animal by c-section if the mother is killed in a car accident. I have a deep respect for life.

What sickens me, is that the lives of unborn children are simply items of political importance. I am convinced, for example, that many Democrats are pro-choice only because in doing so, they are opposing Republicans. Though I am mostly conservative, when it comes to fairness I do not take sides. I can't stand Fox News, because they are slanted to promote an UNbalanced view of world events. I can't stand that the same liberals who so aggressively advocate for the rights of animals, who "have no voice," simultaneously choose to advocate abortion against the voiceless unborn.

The right to choose is among our most basic of human freedoms. All choices have consequences. You see, selfishness often blurs the line between right and wrong. The Roe vs. Wade decision was born of a generational change in thinking... one that says, "Do whatever feels right." I believe in a mother's right to choose, to a limited extent. But I believe that our mothers facing the choice of abortion are also misinformed and misled. Abortion has become so socially acceptable, that it is no longer viewed as "wrong"... nowadays, even as late as the third trimester.

Here are some fetal development facts. Between three and four weeks after conception, the human embryo develops its own heartbeat, and manufactures its own blood cells (and blood type). By eight weeks, every organ is typically in place, bones replace cartilage, fingerprints form, the brain is in full function and the baby responds to both sound and touch. It "feels." By week 12, the baby can experience pain in every part of its body. Vocal chords are complete as well. Baby can now suck his or her thumb. By week 20, the baby can taste, dream, distinguish momma's voice, smile, frown, laugh, cry, and can even sustain life if born prematurely. This is the earliest stage where we allow partial-birth abortions.

If you support partial-birth abortion, please read this paragraph. If not, please skip it. Partial-birth abortions are truly gruesome! An active, content baby is pulled out of the womb by its leg using forceps. Scissors are thrust into the base of the skull of the wiggling, 'wants-to-live' baby. A catheter is then inserted to scramble and suck out the baby's brain. And we call ourselves humane. The procedures are titled "D&X," "D&E," or "ICD," in order to de-humanize a very human baby. I did not want to sound like a president-basher in this story, but I did the research and it turns out that President and Mrs. Obama are very, very adamant supporters of partial-birth abortion. Why? Political reasons, I'm sure... once again, making a point that they are anti-Republican instead of making a decision based upon ethical common sense. No

one who has physically seen the procedure, and still think it's okay, can be remotely considered 'psychologically sound' in my book.

Look, all Americans believe in freedom--among which, freedom of choice may be chief. But right to choice does not trump right to life, not now, not ever. To quote a national charter document, the importance of which has slowly degraded to that of a meaningless icon, I refer to the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights... that among them is LIFE..." Regardless of how you believe, you should be reminded that the Declaration is directly responsible for the freedoms we enjoy today, and the 56 men who signed it agreed that life is a God-given right... no person can take the life of another for a selfish cause, without paying the consequences... even with a government's approval. Last time I checked, God does not answer to the United States government.

Two Great Quotes

I love motivational quotes. Here are two from church today--Derek Gaskill was speaking; these are from his notes.

"Ten people who speak make more noise than ten thousand who are silent."
--Napoleon Bonaparte

"Life is either a daring adventure or nothing. Security does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than exposure."
--Helen Keller

The Family that Plays Together...

It all started with a rope. I took a length of static kernmantle and looped it over a nice high branch. Jumping off the surface roots of the big tree from which the rope hangs, you can get to a point where your feet are 10' off the ground, just above the sandy beach area by the lake. Daddy tested it first, not because I believed it would fail, but to show momma that it would be fine for the kids. I made a nice footloop, swung out with Lily in Tarzan / Jane style, and then with Ayla our 10-month-old; both girls loved it. The boys swung on it all morning.

Around Noon, we packed up and headed to the Suffolk Chili Fest, sampled some great chilis, then headed home around 2. That's when the games began!

Lily was begging me to play hide & seek. I started playing, and then the boys joined

in. Petra joined in as well. The baby went down for a nap, and before you knew it, we were knee-deep in a great game of hide & seek. After about an hour, Petra told the boys that we were not playing "true" hide & seek. In true hide 'n' seek, you stay hidden until somebody finds you--you don't come running out to tag base... it promotes goaltending. She's right, I realized. What we were actually playing (and what several kids play) is "kick the can" rules, but there's no kicking and there's no can, just a base that kids race to touch.

We played a quick game of basketball while momma was inside. Then we all played freeze tag and got super winded. Red rover, only because the kids wanted to... and it doesn't work with 5 people, no matter how you slice it. Red light, green light... too easy to bend the rules. Simon Says... It was a great time except when Lily was Simon. "Simon says, look over there!" "Simon says, look up there!" Simon says, look down here!" "Simon says, look over here!" Simon never 'didn't' say, and we were constantly looking at stuff. We played dodgeball, and I still suck at it. Then we played an awesome game of kickball, that lasted until the sun went down. Caleb and I won over mom & Josh, by a mere 2 points in a 21-point game.

2010 Suffolk Chili Fest

Sunday, April 11, 2010

IT IS NOT a Texas chili cookoff, but we're proud of it. Originally, we were supposed to be helping our friends (and three time first-place winners) Casey and Sharon with this year's event, but they had to back out of the competition at the last minute.

Suffolk put on a pretty decent "family friendly"

chili fest that was officially sanctioned by the International Chili Society. Cold beer was flowing to the sounds of the live band "More Cow Bell." The weather was gorgeous, and the turnout was good. By family friendly, I mean that (surprisingly)



none of the chilis were HOT! My kids were sampling them as well. Here is how we voted:

Tent # 1 -- Couldn't find it. Either they forfeited or they hadn't set up yet.

Tent # 2 -- Team "Good to the Bone." Great chili. Classic flavor, easy to eat, good use of spices, friendly atmosphere.

Tent # 3 -- Team "Tidewater Prosthetic Center." Meaty but watered down. Needed some salt.

Tent # 4 -- This was the judge's tent, cleverly disguised as a competitor's tent.

Tent # 5 -- Got lei'd at # 5, "Tiki Wiki Chili." On one hand, I wanted to give them a 'B' for effort, but "the chili won't be ready until 2." Never tried it.

Tent # 6 -- "Green Jacket Green Chili." Southwest style. Big sign said "HOT! HOT! HOT!" Chili Elvis sitting on the table. Chili was good; a little front heat, easily distinguished (but not unproportionate) lime and cilantro, white corn. Mild, mild, mild-but not disappointing.

Tent # 7 -- "Pender & Coward." This was a very loud, busy, active booth, and they had all their ingredients displayed up-front (among which was my favorite beer, Yeungling). Like the previous tent, these guys put out a Southwest-style chili with corn and black beans, but the chili was a bit too sweet for my liking. Every time someone would say the words "Number Seven," the tentmaster guy would slap the big number hanging from the ceiling and repeat, "Numbeeeeeer SEVEN!!!" If the chili had been better, I would have predicted them as the winners for a 'whole package' experience.

Tent # 8 -- No name. No signs. No hype, frills, or fluff. Just a Plain Jane tent with a few workers and some chili. Not too spicy, not too mild, not bad. If they joined forces with tent # 7, we'd have a winner.

Tent # 9 -- "Boy Scout Troop 1" of Suffolk, VA. Chili was not bad, but also was not unlike Hormel chili or something from a can. A bit of finesse by way of added color or texture would go a long way. This tent got the vote of each of our boys (Josh and Caleb).

Tent # 10 -- "Edward Jones Investments." Would you like a little chili with your Budweiser? Heavy beer flavor, a little tangy. Wrong flavors for chili (for me).

Tent # 11 -- Good service, a small dallop of sour cream and some shredded cheese earned Petra's vote. I call it a tie between Tent # 2 and Tent # 11 for good chili flavor and texture.

Tent # 12 -- "Bada Bloom!" This was the Bennett's Creek Nursery tent. Chili was hard on the cumin. Petra points out that it was so overpowering, that the cumin is all you can taste.

Tent # 13 -- The old adage rings true: The way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Super-sized portions and big chip scoops made this my #1 choice for top chili of the year. Petra wasn't thrilled about the smoked bacon hints, but something about the bold flavor roused my inner lumberjack.

Tent # 14 -- Not ready. "Come back at 2." Not to be unfair, but once again, a chili competition is about the whole package. Service, presentation, and heck, who doesn't like a little swag? Chances are, half the voters will be satiated by the time your chili's ready.

Tent # 15 -- Not ready,

Tent # 16 -- Non-existent. Must've blown away, or got carried off by the hordes of sand fleas that started coming out of nowhere.

Tent # 17 -- "Heat Wave." Ran out of cups. We'll come back. On the second trip, we tasted slight cumin, bold flavor, a not-bad chili. Not fantastic either.

Tent # 18 -- Close, but no cigar. A good, plain chili in a good, plain tent.

The Beer Tent -- Phenomenal. Don't drink the Pale Ale.

All said and done, we had a good time. Tickets to the Chili Fest were \$10 per person, and the Girl Scouts had bouncy toys set up for the kids. It was a 7 out of a possible 10 for fun local events in Hampton Roads.

*As of today (Monday, April 12, 2010), the results of the competition have not been posted online.

Matty's Italian Sausage over Garlic Bread

Monday, April 12, 2010

**Before pressing "Play," please scroll down to the bottom of the page and pause the soundtrack / playlist.*

(link to YouTube video: "Matty's Italian Sausage over Garlic Bread")

Geocache Discovery!



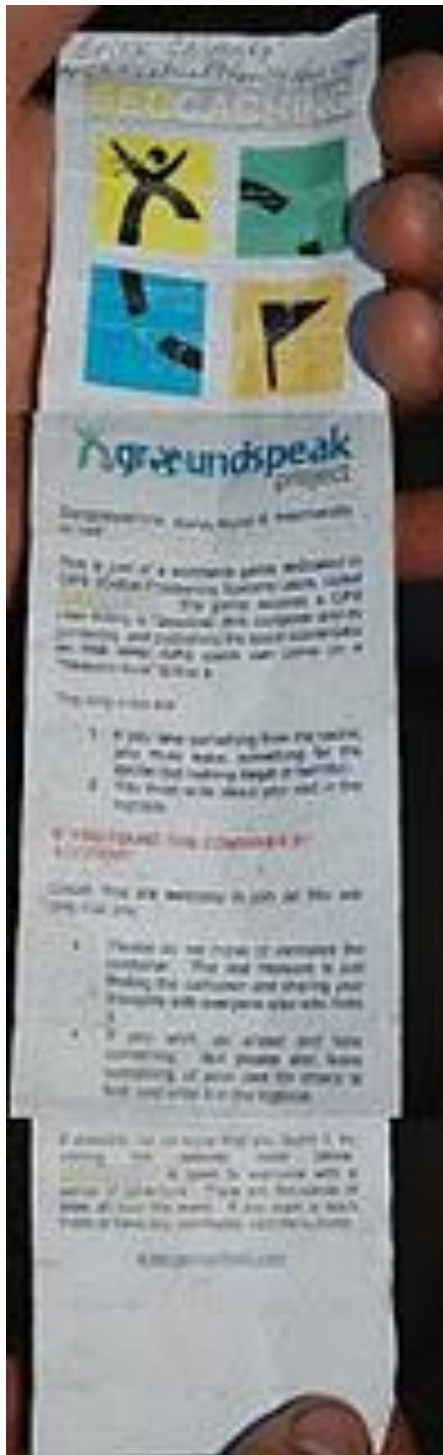
What's a Geocache?! We didn't have a clue... until we found one on Sunday evening.





Sarah D. from church told us about the newly finished Windsor Castle Trail in Smithfield (Virginia). It's a 20 minute drive from our house. Beautiful trail... I'll write about it later this week, or when I have time to blog next. Along our route, we stepped off the trail and into the woods toward a freestanding brick chimney. I, a collector of bricks from interesting places to comprise a fireplace sometime in the future, was searching for a suitable brick to take home. I picked up a few, inspecting them thoroughly for elements of character. Had I not been so wierd, I might not have

discovered this... a "geocache." It was hidden inside of a real brick that had been chiseled out. Check out the photos. How cool is that?



We scribbled "The Speights Family" on the bottom of the paper with a crayon (it's all we could find in the baby bag, go figure), then looked around for something cool to put inside of it. Found nothing. Sealed it up and placed it inconspicuously back in the chimney, between two other bricks. It doesn't take much to make your day sometimes.

The Wisdom of Petra: "Stupid Laws"

Wednesday, April 14, 2010

Wise beyond her years, my wife often (unknowingly) reminds me why she is my better half. She has some great ideas. Here's one of them.

How many of us have wished there were laws against stupidity? All joking aside, Petra would propose that a 'stupidity' clause be incorporated into the U.S. Code. What this clause would hold, is that once any of a number of parameters have been met, a criminal--or, rather, someone accused of a crime--passes beyond the threshold of ignorance and is held to the fair and reasonable expectation of common sense. This clause would also extend to plaintiffs. In layman's terms, if an individual is smart enough to pass a driving exam, that individual is automatically deemed smart enough to know that coffee from McDonald's is usually served very hot, and under the stupidity clause would not be allowed to file a suit against McDonald's (an over-used example, I know). Other parameters could be education-based... When someone graduates high school or earns a GED, they are considered to have a reasonable amount of common sense. There are many other ways to determine common sense. Bottom line is, we need to define thresholds to clearly delineate between sensibility and stupidity... and enforce them in U.S. courtrooms.

Petra, you're a genius.

The Wisdom of Petra: Good Cops, Bad Cops

Friday, April 16, 2010

Here's another one of my wife's great ideas. It makes too much sense.

There is a duality that exists among the police officers in this country. On one hand, they are the protectors of the American citizen; defenders against armed burglars, keepers of the peace, etc. On the other hand, they are the enemy of any driver who is in a hurry, sneakily lying in wait to ambush those whose right tail light is burned out--and often quick to deliver a ticket.

In recent years, I've become increasingly upset at the priorities given to police operations, from a citizen's standpoint. I usually stop to help people who are broken down on the side of the road. A recurring complaint is "Yeah, we've had two cops drive right by us and not even have the courtesy to see if we were okay." In some cases, an overheated vehicle may be occupied by very small children and a frustrated mother with no one to contact. My gripe is that for every cop that passes by without helping, there are two in the bushes with radar detectors. The result? My kids would never consider becoming cops for fear that I would disown them.

The solution? Petra would propose that two separate entities tackle 'public defense' and 'traffic enforcement.' For traffic enforcement, establish a national group that is checked and balanced between the NHTSA, State Departments of Transportation & Divisions of Motor Vehicles. Let them hide behind bushes and hand out tickets. Then the police can be the undisputed good guys.

Nerds Have All the Fun

Finally, the outdoors has made its first significant attempt at re-claiming "FUN" from its competitive arch enemy, the indoors. Video games and movies, "Slide over, baby!"

Messages in bottles, time capsules, Easter eggs, treasure hunts, and military land nav exercises are all related to the modern game of geocaching. While my family is new to the game, it seems to have been around for several years. Today, we're off on our first pre-planned hunt for hidden treasures, and we might hide a few rogue capsules ourselves. Visit <http://www.geocaching.com/> to get started looking for caches in your area. Have fun and happy hunting!

It's Just Wood

Sunday, April 18, 2010

...But it's wood with Gusto. This piece of Balsa was purchased at the Kon-Tiki Museum (Oslo, Norway) in the 1980's, where I visited as a kid. It was glued to a "Certificate of Authenticity" that has been detached and presumably destroyed over the years. It's actually a piece of the Kon-Tiki, which was eventually replaced piece-by-piece as sections deteriorated.



The Kon-Tiki is a raft that was navigated across the Pacific in 1947 by a Norwegian explorer named Thor Heyerdahl, who wanted to prove that the Polynesian Islands could have originally been inhabited by early South Americans. He made his raft with the same wood that was indigenous to Peru, which would have been most readily available to such people.

It took 101 days for Heyerdahl to travel more than 4200 miles between mainland South America and French Polynesia. Heyerdahl documented his journey and later authored a book of the same title, which became a bestseller in the United States and was a common 'required reader' in U.S. high schools in the 1960's and 70's.

MJ's Top 100 East Coast Digs & Dines, Part 1 (1-25)

From North to South, here's my first installment (1 through 25) of my Top 100 East Coast Digs & Dines. They are not listed in favored order. There are a few more whose names escape me...

Brunswick, ME

Fat Boy! It's a local TRUE drive in chain with great burgers. Cult-like following. Must do.

New York, NY

Pigalle – It's casual upscale French dining, walking distance from Times Square. Seasonal dishes. Lowlighting, appealing décor, and a well-designed bar make for a very chill experience.

Half Moon Cruise – The Official New York Booze Cruise. Best place in NYC to watch a girl puke in the Hudson.

Hogs & Heifers – The original Coyote Ugly bar. Favored hangout of Fleet Week Marines & Sailors.

DPHH – Deaf Professional Happy Hour – It's not a place, it's an experience. Try Europa Bar.

Coney Island Arcade – Just visit Coney Island Boardwalk. Whether you go to the arcade or not is on you.

TGIFriday's – Hey, it's all over the place, right? But nothing beats the busy

atmosphere of Friday's in Times Square!

China Club – P. Diddy's exclusive club. Some nights it's hot, some nights it's cold.

Son Cubano – Low-key Cuban cuisine in the meat-packing district. Excellent service.

Keltic Lounge – One of the better Irish drinking establishments in the Big Apple, if there is such a thing as a bad one.

Verona, NJ

Oneil's Irish Pub – We hung out here one night with the Gaffney crew. It's a great after-hours hangout in Hometown, USA

Harrisburg, PA

Spice Restaurant – Classic casual landlubber cuisine with a generous splash of sea fare.

Hershey Chocolate Factory – Take the free tour, bulk up on discount chocolate! Snack your way to the next eatery... but don't spoil your dinner!

Washington, DC (& Metro Area; VA/MD)

MiMi's American Bistro – Fine dining in an artsy locale, just 2 blocks from 'curious' Dupont Circle. Home of the singing servers! Great eats. Recent rumor that it has shut down or will be shutting down soon!

Every Hot Dog Stand, Imbiss, and Roach Coach in DC – This is the DC experience! So much to do, so little time to sit in a restaurant and eat! Hot dogs all day at the Mall, Happy Hour from 6-8 @ Embassy Suites!

Kabob Palace – Really, really good take-out. It's like a busy mosque, that smells of delicious curry.

Crystal City Underground – Eat, drink, and then shoot to one of the 7 major malls to shop till you drop (Petra prefers Pentagon City Mall).

Sine Irish Pub & Restaurant – Located in Arlington on Pentagon Row, this place is no stranger to great times and high traffic. Authentic imported beers and foods. The Pentagon City Plaza also offers a number of great ethnic food experiences.

Joe Theismann's – An upscale casual diner with room for a large crowd... nice bar with a sports flair. Great service, great atmosphere. Actually located in Alexandria, I believe.

National Aquarium – Baltimore, MD. Take the kids to the aquarium, then have your choice of great chain restaurants afterwards, and a few nice local hangouts as well. PF Chang's, California Pizza Kitchen, Hard Rock, Cheesecake Factory, e.g. All centrally located.

BD's Mongolian Barbeque – Bethesda, MD. Create your own stir-fry (like any Mongol BBQ), enjoy a Jones natural soda, and then take your girl down the street to Tiffany's!

Hampton Roads, Virginia

Spirit of Norfolk – A nice dinner cruise along the Chesapeake Bay

Alexander's on the Bay – “Casual fine dining on the Chesapeake Bay.” Beautiful view of the Bay Bridge at night. Traditional East coast sea fare. Try the Lobster Napoli.

Norfolk Waterside – Joe's Crab Shack, Jillian's, Have a Nice Day Café, Hooters, Outback... all in one giant food court-like building located smack dab in the middle of Port Norfolk. This is 'special event' central in downtown Norfolk.

Granby Street Norfolk – O'Malley's Irish Pub, Jack Quinn's Irish Pub, Havana's, Kelly's Backstage Tavern / the Norva, Guadalajara City Café / Ooka Sushi, Granby Theater / Premier, Scottie Quixx, HK, some nice side alley dives, MacArthur Center Mall, Nauticus... all on two parallel strips, walking distance from Waterside. Lots to do here.

MJ's Top 100 East Coast Digs & Dines, Part 2 (26-50)

Installment # 2 (26 through 50) of my Top 100 East Coast Digs & Dines...

Hampton Roads, VA (...Continued)

Rita's Ice Custard Happiness – Need I say more? Look for one near you. Have a mango ice, or pick another fresh flavor of the day. If no Ritas in sight, substitute with a Route 44 Fresh Strawberry Slush from Sonic's. Half-price Happy Hour from 2-4, baby! YEAH!

Freemason Abbey Restaurant – A unique dining experience inside of an 1873 stone church with a squared bell tower; walking distance from Granby.

Doumar's Cones & Barbecue – An original drive-in café with a lot of history (curb beer in the late 30's, 'the creamiest' ice cream, great barbecue); cheap eats and trays that hang on your car door; waffle cones hand-made before your eyes. A great experience, located across from the old Norfolk Coca-Cola bottling plant.

Smithfield Station – Luxury accommodations & a candlelit dining experience on the Pagan River, overlooking a marina with a beautiful scenic backdrop. The area is somewhat off-the-map, making for a relaxing, romantic experience. Recently, a beautiful 5-mile walking trail was built that intersects Smithfield Station.

La Familia – It's a simple Mexican restaurant in the Deep Creek area of Chesapeake, located directly on the Dismal Swamp Canal. The La Familia Special is an amazing beef and chicken dish that is well-complemented by a Negro Modelo.

Virginia Beach Oceanfront – The sky's the limit; you've got a plethora of dines & dives along the Boardwalk on the Atlantic Avenue side, and several on the next street over (Pacific) as well. Some of our favorites include Catch 31 (great for dining or drinks), The Jewish Mother (aka "JewMom"—try the Reubens), the Pancake House, Jody's Gourmet Popcorn, Mahi-Mah's, and Rudee's raw bar.

Colley Ave. / Ghent District Norfolk – Fair Grounds Coffee Bar, Naro Cinema, No Frill Bar & Grill, Bangkok Garden Thai Restaurant, Boot, Press 626 Café & Wine Bar... this is an artsy area in the [Old Dominion University] college-age granola-eaters district. It's a low-key hipster scene, and a favored hangout spot for my wife & I on the increasingly-elusive 'date night.'

Virginia Beach Town Center—Another favored area for date night, it is the area hub for all high-end chain restaurants; of which, we've frequented Ruth's Chris, PF Chang's, Cheesecake Factory, and Gordon Biersch.

Malbon Brothers Barbecue – When it comes to pork, trust these guys—especially if you're catering. They'll put those pigs right where you want 'em, marinated and pulled in their own house sauce.

Firehouse Subs – Yes, it's a simple chain of sub restaurants. But the chain was started by firemen, who are mysteriously linked to good food... also, the chain does good—donating to local fire departments. Our first Firehouse Subs discovery was in Raleigh-Durham, NC, in 2002. We've been fans ever since. Although the all-time best Italian sub (and chili) belongs to Super Subby's of Dayton, Ohio, Firehouse takes a close second with their Fully-Involved Italian, and deserves an Honorable Mention for their Beef & Cheddar Brisket sub as well.

Jimmy John's – "Freaky Fast" subs. They deliver. Yeah, another restaurant chain. If you haven't been yet, and you want some great cold-cut combo subs on really soft bread, fast fast fast, duck in and you won't be disappointed. The fresh, in-your-face wall signs and shirt themes add a zesty and refreshing sass to the atmosphere, without the jerkoff waiters like those at Dick's Last Resort.

Olde Towne Portsmouth – Just a water-taxi ride away from the Norfolk Waterfront, this area has a number of dining attractions, including the eat-in theater The Commodore, the authentic German cuisine Bier Garden, and one of our special quiet corner restaurants, Brutti's.

Cogan's Pizza – We absolutely love this place. The original is in Portsmouth, the one we usually eat at is in Suffolk at Harbor View, and there is supposedly a new one in the Ghent area of Norfolk. Grab a Caprese appetizer, a Pizza Margherita, and peel a few beers off their extensive beer list (hurry, it is sadly waning due to the apparent lack of beer aficionados in the area).

Feather-N-Fin – Chicken & Seafood... A late-night soul food dive in Suffolk; on occasion, they serve some great pork chop sandwiches!

Tony's Famous Diner – Truckers familiar with SE Virginia may be fans of Tony's. Located at the intersection of VA-460 and 58 in Suffolk, this 24-hour diner at one of the area's only large truck stops offers authentic Greek Gyros as well as great burgers and fries.

Zino's - Home of the Deep Creek Hornets. Great food, great proprietor, great atmosphere. Take me and my baseball team there any time.

Kelly's Tavern – There are a few of these in Hampton Roads. The one in downtown Norfolk is my favorite present spot to play pool; it's partially underground so you can watch street passers-by on Granby. It bumps up to the Norva, one of the hippest joints to bring great musicians to the area. The Kelly's in Suffolk supplies free beer all night, each November 10th, to Marines, for a big Marine Birthday shebash.

Williamsburg, VA

In the heart of colonial America, you'll find an array of fine establishments with historical ties, in which to wine and dine. I have one solid favorite.

New York Deli (& Pizza Restaurant) – If "BUSY" is or has been any indication of a popular hangout, New York Deli takes the cake. It's loud, it's fast, and the servings are huge and sloppy good. Plenty of TV's hanging up for entertainment... or you can just watch the bustling business luncher scene.

Das Festhaus – Busch Gardens... I don't particularly want to list the feeding facilities inside of overpriced theme parks, but there are a few on the list. The Festhaus is

cool because it is built just like a German Oktoberfesthaus. In a real festhaus, you may be fortunate to have whips cracking above your head to the beat of Polka music. In the Busch Gardens version, you may be dragged onto stage by a bunch of blondes in dirndls who flirt around with you, effectively ruining the rest of your day with your significant other.

Moyock, NC

Border Station – There is a Sunoco gas station on the border of Virginia and North Carolina, known to the locals as simply “Border Station.” Besides having a decent tobacco shop, this place has one of the absolute best Southern-style BBQ sandwiches around. Make sure to add slaw and Texas Pete!

Outer Banks, NC

We only stopped at one joint to eat on a Sunday drive. We'll be exploring and reporting on the area further in the forthcoming months.

Mulligan's – Excellent surf & turf. Great atmosphere.

New Bern, NC

Home of Pepsi-Cola, world-famous Hatteras Yachts, and Notebook author / romance writer Nicholas Sparks, New Bern makes for a fantastic experience in dining and relaxation.

Maola Milk Factory – Producer of the world's all-time, absolute best chocolate milk. Buy it at any gas station or breakfast restaurant within 150 miles of New Bern. You won't be disappointed... unless, of course, the milk's expired.

Ziggy's Café – Located in Havelock, it's a low-key hangout worth visiting.

Swiss Chalet – An authentic Swiss bakery, with fresh daily baked goods, pastries, and imported foods and sweets from Germany, Austria, & Switzerland.

Andy's – Famous cheesesteaks & shakes. An area staple. When in New Bern, eat at Andy's. Period.

MJ's Top 100 East Coast Digs & Dines, Part 3 (51-75)

The 3rd Installment (51-75) of my Top East Coast Digs & Dines...

Coastal North Carolina (Morehead City / Atlantic Beach through Wilmington / Cape Fear)

Raps Grill & Bar – “Cheers” type of atmosphere. Located under the green awning on Arrendal Street in Morehead City. Seasonally, the Morehead City Seafood Fest is just a five minute walk away.

Bojangles – This is a classic Southeast chain, specializing in chicken & biscuits. I am not particularly fond of their chicken, but the biscuits are great and the gallon jugs of extra sweet tea are done right if you appreciate good Southern sweet tea.

The Atlantic Beach Fishing Pier – It’s an active fishing pier with a meager burger and fries joint at the base; but you can admire a wall of ‘monstrous catch’ photos, or walk the pier and see firsthand catches of sharks, Spanish mackerel, bluefish, and flounder. Better yet, swallow that last bite of hot dog, grab a Coke, and go catch something yourself.

Beaufort Grocery Co. – Beaufort (pronounced ‘Bo-fort,’ as opposed to South Carolina’s, Pronounced ‘Beewfort’), is a small coastal town with some artsy flair. This restaurant is one of its finest. Make an advanced reservation for brunch or dinner.

The Flying Bridge – Swansboro, NC – Casual seafood, low-key setting, nestled in fisherman territory on the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway. Short drive from downtown

Swansboro, where Lazy Lyon’s Antiques and local artisan storefronts immerse you in the simple magic of the central Atlantic coast. Grab some ice cream on the water.

White Oak River Bistro – Swansboro, NC – upscale casual surf & turf

The Fisherman’s Wharf – Jacksonville, NC – Great frog legs, great local seafood

The Orleans House – (The “O-House”) A great local bar favored by Marines in Jacksonville, NC (home of Camp Lejeune). Loud music, good atmosphere, pool tables, small building, packed house. “Rally at the O!” New location in Jacksonville—haven’t been there but seems to be just as hyped up.

Shogun’s Hibachi Grill & Sushi Bar – In Jacksonville, NC, there are a ton of steak houses and seafood joints, amply intermingled between strip clubs, tattoo parlors, and pawn shops. Shogun’s is on the cleaner, civilian-friendly backside of town, and has a fantastic selection of sushi at their bar... or you can grab a table and watch expert flame-throwing Hibachi chefs prep your meal.

O'Charley's – Another chain restaurant that makes the list, but only in this location. Here, kids would eat free for years. Every kid under ten, every day, all day. It has since changed to reflect the policies of other O'Charley's, but the menu, service, and fast, friendly attitude remained.

Prima – A spiffy restaurant in downtown Wilmington. Petra once ordered the best scallops there we've ever had—large, tender, simmered in a peppercorn sauce; Amazing!

Caprice Bistro – “Our spot.” Elegant French cuisine in a moderate atmosphere. Wilmington is a beautiful water town with a number of great dives and dines, but Caprice was always our favorite. Located just off the waterfront, near U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Diligence.

Elijah's – Casual American dining & oyster bar on the Cape Fear River.

Sunset Café & Rooftop Patio – A fun, unique, low-key hangout for food & drinks. Wilmington.

Rossi's – Excellent casual Italian in the manner of Olive Garden & Carrabba's. Wilmington.

Mollie's – Casual dining in Surf City, NC. While in the area, check out some great pizza joints, restaurants, and bars with pirate / Blackbeard motifs.

Myrtle Beach, SC (including North Myrtle Beach)

Mad Boar Brewhouse – North MB, Barefoot Landing area. Excellent food and atmosphere, great medium-heavy brews

Rally's or Checker's – Somewhere around this area, the Rally's drive-in chains of the North turn into the Checker's drive-in chains of the South. Either way, their burgers are really good; I don't think I've ever ordered one that wasn't piping hot and packed with fresh, crispy lettuce and sliced tomato.

House of Blues – Themed restaurant with live music. Good beer. Pricy for the quality of food, but a potentially great experience depending on the musical lineup. Barefoot Landing.

Wild Wing Café – Great selection of wings and beer accoutrements. Barefoot Landing.

Medieval Times – A cool themed dinner show, good for the show once, don't go twice—the food's not worth it.

Key West Grill – Located at Celebrity Circle, Broadway at the Beach. This area is crammed with themed restaurants. This one has (or had, years ago) a huge, ornery Blue & Gold Macaw that talks up a storm, hanging out on a branch when you walk into the place.

Margaritaville – Good food, very chill atmosphere to go with the light fare. A tribute to the song and to Buffett. Broadway at the Beach.

Broadway Louie's, Fat Tuesday, Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream – All three are also located at Broadway at the Beach, and were usual drop-ins during a weeklong vacation (our hotel was right there).

Planet Hollywood – A cool experience, though somewhat over-marketed. Food is surprisingly good and my wife and I both liked it there.

Charleston, SC

Pitt Street Pharmacy – Mt. Pleasant. Nothing's changed since the 30's in this old-fashioned soda jerk. Worth the visit! Famous local black history author hangs out there.

MJ's Top 100 East Coast Digs & Dines, Part 4 (76-100)

Here's the final installment (76 through 100) of my Top 100 East Coast Digs & Dines...

Charleston, SC (...Continued)

Village Bakery Café – Also on Pitt Street in Mt. Pleasant. There's something very alluring about this slow, old-fashioned street and their storefront that kept us hanging around. The café looks and feels like old country Europe.

Sticky Fingers Ribhouse – Wow, fall-off-the-bones ribs with a secret recipe sauce! Great ribs!

Historic Charleston City Market – This open-air city marketplace is the largest of its kind on the East coast. Food vendors are intermingled through a cornucopia of local artisans and specialty vendors. Hustle, bustle, and diversity at its very finest.

Atlanta, GA

Buckhead Saloon – A (once) hugely popular hangout for college studs and military types on libo.

Fado Irish Pub – Buckhead. Packed. Big hangout.

Elbow Room Bar – Buckhead. Unofficial overflow bar for Fado.

Savannah, GA

The Pirates' House – A very enjoyable dining experience in a historically-appropriate location. I recommend starting with the she-crab soup.

Orlando, FL

Victoria & Albert's – Central Florida's only AAA Five-Diamond restaurant. Live harpist. Menus are delivered verbally, meal is 7-course, service is exceptional, food is phenomenal. To this day, this is both my wife's and my top choice for a favorite fine dining experience. Located at Disney's Grand Floridian Resort & Spa.

Citricco's – Disney's Grand Floridian, fine dining (dinner only), otherwise upscale casual.

Confisco Grille – Located at Universal-Islands of Adventure's Port of Entry, this low-cost cafeteria setting is great for ducking in and out with the kids. Cold A/C! While you're at Islands of Adventure, you might want to check out Mythos, voted 6 years in a row as the #1 Theme Park Restaurant by Theme Parks Magazine! We didn't eat there.

Croissant Moon Bakery – Right next door to Confisco, this place offers an array of delicious baked sweets & snackables, including a ginormous Rice Krispies brick for daddy.

Richter's Burger Company – Great burgers! It will cost you \$80 to feed a hungry family of four, though. This Universal Studios restaurant in Orlando is set up nicely, but it's always packed. The burgers, like I said, are really good.

Epcot Center – If you haven't been, or if you haven't been in a long time, keep in mind that it has several international-themed restaurants, in a setting that only Disney can provide. I have eaten at two of them, Restaurant Marrakesh and Nine Dragons Restaurant. At the former, we watched an authentic belly dancer and also enjoyed Moroccan-style musical performers over some tasty curry-toned dishes. The latter requires a hefty climb up a series of steep steps; the restaurant itself is an impressive structure with many Asian architectural frills. Entertainment included fan

dancers and glass blowers. Food was almost PF Changs in style. Each experience was both pleasurable and memorable.

Copper Canyon Grill – Formerly Red Rock Canyon Grill, located on International Avenue, in the vicinity of Tommy Bahama’s (dinner only) and The Grape. Great food, excellent service. Not very busy around lunchtime.

IHOP??? – Yes, but not in Orlando. The International House of Pancakes at Clearwater Beach makes my list for being the only fish in its pond. You see, at 3AM, if you’re hungry and wandering the beach at Clearwater, you’ll thank God for IHOP.

Sapporo Japanese Steak House – Another establishment not in Orlando (rather Daytona Beach), this is a decent Hibachi with some exceptional talent behind the grill. Nice bar. Not too pricy.

Giovanni’s NY Pizza – Winterhaven. Home of the “BIG MAMA” 30-incher. Comes in a 36” box. Hope your front door is wide! Whatever you do, if you’re only trying to feed 5 or 6 small kids, don’t order two Big Mama’s. Made that mistake.

Universal’s CityWalk versus Downtown Disney – You decide. I’ve been to Downtown Disney at Disneyland on the West coast, and to CityWalk on the East coast, and it’s a tough toss-up. Both are adult-themed areas with hip/pop/chic shopping venues by day, and hip-hop chick clubs, bars, and restaurants by night. I believe that in this case, I’ll swing for CityWalk... because it’s got Emeril. On that note, dress your best for Emeril’s, or you won’t fit in (that’s what kept us out during our trip with the kids—we failed to bring spiffy clothes).

Key West, Florida

Hard Rock Café – It’s almost a toss-up for me. As far as East Coast Hard Rocks go, Orlando’s (vicinity of Universal Studios CityWalk) is tough to beat. I am, however, partial to a more laid-back atmosphere, and HR Key West is designed to accommodate in that area.

Sloppy Joe’s – Like most decent hangouts in Key West, Sloppy Joe’s is located on Duval Street, home of the infamous “Duval Crawl.” What makes Sloppy Joe’s so great is that it is very military-friendly, and is a common hangout for aircrew types. In the evening, the tables slide over to reveal a meager but packed dance floor.

U.S. Army Special Forces Dive Center – THIS IS THE ONLY exclusive ‘restaurant’ that made the list. If you are in the U.S. military, and you find yourself in Key West, it is worth the trip to this chow hall, where almost any type of food you can imagine is made to order by a rumored GS-15 Chef. Try me—see if it’s not the best food that ever came out of the military.

Hog's Breath Saloon – This is a cool bar with a cult-like following. Great place to hang out.

Florida Panhandle

Club La Vela – Panama City Beach – Petra and I were extras for an MTV filming of The Grind @ the Beach, Spring Break 2007. It is one of the most infamous clubs in Spring Breakdom. I don't remember if they had food, but the drinks were a-plenty.

Trader Jon's – Pensacola – Popular bar for Navy / Marine Corps aviators and other aircrew types. Until "hazing" was 'abolished' in the military, this was a popular before / after spot for a wings-pinning ceremony wetdown.

FloridaBama – A conglomerate of very cool nightclubs on the Florida / Alabama border, all under one cover charge. Reggae, hip-hop, country, dueling pianos... worth the visit.

The Road to San Francisco

Friday, April 23, 2010



We made it. Petra and I just rolled in last night, by way of Chicago O'Hare. We started out by kissing the kids goodbye (they're with grandma and grandpa), and driving to the Planters Peanut store in Suffolk to buy a few trinkets. We're planning on making a few cache drops out here while we're gallavantin.'

Then we drove to

Richmond airport, flew to Chicago, and since we didn't have the time for me to take Petra to Harry Caray's for a bite, we grabbed some tremendous airport food (an oxymoron, I'm aware) at Wolfgang Puck's. Wow. We flew into SF last night, picked



up our rental car, and drove to the Comfort Inn in San Mateo. We're not splurging this trip, so we opted for Choice Hotels and a compact car. My only complaint is that my knuckles set off the windshield wiper every time I steer to the right! Here are a couple pictures from the start of our trip, both at the Planter's store and on the drive to Richmond...



Pushing Through Imaginary Walls

Monday, April 26, 2010



Dum Spiro Spero... (While I breathe, I hope). This motivational statement was printed in large, bold typeset on one of the 26 new imaginative, artistic, well-designed mile markers that were instantly famous this year. Marveling in the beautiful vistas of the North-Central California coast, I clung to this statement as a mantra of sorts, and transcended the discomfort of my untrained legs.

The Big Sur International Marathon was recently described to me as "A deeply spiritual experience even for an atheist." The man who told me that wasn't far off. Photos or words cannot do justice to the region or the race.



I've been wanting to run Big Sur since I was 16. The stars finally aligned fifteen years later, and I accomplished the feat yesterday--on the race's 25th Anniversary. It was a race fueled by emotion and self-discipline; quick bursts of water and live

music were each abruptly followed by 2.5 miles of Haynes Point desolation and unbelievably long, unforgivingly steep hills throughout the course (at least three hills each exceeding 2 miles, and one exceeding 3 miles... lots of smaller hills in-between. Aside from at the amply-dispersed oases of hope (water stations), there were no spectators to offer motivation.



My approach to marathon running (or racing in general) is irregular, if not downright eccentric. I don't typically train... the luxury of time is culprit. Also, my eating habits do not change for any race. Saturday night, while my fellow competitors were getting massages, stretching, packing fluids and carbo loading (gouging themselves on pasta), I was finishing off a fatburger and a quarter-pound block of fudge on Cannery Row, staying out late with my wife--par for the evening course on our child-free date weekend in the SF Bay / Monterey areas.

Because Big Sur is the third toughest traditional marathon course in the world, I actually wanted to eat right and train hard. I came into this race weighing 218 lbs...which for me is not a bad weight (a far cry from 238, where I was earlier this year)--but 218 is still not conducive to distance running. More effort and control is required to keep my steps softer, in a short-term aim to avoid long-term joint damage. My current weight, coupled with a schedule over the preceding months that has deterred any training, left me wondering how I would fare in the race. Big Sur, also the third most popular U.S. marathon as of this year (New York, Boston), is typically won at a 20- to 30-minute lapse time over other marathon times. For example, the average male winner of a marathon these days, runs it in 2:10 to 2:15.

Big Sur win times have generally been in the high 2:30's for male racers over the years. Using this info as an pre-indicator of course toughness, I added :30 to my finishing expectations (my average race is four hours, so 4:30). However, for the first time since I can remember, the course was psyching me out with intimidation, and the thought that I might not finish inside the 6:00 limit was heavily looming.

I rarely look at the route or elevation map prior to a race, so I had no clue what to expect. I pulled my right calf while walking with Petra two days prior, and the calf muscle was threatening at the Start line. The long bus ride (personal vehicle drop-offs are not allowed, because CA Route 1 is completely shut down for 26.2 miles) got me to the start line only 30 minutes before the gun, so I had little time to stretch. 3:15 wake up gave me three hours of sleep before the race. Things were looking badly. Then I broke my dip rule for tradition's sake (running with a dip), bumming a pinch off one of the Marine volunteers who was attending Defense Language Institute. I chatted it up with them and my spirits were boosted. I took it easy on the calf, who over the course of the race was joined by my right hip flexor and both quads.

Marathoners often talk about hitting a "wall." Just as fear is a reaction to something that hasn't happened, a runner's wall is a mental block. In order to avoid hitting it, you must simply make the conclusion that there is no wall. There is pain, there are unforeseen challenges, and there is one bad individual who is determined to persevere and succeed. That's how you've got to think.

I came in with a time of 4:36... I didn't set any land speed records, but I never stopped to stretch, never stopped to relieve myself, and I never walked. That felt really, really good. Didn't pull any muscles, either. Out of 5,000+ competitors, I finished at 1757. Check out the picture Pet took below--we love the pink guy to my left (yellow bib denotes 10-miler, I believe)!



Overall, the race was amazing and I feel great, in a painful sort of way. Took a dip in the freezing-but-beautiful blue Pacific at Carmel-by-the-Sea (Carmel Beach), to wash off the dried sweat and Vaseline. Took Petra for a ride down the route once Highway 1 opened back up. She couldn't believe all the hills... and the view. We both found another place on this planet to fall in love with.





Finding Refuge



Petra and I are now back from CA. I'll be sharing the photos and highlights of our trip over the next few days. For starters, we took a few little knickknacks with us representing our area, included a short introduction to our family, and dropped them off in 5 locations.

This morning, I checked my email, and was surprised to see an email from the discoverers at Bixby Bridge in Big Sur! The finders picked up our 'drop,' (a small peanut pin from the Planters store, a couple postcards and a letter), and left their own in its place. Pastor Bill and Joy Welsh have a church in Huntington Beach, called **Refuge Calvary Chapel**. From what I could glean online, it seems to be not unlike our own church, **3n1**, pastored by Matt (/Lori) Stewart from NorCal. Petra and I listened online to the whole of one of Pastor Bill's messages, entitled Self Portrait of Jesus: Life-Giver (Part 2). We chuckled at his admittedly-corny opening joke about the talking dog... because it's a joke I tell from time to time as well! Anyway, check out their website, and if you find yourself in their neck of the woods, check out their church... it looks like they've got a great mix of generation-bridging ministries, and I believe they do offer the shelter that the people of this world need right now!

Single Serving San Francisco

Tuesday, April 27, 2010

We had one single day in San Francisco. No kids, no plans, just us and the city on a free-for-all Friday. Here's how we spent it: Candlestick Park (49ers). AT&T Park / Field (Giants). Every tall or steep hill in the city (Filbert, Divisadero, John, etc.). Lombard Street. The Hyde Street Pier. Hyde Street railcar. Fisherman's Wharf. In-n-Out Burger. One-man band. The Presidio. Walked across Golden Gate Bridge. Walked back. Muir Woods. Downtown by night. Casual upscale dinner at First Crush. Had a blast. Lots of pictures in the posts immediately to follow.

The San Francisco Art Institute

It's not a museum, but hey, I could see that old steeple from miles away and had to check it out. The doors were opened to an old-time cathedral square or abbey, chocked full of artsy students and presumed professors. I stole a few shots on Petra's camera, and created this collage:



Lombard Street is One Brick Lighter... and Other Images of San Francisco



























Why Petra Won't Take Me on the Golden Gate Bridge Again

Wednesday, April 28, 2010







Golden Gate Bridge: Nine Random Photos and One Suicide Attempt

Thursday, April 29, 2010

Shortly after Petra took pictures of me hanging off the rail of the Golden Gate Bridge (last blog), we witnessed a guy who was apparently trying to jump for real. Yeah, I felt like a douchebag, to put it mildly.

We were taking a walk all the way across the bridge, snapping photos and marveling in the structure and the view. Then we saw some guys in hard hats who were holding onto another man, walking with him and talking to him. Within a few minutes, the 'Bridge Patrol' showed up. They talked to the guy and left with him. I got the story while it was all going down; one of the construction workers had to tackle this guy. I considered it pretty big news until some locals told us that two suicide attempts happen on that bridge every week... apparently it's one of the most popular suicide destinations.

Doom & gloom aside, we got to take a few nice pictures.











Walking Among Giants



"I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in." --John Muir

John Muir was an adventure-some American naturalist in the early 20th century. It was after this man, that the National Park Service named 'one of

America's best ideas,' Muir Woods. The small park packs a punch in scenic views and pristine slivers of undisturbed nature, just a 45 minute drive North/Northwest of San Fran.





The gift shop is filled with redwood products such as these skillfully crafted artisan bowls shown above. I was once invited to a 'turners' meeting, where I learned the intricate difficulties of the wood bowl craft.



Above: For this picture of Petra, she stood on the ground while I climbed to the top of a root base shared by two trees (where the trunks began). Then I handed her the camera and she took a picture of me (photo below).



"A Yellow Bird..."



Petra discovered a bunch of horsetail, which is edible if properly prepared and is very useful as a medicinal herb



There are no straight lines found in nature, except for rays of sunlight. My friend Mark taught me that. Every time he'd see rays of sunshine like this, he'd say, "Hey look, there's God!"



Petra swapping secrets with a tree



Wow, 909 AD. I love studying the rings of old tree cross sections. Trees are like botanical time capsules. You can literally determine the average annual rainfall based upon how thick the rings are, and you can note drought occurrence by very thinly spaced growth rings. Forest fires, lightning strikes, and even estimated annual temperatures can be read off of a sampling of tree sections such as the one shown above.





California poppies. Absolutely gorgeous. Petra took this picture.



This chipmunk was not the least bit scared of us. I took multiple photos of him from three feet away while he gorged himself on leaves. Note the long tail.





A Dozen Bronze Seabags...

...Are spread across the United States. Beside each of them, a solemn-faced warrior of the sea--an American sailor. In California, one of these twelve Lone Sailors overlooks the Golden Gate Bridge from its Northern shoreline.



La Nebbia Winery

On the Northeast corner of Half Moon Bay, CA, which is on the coast between Pacifica and Pescadero, there's a small roadside winery called La Nebbia. We stopped for a wine tasting and left with a couple inexpensive bottles of their El Dorado Valley Merlot they were bottling that day. While we were there, the friendly folks of the winery catered to a continuous slew of local customers, who brought in boxes full of empty wine bottles--each empty was refilled for \$4 and some change. The gentleman who worked the sampling table unloaded what was likely just a metaphorical sip from his vat of wine making knowledge. The girls working the bottling racks didn't stop moving. It was one of several enjoyable visits on our trip down the coast.















Southbound on the Cabrillo Highway

When Pet and I hit the coast, we were speechless. We stopped and took pictures all along the way. She took some good ones of me, but I didn't reciprocate the favor as well... most pictures of her didn't turn out (blurry, wind in face, e.g.).









The Fires at Carmel Beach

Friday, April 30, 2010



Whoever coined the term "Sex on the Beach," must have had Carmel in mind. Carmel-by-the-Sea is just 5 minutes South of Monterey along Highway 1 in California. Along much of Cali's coastline, beachside fires are allowed, except for in municipal areas. The exception to the exception, however, is Carmel Beach. South of 10th Street, fires are allowed. Because Carmel's coast is flanked by land on both sides, it has a 'tucked away' feeling; coupled with a cozy fire and a dying sunset over a bold-hued blue Pacific, and the mood is set with a perfect, natural, romantic ambiance.







Miscellaneous Monterey



Above: Petra gets briefed on her duties as a *Big Sur International Marathon* race volunteer

Monterey is well-known for a lot of things. Its beautiful harbor full of vibrant sea life. The Monterey Jazz Festival. The world-famous Monterey Bay Aquarium. American author John Steinbeck (*The Grapes of Wrath*) was raised here, and wrote four books that pay tribute to the area, *East of Eden*, *Cannery Row*, *Tortilla Flat*, and *Sweet Thursday*.

Just in the water off of Cannery Row's small beach strand, sea otters can be seen snacking on mollusks throughout the day. Petra and I watched an amazing spraypaint artist on YouTube a month ago... and then just saw him on Cannery Row. Monterey is home to the Defense Language Institute, one of the foremost immersion language schools in the world.

The downtown area is slow-paced and thoroughly enjoyable. Minutes away is the faster-paced Fisherman's Wharf. There is an apparent plethora of outdoor activities and an equally visible group of participants actively engaging in them 24/7. Paddle boats, frisbee, volleyball, catch. Beautiful parks and scenery. Runners, bikers, and families on walks.

Here are some of our random shots of Monterey.







Del Mar
FRENCH LAUNDRY
SINCE 1922





George's Birds

George Brandt runs a bird rescue, and brings his beauties out to Fisherman's Wharf in Monterey each Sunday afternoon on a display cart. Accepting only donations, he lets pretty much anybody and everybody hold and pet the friendly and colorful macaws, African greys, and cockatoos... especially small children! If the parents decline because they don't think their child will behave, he assures them that he will retain complete control of the situation... and he lets the small child and the bird share space in the most expert manner. He draws a decent sized crowd and he helps encourage even the timid to hold and pet the birds. I see George as one of the world's good guys.









1 comments:

Anonymous said...

George & his birds are all pretty fantastic... Thanks for the post!

August 16, 2011 5:38 AM

A Couple Good Men



Petra was fulfilling her race volunteer duties at the Big Sur race expo in Monterey. Not wanting to sightsee without her, I meandered over to a friendly-looking place to grab a drink. The Crown & Anchor was the first to catch my eye, probably because the anchor appealed to my nautical service side--so I walked in. First thing you do is walk down a set of stairs into a basement of sorts, and BAM! You have just landed yourself in the heart of an Irishman's bad dream. British stuff EVERYWHERE! I mean, the walls are slam-packed with shiny royal this and royal that. The place is certainly not uncool--it's exactly how I would decorate my bar if I were an uber-patriotic Brit in Her Majesty's Royal Navy--and I'm sure HM the Queen Mother would have been right proud to dine here.

I pull up a chair at the corner of the three-sided bar, grab a drink, and before you know it, I'm chatting it up with two business professionals, Horacio and Sergio, who are occupying chairs opposite me on the same corner of the bar. These gentlemen are brothers, of Mexican descent, who live in Half-Moon Bay. Like myself, they're easy conversationalists and jokesters, so we start swapping some jokes and laughing, and the next thing you know, they're telling me gut-busting stories about their cousin Jorge, who is affectionately known in the family as 'El Chivo,' or the goat. They buy my next beer. Good guys.

They're in the restaurant business, as it turns out, and they happen to own Papa Chano's Mexican Restaurant on the upscale main walking strip downtown (and another restaurant nearby, I forget the name). Impressive. Papa Chano is what they called their grandfather when they were younger, because they couldn't pronounce his full name.

My new friends hail originally from Guadalajara, the capital city of Jalisco, Mexico-- "The City of the Roses," and, as it turns out, home to the best doggone soccer team in Mexico, Club Deportivo Guadalajara, S.A. DE C.V. Ironically, this team is affectionately known to the locals as Chivas (Goats), based upon their mascot. The brothers give me some insider vacation tips about their home city, which sounds like a good place in Mexico to visit with family. And, apparently one cannot visit Guadalajara without stopping in for a beer at Cantina La Fuente. I did some checking up, and the city's got some real beauty and historical allure. It may be a few years for us (because there's a waiting list), but if life is a highway, Guadalajara sounds like a solid waypoint to me! So let it be written...



Parting Shots of Nor Cal, 2010

Monday, May 3, 2010











Chicken Saltimbocca Video

Sunday, May 9, 2010

Hi all--

Just uploaded a video to YouTube; it's the step-by-step on one of my favorite meals to make... hope you like it! Be sure to turn down the blog playlist at the bottom of this page before starting the video.

--MJ

(Link to YouTube video: "Matty's Chicken Saltimbocca and Signature Dill Dressing")

Racing Season



Well, this year's racing season is off to a good start. It began in March with the Shamrock... this year Matt & I only ran the 8k... followed shortly thereafter by VADU, or the Virginia Duathlon near Smithfield. I spent a couple weeks of run-swim-running between home and the Y, then participated in the Big Sur International Marathon three weekends ago. The weekend after that, we took part in the Columbia Muddy

Buddy in Richmond, a run-bike-mud event. Our team name: "Mud Matts." The following Saturday (last weekend) was the Sproute Sport 12-Hour adventure race, just Northwest of Richmond. We're on a three week break, then our next wave begins with the MS-150 bike ride on Virginia's Eastern Shore, along with two others joining us from Maryland and Florida. The four of us will be riding as the "Snot Rockets." It's a picture-heavy event, so I'll be sure to post a few.

A Sad, Preventable Death

Saturday, May 15, 2010

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm freakin' pissin!" This is one of the many story endings you may be familiar with if you've heard me talk about my buddy from the Corps, Crazy Eddie Dane. Besides being working counterparts, we were neighbors. As far as Petra or my boys were concerned, Uncle Ed and Uncle Travis were not just neighbors, they were family. My father-in-law would play chess with him for hours after dinner. Upon entrance into Recon, I was assigned to Ed's team as his Assistant Team Leader. Unstable at best, he would drink himself silly, then grab his gun. I'd talk him down from tracking down and killing child molesters, for less-eventful nights of shooting range control signs in the woods on base. I've always described Eddie as the guy I'd call if I ever needed someone 'taken care of,' also as the guy who kept Heineken and Xbox in business. I've been trying to re-connect with him for years.

Summer of 2002, after a big scare, I reported Ed to our commander as a possible suicide case. My concerns were brushed aside. Knee deep in preparation for an upcoming deployment, I never persisted. If ever there was a blatantly preventable death, it was Ed's. I just found out from Reade, who just found out from Mike, that Ed killed himself last summer. He was an Active Duty Marine who was being forced out of the Corps for his 2nd DUI charge. He was on meds for PTSD and depression. He had 6 combat tours under his belt. He was laid to rest in New Hampshire last year with full military honors.

I failed Eddie. We all did. I'm so sorry, brother.



"Hey Matty--" "Yeah man." "Are you familiar with the constellations?" "Yeah, man." "You see Orion's belt right there?" "Yup." "Okay, from the left star on the belt, move three fingers left. You see that little cluster of stars?" "Uh-huh." "See the dim one that's kinda flickering?" "Yeah." Okay, the bright star directly above it... that's where I'm from." --Charles Edward "Crazy Eddie" Dane

Pretty Wings



Petra at the Norfolk Botanical Gardens, 2007
Medium: Acrylic on Sharpie
18x24 Artists Paper

Leakproof Sippy Cups...

...Do not exist. Four kids deep, and one thing we've learned, that once your child is done drinking from a nipples container--whether the boob or the bottle--you're in for some leaks, drips, and outright gushes from any of the sippy cups on the market these days. It's a crappy selection out there right now, and yes, it's frustrating.

If any of you mothers get really fed up with this, I suggest you take your plea to the top two companies in this country that have a history of proven, sustained durability in drinking containers, Nalgene and Stanley. Stanley has been shelving a high-quality, well-insulated, leakproof thermos since your grandfather was old enough to drink coffee. Nalgene bottles are impact-resistant, nearly indestructible drinking containers that are found at most sports stores. They are often imitated; I'm not

talking about Coleman or Camp-Mor... get the Nalgene brand.

I don't know what the finished products would look like (insert funny concept drawings here), but I guarantee that your toddler(s) will not only have a clean drinking experience, they will be able to use their precious sippy cups again when their lives have gone full circle. If Stanley has anything to say about it, your kids will be able to pass these down as heirlooms for generations to come.

Praying Like David Prayed

Sunday, May 23, 2010

Not one single Marine in my class was listening to the Colonel who was teaching. There he was, in a saggy uniform with his hands in his pockets. To a Marine, that's inexcusably "nasty" and unprofessional. *"Now, how many of you didn't hear a word I said over the last five minutes, because you were focused on my slovenly appearance and my hands in my pockets?"* The student audience chuckled; he caught us by surprise. The class topic that ensued related to--you guessed it--"listening."

Likewise, I ask you not to shoot the messenger on the forthcoming topic, rather put on your ears and please don't misinterpret what I'm trying to say.

David was described in the Bible as 'a man after God's own heart.' As an accoutrement to his full and interesting life, David wrote 150 Psalms, thanking and praising God, giving recognition to his Creator, and pleading with the same for protection from very real threats and bottomless situations in his life. These deeply personal thoughts and outpourings are accessible to Christians through the Bible (and of course to Jews, through the Hebrew Bible), and have served as a basis for modern songs, poems, and sayings that are a conglomerate keystone of the modern church.

Lately, this has been an issue for me. I know that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for [a number of things]," but I have a problem with leaning primarily on David's life (or the life of any king, prophet, or biblical father's father) as a crutch in my own salvation walk. God is just as much the God of my life today as He was the God of David's life back then, and He is deserving of equally poignant, ORIGINAL praises, prayers, psalms if you will, from the believers of today. Just as repeating a prayer doesn't make it your own, repeating the emotion-inspired words of David does not give God the interpersonal praise and worship that He desires and deserves from yourself or myself as individuals.

In a hip-shot guess, I'd say that 80% of all chart-topping contemporary praise songs are drawn from the words of David. Well, David is not the only one with a song.

There's a very unique song in all of us. We as humans were created to praise our maker... as Pastor Matt recently preached, it's in our DNA. So without wasting any more time on the subject, I'll end with this challenge: Give thanks to your Creator. Acknowledge His existence and His impact on your life. Thank Him for what you have. Thank Him for what you do not have. And for a change, do it in your own words, tailored exactly to your own personal situation.

Anticipation and Preparation: Harvesting Fruit from Failure

In his book entitled *Heroes for my Son*, Brad Meltzer notes that the Wright Brothers brought lots of extra materials to every test flight they conducted, in anticipation of failure. When I read this, I started researching the Wright Brothers experiments. The bicycle-shop-owning duo had a fundamental belief that, like a bicycle, an unstable flying machine could be controlled with sufficient practice. They failed, and failed, and failed... using known principles of flight (gliding) and discovering a few of their own along the way. They were grown men. Never married. Nerds. "Losers." Then they got a big break in 1903, and there were witnesses. Looking out my window right now, I count five blinking airplanes overhead. Way to go, guys.

A Painting of La Nebbia Winery

Wednesday, May 26, 2010



Mother's Day Masterpiece

On Mother's Day, my mom hosted her annual mother-daughter tea party. She has the perfect house for it, with gardens and a courtyard and balconies and flowers galore. Big, gawdy hats and colorful dresses are the uniform of the day.

I was failing miserably at the one job Petra assigned me: babysitting. "Where are Lily and Destiny?" She asked me, concerned. "I haven't seen them," she continued. "Me neither," I admitted. "I'll find them." I searched all over the house, until I heard giggles coming from the secret playroom. What I saw would make any mother furious. I smile widely, tiptoe back out, and quickly fetch the camera for some priceless photos. The girls, in their big hats and dresses, had found grandma's latest painting-in-progress, and all the supplies one would need to complete it.









A Day in the Life: Family SITREP

Okay, so mama's out with the girls tonight (Sarah & Amanda's B-day shebash). Papa gets to chillax, right? Right. As she's leaving, the world simultaneously has a meltdown. Josh smashes Caleb's head when they're wrestling. "No more wrestling." That should buy me five minutes. Speaking of buying...

"Dad, can we go buy me blah blah blah toy?--I'll pay for it with my money!" Yeah, I got suckered into that one already this week. One kid's got money for a toy. They all want to go to Wal-Mart. We're gonna buy the toy, in-n-out. But wait... "Aw, man. Can we each get a little toy too, dad?" *Don't look at Lily. Don't look at Lily. Don't... Sucka.* "Of course! Toys for everybody." And snacks. And wait, we didn't buy anything for mommy! All eyes on you, poppa. Momma gets "flowers, candies... chocolates." So in the end, as I reason, I spent \$60 on a GI Joe.

Back at the house, time to fix supper with lightning speed. Once a week, trial by fire, I learn two new flavors that don't go together. Last week: Asiago cheese, red wine, and basil can create a surprisingly horrifying-flavored chicken that tastes not unlike vomit. I'm still not convinced that it wasn't a fluke. This week: don't pee on the electric fence, don't judge a vegetable by it's color, and in desperation don't ever, ever, *EVER* add a can of slimy spinach to a potato soup base that usually calls for a handful of chopped fresh / frozen kale.

Rebound meal? In this family, it's called an Aunt Pam special. Aunt Pam is the wife of Uncle Alan, a lifelong corn farmer in Ohio. Corn on the cob. Lots of it. In areas of the country where corn isn't a staple crop, I'll buy if the price is under \$.25 and ear. While buying toys, I noticed a nineteen cent price tag on what appeared to be a new truckload of mostly-husked, big-eared sweet corn. Yeah, we dumped the slime, and ate nothing but a bunch of the biggest, sweetest, butteriest corn this side of Oklahoma. *Regulate THIS, salt-haters!!!*

Now it's time to get the girls in the bathtub. I'll be back to do the dishes. I need a fire hose for the table and the baby seat. "Boys! Take out the trash and clean yourselves up!" "Okay." Upstairs, I get undressed. Deep jacuzzi tub so I can't just hold the girls, I gotta take a bath with them. Undress bottom half of baby Ayla. She pees on me. Lily turns on the bath water and gets in the bathtub. Full hot. "Ow! Dadd-eeeeee!!!!" Top half of the baby-undressing operation is stuck on an earring. Running to Lily with a screaming baby, dodging the windows and the neighbors with the telescope in my birthday suit. "Ouch! DAG! gonnit. What the...?" My foot now has a Star Wars-shaped dent in the bottom of it, thanks to the jaggedest carpet-colored figurine available. "KAY-LUUUUB!!! Come pick up your toys!" Then into the bathroom... "Baby, you need to turn on the cold water at the same time... and you need to take your pants off before you get in the bathtub!"

Dry baby, leave Lily. Lily chokes on bubbles. Josh walks in with a man-sized scrape

across his back. Caleb's outside screaming. Looks like a bloody bike accident. Calgon, take me away! How does she do it?! I zip outside. Everybody's good. Miraculously, I get the girls down. To do this, I sang at least fifty songs, danced with each of them, rubbed backs and scratched arms and necks and fingers and legs, patted butts and rooted up missing stuffed animals... only to be a hardnose in the end anyway. "GO TO BED. GO TO FREAKIN BED. YOU'RE FREAKIN DONE YOU UNDERSTAND ME?" Kidding. But it's almost like that. "La, la, Jesus loves me, princesa, bella notte, butterflies, sugar and spice & pretty little ponies WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM, WOMAN CHILD??!! **GO TO SLEEEEEEPP!!!!!!**" The teensiest, tiniest creak in the floor when you're quietly exiting the room, and one of them starts crying. Then the other one. Then the baby is screaming bloody murder, while the 2-year-old tries to administer verbal discipline. "AYLA, BE QUIET! GO TO SLEEP!" "Lily, *I'm* the Daddy. Stop correcting your sister and go to bed." "Ayla! Be quiet & go to sleep."

The boys are downstairs eating ice cream and arguing... its the iCarly vs. Spongebob debate. It's past their bedtime. Hey, they're not smoking pot & watching porn, so who cares? I sure don't. "You can stay up until 9:30 tonight. Record one, watch both. I hear you arguing again, I'm putting a brick through the TV. Watch me." They just went down. Okay, so I'll never be a parenting counselor. *Where the heck is that wife of mine?*

100% Ron Swanson

Thursday, May 27, 2010

If ever a person deserved to be the spokesperson for Kona coffee, it's Ron Swanson. A visiting pastor from Table Rock Fellowship in Medford, Oregon, Ron graced us with his presence last Sunday in a special guest message at our church, 3n1. In his introduction he described, with vivid detail, a recent trip that he and his wife made to a coffee farm on the Big Island of Hawai'i. His story's hook set easily with our congregation, a bunch of coffee lovers whose java whistles are wet each Sunday at the church's pre-game social cafe experience, "Brewed Awakenings."

I was 'fished in' without a fight. Once upon a time, I was flown home from Iraq (via Kuwait) on Hawaiian Airlines, the end cap on a 10-month deployment wherein good coffee *was not*. The Lion brand Kona coffee served on the ride home was, in the language of Joe, good enough to change one's religion. It was instantly my favorite coffee, and it led down a path in search of the best pure Kona coffee.

That type of purity is exactly what constituted the heart and soul of Ron's powerful message. "One hundred percent." Being real. Not ten per cent Kona and ninety percent generic beans... as pertains to life, of course--not coffee. But this message--*my message*--is about Ron's coffee story.

In his story, he described watching the sun rise on their drive through the lush terrain enroute to the factory. The perfect temperature. The perfect breeze. The emanating, alluring smell of coffee beans that wafted from roasting chambers, the mass amounts of cooled beans being funneled into burlap sacks, the opening of a sack to reveal the beans for close inspection, handfuls being freshly ground and meticulously scooped into French presses in fulfillment of a perfect life cycle... one fostering a fruit that is planted, grown, harvested and percolated under the most desirable conditions. The slow pouring of a cup of piping, 100% pure Kona coffee.

I'm a *great story* aficionado. LOVE a great story. Great story tellers, I mean *really* great story tellers, are hard to find. If you get the chance, look up Ron Swanson. My guess? This ambassador of good taste has got another 'coffee story' just around the corner. Heck, he's probably telling one now.

Memorial Day Intro

Greetings Friends and Family,

Last Memorial Day, I wrote about a handful of great guys who served our country and are no longer with us. There have since arisen more names to add to my list, whom I will do my best to honor and share stories of over the passage of time: SSgt. Edgar A. Heredia, a Recon Marine I served with and knew well... I did not learn of his death until shortly after last year's Memorial Day tribute. SSgt. Charles Edward Dane, also a Recon Marine who I served with; he was a close friend whom I have mentioned recently on this website. Yesterday, I learned of the death of Dave Hudnall, a retired Navy veteran whom I have known for the last few years.

This year, I would like to put the spotlight on one man in particular. He has been mentioned before now, but as I wrote in last year's Memorial Day tribute, I have not had the time, nor the space, to honor him properly. His name is Stephen Peter Gaffney, and I will be writing about him throughout the following week.

Paying tribute to men and women who have served our nation on Memorial Day is unfortunately cliché to many Americans. For some of us, however, the gesture of thanks is very real. I am so proud of our veterans, active or otherwise, and my heart goes out to the families of the fallen. As long as I live, the memories of such brave men and women will not be forgotten.

Big Irish Gyrene, Part I

Sunday, May 30, 2010

This Memorial Day, I'd like to share a story I have been struggling to write for a long time—not because it is difficult to tell (on the contrary), but because I was afraid I could never tell it right, that is, in a way that would capture the reader and properly acquaint him or her with the hero of the story. It is the story of Stephen Peter Gaffney, who was one of my closest friends. I knew him as 'Gaff.'

Because death is altogether untimely, heroes cannot be defined simply by what they were doing at the time of their death, but also by what they did in the random defining moments of their lives. The hero of this story did not die in Iraq or Afghanistan. He died as an active duty Marine in an unfortunate car accident near Cherry Point, NC, shortly after the towers fell in 2001. The caliber of this man lends great credibility to the assertion that he would have been nothing short of legendary on the field of battle. With no intention of devaluing the sacrifices of my brothers who *did* lose their lives on the battlefield, I will say this: Stephen Peter Gaffney was **MY** hero.

I met Gaff when we were both assigned to Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron VMGR-252 "Otis," located at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, North Carolina. At that time, we were both Alpha-type motivators in our own microcosms. Though we were briefly introduced beforehand, we came to know each other best after the following incident.

First, a preface: I worked in a shop with about fifteen different KC-130 flight mechanics. We were the guys who fixed planes while they were flying, or while they were on the ground at various overseas locations. When guys weren't out on a mission, they were repairing, servicing, and inspecting the planes that were parked here at home base. We pulled 6-6 (12-hour) shifts. I was part of night crew. As with any job's night crew, because there are fewer whip-crackers, there is a natural tendency to goof off when the scheduled work is complete. We used to roughhouse a lot. Inside our shop was a set of yellow footprints, painted on the ground, with the words, "Beat me up, Scotty" printed next to them. Any time someone from outside our shop wanted to show how big their balls were, they would come in and stand on the footprints (usually by accident). Then we'd jump that person. It would, in turn, promote cross-shop rivalries that ended in friendly snatch-n-grab kidnappings and more adult-ish, mature versions of wet Willies and atomic wedgies. It was not entirely uncommon at night to see a naked Marine duct-taped to a rolling office chair out in the aircraft parking area.

It was 2 AM and the flightline was quiet. I was the only guy in the shop for the moment. Out of nowhere, this six-foot-four cock-n-drive guy that I've never seen before (Gaff) slams open our door, strides to the center of the shop, and stands smack-dab in the center of the footprints. Then he looks up at me with a "get some"

grin. I would eventually learn that this single incident exemplified Gaffney's approach to life. He had no clue how many Marines were behind that door. He didn't know and he didn't care. He was going to take every one of them, without the slightest stutter in his step, just for shniggles. Not in the mood, but for the sake of sheer loyalty to the shop cause, I go at this guy with everything I've got. Within a minute, we're on the ground, bustin' eachother's teeth on the burned concrete slab floor, punching and choking and trash talkin' all the way. He was incredibly strong, and pretty fast for someone so tall. Then two other guys from his shop, and one guy from the tool room, come in and the four of them drag me out into the hangar. I kick one guy in the stomach, knock over the water fountain and break the eyewash station. My shop guys see the commotion, join in the rumble until I'm back on my feet, and later we go to take the battle back to the rest of the instigators... the Powerline shop.

The friendly feud ensued for weeks. When the dust finally settled, as is the case for most guys that fight each other and then are forced to work adjacently every day (night), I had developed a lasting friendship with that crazy big Irish guy with the deep voice and strong handshake. Turns out, we had common ground: we both fished the same area of Cahooke Creek, and we'd both been trying to catch a particular gator out of there. And we were both pretty carefree. We began planning our first gator grab... a 7-foot Bertha that used to hang out on this slick little mud island in the afternoons.

Big Irish Gyrene, Part II

Wednesday, June 9, 2010

Gaff and I practically lived on Cahooke Creek. We would take his 17' fiberglass boat down to the water with guns, knives, shark fishing hooks, nets, a long fishing gaff, and a couple whole chickens from the grocery. If we had ever been caught, our intentions would have been plain... we were fishing. No way we could be mistaken for gator poachers. The term 'redneck' applied liberally, we were a couple of unlikely good ol' boys--he from Jersey and I from Indiana. We loved gallavantin' in the woods, hunting, trapping, shooting stuff, fishing, and scrappin.' A lot of great stories came from these adventures. One of my favorites occurred as Gaff and I approached a mud slick island on the creek. It was the preferred hangout spot of Big Bertha, the largest of several gators in the area. Catching or killing the gator (for meat, hide, and the skull) was not good enough for my John Wayne buddy. An impatient Stephen, using the momentum of our approaching boat, leapt from the boat directly onto the mud beside the gator, without so much as an inkling of inhibition. He was armed with a .45 long Colt, but he was so close to the gator that it could've snapped his arm off before even getting a chance to fire a shot. Oh, I didn't tell you the good part yet... Gaff landed on the firm-looking mud slick--which supported the widely-dispersed weight of a couple hundred pound gator--with the grace of an elephant in high heels. The quicksand island INSTANTLY swallowed him up to the waist. Bertha turned so

quick, I thought she was gonna take his head off with her tail. Gaff unloaded all six hydra-shock rounds into the gator, who then disappeared into the murky black water, never to be seen again. Neither to be seen again was Gaff's flip-flop, which was retained by the mud that clutched him.

I remember when we showed up one day at Cahooke Creek, to discover that someone (the city, county, park service, e.g.) had built a really nice wooden pier out over the river inlet next to the public boat ramp adjacent to the creek. The surface of the deck was less than 10 inches from the water at high tide (intercoastal waterway tidal basin / brackish water) Carefree as always, he decided to camp there that night. "Where, on the pier?" "Yeah." So after I was done fishing, I left him there. The next day I drove out to pick him up. He was passed out at the end of the pier, under the blazing sun, next to a taut stringer that disappeared into the water, a fly-covered, medium-sized red drum that had obviously been mutilated for cutbait, and probably six of however many Budweiser empties that hadn't floated away. No fishing pole (I didn't ask; I already assumed that it got dragged off by a monster fish). The best part? Between Gaff and I, there was a four foot section missing out of this 250-foot pier. Burned, as if a meteor landed right in the middle of the pier. "Gaff!!" I yelled again. He woke up, sat up, looked around, visibly searching for either his fishing pole or a hopeful beer that hadn't been annihilated over the course of the night. He looked at me, standing on the now separate pier, and gave me a priceless crap-eating grin. Wish I had a camera then. As we were walking back up to the truck, he turned around and looked at the damaged incurred by his bonfire on the pier. "Hey, what happened to the pier?" he asked me seriously, followed by a snicker that was akin to a snort, or an outward snore through the nose (this was a defining trait of his, one that I can still hear in my head and imitate to this day, but that does not write well... if you hold your breath, then transfer air pressure to your head, then under pressure manipulate your epiglottis to allow air to escape from your nose... yeah I know, too much information).

It was early experiences such as these, coupled with danger and excitement, that helped to solidify our friendship. Eventually, adventure would take different shapes. Follow my next few bog posts to learn more about this incredible man, Stephen Peter Gaffney, and to see how he positively impacted the lives of me, my wife, and everyone who knew him.

Big Irish Gyrene, Part III

Sunday, June 13, 2010

Petra and I bought our first house in 1997. It was a brick ranch on nearly three acres, directly across the street from the Croatan National Forest. At the time of purchase, our backyard was a jungle. I held a few tree-felling parties, in which Marines would all get together and attack 50' trees with chainsaws, axes, hatchets,

KA-Bar knives and ropes. All it cost me each time was a keg and a tall stack of pizzas. Once all the trees were cut into huge 4' logs, they'd be rolled, stacked, doused with 20 gallons of kerosene, and ignited with a barrage of gasoline-fed Maltov cocktails. Yeah, they were the biggest bonfires you've ever seen. Well, after a warning from the Fire Marshal (as the entire neighborhood and all the firemen just stood in awe), I decided to scale back, burning two huge logs at a time for years... nonstop. We had a 24/7, unmonitored fire at that property for three years.

Gaff used to love hanging out at our place, even if no one was home. He had a cot in the shed, but he preferred to sleep by the eternal flame under the open sky. His boat sat on a trailer in the back, and he kept his tools in the shed so he could work on his 1987-ish manual transmission Honda Accord on the weekends. Boy, that piece of crap needed the love. At any given time on a Saturday or Sunday, if Petra or myself would look out the window, we'd see Gaff elbow deep in axle grease, jamming out to "Eye of the Tiger," on a tape that he found under the seat when he bought the car... it was one of his prized finds. Some nights, he'd invite us out for steaks on the fire, other nights, he'd come in for movies and ice cream before heading back outside to smoke a few Marlboros, drink a few Buds, prop his head on a rock with his boots toward the fire, and drift away for the night. If Gaff wasn't fixing his car, he and I were competitively chopping wood. We had probably thirty cords of wood stacked in two rows all the way down one side of our property.

Petra and I still laugh about the time Gaff made us watch the movie *Ladyhawk*. He was a huge Michelle Pfeiffer fan, though his dream girl of the future would look nothing like her. He would often talk about her: "She'll be tall, with jet black hair, bright blue eyes and a pretty face... and her name will be Barbara." So anyway, Gaff talked up this movie for months. It was one of his favorites, aside from *Rocky*. The movie was hilarious. We laughed so hard at the 1970's music and themes. Have you ever seen the TV show *The Bionic Man*? Every time the main character would leap over a chair, or punch through a wall, the film would roll in slow motion and this really cheesy sound effect music would play... "Rack-ack-ack-ack-ack-ack-ack-ack-ack..." Well, it was just like that in *Ladyhawk*. Same type of music. Petra was bawl-bustin' through the entire thing, Gaff was visibly upset but being a good sport about it, and I was cracking up.

Of his favorite movie, *Rocky*, Gaff would often quote, "Ey, yo, Adrian. I was wonderin' if you ain't doin' nuthin' for the next twenty thirty years, if you wouldn't mind marryin' me too much." That's not exactly how it's said in the movie, but that's exactly how Gaff would quote it, with his perfect Stallone style.

Christmas time, one evening in 1998. Petra and I just got back from Wal-Mart, a half hour away. We pull in the driveway, and Gaff's up on our roof, yelling at us to go away. "Get outta here! Come back in fifteen minutes!" Petra's asking me, "What the heck is he doing on the roof, Matt?" "I dunno, baby, hold on." I get out of the car and he throws a wadded-up \$20 at me. "Take Petra to McDonald's or something, come

back in fifteen minutes." So I do. Petra's like, "Will somebody please tell me what's going on? I want to watch *Friends*. So we leave and come back, and Gaff's sitting on the front porch with two cords in his hand. We get out of the car. He plugs the two cords together. "TA-DAAAAA!!!!" Christmas lights that the Griswolds and the Whos would be proud of, stapled all over the freaking roof in no coherent pattern. I mean ALL over the roof, in every direction. Every shingle was glowing. Petra and I just looked at each other and started laughing. "It's beautiful, Gaff." When I woke him up for work the next morning, the heel of his boot had melted in the fire. There was a half-eaten rattlesnake rolled up in tinfoil next to a salt shaker. "Dude, wake up. What did you do with my new PowerShot stapler? Oh, never mind. There it is (melted around a pile of staples and a spring)." Gaff made his snicker.

He had a real tough-guy wild streak. Got in trouble for throwing someone off the second floor balcony in a fight. Got busted down from Sergeant twice. Caught crap from a headstrong cop on base, who on top of issuing a citation, called our command in an attempt to make Gaff's life miserable. Gaff bought a ginormous exploding aerial firework--the kind you see after a big league ball game--walked into PMO (Military Police Headquarters), lit this thing and let it fly down the hallway and into the office where the traffic cops work out of. It made the paper. Gaff taught me to waterski. We did a lot of that. He raked someone across an oyster bed once while driving the boat... felt horrible and bought the guy a steak dinner. We'd smoke Cubanos by the fire and drink tall Budweisers--his beer of choice, and talk about everything. We hunted bears and trapped foxes and raccoons. He read a lot, and often referenced a fictional book character named "Jack Deforge," or maybe it was "Jack DeFord." The father of one of our friends, Sten Cedergren, had written a book entitled *The Adventurous Life of a Vagabond Hunter*. He loved that book.

There are many more stories of Gaff to be told. I'll share a few more and then I'll sum up. Suffice to say, it was tough losing him, and I'll never forget him. My writing of these stories will ensure that my kids know who he was as well.

Big Irish Gyrene, Part IV

Six foot four or thereabouts. Fearless. Lover of life. Balls to the wall. 200 MPH, all day, every day, drink-everybody-under-the-table, arm wrestle everybody, then run ten miles and beat everybody. Then drink everybody down again, and smoke a pack of reds. Sleep optional. Stephen Peter Gaffney. That's the guy we're talking about.

Gaff and I had set up several hunting stands across the street, all over our quiet corner of the Croatan forest. The first time I took Gaff out there, I only had two stands built. It took us an hour to get to them, sneaking slowly to a nice honey hole under moonlight. As soon as we got close, I told Gaff in a whisper, "All right, brother, fifty meters straight ahead, and we're at your stand. Once we're there, I'll show you the direction of my stand." He nodded, then added quietly, "Psst... hey Matty, I got a

new deer call. Wanna hear it?" "Sure." "OOOHHH DEEE-EEEEER!!! DEER DEER DEER DEER!!!" His yell was so unexpected--that sonofagun scared the piss outta me. It was so loud I almost crapped myself. He laughed out loud as I was punching him, mad because he ruined all the stealthy progress we'd made over the last hour. We'd head out to those stands from time to time throughout the year, to thin the massive deer population of the Croatan and keep the freezer stocked. In all honesty, we'd typically turn an entire deer into jerky within a few hours of killing it, and it would be completely devoured at work the next day. Deep freezers are for fish.

Speaking of fish, or of fishing rather, one time Petra caught this big shark off the Atlantic Beach pier (another favored spot where Gaff and I would fish); it took four guys to pull it up with a net, and our freezer was packed with shark steaks for months (awesome grilling meat, by the way). Gaff was so stoked, he decided to go land a big shark for himself. The pier was usually a bad spot for it; posted signs and do-gooder mackerel fishermen would remind that you couldn't OVERTLY fish for sharks, though you could keep one if you caught it accidentally (while intending to catch something else--for you non-fishers, that means that you can't show up with whole chickens and chum blocks and shark hooks). So Gaff skipped the pier, skipped the charter fishermen, and paid some random guy to take him and his huge pole "Exactly one mile off the Atlantic Beach pier." Well, the one thing that outlasted Petra's shark steaks was the animated 'shark that got away' story. "So we drive the boat. Out. Out exactly one mile off the pier. We drop anchor, and we hang chum blocks and chicken livers all around the sides of the boat. We wait an hour, all of a sudden, the place is slam packed full of sharks. I see this big one keep popping up, so I throw a Mustad shark hook out there in front of him with a couple chicken livers on it, and BAM!!! MATTY, I MEAN IT WAS LIKE CATCHING A SCHOOL BUS!!! ALMOST PULLED ME OUT, BUT I'M JAMMED IN BEHIND THE SEAT AND IT'S PULLIN' THE BOAT... I CAN'T EVEN LET MY HANDS OFF TO EASE THE DRAG BEFORE THE LINE SNAPS."

Every one of Gaff's stories was like that. He was a great storyteller. He'd start his stories soft and slow, with that big deep voice of his. During this part of the story, he'd routinely dry spit... not actually spitting any saliva out, but just a short "pt," as if trying to discharge the husk of a popcorn kernel that he had dislodged from between his teeth. He'd (pt) start off his story doing this (pt) about every ten or fifteen seconds (pt). Then he'd get louder and closer to you as he was reeling you into the story. There was always a "BAM," followed by this amped-up crazy ending... funny or not, dramatic or not, the hook has been set, you've been fished in, and you're either laughing, crying, or caught in the 'yeah' web, like this... Gaff: and THAT's why I refuse to buy a Jeep, my friend. Me: Yeah? Gaff: YEAH! YEAH? YEAH!! YEAH?? **YEEE--AY-AH!!**

When our schedules finally synched up again, with both of us on nights and my flight schedule slowing down a bit, we decided to start a side business. Up to that point,

we were always trying to make some side money, selling corded red oak, selling fox pelts to that kooky Indian guy at the New Bern gun show, or working for Mayflower moving company on the weekends. We had accumulated a ton of lawn care tools, to include two decent riding mowers, so we started "Two Mooks Lawn Care & General Maintenance Service." People loved us, and whenever they'd ask what a 'mook' was, Gaff would answer proudly, "Ma'am, a mook is someone that is just a hair above being a dweeb, and just a pinch below goofball." There are many, many funny stories that I could tell regarding Two Mooks, to include our first customer, Mr. Hoogendam; his elderly hairdresser, who had a volume control problem and would get louder AND LOUDER AND LOUDER as she was talking; also our first commercial account with the Havelock Homeowner's Association... the evening of our first day of landscaping, Gaff jumped into the ornamental fountain pond in the middle of the development, where he carried off an armful of (three) screaming, squawking, quacking (but previously unsuspecting, sleeping) ducks. He called me up at midnight and invited me to the barracks for a duck roast. When I got there, shaking my head (I knew what he had done because we had joked about catching the gullible ducks with a cast net earlier that day), I had to laugh because he already had one of the duck bills mounted on a blank wooden plaque on his wall.

Cruising the highway on the way back from Gaston Lake on the Virginia border, some guy in a convertible flipped Gaff off. Gaff was cool. He backed off and followed this guy from a distance. When the guy stopped for gas, Gaff waited for the man to go into the gas station. Then he took his stiff, prized Gaston Lake 5 lb. bass out of the cooler, sliced its gut open, leaned over into the gentleman's car and stuffed the huge fish under the driver's seat, and drove away. As small as the shop was, I'll bet the recipient of that gift saw the whole thing happen from the cash register. He did the right thing, though. Just stay inside the gas station and don't flip off Stephen ever again. A photo of Gaff holding that fish hung just inside Lew's Rod & Reel (or was it Lew's Bait & Tackle?) on Main Street in Havelock, NC, until just a few days after Gaff died. Then somebody must've claimed it.

Our first bear "hunt" went like this: We took to a heavy bear traffic area in the Croatan with four other guys, armed with tons of apples, honey, peanut butter, night vision goggles, booze, and high-powered rifles. We stayed out all night, in the thickest bush this side of Camp Lejeune's South Sandy Run training area. I specifically remember that this took place right after the Blair Witch Project came out at the theater... Gaff and I listened to four grown men with guns--*Marines*, no less--scare themselves to death over every little mosquito in their ear and bat wing flutter. I don't watch scary movies, so I didn't share their fear, and Gaff was indifferent, and probably ate boogiemens for breakfast. Our next bear hunt was equally hilarious. One Saturday, we were going bear hunting up in Hyde County. The whole day was great; this bear we'd been tracking took a huge steaming crap next to the driver's door of our truck while we were out tracking, um, him. The best part was when I picked Gaff up at the barracks at 3AM. He told me we had to go pick up his new rifle from Wal-Mart--"It's already paid for, but they wouldn't give it to me yesterday because they

said I was drunk... can you believe that? (short pause)(and there's the snicker). Then he finished his Bud. He was so excited about today's hunt, that he stayed up all night, talking to everybody about our hunting adventures... while drinking, of course. So now, we're headed to Wal-Mart, to see if they'll give him his gun while he's REALLY drunk. Ringing the bell repeatedly at the 'sporting goods' desk would certainly not suffice, Gaff had to say it as well. "DING, DING, DING!!! HELLO?? ANYBODY HERE? (Snicker). "Wait till you see this gun, Matty. It's a 300 Win Mag. You know what they use it to kill? Pachyderms, Matty, PACHYDERMS!!! That's elephants! YeeeeAAah!"

Man, I loved that guy. Yeah, we got the gun out of Wal-Mart, with a little finesse. No bear. In fact, neither of us ever got a bear. I got Gaff's gun, though. In a surprise invite to dinner with Gaff's sisters while his folks were down visiting, I was endowed with this prized possession. Of course, I named the gun Gaff, so in the rare instances these days when I go hunting, I can still tell Petra that me and Gaff are out gallavantin,' or me and Gaff shot a big old buck...

Big Irish Gyrene, Part V

Wednesday, June 16, 2010

Stephen Peter Gaffney liked things simple. He was a flip-flop wearing kind of guy, loved classic rock & roll hits, and regarding music, had a favorite saying, "I CAN'T STAND THIS MAMBY-PAMBY, WHINY, GREENDAY, SMASHING PUMPKINS, HALF-A-FAG CRAP THAT THEY CALL MUSIC THESE DAYS." He was all about being manly, and in fact, exuded manliness (see photo above). That all-star high school pitcher-turned John Wayne Marine would not so much as admit to liking sugar in his coffee. When we'd stop at any gas station, fast food joint, or our favorite breakfast spot, Dunkin' Donuts (where Gaff would religiously order an 'everything bagel with cream cheese'), Gaff would order his coffee with cream and sugar... "for my sister," he would always tell the cashier.

As anyone would be with someone they loved, I was concerned for the long-term effects of Gaff's hell-on-wheels ways. Myself constantly struggling between what is 'fun' and what is right, I at that time (along with Petra) pressed toward the Godly counsel of a stand-up non-denominational church on the edge of Havelock, called Liberty. Being a Marine, if nothing else, at that time gave me a keen and discerning nose toward fake leadership, even of the spiritual type. I really liked Pastor Tom, he was funny, he was Marine-friendly, he was Godly, and he was REAL. So I invited Gaff. Wrong answer. He couldn't so much as sit through two entire songs akin to "Jesus Loves Me," before he turned bright red in apparent anger, and stormed out of the building. My attempts to stop him and talk to him were in vain. We didn't talk for about two weeks after that, and the relationship seemed to be visibly marred. Ugh.

Then, out of the blue, a letter appeared in a plain envelope in our mailbox. It was a letter of apology to Petra and I, from Gaff. In the letter, he expressed that his failure to communicate with us was due in part to his inability to form the proper words that adequately described his feelings... and so he told us a story, more like a Biblical parable. In the story, he said that there was a small town, and in this small town was a man with unparalleled, unending kindness. He gives of his time and possessions to everyone. He takes care of people, laughs with them, cries with them, e.g. Then he tells about another man... one who knows that the old man is kind, yet he steals from him anyway. After several pages of writing, Gaff sums up with his acknowledgement that God is incredibly good, and kind, and forgiving, and all-seeing and all-knowing. He felt such deep shame that his lifestyle did not reflect thanks; in fact that it reflected a measurable rebellion--even one that is overtly against God, God's people, and the ways of God. Furthermore, he said that although he knew God, he did not want to change his life and walk in his ways... not yet. When he was ready to make that change, that we (Petra and I) would be the first to know.

His letter was heartfelt, touching, and extremely revealing of his knowledge of God and of the condition of his soul. It was apparent to me that Gaff would rather be a full-blown heathen than be a hypocrite... better than I could say of myself, or of many 'Christians,' despite a lifetime of good intentions. We continued to pray for Gaff, but did not try to invite him to church again after that, except by cleaning up our own lives and setting an example. I have never been very good at that. Before you know it, we were back to raising cane, he and I. Don't get me wrong... we also helped people, all the time. Gaff and I were like-minded when it came to giving someone the shirt off your back, so I guess you could say that we raised cane some of the time and helped people the rest of the time. Eventually, I would jump ship on our "Otis" airdale unit, to become a Reconnaissance Man stationed at Camp Lejeune--an hour's drive South (and some change). Gaff was the kind of guy who always repeated himself, even though he knew he told someone something--I think he just liked to hear himself say things a couple times. When I had my bags packed to 'go Recon,' he kept reminding me to look up his brother-in-law who was stationed at 2d Recon Battalion, and then he would spell his name, loud and slow. I can still hear him spelling it for me. He's married to my sister--(Rosie, he called her sometimes; this was the only sibling that I'd remembered that he had, because he talked about her so much). After his accident, I would meet his whole clan of great family members, to include a deep pocketful of brothers and sisters.

We would meet up when our schedules would allow it, either to catch the Crystal Lake Gator behind Recon's French Creek barracks at Lejeune, or to go hunt our stands in the Croatan (Petra and I still owned the property across from it; we were renting it out), or to occasionally land some weekend cash. Nothing like before, though. A year had passed, and with completely different operational schedules, we had become much busier as individuals now.

In early October, 2001, as the images of the crumbling twin towers burned brightly upon the minds of most Americans, Gaff and I got together for a weekend, to have one more go at the Crystal Lake gator. He laughed at the lame attempt a few of us Recon guys had made at catching the mid-sized reptile, who was more-or-less trapped inside this small, shallow quarry. We didn't see him that day, so we resorted to stripping down to our skivvies and practicing our diving and belly-flop skills off the 10' sand cliffs into the only deep part of the quarry. I took some pictures of his crazy antics with a disposable waterproof camera (I cursed the day I lost the camera, the following week on a helocast). Later that evening, I showed him around the barracks and introduced him to some of the guys in my platoon. Then we talked outside for a while, and he told me he would like to go to church again, to make it up to us. He said he'd been making some changes in his life, even started drinking light beer for crying out loud (snicker)! "For my sister," he added. "Are you sure you're ready? Have you got a lightning-proof jacket?" I prodded. "I'm ready. Now I'm ready."

We made plans to meet up the following weekend to hunt. They fell through. We finally firmed up a time to hunt our stands, on either Tuesday or Thursday evening (I had both days off, and he had an easy week except for college classes). So Sunday night we talked, and Tuesday is when we would meet at the stands. I drove up a bit later than I wanted, having only about three hours of light left to hunt. I called for Gaff a few times, and figured he was probably on the hunt. Darkness came, and I spotted a spike buck just before. I took the shot. Missed! Or passed right through. Absolutely amazing. Waited and listened for an irregular running pattern. Waited and listened for Gaff to yell out, "Hey, Matty! Did you get him?" All I heard was the familiar gentle wind on the treetops, and the sound of ambulances and firetrucks growing closer. With that, I packed it up. I don't have a clue where Gaff is at this point, but he probably couldn't make it and we'll recock and reload on Thursday. I punch out of the woods (I'm at the nearest stand, only 10 minutes movement from the car).

I drive three miles down from where I'm parked (at the house we're renting to some friends) on familiar Greenfield Heights Blvd., then turn right at the railroad tracks onto Nine Mile Road. A mile and a half ahead, there's a holdup. Five cars in front of me, an ambulance has our lane blocked. A fire truck has the opposite lane blocked. We're a few hundred meters down the road from B&R Gun Range. Now, I just got out of EMT school two months ago, but I know that I'm often overzealous and I don't want to get in the way. Four emergency vehicle crews have got this under control, the jaws of life are presently in action, and it looks like a small black car drove off the road, across a ditch and into a large tree, knocking a large, dead branch loose, which fell directly atop the car. I call Petra on my cell phone, apologizing in advance for not being able to get home at a decent time. She understood. "How did you guys do?" She asked regarding the hunt. "I don't know where Gaff was..." "He didn't show? That's wierd. Did you call him?" "I tried. Nothing." "Hmm. Are you going back up on Thursday?" "Yeah, probably. I'll talk to him tonight or tomorrow... Oh wow, this is a pretty bad accident, sweetie, here comes the helicopter." "Sweet Jesus, I hope the people are okay." "Why aren't you helping? It's not like you to be a bystander." "I

know, Sweets. There are a lot of professionals just standing by their trucks. I'll just be in the way, for sure. Hey, let me call you back after the helicopter takes back off, it's getting loud." "Sure thing. Love you, Matty!" "Love you, baby." The helicopter lands near the gun range, then takes off again after five or ten minutes. The road opens back up, and I call Petra, giving her the play-by-play on the wreckage as I crept by the small black Nissan-looking vehicle, covered in pine needles. "I don't know how many people were in the vehicle, Sweetie, but you'd better start praying for them. I'm surprised they even made it to the helicopter alive, looking at the wreckage."

It wasn't a small black Nissan. It was a large black Blazer, crumpled up the size of a small black Nissan. When I got home, my phone was off the hook with calls. First Kenny. Then Brent. Then Bill. Greeny... "Matty, I'm so sorry..." I could not believe-- and still cannot, to this day-- that I sat 150 feet away from my dying friend and did not get out of my car to help. It was a horrible ending to a wonderful friendship. Alcohol was not a factor. Sleep, possibly. Vehicle malfunction, wouldn't doubt it... neither he nor I have had a history of keeping reliable vehicles for ourselves (such amenities are reserved for the wife and kids). After bawling our eyes out, Petra and I got it together so we could call Gaff's sister. I don't know how we fell asleep that night. The next morning, I asked for the day off, then drove immediately to the site to make sense of what happened. No clues whatsoever. I did find Gaff's last pack of smokes though, which I kept. He either switched to the blue Marlboros, or he had received that pack by default. He always smoked reds around me. As I stood there, staring at the massive longleaf pine, the deep ditch, the absence of skidmarks or weaving tire marks that would indicate a loss of control... I could envision only one thing. Whether he had nodded off, or been run off the road by an idiot driver, or had flicked his cigarette out the window and back into the car--diverting his attention from the road, or had experienced a vehicular malfunction... in the instant that he saw the tree, and his life flashed, and he knew that the impending impact was certain... I cannot to this day see anything but his 'get some' grin and a gas pedal that went straight to the floor. If he can't go around the tree, he's going through it... or at least takin' it out.

I do not know what the condition of Gaff's soul was at the time of his accident. I have reeled over this since his father and I had discussed the matter; it was naturally of great concern to him. Gaff's earlier letter to Petra and I proved that he was deeply in tune to spiritual things, whether he talked about such things or not. He made the decision to go back to church, saying he was ready. Knowing Gaff, I do not believe he would have made such a statement, or such a decision, before getting right with God. I pray that he did.

The days that followed Gaff's accident, and many fantastic memories that preceded, are for me to cherish. Most of them cannot fit in a book, let alone a few pages. Petra alone could write volumes, in her own version of the big-hearted roughneck that had so intricately woven his way into the fabric of our family. In his death, we were able

to meet Gaff's own phenomenal family, who accepted us as theirs, and filled in the blanks of his childhood for us as we filled in the blanks of his life as a Marine. His unit (my former unit), VMGR-252 "Otis," provided the military airlift of his body in a flag-draped casket, and an around-the-clock guard until his interment. I was honored to take part in his memorial service in New Jersey, and we accompanied Gaff to Ft. Dix, where he was laid to rest. As long as I live, I will never forget him.



Be a Great Father

Sunday, June 20, 2010

There are plenty of 'Happy Father's Day' wishes going around today. In order to have a great Father's Day, you've got to be a great dad. Spend time with your kids; we're not promised tomorrow and they need your love, attention, and encouragement. Whether it's going fishing, wrestling, building Lego spaceships, playing dress-up or Candy Land... Whether you're a dad, a step-dad, a grandpa, uncle, guardian, or father-figure... Today may be about you, but the rest of the time, it's all about them. So today, instead of wishing you'll have a great Father's Day, I wish you to be a great father; the best you can possibly be.

Lily's 3rd Birthday: Our Saturday in Photos













Eric Harris' Annual Father's Day Shebash











Father's Day Afternoon at the Y
Monday, June 21, 2010





On Straws

Wednesday, June 23, 2010

I recently heard someone say, "I feel like I'm breathing through a straw." In this case, the woman was referencing the thick humidity that hung in the air on a sweltering day. I've previously heard the same analogy used to describe asthma. My question is, what kind of straw do you feel like you're sucking air through? I mean, are we talking a wide-bore McDonald's straw? Because I can suck air through those puppies all day. Even better, a 7-11 Big Gulp straw... and if you get the candy straws, even better. You can breathe easy and snack at the same time. Well, okay, not exactly at the same time. On the other hand, if you're sucking air through a Taco Bell straw, your lungs are getting a workout. These, my favorite straws, would be horrible to breathe through. The Robin Hood characters in the Disney animated classic would surely have drowned trying to breath underwater using these. Anyway, no bucketfuls of wisdom in this post... it was just a thought.

Abby Sunderland, American Hero

Thursday, June 24, 2010

Passion. Unbridled wild. The spirit of adventure. Slowly choked by decades of money-making, ulterior motive-driven 'safety' measures and touchy-feely softies, these fierce elements of life barely emit an audible heartbeat in these United States.

It has been nearly two weeks since Abby Sunderland, the 16-year-old Californian sailor, was rescued by a French fishing vessel in the Indian Ocean, more than halfway into her round-the-world solo sailing quest. She will be returning to the United States soon--on the figurative eve of our nation's 234th birthday celebration--and she should be embraced by her countrymen with nothing short of a hero's welcome. Her parents should not be attacked, and "Attagirl" should be the only news headline referencing our heroine.

Who attempts to sail around the world solo? Certainly nobody that I know, let alone a 16-year-old girl. Her place is with the daring trans-continental flyers of old, whose trial-and-error sacrifices have given us the knowledge platforms to design and produce modern jets and passenger aircraft. Her people are boundary-breaking seafarers and like-minded dreamers, 'Vernes'and 'Hemmingways'; limit-pushers, record-breakers, the seekers of world cures, and conquerors of the highest mountains. Such passion cannot be tamed; such taming should not be attempted.

Greatness is not achieved by mediocrity. It is borne of audacity. "Life is either a fantastic adventure, or it's nothing," signed Helen Keller. Abby Sunderland epitomizes the American spirit of adventure and she is a hero. Abby, I salute you.

Check out Abby's blog... <http://www.soloround.blogspot.com/>

How to Make an Effective Cough Expectorant

Sunday, June 27, 2010



Of all the subjects that my mother-and-law disagree on, plant 229annequin229ia isn't one of them. I'm kind of a dork when it comes to edible plant knowledge, and Maria (or Anyu) is highly knowledgeable when it comes to herbal remedies, tonics, and general medicine. One topic that usually arises when we're on the subject, is the difference between U.S. pharmacies and European apothekes / apothecary shops. Truth is, morphine is an over-the-counter drug in some countries. Adult medicines have infant dosage information printed on the bottle, as opposed to the American medicinal trend phrase, "ask a doctor." Furthermore, there are numerous types of effective medicines that are simply not available in the U.S., for lack of FDA approval.

Among the medicines that are not available here, is a highly effective cough expectorant that in Germany is called "Spitzwegerich." An expectorant is the type of cough medicine that breaks up phlegm in the respiratory tract, to foster a more



productive cough (as opposed to a suppressant, such as codeine, which slows respiration, dries up the respiratory tract, and targets the brain's urge to cough). I have had ears, nose, and throat problems throughout my life, to include asthma as a kid, recurring ear infections, and chronic cough—the latter incurred early in the Marines and popping up from time to time. If a bout of coughing occurs due to a cold or flu, I'll take Spitzwegerich a few times a day and right before bedtime, and the coughing will be cured within a couple of days. I love the stuff.

So my mom-in-law gave me the recipe. What you'll need to make the stuff is (1) a bottle of 40% or stronger drinking alcohol, preferably vodka; (2) sugar; and (3) a large bunch of plantain... not the small green banana plantain, rather the lawn weed that—chances are—is growing in your front yard right now.

So first, go find a few bundles of the plant that looks like this, any time during the Spring or Summer:

All parts of the plant above the ground may be used; leaves, stems, and buds. To separate them from the roots, optimally, use a razor blade. Discard plant parts that are damaged. Rinse the select parts under cold water.

Now, in a small ceramic or porcelain mixing bowl (glass is acceptable, but it will need to be covered on the sides later, to make it opaque during the fermentation phase), add 40% drinking alcohol (preferably not a sweetened alcohol—I use Grey Goose) and enough sugar to make the medicine palatable (I used about $\frac{3}{4}$ cup to roughly a liter of alcohol), and add the select plant parts. Now cover the bowl with a



lid, or with cellophane, and make it so that light cannot pass through to the solution. Store in a relatively cool area (45-75 degrees Fahrenheit) for between three and five weeks. The longer the better, unless storage temperature has primarily been in the 70's.

As with any food or beverage product that is to be stored long term, it is important to sterilize all tools and containers. This product needs to be stored in a brown or green bottle to retain its potency, so I just used a wine bottle. As in wine and beer making, I boiled a large pot of water, with which to sterilize a pair of tongs, a strainer, a funnel, an old wine bottle and a cork. Then I removed the plant parts, and strained the liquid into the wine bottle. I taste-tested before the cork went on. Tastes just like store-bought; and no less effective, I'm certain.



Twenty-four Lines

Following is a submission for a patriotic poetry contest sponsored by *Leatherneck Magazine*, which I wrote aboard the *USS Nassau* one week before the U.S. (and our unit) entered Iraq in 2003. It received an Honorable Mention. The title was derived from the poetry contest rules; I was hard-pressed to fit patriotic passion inside the parameters of “not to exceed 24 lines.” Without further adieu:

Twenty-four lines is all I've been given
To form into words, the reason I'm driven
To wake up each morning and don my beret,
Or man my ship's rails on the Chesapeake Bay.
Four lines have just passed, but what about those
Who birth future leaders, or plant corn in rows?
Your doctors, your truckers, your business execs,
The ones who change oil, invest, or build decks;
The jobless, the homeless, and men behind bars
Still proudly display our flag's union of stars.
Patriotism... cannot be confined
In writings or speeches that come from the mind;
It lies in the people, and that is the key
To building and shaping through diversity.
One day I'll explain to my sons, through my tears,
The reason their dad wasn't with them for years
Was because, like my father, and his father, too,
He stepped to the plate despite those who withdrew
And through my example, I hope they will see
The power of pride and the price to be free--
Whatever they do for their country, they'll know
No matter their workplace, as heroes they'll go.
Though I'm no Thoreau, it's hard to believe
That he could do better to help me retrieve
The feelings of passion my soul intertwines
With my country, and write them in 24 lines.

Dorothy H. Wampler, Dedicated Teacher

Last night, I had a dream in which my fourth grade teacher was mentoring and shaping my creative writing ideas as an adult. I woke up with vivid recollection of the dream, as well as 15 different story ideas, which I then scribbled out on paper.

I started thinking about my early teachers, amazed that one could impact my dreams after a single elementary school year over 20 years ago. I remember Mrs. Galbreath,

my kindergarten teacher. I remember her face well. Then came Mrs. Wampler, who taught me how to read and write in first grade. She was followed by Mrs. Nora Moore, Ms. Cathy Condon, and Mrs. Karen Cantor. As I have done a few times over the years, I looked them up online. I found Mrs. Wampler's obituary this morning; she died on March 6th of this year, at 81 years old. She taught first grade at Union Elementary School (Union, Ohio—near Dayton) for 25 years. Interred at Arlington.

I find it sad that the accomplishments of one's life are never so boldly highlighted as when published after death, and it drives me to recognize the accomplishments of people who have impacted my life while they are still alive. However, digressing, I thank Mrs. Dorothy Wampler for her patience with me, and with little kids like me, over the course of 25 years of teaching. A dedicated teacher's life may be humbly downplayed, but honestly, what an amazing way to impact lives. Thanks, Mrs. Wampler.

4th of July 2010, in Photos



















An American Cedar Puzzle Box

Perhaps you've heard of a Chinese, Turkish, or Indian puzzle box. The general concept is a jewelry box with an ambiguous, often challenging (and even cryptic) method of access. Hidden keys, turning parts, and even counterbalanced weights are often incorporated.

I count myself fortunate to have been selected as one of the five wood shop workers from a pool of 350+ prisoners during a year-long stint in the Marine Corps brig at Camp Lejeune. Truckloads of old barracks furniture—usually solid red oak—would be delivered on a monthly basis, which we would skin using one of two large industrial planers. Then we'd use any of the numerous industrial-grade finish tools to create toys for the Marine Corps Toys 4 Tots campaign. We were given creative freedom, so long as toys were being produced. Wooden trains, rocking horses, baby (crib) mobiles, doll houses, children's furniture, chess sets, toy boxes, and similar items were produced by the five of us. There was a period when we were creating hundreds of shadow boxes for families of deceased Marines. During the lulls, I worked on a few personal projects. One was a cedar-lined retirement chest (large hope chest) with the Battle of Bellau Wood carved around the entire outside in vivid detail and strategically stained using mixed oil bases to accentuate the depth of the forest. The sides had two hand-carved, cord-wrapped handles, and the inside had a handled cedar tray for uniform display. Underneath this tray was a series of

moveable cedar boxes with glass lids, intended for the display of ribbons, medals, badges, insignia, etc. All the cedar came from a large, raw cedar log. Centered on the spring-hinged lid was a large, hand-carved eagle, globe, and anchor (the insignia of the Marines). Unfortunately, photographs are strictly prohibited in and around the brig, so it will never be seen outside of its intended recipient, a Gunny who retired.

Another personal project is now available for your viewing pleasure, thanks to a simple bribe and the craftiness of a brig guard who sneaked the item out and sent it to my wife. In the longstanding tradition of puzzle boxes, but having no influence beside my own creative vision, I have dubbed it simply, "an American puzzle box." Here are the photos.





The box is built in the fashion of a large humidor, with a distressed finish and a center-mounted brass plate inscribed "Love will find a way." In other words, love will find a way for me to get this thing out of the freakin' brig. The lid is tightly shut, with no clue as to how it opens.



The top tier of the back left corner is snugly fit but not attached. It slides out. The front left corner's top piece does the same thing, revealing the flush head of a large trim nail.



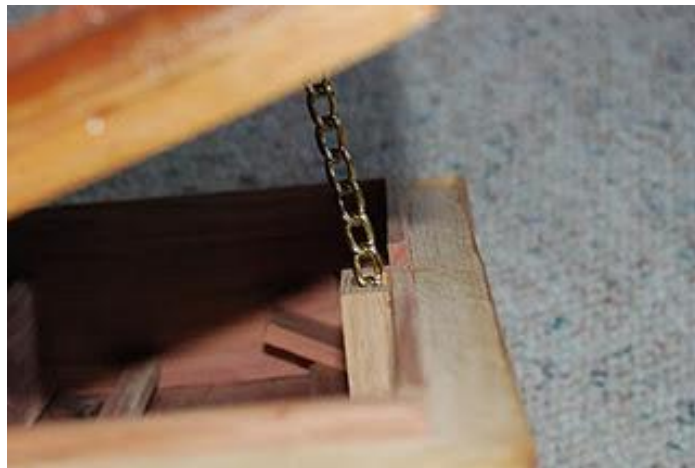
One slap to the back of the box will free the trim nail, causing it to slide out of its pre-drilled hole. The nail will act as a key.







Without the top retaining pieces on the corners, a thin piece of trim that appears to be fixed will actually slide out, revealing a 'keyhole.' Using the nail as a lever, insert the nail and pull up to pop out a snug-fitted bottom slat. Remove the slat to reveal a gold chain that is anchored by sliding the link over a set screw.





Inside, under the lid I sealed a yellow flower from the brig yard under about 6 coats of polyurethane (against a large, thin slice of raw cedar). The box itself is cedar lined, and still smells very strongly of it today. The blue crushed velvet compartments lift out to reveal a hidden note to Petra.

It's a simple puzzle box (given the materials on hand), but it was fun to make and may offer ideas for your own project!

Huntress: A Proper Pirate Ship

Monday, July 5, 2010



Christmas of 2007, I had it in my heart to make a pirate ship for my boys. The inspiration came from my Uncle Ken, who made a small wooden sailboat with me in his garage when I was a boy. The gesture and the boat were priceless. Made of balsa wood, it was destroyed with several boxes of household goods during a return

move to the States from Germany. I was crushed. Keeping in mind the possibility of a transient future lifestyle for my kids, I wanted this boat to be big and beefy. Using whatever scrap wood I had laying around (some 2x6 cutoffs, a warped 1x6x8, a few botched strips of routed red oak, a stack of dowels collecting dust, a broom handle), I set sail in my garage and didn't come ashore until the project was finished.

The boat has a crow's nest with an etrier (rope ladder), a retractable anchor, two lifeboats made out of a halved broomstick, strips of decking attached to the top surface of the boat with tiny nails, a carved deer antler mounted aft of the ship's fantail—bearing the ship's name, and a set of stiffened burlap sails. There are portholes drilled into one side, plenty of storage for legos and kidnapped Star Wars characters below decks, and a full accoutrement of moveable pieces, such as a treasure chest filled to the brim with glued-in cubic zirconia, a bunch of wine kegs and powder barrels, numerous cannon balls, a few cannons with fishing leader fuses, and a ship's wheel that was eventually going to be attached at the helm (I never got around to it). In the center of the ship, mounted on the deck, is a piece of copper jewelry my grandpa made while serving in Germany during WWII. Thinking ahead, I made a template for the ship, and also created a small fleet of similar ghost ships using the scrap wood in my garage—only the shells, no frills—so that I could make individual ships for each of my kids in the future.

Huntress turned out to be my boys' lasting favorite toy. They beat it up, rode on it, drove it around on the house, you name it. They still do. As soon as Lily was big enough, she was climbing on it and doing all the same stuff the boys did with it. I'm tickled to now see our fourth baby, Ayla, playing with the pirate ship as much as the other three did. It's a feeling for dad that can't be purchased from *Toys 'R' Us*.









Not Your Grandmother's Museum



“C’mon you sons of bitches, you wanna live forever?” Every Marine knows that these words were immortalized by two-time Medal of Honor recipient Dan Daly during the Battle of Belleau Wood in WWI France. This quote is one of several poignant statements etched high in the walls of the rotunda entrance at the National Museum of the Marine Corps near Quantico, Virginia. In true Marine Corps fashion, the museum grips your full attention from start to finish. Active Duty Marines greet you at the front desk when you walk through the door. Just beyond that is the aforementioned rotunda, with high walls that host larger-

than-life photos and etched quotes.

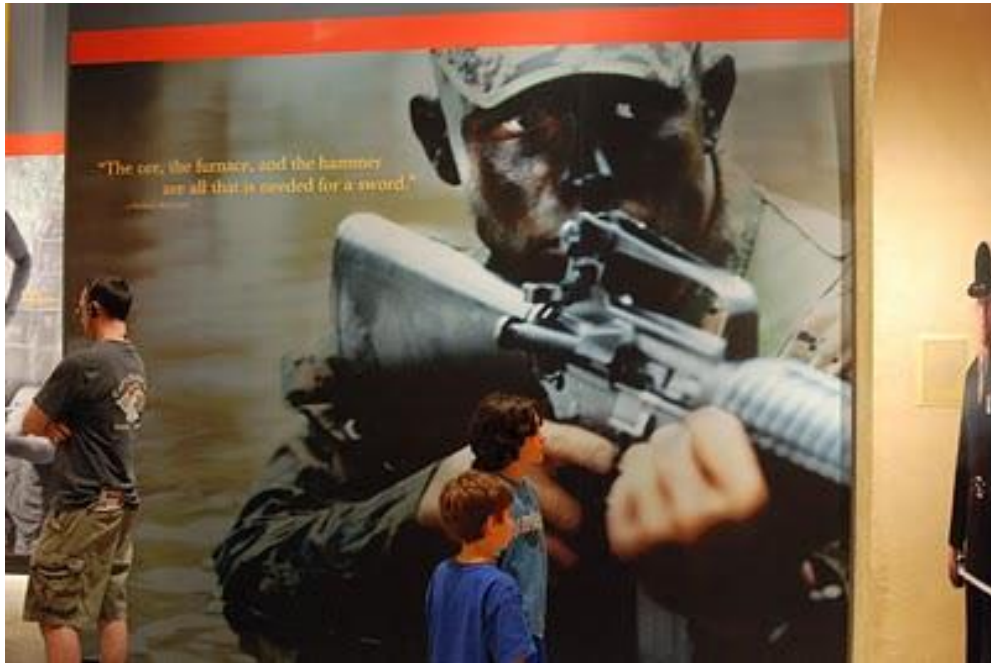
From there, visitors begin a journey into Marine Corps history and reality. Stand on the infamous yellow footprints. Interact with a ‘virtual’ drill instructor from a recruit’s perspective. See how Marines are made and further developed... in every clime and place. Experience the anticipation of battle from across a mustard field at Belleau Wood. Experience H-Hour from a troop carrier boat off Iwo’s coast. See one of the two flags that flew on Iwo Jima’s *Mount Suribachi*, to include the one made famous by Joe Rosenthal in his flag raising photo. The cold rocky terrain of Guadalcanal. Street fighting at Hue. Conduct a ground insert in Vietnam via helo.



Interesting to note, that the face of each 254annequin used throughout the museum was cast from the face of an actual Marine. There is also one actual Marine on display—a German Shepherd who was recently killed in combat. Visitors wrap-up their tour in a gallery of poignant, proudly displayed Marine art pieces, and then make their way back to the rotunda. From there, venture upstairs to grab a bite to eat at the chow hall, or grab a bite and a beer at Tun Tavern, so named for the Philadelphia birth place of the Marines. My wife, my kids, and myself... we loved

this museum! Can't wait to go back. Expect to spend three to five hours there per visit--worth every minute.

The National Museum of the Marine Corps, established in November of 2006, is located at 18900 Jefferson Davis Highway in Triangle, VA 22172. The museum is open from 9AM - 5PM every day of the year except Christmas. Admission is free. For information, call 1-877-635-1775 1-877-635-1775 or email info@usmcmuseum.org.





Empowering the Weekend Warrior: 10 x 12 Deck, Part I of II

Wednesday, July 7, 2010

One-Man Weekend Warrior Project: Build a Quality 10 x 12 Deck in a Day, Part I of II (Planning Phase)

Across our country, people are getting screwed by contractors—even on the simplest of projects. Time to grow a pair and do it yourself like grandpa did. Okay, so you've got a free weekend and \$1200. Let's build a deck. Nothing hokey or jack-leg; this will be a by-the-book, code-compliant, splinter-resistant deck with aesthetic appeal. Having a well-built deck this size will allow the add-ons of a pergola, a canopy, a covered grill portico, or a built-in bench... any of which you can tackle the following weekend for pennies on the dollar in DIY mode.

First, get all the planning crap out of the way. If you already know where you want your deck, and you're on the ball with your permit requirements (or if you're building without a permit), then skip the following three paragraphs (the following paragraphs apply not only to decks, but to anything you ever want to build on your property)... otherwise, chew up the meat and spit out the bones, 'cause there's a lot of detail to follow.

Figure out where you want your deck to go. Plan the location in relation to summer sunlight, or with ease of access in mind. Call your city or county for "setback limits," that is, the distance that you are required to have between the edge of a structure and the property line. If you have a setback dispute (and wish to challenge based upon what others in your neighborhood have done, for instance), ask your municipality how to apply for a variance. Ask what the permit requirements are for a deck. Some cities / counties will not require a permit in certain instances, such as (1) the removal and replacement of an existing deck that the zoning office already has on file, (2) if the walking surface of the deck is less than 30" off the ground at its highest point (negating the requirement for handrails), or (3) if the deck is not built as a permanent structure (it is built upon pre-cast pier blocks, as opposed to being set in concrete).

Under most circumstances, your municipality will require a simple building permit. These can cost anywhere between \$10 and \$500; generally around \$100 these days. Your city or county probably has a building permit office, or 'neighborhood development,' or 'construction services' office, with a standard one- or two-page permit application. Fill this out, pay the permit fee, submit two copies of your property survey (one showing the new deck), and a few simple drawings that show both the finished concept and the details of footing, foundation, and hardware (type, size, and placement). Ask for the footing requirement in layman's terms, before drawing and submitting it with your package. A "12x16 pier footing with 8" concrete" means that you will need to dig a sixteen-inch wide hole, twelve inches deep, with eight inches of concrete poured into the hole and four inches of dirt filled back over

the top, to protect the concrete from potentially freezing (required in cold-to-temperate regions). Some places will allow the concrete to be poured around the post, others will require that the post is mounted on an approved metal or plastic base that is anchored into the concrete (so that the post is not in direct contact with the concrete). Avalanche- and earthquake-prone areas may require that a deck is built to load-bearing specifications. Hurricane- and tornado-prone areas may require additional metal straps that anchor into the ground. Flood-prone areas may require larger footings, erosion controls, and .040-grade (submersible) treated lumber. Erosion controls will always be a factor when building near a protected watershed, which will likely require the installation of a silt fence and may include the requirement to plant specific types of shrubs or ground-covering plants once the project is completed, to mitigate soil displacement. As a rule of thumb, if there is sufficient room to walk underneath any part of the deck, 6x6 posts will be required instead of 4x4's. Finally, call the utilities hotline for digging—this is a free service offered by your state, to mitigate the instance of accidental electrocution or plumbing catastrophe.

Now, think about your materials purchase. Look online for ways to save 10% through your supplier. Military discounts, bulk purchase pricing, online coupons and manager discounts (just ask—your chances are good if there is a nearby competitor) are all good ways to save. General building knowledge and lumber selection criteria: modern dimensional lumber is not accurately named. Anything that is “two by,” such as a “two-by-four,” is actually only one and a half inches thick. FYI, anything that is “one by” is only 3/4” thick. A 2x4 is actually 1.5” x 3.5.” A 2x6 is 1.5” x 5.5.” A 2x8 is 1.5” x 7.5.” A 2x10 can be either 9 and 1/4 inches wide or 9 and 1/2 inches wide, and a 2x12 is 11.25” wide. A 4x4 is 3.5” x 3.5.” A 6x6, 5.5 x 5.5. It's important to use both fractions and decimals when building; your tape measure reads in fractions while a standard calculator (as opposed to a \$50 construction calculator) calculates decimals. Variations in board width will occur. 1/4” is acceptable. 3/8” is questionable. 1/2” will require you to either trim the board or throw it in the “return” pile. Returns on lumber, especially to lumber yards, may require some pushiness/persuasion, particularly if you selected the lumber yourself. Be prepared to pay a 15% re-stocking fee as well. When selecting lumber, look down the long axis of a board from one end, turning the board to look for a heavy crown, cup, bow, or twist. These terms will be explained during the building process. Feet are indicated by an apostrophe (’), inches are indicated by a quote (”). For a really strong deck, change all 2x6 girders and joists to 2x8 girders and joists. If the decking will lay at an angle, or in a herringbone pattern, then joists should be spaced 12” O/C (‘On Center,’ meaning the measurement from the center of one support board to the center of the one beside it).

For understanding of the layout of the deck, facing your house, the left side of the deck will be the “A-wall,” the middle (side facing you) is the “B-wall,” and the right side is the “C-wall.” Each side has an associated band board (or ‘band,’ simply), aka ‘rim joist’ in the olden days, and the side bands attach to a ledger board. The ledger

is simply the fourth side of the rectangular band, mounted to the house either at the house's band board (using galvanized lag bolts, or simply 'lags') or to a brick or block foundation using Red Head© or similar concrete anchors. Mounting into brick is not considered to be a 'load bearing mount' per modern engineering standards, but between you and me, I've torn out fifty-year-old decks that were mounted to fascia brick with long cut masonry nails, and they were the most difficult tear-outs. The going joke is that they don't make engineers like they used to. In building, 'posts' run North/South or vertically, and 'beams' run East/West or horizontally. Girders also run horizontally, and will be used under your deck, running from the outside edge of the A-wall to the outside edge of the C-wall. Joists will protrude outward from the ledger, perpendicular to the house mounting wall, sitting directly atop the girders. Officially, no part of your deck should be touching the ground unless you use submersible-treatment lumber (3x the cost of normal treated lumber). Off the record, I'll tell you that normal treated lumber seems to do just fine with ground contact over the years, as long as there is a drainage solution (no standing water under the deck).

Before you build, you will need to have water and power available. If a hose and spigot is not available, bring buckets for lake water or water from a friendly neighbor (for your concrete). Power requirement should be a dedicated 20A circuit if the homeowner is away from home and you do not have access to the circuit breaker panel. Otherwise, bring a generator, or purchase a high-end A/C inverter for your vehicle (\$120 or less). If the generator is a rental (or borrowed), make sure to specify whether it runs on diesel or unleaded gasoline. You will need the following tools, at a minimum: a circular saw (aka Skilsaw), a large claw hammer, a speed square, a framing or builder's square, a level, an impact driver with a 3/4" deep well socket, an electric drill or a battery-operated hammer drill capable of continuous high-torque operation, a 1/2" wood boring drill bit (at least 6" long), a nail gun, a Bosch or Hilti electric hammer drill with a 1/2" bit, a Sawzall (reciprocating saw), an adjustable wrench, three pencils.

Nice to have: a tool belt, a set of sharp chisels, a nail set / punch, a chalk box with extra chalk, a plumb bob, a long (extendable) level, a jigsaw with a pack of sharp blades, a router with a sharp 1/4" or 3/8" roundover bit, a belt sander with 80 grit and 120 grit belts, an orbital or square palm sander with 120 and 180 grit pads, a miter saw (aka chop saw), a Bo-wrench©, a flat bar, a pry bar, a crow bar, a cat's claw, gloves, eye protection, ear pro, a radio, a hard-working helper, a cooler full of iced tea with two end-of-the-day victory beers at the bottom of the cooler...

If the walking surface of your deck is less than 4' high, then here's your list. All lumber is pressure-treated, unless otherwise noted.

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(13) 4x4x10 posts (4x4x8's will suffice if you are 3' off the ground, or purchase only [7] 4x4x8's if you are 2' off the ground)

(75) 2"x2"x36" ballusters / pickets (preferably 36" long; this is a rough count based upon stair rail length variations and the instance of bad / split pickets in a bundle).

(9) 2x6x12's (one for the B-wall band board, one for the ledger, two for the A- & C-wall top rail plates, one (halved) for the stair rail top plates, and four used to make two double 2x6 girders; one girder against the house wall to accommodate recent national code changes, and one at the deck's midspan. An additional girder may be built near the outside wall for a super-beefy substructure, but it is by no means typically required, unless the deck is cantilevered (built so that the joist system / finished structure freely overhangs the girder by up to 1/3 total joist length, with no direct transference of top-to-bottom load on the 'floating' end of the deck).

(16) 1/2" x 6" galvanized carriage bolts, with nuts and washers (for securing your substructure perimeter posts to the band board).

(20) 1/2" x 5" galvanized lag screws, with washers (for securing your rail posts onto the outside of the band board).

(1) box of 3" strip nails for a Paslode© gas-operated nail gun or for a standard pneumatic nailer. Ring-shank nails are preferred. Electro-galvanized zinc, stainless, or other type approved nail required. If screws are to be used instead of nails, recommend purchasing a \$150 QuickDrive screw gun.

(1) 2-pack of long red Paslode gas charges (if Paslode is used).

(1) long bi-metal or "wood with nails" reciprocating saw blade

(1) long pruning "Ugly" or "fast wood cutting" reciprocating saw blade

(1) new circular saw blade, wet lumber preferred... I like Rigid© gold blade or red Diablo©

(1) 2-pack of 4x24 sanding belts, to smooth over the rails and remove lumber stamps and markings.

(17) 2x6x10's (joists, A- & C-wall bands, band wrap, B-wall top rail plate—only if steps spill off the B-wall—otherwise use a 2x6x14 for the B-wall rail top plate)

(2) 2x4x12's (halved, stair rails)

(4) 2x4x10's (A / C rails)

(2) 2x4x12's (B rail)

(21) 80# bags of concrete mix, which allows for 1.5 bags per hole.

(4) 2x6x8 white wood (non-pressure treated pine, for use as temporary support legs).

(9) 2x6 joist hangars, if required against house wall (remember, you will have girder support within one foot of the ledger. Hangars are not required against the B-wall band, as long as a minimum of 5 nails pass straight through from the outside of the band board into the end of each joist (cannot be toenailed [or angle nailed] from inside of the box).

(1) 5# box of #30 triple hot-dipped galvanized hangar nails.

(1) box of ½" x 5" Red Head© concrete anchors (or equivalent), OR

(7) ½" x 5" (additional) lags with washers (whichever is necessary to anchor to the house; space them not greater than 2' apart on the ledger, being mindful of joist / joist hangar placement).

(23) 5/4 x 6 x 12 deck boards. If you don't have to go cheap in this area, don't. Get the premium "knot-free" decking for \$3 more per board.

(1) 2x12x16, from which to cut three stair stringers. If the finished walking surface of the deck is less than 3' from the ground at the place where the stairs will mount, then (1) 2x12x12 will suffice (in lieu of the 16 footer).

(8) 5/4 x 6 x 8 deck boards, for stair treads & risers.

(2) 2x2x8's will be required to fulfill the 'grippable' or 'graspable' handrail code requirement of recent years. Though the code only calls for it to be mounted on one handrail, build two for symmetry (and to avoid getting into a pissing contest over building code with your municipal inspector. For that matter, be prepared to change your rail at least once, since every inspector in every city or county has a different interpretation). In lieu of 2x2x8's, two 2x4x8's may be cut into elongated "C" shapes to make graspable side-mounted rails... if you decide to do this (it's stronger / more functional), purchase either four more ½" x 5" lags or (preferably) four 5" galvanized Simpson Strong Screws.©

(1) 12' roll of flashing or aluminum trim coil, along with a handful of siding or roofing nails (at least 1.5" long).

(1) small bottle of wood glue.

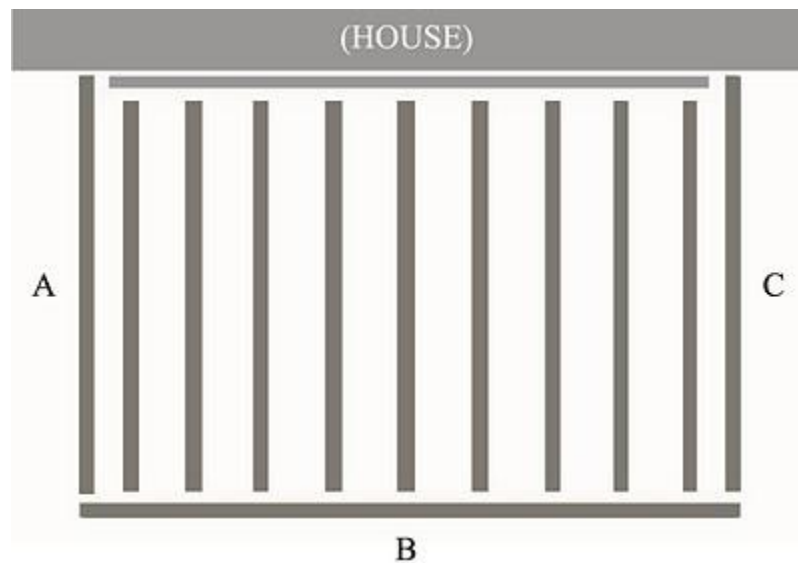
(2) gallons of Olympic deck stain / water repellent or Thompson's Water Seal

(approved Simpson or Z-Max post bases, hurricane straps, or mending plates... as required)

(Lattice or vertical solid skirting... as desired)

Empowering the Weekend Warrior: 10 x 12 Deck, Part II of, um, III

Saturday, July 10, 2010



Well, it takes more writing than I had anticipated to accurately share the info for this topic. This two-part story has become three-part. Okay, your location is chosen, you have a permit, and your material is on site. It's a beautiful Saturday morning, and at the end of the day, you'll be chillaxing on your new deck.

1. Make a cut list. Draw your 'box,' that is, the overhead view of your ledger board (against the house) and your A-, B-, and C-wall band boards. Annotate the location of the house wall on your drawing. Make the following measurements:

Ledger 141"
A-Wall Band 118.5"
B-Wall Band 144"
C-Wall Band 118.5"
Joists 117"

2. Check the factory ends of your boards with a speed square, to ensure that they

are squarely cut. If they are off a bit, draw a line and cut off just enough to make the ends square (90 degrees). Cut your boards according to the measurements on your cut list, and crown them. To crown a board, look down the long axis of the board from the end, with your dominant eye, while it is turned on its side (flat, wide surface of board perpendicular to the ground). In most cases, you will note either a slight hump / arch in the board, or you will notice a slight dip. If a dip, turn the board over. You are looking for a natural upward arch in the board, or the "crown"; that is how you will lay your joists, your band boards, your ledger board, and your girder(s). So, after each cut is made, draw an arrow on the board with a pencil or a lumber crayon, pointing in the direction of the upward crown. Once your boards are crowned, lay them on the ground in their proper locations according to your drawing.

3. Build two temporary legs out of 2x6x8 white wood. A solid temporary leg is basically an upside-down "T" with an 45 degree brace. The upright member should be at least as high as the top of the finished deck. The base should be at least 3' long for proper weight distribution of a deck this size. No measurements needed here, just make sure your cuts are straight. These legs will temporarily support the deck in lieu of posts, and will allow you to move the skeletized deck (band and joist system) left / right / up / down to become perfectly squared and leveled, with exception for variations in lumber. These temp legs will be attached approximately 110 inches from the house on both A- and C-wall band boards (mount to the inside of the band).

4. Mark the location where you'll be mounting the ledger board to the house. Remember that you'll need to consider that the deck boards will be sitting on top of the ledger, so if you're going off the materials list provided, you're gonna need a fat inch above the ledger board. Take that into consideration when mounting the ledger below an exterior door threshold, or when cutting away vinyl siding. To remove vinyl siding, use a grinder with a thin blade, or use a circular saw with the blade reversed... use a razor knife (box cutter, utility blade, e.g.) only as a contingency. Unroll a 13' length of flashing, and tuck it behind / underneath the house siding above and on each side. Nail it in place using roofing / siding nails.

5. It's time to mount the ledger, using concrete anchors or lag screws (as applicable). If you will be mounting onto a house band board using lags, make sure that you are actually attaching to the band and not to any part of the wall above it. In order to mount this board with no help, you'll need to mark on the house with a pencil / crayon / Sharpie© (only use the Sharpie for writing on flashing, or where you know it will be covered). First, mark the extreme left side of the deck. Then run a tape measure, and mark the house wall at 6' and at the extreme right side of the deck, 12.' Use a level to make sure these lines extend up and down on both sides of the intended ledger mount area. Now make a line at the center of your ledger (70.5 inches), and if you will be mounting into brick or block, pre-drill a 1/2" diameter hole about three inches to the left or right of the center line. Also, if you are mounting into brick or block, drill a 1/2" diameter hole exactly 3 1/2" from each end of the ledger

board. Now, having ready and by your side a level, a hammer, and a nail gun (if wood mount) or the concrete anchors and a hammer drill with a ½" bit (if brick or block mount), pick up the ledger board with your non-firing hand, under its center line for balance, and move it up to the center line on the wall. Match up the two lines, make sure you're not too high, and pop a few nails dead center on the board (or drill a hole in the masonry surface, using the pre-drilled ledger hole as a guide for the hammer drill bit. Place the level on the left side of the ledger board, then nail it in place with a handful of nails. Repeat this process for the right side. For a masonry mount, anchor each of the side holes as well. A level ledger is very important.

6. Once the ledger is mounted, attach the A- and C-wall bands. To do this as a one-man army, start by popping a nail in the A-wall band at the temp leg (at the roughly equivalent height of the ledger). Then move to the ledger and attach the A-wall band to the outside, as shown in the diagram. Use, at a minimum, five (5) three-inch nails, driven directly through the band board and straight into the end of the ledger. Then knock the temp leg off while supporting the band board. Place a level on top of the band. Allow the bubble to be slightly higher—but still within the lines—on the side of the board that is farthest from the house, because the weight of the joists will cause the deck to sink slightly. Keep the band still, and pop about six nails through the band and into the temp leg. Repeat this process for the C-wall.

7. Attach the B-wall band as illustrated, popping one nail through the B-band and into the end of the C-band for a temporary hold. Lift the left side of the B-wall band, and secure it to end of the A-wall band with five nails. No go remove and reset the opposite side, using five nails. You have now built the box.

8. Take a corner-to-corner measurement (diagonal, from one house corner to the opposite outside corner of the band). Remember the measurement. Now take the opposite corner-to-corner measurement. Move the temp legs left or right until the corner-to-corner measurements are within ¼." Your box is square. You will be squaring the box again once the joists are up.

9. Now, from the C-wall, facing the house, hook your tape measure onto the left side of the box against the house, and stretch it to the right (all the way to C wall). From left to right, make tic marks at the following lengths along the ledger board: 8", 24", 40", 56", 72", 88", 104", 120" and 136." Repeat this on the B-wall band board.

10. Center your joists on these tic marks. To do this by yourself, nail a 2x4 or 2x6 under the ledger, to act as a lip that holds your joists up. You can us scraps to accomplish this too. Then, one at a time, place the joists in their proper positions, driving five top-to-bottom nails through the B-wall band board and straight into the end of each joist. Then drive a few nails in the top and sides of the joist on the house end, to hold it in place. Once all joists are in place, attach joist hangars at the house wall. Take another corner-to-corner measurement to ensure that the deck is still square.

Empowering the Weekend Warrior: 10 x 12 Deck, Part III

11. With the deck squared, mark the locations of your posts. Holding your tape measure against the house, draw a line on top of your A-wall band board at 6" and 9.5," then draw an "X" between them. This is where the first 4x4 post will be mounted (inside the deck). Keeping the tape measure on the house wall, make similar marks at $118 \frac{1}{4}$ " and $121 \frac{3}{4}$," also with an "X" between the two lines. Now repeat this process on the C-wall band board. For the B-wall markings, hook the tape measure at the outside of either side wall (A or B), and make the following paired markings with an "X" between each pair: $46 \frac{1}{4}$ to $49 \frac{3}{4}$," and $94 \frac{1}{4}$ to $97 \frac{3}{4}$." Each wall has now been marked. There will also be a post in the A/B corner and the B/C corner.

12. Dig holes under both corners and under each "X." Each hole should be 12" deep by 16" wide, unless otherwise directed by local building code. Once the holes are dug, put a level on the band board all the way around the deck. If out-of-level in any area, manipulate the deck height by either excavating under the temporary legs or driving a wedge underneath. If you have a second set of hands, preferably with some muscle, one can simply lift the deck up while the other slides shims under the temp leg that needs to be lifted.

13. Measure the required length of each post. Using a sheet of paper, and starting at the A-wall against the house, measure from the top of the deck to 4" below the ground inside the hole. Write down the measurement for post # 1. Then move to post numbers 2 through 8. Cut your 4x4 posts and mark them accordingly, 1-8. Install 4x4 post bases on the bottom of each cut post, preferably the kind that can be installed in wet concrete. Temporarily nail the posts into their respective places, in such a way as for the posts to remain plumb (that is, vertically level or straight up-and-down), but not so as to impede the use of two through-bolts.

Now, it may be a local code requirement that you notch your posts, so that top-to-bottom 'positive load transference' is maintained from the walking surface of the deck to the concrete footing. This is not enforced nationally except when the deck surface is classified as load-bearing, meaning that it supports a wall that holds up the bottom of a roof structure. If you believe that you may one day turn your deck into a foundation for any type of room (screened porch, sunroom, standard residential addition), then notch your posts. If the room that you intend to build is habitable, meaning that it is heated (aka) "all season," then you will likely need to have a continuous footer around the entire deck (as opposed to 12x16 pier footings), connected to the existing house footer by an epoxied double track or triple track of $\frac{1}{2}$ " rebar from one end to the other (A/House to C/House). To notch the posts, measure $5 \frac{1}{4}$ " from the end of each cut post, and using a speed square, make a straight line across only one side of the post (perpendicular to the long axis of the post). Now set your Skilsaw (circular saw) to a blade depth of 1.5," and cut on that line. On two sides of the post now, there is a 1.5" cut. At the end of each cut, draw a

straight line to the nearest end of the post (2 ¼ inches-ish). Extend your circular saw blade fully, and cut the line you just drew on both sides. Cut the rest of the notch out with a jigsaw or Sawzall.

14. With the posts in place, drill ½" holes that pass through the band and each post (two holes per post). On the corner posts, one hole per side should be acceptable; some areas will require two bolts on each side. Install one galvanized ½" x 6" carriage bolt per hole, then install washers and nuts on each bolt. Tighten each with a ¾" wrench, ratchet, or adjustable wrench (or impact wrench to save time).

15. The following type of girder is not typically approved for a load-bearing structure (walls/roof), but it is perfectly acceptable for a deck. Instead of having two boards nailed together to support a top load, this method incorporates the bolting of two independent boards on each side of a 4x4 post. For the other method, see the next paragraph. Cut four girder boards (2x6x12's) at exactly 144" and pre-stage them underneath the deck, with the crowns marked. If you're building alone, it is time to make a few cheater blocks. Stand on the A-wall side and face the deck. As you are viewing it, you will need to nail one cheater block on both the left and right side of the number 1 and number 2 posts. Four blocks of wood in all. Using a single nail for each block of wood, mount each block on the post so that there is 6" of space between the top of the block and the bottom of the band. Now return to the girder boards. Place the A-wall end of one girder board on top of a block, then move to the C-wall side and, holding a nail gun, slide the girder board so that the end is flush with the outside of the C-wall band board. Lift it so that it touches the band board, and nail it into place with one or two nails. Go back to the A-wall and lift the girder so that it touches the band board, and so that it is also flush on the outside. Because there may be a natural bow in one of the bands, it is possible that you will have to push the girder toward, or pull it away from, the C-wall. Pop one or two nails to hold. Continue with the rest of the girder boards. Once all four have been installed, mark the locations of two inside posts per girder, using the B-wall posts as a guide. Dig the four holes for the inside pier footings, measure, cut, and install the post—each in their appropriate place, sandwiched between the two girder boards. Nail them each with two nails to hold. Now install two ½" x 8" bolts through the girder at each post. Add washers and nuts. Tighten. Now, standing or sitting on each joist (one at a time), ensure relative straightness of the joist and toenail (or angle nail) each joist to each girder board (preferably on each side of each joist).

To make a load-bearing girder for this deck (in the instance of a pre-planned future addition), crown two 2x8x12's and nail them together, three nails across the width of the board every two feet. Then, flip the girder over and repeat this, directly in-between the opposite side's sets of nails. In order for a girder such as this to be supported, either notch your opposite [A and C] wall posts by one inch (for the girder to set inside), or bolt a 2x4 to the back of the post, so that the 2x4 sits on the concrete footing and the girder sits on the 2x4.

16. Check square and level one last time. If good, pour concrete. To do this, wet the hole, then dry dump half a bag and add water. Mix in place thoroughly with a hoe, shovel, electric paddle mixer, or a combination of the three. Now dry dump the other half of the bag. Add water. Mix in place. 1 and ½ bags is preferred per hole, though one bag will suffice. Concrete loves water, so once the water settles, top off each footing.

17. Make a pencil mark on the house wall above the center of each joist, approximately 1.5" above the ledger (or higher). Now comes the easy part... putting on the deck boards. The only specific advice I have for the lay of the board is to cup the board downward... that means to look at the end of the board and see which way the board wants to arch or buckle. If you're not sure, a good rule of thumb is to look at the rings in the wood. Lay it so the rainbow effect of the trees rings is right-side-up. The lumber companies are supposed to mark the cupped side with a stamp or a crayon, so that you can lay that side down toward the ground. That method isn't trustworthy enough to follow all the time, though.

Some pros say to start from the B-wall and work toward the house, but doing so allows less room to work as you approach the house wall. Pre-cut the first two boards to the exact width of the deck (measure it now; a gap or a space could make it a pinch wider than 144"). Nail or screw these boards down. If you're screwing the boards down, save time by investing \$150-\$200 in a QuickDrive© or Senco© screw gun. I prefer the stand-up QuickDrive. The screws are expensive (\$120 per box... one box will cover the tread surface of this deck), but your back will thank you for it. Easy to operate. If you are nailing the boards down, use 16-penny ring shanks or equivalent! Smaller nails will eventually lift out of the board. Smooth-shank nails will do the same. Now, run the uncut boards, one after another all the way out to the end of the deck. You can nail/screw each board completely, or just pin it with three nails (A, C, center) until all boards are on... then beginning at each pencil mark that you just made on the house, run a string line (chalk box) to the B-wall location corresponding to the same joist (indicated by the vertical nails in the B-wall overhanging the last board. Nail or screw along each line, using two nails or screws per board. Using a string line (a chalk box), pop lines on the top edge of the boards on all three sides (A, B, & C). The lines should accurately represent the outside edge of the band board. Double check so that you don't cut into the band. At this point, trim the excess for a clean deck with no overhangs.

18. Cut your rail posts. As long as you did not substitute 2x8's for your band / joist system, or substitute "two by" lumber for the deck boards in place of 5/4 decking, the measurement for your posts will be 43 ½." This allows you to use 32" balusters / pickets without cutting them, for a 37" high handrail. You can bevel the bottom of the posts any number of ways, but I usually just snip an inch or so off the exposed bottom edge of each post, at a 45 degree angle (for aesthetics). Mounting locations for the posts are as follows: on the A and C walls, there should be a post against the house (an inch away or so) and a post at the center of the wall. Forget the corners

for now. On the B wall, the posts should line up with the bottom posts. Mount all of the posts except for the two corners (which for aesthetics will each require a double-bevel), making the bottom of each post flush with the bottom of the band board, and popping two nails to hold each post in place. Between each post, cut a tightly-fit 2x6. In your materials list, I referred to this as 'band wrap.' This will also help to keep the posts plumb. Now, when you have cut 2x6's between posts, nail them in place so that they are flush with the top of the deck. So at this point, you're wondering about the corner posts. Cut four 2x6 boards that run tightly from the corner of the deck to their corresponding posts. By doing this, you have created a small corner pocket with the 2x6's for which to mount the corner posts. Pre-drill two ½" holes about halfway through each post, then drive 5" lag bolts into each post with a washer between the post and the bolt head. For the corner posts, you may want to shave the exposed edge (outside corner) of each, for a flat bolt-mounting surface.

19. Lay out a 2x4x10 on the inside of A-wall's posts. Use a pencil to mark along the sides of the posts. Cut one piece to fit between the first two posts, and cut a second piece to cut between post 2 and post 3. Mount with nails between the posts. From the above view, you should see the skinny side of the 2x4 (1.5") flush with the top of the posts. The 2x4 should be mounted flush with the inside of the rail posts (toward the deck, as opposed to being mounted outside toward the yard). Repeat these cuts, and mirror these mounts at the bottom of the rail, with a 3.5" space between the bottom of the 2x4 and the deck surface (use the wide part of another 2x4 as a spacer). Now do this for the B-wall and C-wall as well, remembering to leave the space between B-wall's center posts open for the steps.

20. With the 2x4 rails installed, lay a 2x6x12 on top of both the A wall and the C-wall, cup down (just like your deck boards). This is your top rail plate. Scoot it so that it is flush with the inside of the posts, and so that it is nearly touching the house. Using a speed square, mark a 45 degree angle on the end of the board so that it can marry up with B-wall's top rail plate. The short side of your cut should end at the inside corner of the corner rail post; the long side of your cut protrudes toward the yard (away from the deck). Cut and secure with nails or screws; use a minimum of two fasteners per post and two fasteners per 2x4 rail section (A-wall, for instance, should have a minimum of ten screws). Once A- and C-walls top rail plates are installed, take a measurement from the long corner of the A- or C-wall top plate to the opposite side of the following rail. Overhang that rail by ¼." Make the cut and install the plate. Repeat for the opposite side.

21. Install the pickets / balusters. Begin on one side of the stair rail post and continue to the house wall, using the broad side (3.5") of a 2x4 as a spacer. Place the 2x4 block against the first post and drive a nail with your nail gun center mass near the top of the picket, with a slight upward angle. Do this all the way to the house wall, putting only one nail at the top. It is important to slightly angle the nail so that the nail does not protrude through the opposite side of the rail. If the pickets are old or dry, they will split; you either need fresh-cut pickets to use a nail gun, or you

will need a trim nailer with stainless 2 ½” nails (or screws, but you will need to pre-drill all your pickets). Whenever you finish a section of pickets (between posts), maintain the same space between the post and the picket when you begin running pickets on the opposite side of that same post. Just remember, you need to have no space greater than 4.” If your deck is less than 30” from the ground, a handrail is not even required. If your deck is less than 16” from the ground, steps are not required. When you are finished nailing the tops of the pickets, come back and nail the bottoms, placing a level against every fourth or fifth picket to ensure you’re not running off of plumb. When all pickets have been installed, take a breather. Go over the whole deck and look for nail pops (nails that are sticking out or sticking up anywhere).

Though steps (stairs) were contemplated in the materials list, they will not be included in this post. Amazing how much writing is required to explain a simple construction project in detail.

Two Chesapeake Park Skaters, 7/10/10















Flashback 1988: Broughton, England



This is my kid sis, at a castle in Broughton, England in 1988. Just to the right of the picture, there's a pear tree. What makes this photo memorable to me is, at the very moment that this photo was taken, I was standing under the pear tree, peeing toward the moat... and directly onto the electric fence. I thought my sister was throwing pears at the side of my head, and I kept screaming, "OW, STOP!... OW, STOP!..." Some things you just don't forget.

Whirlwind Paris

Some friends from our church went to Israel today, and they have a scheduled 13-hour layover in Paris. One of them asked me what could be realistically accomplished for first-timers in Paris on such a short clock. Surprisingly, I couldn't find the answer online. So I worked up a possible itinerary. It should be helpful for anyone who passes through Paris on a small fuse.

— — —

Okay, you've touched down at Paris / Charles de Gaulle International, and you've got at least six hours before your next flight. Fun! Here you go...

First off, if anyone in the group flew on separate planes, make a solid linkup plan. CDG is a pretty big airport. Wear a recognizable shirt and stay visible. The typical link-up terminal is Terminal 2, which is huge (broken into sections, 2A – 2F). The best place to meet is under Terminal 2, at the railway information kiosk. From there, the attendant can page a separated friend across the terminal's intercom, like my mom had to do for me once at K-Mart. FYI, Terminal 3 also has a railway. Follow the "Trains to Paris" signs to take you to the kiosk.

You can purchase a day pass that works on all trains, but you're limited on how many zones you stop at. The zones are basically concentric rings drawn around Paris... don't worry, everything you want to see in a short period of time is in Zone 1, which is central Paris. (Relating it to the U.S., for those who are familiar with Washington, D.C., Zone 1 would be all of D.C. and Arlington, Zone 2 would be Crystal City, Alexandria, etc.; Zone 3 would be Bethesda...) Zone 5, the farthest rung, is where CDG Airport is located. So you'll be physically occupying Zones 1 and 5 today, and just passing through Zones 2, 3, and 4.

Ask the information booth attendant where to purchase a (2-Zone) day pass to Paris. They have automatic ticket machines, but you'll need Euros... there are a few ATM's around, just ask any English-speaker where one is. Good news, the Euro has been sitting at around .8, or roughly \$1.25 per 1€. Good time for Americans to visit. Be careful, though, it's still expensive, and the price on an item will often creep upward if the vendor knows that you're an American. Just be alert on your spending. The good thing is that in Europe, and in most of the world, the price on the tag is the price that you'll pay, exactly. Tax is always built into the printed price, so you won't have to guess the tax rate like you do here in the U.S. during interstate travel.

Okay, so you're itching to go. Here's a good, fast route that will maximize the bang for your buck.

1. Hold on to your ticket! At the airport, jump the RER-B (blue line) train to Paris. Get off at St. Michel / Notre Dame. This is the longest leg of your route today, 20-30 minutes ride time. Ooh, ahh, la Dame, c'est magnifique! Take pictures.

2. Re-enter the St. Michel / ND station. This time, take the RER-C (yellow line) toward Versailles – Rive Gauche. If you're art lovers, get off at the next stop, Musee d'Orsay. Van Gogh, Gauguin, Monet, Degas, Renoir, and a number of famous sculptors' works are on display here. A day could easily be lost in this museum, so you might just snap a few shots of the building to show you were here. Sounds cheesy until you're gone and you wished you had.

3. Re-enter the station and continue toward Versailles – Rive Gauche. Exit at Champ de Mars... Le Tour Eiffel is in view when you exit, and the River Seine is on your left. If you're hungry, stand under the tower looking out over the mall area (the Seine to your back). Walk down the left side of the mall on the wide sandy path, crossing over one street, and turning left at the second street (maybe the third). One block outside the mall is a favorite hangout spot of mine and Petra's, Le Dome Café. There's a decent souvenir shop right around the corner.

4. Skip the Eiffel steps, you'll do enough walking today. When you're done walking everywhere, around the tower (taking every picture at every angle) head back to the Metro. Take the connector rail from Champ de Mars to Bir-Hakeim. Then jump the green line (#6) toward Charles de Gaulle-Etoile. Get off at Charles de Gaulle-Etoile.

You're at the Arc d'Triomphe. Walk down the cobbled Champs-Elysees and resist McDonald's... you can eat that in Virginia. Instead, look for the signs around France with a little baker man sliding bread in an oven. It's a patisserie, a real French bakery. Don't show disgust over your thimble of coffee.

5. Re-enter the station (CDG-Etoile) and this time take the yellow line (#1) toward Chateau de Vincennes. Stop at Palais Royal to see the Louvre! Yeah, it's the famed site of Mona Lisa and a million of her friends. You won't be sorry you stopped in there, just watch your time. Need to start wrapping this show up.

6. Re-enter and continue on #1 in the same direction. Take the next stop (Louvre Rivoli). Walk toward the river for a great photo op @ Pont Neuf, which is the oldest standing bridge in Paris.

7. Enter Pont Neuf Metro station (purple # 7) toward Villejuif / Marie d'Ivry, get off at the next stop (Chatelet). Walk (follow signs) to Chatelet-Les Halles, where you'll pick up the RER-B (blue line) back to CDG International Airport. Congrats, you just scratched one off the bucket list.

Some general information: In case you're wondering about cab fare, it's pricy—and it's a crap shoot. You can get to Paris from the airport, or vice versa, on 30 Euros if you're a lucky French-speaking American. If you're a non-French-speaker, estimate between 45-65€. 80 to 100 for a drunk, non-French-speaking American... get it? You're in Central European Time (CET), which is Zulu+1. You're 6 hours ahead of U.S. Eastern Standard Time. To dial a U.S. number from any country in the world, dial 001, then the area code and telephone number. Most overseas calling cards do not have punch-in codes like they do in the U.S., they have chips that scan into the machine. The card must sometimes stay in the machine during the call. Public restrooms are not always free. Always keep a few Euros worth of change on you, because some bathroom stalls either have coin slots or attendants to take a flat 1 to 4 Euros in order for you to use the bathroom. Don't worry, this trend is changing. Besides, where public restrooms are concerned, the world has a social contract with McDonald's.

Heckling. If you are in a prominent area full of street merchants that approach you, I use a ¼ price rule of thumb. If the watch costs 40€, I will hold at 10€... if it's something I really want, I might go 12€. The standard trinkets in Paris are Eiffel statues, watches, lighters, scarves, laser-etched crystal, knock-off handbags, and junk jewelry. If you are particularly interested in something, be straightforward, but stone-faced. "I really like that. 10 Euro." "Ten Euro? You're crazy!" (vendor walks away) "Okay, how much then?" "Normally 40€. For you, 35." Now it's your turn to walk away, but you have to dangle a string behind you. Talk out loud a lot. Act like you live down the street, like you've been to Paris fifty times. After 5-10 minutes of banter, you will get your 40€ watch for 10 or 11 Euros.

If you see massive amounts of people marching with flags in the mall area of the Eiffel tower, or on the sidewalks of the Champs-Elysees, take your pictures quickly and leave. You don't need to get slowed up by a political demonstration. Under any other circumstances, you'd be fine... but don't take chances when you've got a plane to catch.

Lastly, if you don't get the chance to shop while you're running around... no worries. From postcards to Prada, the airport's got you covered... and surprisingly, the prices aren't half bad.

Have a fantastic trip, and come again when you have some more time... There's something magical here!

A Lasting Inspiration: Coach Joel Lambson

Monday, July 12, 2010

In 1994, I stepped into a high school football program for the first time. It was overseas, at the Department of Defense Dependent School for the U.S. European Command, A.M. Patch American High School. Unbeknownst to me, the school had a laughing-stock football record across Europe since the late 70's. Conversely, a new Athletic Director had just taken the reigns... bottom line, a winner... and it so happened that he was Patch High's new head football coach.

Two-a-days were all kinds of hell. The coaching staff was comprised of a couple wiry drill-instructor types, Active Duty soldiers and Marines, and a former Patch football grad. Coach Lambson was the quintessential hardass, I kid you not-right up there with Dirty Harry and Gunnery Sergeant Hartman.

Nobody watches our practices. NOBODY. No parents, teachers,



siblings, girlfriends, or random dog-walking strangers. He'd simply have his coaches run them off the field... even if they weren't on the field.

No grab-assin. No showboatin. No smokin & jokin. Not on the field. Not off the field. Yes Sir, No Sir, heads high, stances low, nothing but discipline. Oh yeah, and it goes without saying that he constantly and consistently smoked our bags. Coach Lambson was one of my major inspirations for joining the Marines.

That first year, we dealt some death. Thanks to Coach, who came from Hanau as the head of a winning football program, we blew the dust off of a couple decades' bad performance. I was not a notable player, but I earned my Varsity letter and earned a spot on the starting line toward the end of the season. It was short-lived because I broke my hand. Coach told me, as he told us all, that the amount of time we spent in the gym and out of trouble over the summer would directly affect our positions when we return the following year.

Senior year, I sat in on our first chalk talk of the season, right before two-a-days kicked off. In a move that could have lost me my spot on the team, I sneaked in a mini tape (voice) recorder. Then, obsessive-compulsive me, I transcribed the talk. Stumbling upon the writing in an old notebook this weekend, I read it entirely... I felt like I was listening to the old man in HiFi stereo surround sound. It's a classic American high school football speech. Without further adieu, Coach Joel Lambson:

..."This is Coach Johnson back here (raise your hand coach)--okay? That's Coach Cooper... for you guys that don't know him... That's the only two coaches I have this year--that should be plenty. Okay? If you want to get your gear picked up, or if you want me to swear at you (which I've been known to do occasionally)--give one of those coaches a hard time, okay? If you have problems--serious problems--you come see me with 'em, okay? Do never talk back to a coach--if you want to talk back, try me, okay? If you ever talk back you get your gear turned in. I prefer "Yes Sir," "No Sir." Some of you do not have that in your vocabulary. If you don't, use your head. Use your judgement. Don't screw with my coaches. Screw with me, okay? Im not near as mean as some people think I am. But I will get on your ass--real good, believe you me. Okay? And you too. You're too damn big to miss (presumably pointing at Gary, our Center). If I never talk to you, you probably have a problem. If I don't chew your ass out, that means I probably don't like you. If I think you're capable of doin' something I'm gonna see that you do it. Okay? One way or the other. I'll rip your ass like you have never been ripped before. Why am I doin' that? Think it's just to be mean? [I'm] gonna make you football players, Gentlemen. [I'm] gonna make you football players. [Now] I've done this for a couple years now, alright? A couple years--so I know what I'm doin.' THE FIRST THING YOU HAVE TO HAVE FOR PATCH FOOTBALL---Gentlemen.. You have to have a little faith, okay? You have to have a little faith in me, [the] coaching staff, and you have to have a little faith in what I'm gonna teach ya. Believe me--some of you guys think I'm crazy... but I'll let the record speak for itself okay? // We came close to winning it last

year, but we only had about ten guys who could do ten push-ups. They were just a bunch of little [wishing hats?] last year. We still can't throw worth a shit. With this, Gentlemen, right here, I think we can win it this year. The good news is this, Gentlemen: I think that we can win the European Championships with this team right here--I'm not bullshittin. // I didn't tell you guys that last year. I said, "We're gonna try 'n' survive this year." But low & behold we damn near won. We have seventeen players back from last year. Why can't we sin, Gentlemen? Now, I don't see any reason why we can't. ["Yes Sir"--uttered by Babionne] Babylon? That's the good news. The bad news is this Gentlemen--Patch no longer is a wuss. Y'know, for years, the coaches used to wrestle each other to get to seat up to play Patch they wanted to play 'em two, three times a year. They used to just toy with you guys. You were the laughing stock of Europe--am I lyin? Anybody that's been here--I'm not lyin' am I Ronnie [Ron B.]? I was at Hanau for four years I used to love to play Patch. The game was over in the first quarter Gentlemen. Now we have a little complication for Patch now it's a winner.... Patch is now a winner, okay? What happens when you're a winner? ["People come after you"--Childress] People come after your ass, don't they? The rest of the bad news is we're moved up a league--you win, you move up, okay? We don't play Bamberg this year Gentlemen [Martinez grunts]. We don't play Ansbach this year, y'know... we get to play Hanau. We get to play Wiesbaden, okay? Mannheim--is that// We can... probably finish as bad as 1-6 this year, but that's good. That's all we could win. Three of those teams have called up Tom LeBlanc who is Director of all sports in Europe, okay? They've made him a promise--that they will beat the old man this year okay... I've kicked their ass every year now they made a promise that they're gonna kick my ass this year; and unfortunately you guys have to be a part of it -- [does] that bother you Chet? Wiesbaden said he will beat me. ISB promised that he will beat me too---huh Jermaine?---I said don't beat me too bad--they said I had it comin... That makes my ass pucker I don't know about you guys--I like a good street fight. I told Wiesbaden I said we'll play you on the Autobahn. Well we're gonna do a few things different this year. We came in second last year and we couldn't even tackle! So Gentlemen I'm gonna let your coaches talk to you for a minute now...

At this point, I rustled around and stopped the tape in my pocket under the covering sound of a cough... never had the nerve to turn it back on again, cause Coach moved and was now standing right next to me.

But anyway, that was the driving force behind a winning team. We didn't take the title that year either, but the following year, when several of us had graduated, Coach drove that team to an All-European Championship win, and I believe he got up there one more time the following year before retiring, but don't quote me on that one. In this lifetime, Ladies and Gentlemen, winning is a choice. Coach Lambson proved that to me.





3 comments:

Anonymous said...

Awesome!! I remember parts of that speech! I can't believe you recorded it. God, Coach Lambson was hilarious: "You'd better be on them like shit on stink!" "Give your body a chance!"

Football at Patch is something I'll never forget -- well, except for the concussion during the playoffs my senior year ;) Coach helped me out throughout high school with the administration and other teachers -- he was an absolute inspiration and a huge part of my life as well. Last I looked for him, he was somewhere near Ft. Huachuca, AZ.

MJ, I can't recognize who you are from your picture, but I have a hunch (the team used to box in your basement?)

Anyway, great f'n article. Thanks for posting!

Brian "Montana" Hauck

July 8, 2011 10:24 PM

Anonymous said...

coach lambson was the hardest man i had ever met the day i showed up to practice my sophomore year. taught me a lot.

August 6, 2011 6:25 PM

Anonymous said...

I played running back for coach in Hanau Germany when he first came to Europe. The year was 1992-1993. He brought his son and his son's best friend from New Mexico. He taught us the Wing T Offense and boy, did we run havoc over The European High School seen.

October 17, 2011 5:29 AM

Racial Tension in the U.S., and the Video that Scared My Wife

Even though I wholly back the spirit of righteous revolution, there's a reason I don't subscribe to the modern Tea Party movement. There's not enough oversight to ensure that stupid members keep from marring the good intent of the organization.

If you check out the news today, you'll learn that a billboard in Iowa recently compared President Obama's "Democratic Socialism" to Hitler's "National Socialism" and Lenin's "Marxist Socialism." The sign was placed by members of Iowa's Tea Party. Twenty minutes ago, the news read that the billboard's owner had no intention of removing it. As of ten minutes ago, the sign has reportedly been removed. Amazing how fast politics work these days.

Meanwhile, the NAACP has drafted a resolution condemning racism and bigotry within the Tea Party movement. Oddly enough, NAACP Chairman Julian Bond made similar references to President Bush and the Republican Party in 2006: "The Republican Party would have the American flag and the swastika flying side by side;" he also compared Bush's judicial nominees to members of the Taliban regime, and called Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell "tokens."

Of course, that was way back in 2006. More recently, the NAACP has effectively lobbied for the Obama administration's move to drop charges against the 'new black panther party,' for voter intimidation incidents in Philadelphia and Mississippi, and for the incident viewed all over YouTube, urging blacks to kill crackers and their babies:

Furthermore, NAACP leadership has been fighting battles to include sex crimes and embezzlement. Bottom line, if the NAACP goes after the Tea Party, and lobbies on behalf of racist black organizations, then screw the NAACP. It's not the same as it was in the 60's. Two days ago, Michelle Obama spoke at an NAACP event, crying continued racial inequity towards blacks. I'm ready to paint myself green and move to the Arctic.

Follow-up to Previous Post Re: Racial Tension in the U.S.

Well, it looks like one federal arm has taken this issue seriously. Yesterday, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights challenged the U.S. Department of Justice and this administration, for "the unequal administration of justice" in dropping charges against members of the 'new black panther party.'

Do not be numb to this, America. Members of the aforementioned group have met the most basic definition of terrorism... using the overt threat of force to intimidate or coerce, especially for political, religious, or ideological purposes... and they are

being protected by our President, his nominated officials at the Justice Department, and the NAACP. Racial equality is a two way street, and in the year 2010, Americans need to maintain a zero-tolerance policy across the board.

La Vita Bella

Aaah, life again. The kids flew in from Alaska yesterday (early) morning. I've got the rest of the week free. All day, I nodded my head in a North/South direction, pretending to understand three sets of stories being simultaneously spouted off by Josh, Caleb, and Lily, who were all excited to be home. Wolves, meese, bears, and porcupines. Josh (9) beat up a 13-year-old kid and sent him home crying. Cute. Lily was still hung up on the 4th of July "pair of shoes" man (acrobatic *parachute* man). Baby Ayla was walking around and babbling her own incoherent stories, visibly relieved to be in the company of her older siblings again. Caleb *almost* went off the high dive (made it to the edge). "That's okay, bud. I chickened out my first time on the high dive too." Fishing, gold panning, and general adventures synonymous with the Great State comprised the topic of the day.

Three weeks of separation should have been a welcome respite for Petra and I, but we couldn't get our mind off the kids (especially Lily, who just turned three). By the end of the day, we had settled back into being a family. Hectic frustration, yelling, and extinguishing small fires. Feeding the horde. Petra runs 3 miles. Where's the baby? Dad rides his bike 20 miles. Mama's got singing practice at 7, the boys have their first day of football practice at 6, and coach dad is frantically trying to scratch up some old plays, drills, and exercises for practice. "PETRA!!! HAVE YOU SEEN MY WHISTLE???" Kids are screwed up on their sleep cycles, and they think it's wierd to have darkness at night again. At 1 in the AM, Caleb's ear starts hurting him. Really hurting. Doctor mom prescribes Motrin. 5AM, he's up again, screaming in pain. He and I just got back from the Emergency Room. Middle ear infection, swimming is suspect. Surprisingly good ER crew.

Kids are stomping back to life upstairs. Mama's picking up Caleb's prescriptions. I'm gonna suck one more cup of Joe and psych myself for the day ahead... Ready, break!!!

New Website: City by City Art (.com)

Saturday, July 17, 2010

I started a new website, www.citybycityart.com. The idea just formed in my head this week, and I put it to the test in downtown Norfolk today. This first painting is *Norfolk*. The artist is Norfolk. Only the finished paintings will be displayed on the website, but here are a few candids from today. I'd like to have *Norfolk* finished in a few weeks (estimate 2 or 3 more site visits, next stop Waterside, then Ghent / Colley Ave). We'll see.





Standing in the Gap: Steve Bellavia

Saturday, July 24, 2010

*Stand in the gap, going boldly to His throne of grace;
Stand in the gap, He will hear you when you seek His face;
Put your weapon to its use
And believe it will produce
Stand in the gap...
...Until all hell breaks loose!*

--Petra (Christian rock band)

— — —

There are a number of scriptures in the Bible that point out the importance of living a good life; one that is worthy of our Maker's "Well Done" approval. Often, the concept is likened to walking in our Father's footsteps... on the 'straight and narrow,' walking the good road or path. According to Psalm 1, "Blessed is the man [woman] who walketh not in the way of the ungodly..." Psalm 37:23 tells us that the steps of a righteous man are ordered by the Lord. The narrow way, walled by Salvation, is the route to the beautiful Celestial City in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Pastor Steve Bellavia leads a good life. His name alone hints of 'the good [beautiful] life,' or of 'the good way' [road/path/street]. Few people are deserving of such a good name, but Steve fits his nicely. He and his wife Shelley were recently the emergent victors of a taxing spiritual battle; in the process of overcoming, they--along with their young daughter Gianna--uprooted from coastal Virginia 'for the sake of the call,' and are now ministering and serving from a home base in New York.

I am a finnick learner, with a tendency to shoot the messenger. Don't teach me how to harpoon a whale unless you've got a 6" scar on your chest, a tattoo on your face, and you answer to "Quohog." I won't trust a swinging vine unless the guy who hands it to me is wearing a TOL loincloth. Likewise, I cannot truly receive applicable wisdom from the Word of God if I cannot relate to, or 'click' with, the mouthpiece. I can click with Steve. In fact, I think most people can. The way he crafts his message, the way he forms his thoughts, and the way he relates to people is uncanny. He has the self-deprecating humor that softens hearts and minds, and the powerful anointing of God that allows his poignant words to then penetrate the same. And he does it without a tattoo face.

Last Sunday, he was the guest speaker at our church, 3n1 (Suffolk, VA). He was speaking on 'making your walk more effective,' though his title was undoubtedly snappier. One point he made instantly related to me and to everyone in the audience: you do not need an epic 'rebound from sin' story to have an effective testimony. Bingo! For some reason, in the realm of Christianity, having a past life of

dealing coke and being a murderous thug comes across as sexier and more impacting upon our intended audience. Steve put that into perspective and crushed that lie for his audience Sunday. "In order to have an effective testimony," Steve said, "you've got to know your weapons, inside & out." The most pertinent weapons, of course, being (1) God's Word and (2) prayer. Steve also talked about how we as Christians have become so incredibly comfortable with sin. Sin permeates our senses, through music, TV, movies, games, the company we keep, and every surrounding element of our environment. Garbage in, garbage out. Guilty! Though my family's TV and general environment is well-filtered spiritually, my own personal music collection, my tongue, and other elements of my personal life are nothing short of FILTHY! And the impact of Steve Bellavia? I've felt convicted throughout the week, and have won a few small battles regarding sin in my life because of it. Thanks, Steve.

I have, loosely kept in my head, a running list of individuals whom I believe to be truly charged by God to inspire and empower people to become bold in their individually-respective Christian walk. This man is altogether capable and deserving of, and poised to, impact ridiculous numbers of people for the Lord, both nationwide and across the globe. Remember his name... Steve Bellavia. Father to a beautiful daughter, husband to a beautiful wife, servant of a beautiful Savior, liver of a beautiful life.

3n1 Delivers a Powerhouse Two-for-Two

Tuesday, July 27, 2010

In my previous post, I did my best to highlight a powerful sermon from a guest speaker and mighty man of God, Steve Bellavia. In what can be deemed nothing short of divine inspiration, that message was seamlessly continued and bolstered by our pastor, Matt Stewart--who, having just returned from Israel with his wife (Lori) and the church's foreign ministry team, had not yet heard last week's message.

Matt Stewart has grown on me. Not that I ever disliked him--on the contrary--I simply never felt that we had much in common... exception being that he has a great family, of which I'm convinced that he's an exceptional husband and father (which I try to be). What I love about Matt is that he is a very "real" pastor. In the sermon / message he delivered Sunday, he outlined four baseline characteristics that a Christian should follow for an effective walk. My spiritual spidey senses nodded in full agreement, and it was then that I realized... Matt personifies these characteristics; he exudes them in his day-to-day life. In a world of 'do as I say' leaders, Matt is not.

To preface the message he preached, if you look in the back of your phone book today, you may very well find more churches--and types of churches--in your area

than, say, restaurants. The devil has been particularly busy in the last century, causing Babel-esque division in the Christian Church, under the guise of innocent-sounding denominations--or flavors--of Christianity. So how do you know which type of church to attend? Which one is the most 'correct' or doctrinally accurate?

Pastor Matt opened up with a simple thought on cooking recipes. The gist: a slam-dunk family recipe for a killer [lasagna, dessert, whatever], over time, can be replicated and contorted to the point that it 'misses the mark' when stood up to the original recipe. He then related the subject to the aforementioned contorsion of the modern Christian church, slamming some perceived myths relating to the Church and to an individual's faith, and laying out a simple recipe for bringing Christians back to base. {paraphrased} "Following a 'Super Pastor,' or attending a church that revolves around miraculous works... these should not define your walk. Believing that your Christian walk can be right without the Word of God--also a myth. Rather, it is simple obedience that moves the heart of God." If you're familiar with animated movie *Kung Fu Panda*, this would be the part where Jack Black's character learns that there is no secret ingredient in his father's recipe for Secret Ingredient Soup. *Simple obedience that moves the heart of God.* Nothing else is required!

Then Pastor Matt shared some spot-on insight: Jesus did not begin to perform miracles until he was thirty years old. We know that up to that point, he was a hard worker who loved God, loved people, and shared the story of God's love... and that was enough to incite the pride of Jesus' Heavenly Father. "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

And therein lies the recipe. The proof of concept is in the figurative pudding: Work Hard, Love God, Love People, Share the Story of God's Love. A simple recipe for a life that pleases God, packaged in a well-delivered, well-received sermon. Thanks, Pastor Matt.

My Girls: A Day in Photos

Daddy loves his girls. It's not hard to see why. Unfortunately, since I'm rebuilding my blog to make it less of a target for child molesters, I'm leaving out the cute photos. Child molesters, go to hell.







Sweet Little Shutterfly









Lily, you are an amazingly sweet and gorgeous little girl. Thank you for letting us see the world through yoursweet little eyes!



Eew! Yucky spider!





Random Photos of the Week



Babycake for Rebekah's shower thrown by the praise & worship team... Petra designed the cake and Deborah--whose cakes are amazing, by the way--made it. I ate it (the leftovers, that is... humble cake-eater that I am).



Mama Bekah!



'Paul & Court's [Sizzlin] Summer Bash' fell on one of coastal Virginia's hottest days of the decade... 108 degrees! Way to make it smokin' hot, you two! Excellent way to kick off what I hope will be an annual event.



Some five-alarm hottie I met at the shebash, and one of her many looks I love



Lily washed the entire bottom half of my truck, and not just like any three-year-old would do. She actually put some back into it! There was no stoppin' her.



(Photo removed from actual blog)



A Grand day at the Harbor View Grande Theater, present home to our church, 3n1.



Mockingbaby bird



Petra was using my truck because the A/C is out in her Envoy. I borrowed dad's truck to go do a roof job a few days ago. I pulled a 16-year-old driver move and bashed in his rear passenger door, hitting a short ground post that I didn't see. I fixed it yesterday.



Daggone, butterfly, why don't you and Petra's water bottle get a room?! The butterfly wouldn't leave. Finally, I pulled off all its legs so that it couldn't land on the water bottle. Just kidding.

Your Life as a Butterfly

Thursday, July 29, 2010



My folks have some big ol' butterfly bushes at their house. They attract all kinds of crap, the least of which are some gorgeous butterflies. In the last few days, the bushes have erupted with vibrant hatchlings. Yesterday, I was watching Lily catch a number of the more abundant species of butterfly that feasts on these purple-blossomed bushes. I think they're called "Buckeye" butterflies.

While she was catching them (sneaking up, pinching their wings together, then showing me [*Look, Daddy!*] and then releasing them to be caught again later), I pondered the life of a butterfly. I had never really contemplated the subject before. Hitch a ride on my train of thought:

So here you are, caterpillar. Incredibly vulnerable. You're fat, soft, and slow. Bottom of the bottom of the food chain, you are an easy and delicious snack for one of the two hundred birds that fly over your head every day. Birds eat several times their weight in worms and caterpillars such as yourself, so they're constantly on the hunt... for you. You're on the move like a 1-8-7 federal fugitive. You're boxed-in by white sidewalks that contrast starkly to highlight your plumpness, blacktop driveways that singe the hairs on your belly and scorch your forty-some feet that are too small for flip-flops... birds by day, toads by night, and weasel-like scouting ants that will snitch your location to their colony in a heartbeat. Biting little bastards! Spiders and worm-eating beetles are around every corner. Moles sniff you out when you try to go subsurface. You can drown in a single raindrop, and there's no escaping the indiscriminately-blind fury of a Briggs & Stratton lawnmower.

Eat your feelings? Ha! You devour entire crops. Your kind have a place in biblical history... as a plague! Once, you and your buddy personally annihilated four big boy tomato plants, expertly sidestepping the worm-killing granules and droplets to feast on those bright red orbs. Those days are gone, though. Last week, those swarming Japanese beetles ate everything within walking distance that actually had flavor! You are Moses in a desert of bland grass, constantly moving toward a mirage of tall corn stalks and butter bean plants.

Did I mention that you are incredibly alone? You are single for what you know of life. You know nothing of cuddling or spooning, no late-night chats over caramel machiatos, and there is no such thing as caterpillar sex! Your existence is so pathetic, that you almost want to crawl out on that highway and just end it. The only thing stopping you? It would take a month to get to the highway. Finally, you resort to mercilessly engorging yourself on tasteless ryegrass until it's coming out both ends, spinning and wallowing in your own vomit and crap until you've locked yourself inside a bubble; alienating yourself from the outside world and sinking slowly into a self-indulgent 'pity' coma.

You bake. You sweat. You endure torrential downpours. You don't even care anymore. Life sucks, and it will never get any better. Your thoughts drift to your days as a young worm, when the world was bright and new and exciting for fifteen minutes, just before that praying mantis unleashed hell on your brothers and sisters, some of them still trying to escape their cozy little eggs. Life will never be as good as it was back in the cabbage patch before that awful incident.

Wait a minute, it stopped raining. Your coffin stopped swinging. You're wide awake

now, with full clarity of mind, and your back itches like nobody's business. Is somebody playing Bob Marley? With the exception of feeling itchy and sore, you're actually feeling pretty good. Time to bust out of this joint. Hey, wait a minute. You have arms! Not just little stubby gelatinous suction-cup protrusions, but actual slim, sleek, sexy arms! *WOAH!!! Where'd these wings come from???! That's why my back was itching! Will you look at that, I can shake them! HAHA, TIGER STRIPES, BABY!!! Never knew I had it in me! Who'da thunk it. I'm in control of these beautifully inked-up wings! I wonder if they actually work? WHOA, CHECK ME OUT, I'M FLYIN'! NOW I'M A FLYIN' TALKIN' DONKEY!!! WHO'S YOUR DADDY!!!*

Wow, what a change. You can poop on all those ants that tried to eat you from way up here. That highway that was a month's walk before? You just flew over it. And you're meeting others just like you. You can dance on the breeze with a hot mama, and you've got the choicest flowers to drink sweet nectar from. Word on the streets is that MILLIONS of your types are catching a southbound breeze all the way to central Mexico. Ah, this is the life. You had to go through hell to earn these wings, but you'd do it again in an instant for just a moment of this euphoria. And you never had the foresight to imagine a silver lining... to imagine reaching the end of the tunnel. Glory to God, it's good to be a butterfly.

Ohio

Thursday, August 5, 2010



Left: The Girls at Aullwood Audobon Center

Well, we had an eventful weekend. It was a Dayton, Ohio out-n-back—for the annual Buchholz family reunion (mom's side of the family). Thursday night, we picked up uniforms at Peanut Park, then came home to finish packing. Left our town of Suffolk, Virginia at 10PM, an odd time to leave, but I wanted the kids to sleep so I drove through the night. Ohio greeted us with a brilliant sunrise about an hour outside of Dayton.

Because it is home to mom's ginormous family, it was the place we would always visit when we were stationed abroad. I lived there for a few years as a kid, and again for two years as a tweener. Ohio has always been the closest thing I've had to a 'home.' I never could stand the

place for some reason, but over the years, I've come to respect the Buckeye State for its nostalgic grip on my life, and I now concede that she has some very decent attributes.

The trip was short, so we were unable to make our pilgrimage to Super Subby's, the best sandwich joint this side of Jupiter. We were also unable to take the kids to a drive-in movie—I'm convinced that Ohio is one of the last States standing that offers this form of entertainment. Most of my wish list items [when visiting a different geographic area] revolve around food... in this case, beside Subby's there is Frisch's Big Boy, Perkin's, Skyline Chili, and Young's Dairy (just to name a few). Sadly, the patrons of Southern Belle bar informed me that there is no such beer as "Yeungling," at least not in Ohio. This was confirmed by the Century Bar two blocks over. On the upside, this weekend was downtown Dayton's Irish Festival, hosting numerous Celtic bands and an upbeat atmosphere. Until my vehicle was towed, then upbeat went out the window. Found it at 3AM. Paid \$160. Bummer.

Visited the Aullwood Audubon Center with the family, a very special place that I loved to visit as a kid. It still does not disappoint.

The family reunion went well. I actually met a few (first) cousins for the first time ever... and we're not that far apart in age... shameful, I know. It was great to see grandma and grandpa—more importantly, for my girls to meet their great-grandparents for the first time. They seem to be doing well. Par for the course, the family delivered smiles and hugs and kisses and cheek-pinches all around, and left everybody feeling pretty good. Afterwards, I was able to take the kids around to a few of my childhood rompin' grounds, and we tried to visit the awesomely huge Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson AFB, but we missed it (it closes daily at 5PM).

Fought (argued) with my mom-in law, got a hotel. From now on, we stay in a hotel. It's "safer." Played in the pool. Visited Uncle Allen and Aunt Pam Morrow. I love driving through small 'single-stoptlight' towns, where big American flags hang unabashedly from every other porch, and life revolves around a small but busy Main Street. Refreshed my farming knowledge meter and left with some canned pickled green tomatoes and canned salsa. Talked about Virginia Beach with some German Baptists who live next door to Allen & Pam. For those of you who don't know, German Baptists have the look and feel of Amish folk or Pilgrims of old. My request to take a picture of the 5-family gathering was expectedly denied, but I got to take a picture of Lily on one of the buggies. Drove home Monday. Nice trip.



Re-Spin on Sunscreen

Have you ever heard of the sunscreen speech? You may have heard it in Baz Luhrmann song "Everybody's Free (to Wear Sunscreen)." The original was written by Mary Schmich for the *Chicago Tribune* in 1997. I just heard it for the first time in years, and found it rather inspiring. Some messages need to be pumped back into the atmosphere every generation or so. At great risk of being cheezy, I'm going to post the text or lyrics below.

***Ladies and Gentlemen of the class of '97... wear sunscreen.
If I could offer you only one tip for the future, sunscreen would be IT.
The long term benefits of sunscreen have been proved by scientists whereas
the rest of my advice has no basis more reliable than my own meandering
experience.
I will dispense this advice now.***

***Enjoy the power and beauty of your youth. Never mind. You will not
understand the power and beauty of your youth until they have faded. But
trust me, in 20 years you'll look back at photos of yourself and recall in a way
you can't grasp now how much possibility lay before you and how fabulous
you really looked.
You are NOT as fat as you imagine.***

***Don't worry about the future; or worry, but know that worrying is as effective
as trying to solve an algebra equation by chewing bubblegum. The real
troubles in your life are apt to be things that never crossed your worried mind;
the kind that blindside you at 4pm on some idle Tuesday.***

Do one thing every day that scares you.

Sing.

***Don't be reckless with other people's hearts, don't put up with people who are
reckless with yours.***

Floss.

***Don't waste your time on jealousy; sometimes you're ahead, sometimes you're
behind. The race is long, and in the end, it's only with yourself.***

***Remember compliments you receive, forget the insults; if you succeed in
doing this, tell me how.***

Keep your old love letters, throw away your old bank statements.

Stretch.

Don't feel guilty if you don't know what you want to do with your life. The most interesting people I know didn't know at 22 what they wanted to do with their lives, some of the most interesting 40 year olds I know still don't.

Get plenty of calcium.

Be kind to your knees, you'll miss them when they're gone.

Maybe you'll marry, maybe you won't, maybe you'll have children, maybe you won't, maybe you'll divorce at 40, maybe you'll dance the funky chicken on your 75th wedding anniversary.

Whatever you do, don't congratulate yourself too much or berate yourself, either. Your choices are half chance, so are everybody else's.

Enjoy your body, use it every way you can. Don't be afraid of it, or what other people think of it, it's the greatest instrument you'll ever own.

Dance. Even if you have nowhere to do it but in your own living room.

Read the directions, even if you don't follow them.

Do NOT read beauty magazines, they will only make you feel ugly.

Get to know your parents, you never know when they'll be gone for good. Be nice to your siblings; they are your best link to your past and the people most likely to stick with you in the future.

Understand that friends come and go, but for the precious few you should hold on. Work hard to bridge the gaps in geography in lifestyle because the older you get, the more you need the people you knew when you were young.

Live in New York City once, but leave before it makes you hard; live in Northern California once, but leave before it makes you soft.

Travel.

Accept certain inalienable truths, prices will rise, politicians will philander, you too will get old, and when you do you'll fantasize that when you were young prices were reasonable, politicians were noble and children respected their elders.

Respect your elders.

Don't expect anyone else to support you. Maybe you have a trust fund, maybe you'll have a wealthy spouse; but you never know when either one might run out.

Don't mess too much with your hair, or by the time you're 40, it will look 85.

Be careful whose advice you buy, but, be patient with those who supply it. Advice is a form of nostalgia, dispensing it is a way of fishing the past from the disposal, wiping it off, painting over the ugly parts and recycling it for more than it's worth.

But trust me on the sunscreen.

Lost and Found



Johnathan Trotman, whoever you are, I found your Bible last year, while running early one morning through the Chesapeake Arboretum. The picture was serene: an open Book, small but battle-weathered, spread on a wooden bench near an over-creek bridge. There was a fog in the woods that morning, and I half expected to see the Book's owner kneeling nearby in quiet devotion. You were not there. I stopped running.

Ordinarily, I would not have stopped. I can recognize a Christian's attempt to season the world with the light of God's love. I believe that tracts are an impersonal, ineffective way to share this gift. Your Bible, though, was altogether personal. Even on the outside, it screamed of character. In the instant I picked it up, I was guilt

stricken... as if I were reading someone's intimately-written private journal. Then another thought passed through my mind.

Suicide. That must be it. Why would anyone dump their heart and soul into a devotional Bible, one crammed with interpersonal messages between the owner and the Author, and then leave it sitting on a lonely bench? I put the Word right back on the bench, and continued running. On the trail. Off the trail. Around the water. Around every turn, under every bridge, I braced myself for the worst. The arboretum is usually quiet and untraveled at that time in the morning, with the exception of perhaps a dog-walker or two. I saw no one.

After praying for you, "wherever you are, whatever you're going through..." I returned to the bench and found your Bible in the same position that I'd left it in. An hour had passed. *Lord, is there a message in there for me?*

I picked it up again. I scanned the inside cover. Your name and address were inside, sans City, State, or Zip. I called 411. There was no such address in the surrounding area. No such name. Perhaps you're unlisted. Perhaps a dependent teen. Scribbled around your address were a lot of personal messages from people who love you. An excerpt from a Stephen Curtis Chapman song that I noticed. An quote from St. Francis regarding praise.

Then I found a 3x5 card, quietly inserted near the center of the Bible. You wrote on it... at this point, I recognize your handwriting. It's horrible, by the way (your handwriting). I'm kidding.

This is not a goodbye, but instead, another way of saying hello. My heart aches for you Lord, but I am too weak to find you in these pages. So I look for you as the Living God, around me, but more importantly in me. Let me know your grace one more time. You may just be a book to many, but you are my king and my rock. Keep my soul in your hands, and catch me as I fall. It's an upstream swim, so pull me through it. Loved only through your Son,

Your disciple

-Trot

Trot, I sincerely hope that you found our Living God, in the way that you needed to. Your words were very profound, and I hope you'll forgive me for taking the liberty of sharing this note. I believe that it needs to be heard, specifically by Christians.

In the meantime, I've got your weapon safely kept. Let me know when you want it back.

P.S. There's a song by Mercy Me that I love, called Reality Prayer, that reminds me

of your plight. Ironically, it is from a CD that never hit the stores, which has a title that could be shared by your referenced note: "Hello, Pleased to Meet You." Without further adieu: **...Men trying to be of God are on their knees; they are asking for the Father's hand... with doubt in their heart, because they've yet to see their own type of deliverance. And they talk to their Father with so many formalities; they were taught this way I guess (it seems). I just wish the child left in us would find its way out; we're crying please--please Daddy please... if faith so small can move mountains, can we not believe enough to be set free? We need to be free... Then the song shifts, and we're reminded of our hope in God. You know he tore the veil once, and he can tear it again, and he can bring us in from the rain of sin; and He can do everything that we have ever hoped for, and He can do things that we never could comprehend! He is our God, He is Almighty, and He's The Holy One! He is our Hope, He's our Salvation, the One Thing to turn to! Jesus, You are our God... You are Almighty... You're the Holy One.**

The Last American Farmer

Sunday, August 8, 2010



America is about to experience a major economic shift. Relative instability in the Middle East over the last decade has motivated our efforts to reduce foreign oil dependency. I applaud the gesture, but there is a bigger problem: however contrary to one's belief, oil is not essential to life. Food, on the other hand, is. While we're currently in no danger of depending on China for our milk and bread, if we do not bolster value in domestic crop production, we could soon see a lot of U.S. dollars floating away in the coming years as new agricultural giants assume respective pole positions. The real issue is dishearteningly simple: we are running out of farmers.

Once upon a time, not so long ago, every American was immersed in farm culture. If you or I had grown up during the Civil War era, chances are we'd be related to—or

otherwise closely acquainted with—a farmer. Farms have been passed down through families for generations, traditionally in a father-son role. In the year 2010, however, such an antiquated concept of succession is almost impossible to grasp... the thought of placing this seemingly incredible burden on one's child nowadays seems akin to arranged marriage. Not to mention that in contrast to this high-speed, whiz-bang 'age of distraction,' farm life is lackluster.

Alan Morrow, a third-generation corn farmer, is 55 years old. Since he assumed his role in 1973, he has regularly planted on 600 acres in Western Ohio. In that particular region, an organized meeting of his professional peers will produce as many as 150 attendees, "Of which I'm the youngest," says Morrow. He continues, "Farming will see some big changes in the next ten to fifteen years. With just a handful of young guys to carry the torch, operations will need to be more mechanized, requiring bigger equipment to farm more acres. Of course, this will also equate to high start-up costs."

When asked to expound on other foreseeable challenges that young farmers will face, Morrow stressed the importance of situational awareness. "A lot of old-timers who have something to say to an up-and-coming farmer, may have a hidden agenda [often political]. Case-in-point, right now, one of the biggest fallacies is that food crops shouldn't be used for fuel. For the past few years, I've sold 100% of my corn to the Anderson's Marathon Ethanol Plant near Toledo. What folks don't realize is that for corn, which is approximately 10% protein, 1/3 of the ethanol byproduct is distiller's grain... a resource that is in greater demand than bulk corn on the global marketplace. It's a win-win."

On Morrow's farm, there has recently emerged a strong hope for the family's future. Alan and his wife, Pam, are the parents of four children, all of whom are grown. The couple has remained staunchly supportive of each child's future endeavors. Their youngest son, Daniel, has expressed interest in farming, and just this year began learning the technical aspects of tilling and seeding. Though his father is noticeably hesitant to get excited, there is an obvious sparkle in Daniel's eye when he talks about his family's trade. Speaking briefly, he gave me the "soup to nuts" on their growing season.

"We rotate 300 acres each year with soybeans. First thing we'll do is survey the fields, to decide whether or not we need to till. Sometimes, like in our soy fields this year, we'll just burn down the weeds and do a no-till. Come mid-April, depending on the weather, we'll plant 300 acres of corn in three to four days, then turn right around and plant 300 acres of soy. Sometimes we'll fertilize. Sometimes we have to add nitrogen to the soil once or twice after the corn pops up, and we might have to spray weed killer or fungicide on either crop. Harvest is about the same time, around mid-September. We fill the grain bins and start selling. The soy goes to the Cargill plant in Sidney, Ohio, where most of it is sorted, bagged, and sold the following year for seed. Some of the soybeans are processed into food products on site, like soybean

oil that is then added to onion dip for Burger King or Mayo packets for McDonald's... packaged and distributed right from that site. As for corn, up until 3 years ago (when dad got a bigger truck and started running loads to the ethanol plant) most of the corn was delivered to a grain elevator in Covington, where the owner purchases 50, 60, 120 bushels from numerous suppliers and then sells year-round on the global marketplace by the thousands of bushels. In comparison, we're small. If we've got fifty bushels to move in a month, we hire outside help."

Daniel then shared some of his own concerns on becoming a farmer. "It can be overwhelming. I see dad work, and he's not just driving a combine in and out of the barn. He's an equipment mechanic. He's a market analyst. Economist. Truck driver. Data interpreter. Weather forecaster."

The elder Morrow summed up the statement. "Again, those are the same challenges that will face this generation of young farmers. You have to watch that weather closely, because if you plant one week, and the next week it rains like crazy, that ground is going to be brick hard. As far as the market is concerned, just as with any commodity, the key is to gage your bulk sales and purchases against the strength of the dollar. Hold your corn until the following summer, and it will fetch a higher price per bushel. Most of our seed comes from overseas, so purchase when the dollar offers the most buying power."

Before leaving Ohio, I asked Morrow what he would have done if his son had not stepped to the plate to assume the duties of the farm. He left me with a hatful of wisdom. "This country was founded upon the principle that everybody has the God-given freedom to choose their own fate. As much as you'd like someone to do something, you can't force it upon them, or even coerce them." He continued, "If your heart's not in it, you will not be successful at what you do. Anything's fun when you're making money, but the love of doing it is what will get you through those years when the market's down and the money's tight. And that goes for anything, really. That's why so many people live for the weekend, punching a clock, waiting for the whistle on Friday so they can go out and party. Those people simply don't love what they do, and that's why they can't find success or happiness in life. Farmers, butchers, or bankers, whatever the color of your collar... You won't be successful if you don't love it."

Alan Morrow is a fine representative for the lifeblood of our nation. The role of the farmer may be lost on the face of today's hustle-bustle, tech-heavy America; but just as the concrete foundation of a house is often overlooked, the farmer is an unsung hero. A quiet professional within whose sweat-soaked ground our nation's pillars are firmly rooted.

The Hunchback of Rota Spain

Monday, August 9, 2010

It was the closest thing I've ever had to a knife fight. A leisurely day of trinket shopping in Puerto de Santa Maria ended with a taxi ride back to the base, where I sat on my cot and prepared a package for Petra. Colorful waist wraps and beaded jewelry, local snack foods, a Box of Romeo & Julietta's for me to pass out when baby Caleb is born... I seal the box and head to the post office. After the drop, I walk to the chow hall for some free grub, then to the rec center to test my musical talent. There are a handful of soundproof rooms: one with a drum set, others with electric guitars and amps, others with brass. I try my hand at the drums. Total hack job. Electric guitar. Whiny! Hendrix meets Caillou. Okay, I leave the rec center feeling less than "fulfilled." I walk to the Rod & Gun Club, to play three things that I'm better at: pool, the jukebox, and the slots.

The sun drops, and a group of my guys that was hanging out in the rotten gun decides to go downtown. I roll along. It's a great evening on the town. Little cantinas playing Spanish music, a couple of Spanish sailors pushing chairs aside to dance with local girls on the patio, cold Cruzcampos on tap. Chris Meyer and I break off from the group to go chillax at an Irish pub. On our walk back to the base, we're approached by two guys trying to push crack. The first guy was a typical street-rat lookin' kid. *Aladdin* comes to mind. The second guy had more, um, character. He reminded me of the Baby Ruth guy from *The Goonies*, except that he was hunched forward and had a hugely deformed growth on his back. We kindly refused their narcotics and kept walking. They persisted. We told them to stick their crack where the sun don't shine. That's when the big freakin' knife came out. It's the knife that someone would buy as a gift for Emeril--12" long, 2.5" wide, made for cutting through cabbage and Marines.

Now, I'm sure that if I was a *real* Marine (like John Cena, for instance), I could've just planted my boot anywhere near the guy's face with lightning-quick ninja speed, and both men would have burst into screaming flames before exploding into little pieces. But in the real world, there's a big knife in my face and a mean guy behind it. Don't know if it was sharp but I'm sure the pointy end worked just fine. Chris's eyes were big as dinner plates. I was craving Cocoa Puffs. And I was nervous. They had us pretty much cornered. There was an exit, but if we ran for it, one of us would surely get stabbed in the back. You just gotta be faster than your buddy, right? Of course, we are trying to talk our way out of it, but they don't speak English and the English language is really pissing Mongo off. Finally, I glance at Chris and we make a quick decision.

I distracted the knife-wielder with my hands and then kicked the knife out of his own. That move could have gone horribly wrong. Chris instantly bolted for the knife. We weren't worried about the little crackhead, but the big one was running straight for Chris. I slammed into him as Chris tossed the knife in a nearby dumpster. Chris

rejoined me as the hunchback went dumpster-diving. We picked up our pace toward the gate, walking across an open square and under a walking bridge. The dynamic duo was trailing us by 100 yards. That's when the Spanish cops rolled up. We didn't even have to tell them anything. Mongo, in a really sly move, put the knife down quickly as he walked under the bridge. He didn't think the cops would notice. One cop walked up behind him, grabbed the knife and held it up for all the other cops to see. Cops 2, 3, and 4 walked up and started yelling questions at the two. The hunchback took a swing. Wrong answer. We were relieved, if not amused, to watch this guy get a good old-fashioned beatdown. Mongo's hump grew two inches that night. True story.

Rewind: People Magazine, 1979

So I came across this copy of People magazine, right? It's the 5th Anniversary Issue, dated March 5th, 1979. Here are the highlights.

In the editor's mail, I chuckled at these:

"According to your reviews, every album I own is a piece of trash. After your review of Cat Stevens' *Back to Earth*, I can't take it anymore. Cat's lyrics are just as good as ever and his tunes are FAR from being ho-hum. He hasn't fallen out of the groove; he's made a new one." --*Quentin Skaggs, Phoenix*

"First it was Marie watching a soap for a whole week. Now Donny tries to rip off a drink machine. What is the world coming to!" --*Helen Sarkbian, Arcadia CA*

Then there were some great advertisements:

"A Vivarin tablet is more economical than two cups of coffee, and requires no preparation. And it really works."

ULTRA MAX shampoo has a series of pictures under the title "4 Basic Secrets of Blow-Dry Styling." My favorite is a side profile of a lady who looks like she has a full-sized animal curled up on top of her head. The caption is, "Today's feathery look! Nothing is more beautiful!" The page is perforated so you can rip it out and (presumably) pin it up next to your mirror. Makes you wonder why ULTRA MAX never made it big.

You've heard of the Chevette? Gremlin? Aztek? None of these vehicles can come close to matching the chic style and comfort of a **Dodge Omni 024**. It looks like a Datsun station wagon that wants to be a Delorian, built by your kid. AM/FM radio and white sidewall tires come standard. And this is 1979. Wow.

Nothing says "I'm a photographer" like the Canon G-III. With its "simple to operate

pushbutton," the camera practically takes the pictures for you. Oh, and the best part? A five-mile-high automatic electronic flash "that takes all the headaches out of buying bulbs and figuring exposure."

A full page ad for Hormel canned products, touted to "turn your home into a restaurant." Let's see... 'Scalloped Potatoes 'n Ham,' yummm. 'Noodles 'n Chicken.' There's a twist. 'Chili with Beans,' 'Hot Chili with Beans,' 'Beans 'n Wieners,' 'Beans 'n Bacon.' Okay Bubba Gump. Did I say beans? Djon Bean kabobs, bean syrup, bean pancakes, boiled beans, bean snausages... 'Creamed Sauce flavored with Dried Beef.' Tantalizing. I'll call my restaurant "Bistro Bismol."

An ad for *Home Box Office* pay television (HBO)... "with over a million subscribers!"

Alcoholic beverages seem to retain their cool over time, as do their advertisements. But for crying out loud, they had creamed everything back in the day. Creme de Menthe. Creme de Cocoa. Creme de Cassis. Creme de Noyaux. Creme de Banana. Okay, the last one doesn't sound so bad.

Here's one I wish I had never read. Ignorance is bliss. "Norforms Feminine Deodorant Tablets." Essentially, cooter mints. You can use them "even while menstruating." They even come with a handy, fold-up inserter that you can keep in your purse. Something about the whole idea seems nauseatingly unhealthy. I think I just found the root cause of ovarian cancer.

Johnson & Johnson, you deserve an Oscar. The caption reads, "Like son, like father." A man is seated, holding a baby. His adoring wife is leaning over his shoulder in a wifely 'doting' pose. The baby is a blue-eyed blonde. The parents both have exaggeratedly dark features. My question is, does *Johnson & Johnson* promote child abduction?

Readers' Poll: Of *People's* readers, "58 percent are women, 42 percent are men." I love that, the fact that it's plain and simple. Men and women. And the numbers add up to 100%. These days, it would read: 56 percent women, 39 percent men, 3.2 percent gender-neutral, 1 percent "other." And we're still missing .8 percent from the total equation.

Best-looking man in America? "With spun-brass hair, those Wedgewood eyes, that special mole--the winner was the Sundance Kid, Robert Redford, 41, voted so by both men and women readers" Burt Reynolds took 2nd, especially voted for by male readers and all readers under 25. Paul Newman took the ladies' votes, 3 to 1 over men, especially in his own 45-54 age group. They show a picture of Paul Newman all dressed up in the movie *Quintet*, and I'll tell you now, Paul Newman never looked as good as he does on salad dressing bottles. "Kids under 18 rallied behind John Travolta; those slightly older supported Clint Eastwood. The big losers: Frank Sinatra and (surprise) hunky Nick Nolte."

Jackie Onassis gets dissed a lot in this issue.

Best-looking woman in America? Men picked Cheryl Tiegs. Women voters won and the best-looking woman for 1979 went to Angel Jaclyn Smith. Close behind were Cheryl Ladd, Farrah Fawcett-Majors, Suzanne Somers, and Rosalynn Carter. Readers over 55 made Elizabeth Taylor number 1; Catherine Deneuve was nobody's toast and Goldie Hawn scored even lower.

Favorite TV Actor? An overwhelming crush on M*A*S*H's Hawkeye (Alan Alda). Newcomer 'Robin Williams' took an "astounding" second place after only six months on air as Mork in Mork and Mindy (NANOO, NANOO!). Women and old folks loved Michael Landon (Little House on the Prairie) and John Belushi falls in right behind him.

Favorite TV Actress? Jean Stapleton, 56, who played Edith Bunker on All in the Family. Took it by a long shot. The older the reader, the stronger the vote, but good votes under age 30 as well. Kristy McNichol second.

Newscasters? Walter Cronkite, David Brinkley at 1 and 2. Barbara Walters comes in at number 5.

Most violent TV show: Starsky & Hutch.

Sexiest TV Show: Charlie's Angels, followed closely by Soap and Three's Company

Here's a news flash: teenagers find watching bowling to be among the most boring sports on TV, bettered only by golf. They had bowling on TV?

Heavy makeup was the #1 fashion irritant. Other fashion faux pas' were anything related to antiwar flower children, and man purses. Huh. Some things don't change. Men preferred braless women. Women preferred frizzy hair over men.

A cartoon shows a newlywed-ish car driving away with cans and streamers tied to it. The back window reads, "Just Living Together."

Clothing preference? Jeans and jogging shoes.

Pete Rose is way overpaid.

Legal marijuana is split down the middle.

Schools don't discipline students enough.

Most trusted political figures: Jimmy Carter by a landslide (and that poll was taken near the end of his term!), then Ted Kennedy and Jerry Ford. Others included Walter

Mondale, Jerry Brown, and Ronald Reagan. Nixon was the least trusted (surprise).

PEOPLE readers' thoughts on future generations: "*PEOPLE* readers fretted about taxes, the breakdown of the family, abortion, homosexuality, moral laxity, drugs, alcohol, living in sin and ear-damaging music." 42 Percent were optimistic about the future, citing smarter kids and the wonders of modern science.

Overwhelming YES on equal rights support.

92% of readers would vote for a Jew to become president. 91% would vote for a black president. 80% would vote for a female president.

Movie stars: Paul Newman, Barbara Streisand.

Male singers: Billy Joel and Stevie Wonder.

Female Singers: Linda Ronstadt and Olivia Newton-John.

Favorite pop group: Bee Gees

Casey Kasem is officially "the most listened-to voice in America."

Hey, a 20 cent coupon for sugar free TAB! SCORE!!! America's favorite one-calorie soda. I wonder if the coupon's still good.

Another AMAZING car. The Ford Fiesta! Arrrrrrriba!!!

"Decade," "Now," "Vantage," "BelAir," and "True." Five cheesy-looking cigarette brand ads I've seen in the magazine, each trying to prove that they have less tar than all the other cigarette brands. Somebody's lying!

Ah, nude art. In *PEOPLE* magazine.

1979 is rocked with inflation, particularly on groceries. "Economist Gar Alperovitz says there's only one solution to inflation: Consumer Revolt."

"Is religion an important part of American life? A hefty 95 percent thought it was, one half becoming positively evangelistic on the subject."

KISS was the least popular music group.

Haha, this one's good. Bill Mitchell--or William, not to be confused with Billy Mitchell the famous aviator--was a General Foods research scientist. Basically, he made a bunch of 'mad scientist' food products & food substitutes that didn't make it to 2010... with the exception of that wacky packy of candy, Pop Rocks. In this very serious

article, Bill is trying to dispell the rumors that alarmed the Northeast. The story is that a kid with a health condition ate three packs of pop rocks, drank a fizzy soda pop, and then he instantly exploded. The story goes on to tell how Bill's seven kids were "nurtured" on pop rocks, and how his next big food goal was to dehydrate a watermelon. Good luck with that, Pops!

A bio on Italy's legend on wheels, Enzo Ferrari. Good read.

Famous German Drinking Songs

Wednesday, August 11, 2010

You know the tune, but you hum the words... Finally, you can sing along with your cuckoo clock!

(From grandpa's military scraps... spelled uendited without Umlauts and other special characters)

IN MUENCHEN STEHT EIN HOFFBRAU HAUS

In Muenchen steht ein Hofbrauhaus,
ein, zwei, g'suffa
Da lauft so manches Fasschen aus,
ein, zwei, g'suffa
Da hat schon mancher brave Mann,
ein, zwei, g'suffa,
gezeigt was er so vertragen kann.
Schon fruh am Morgen fing er an,
und spaet am Abend kam er heraus
So schoen ist's im Hofbrauhaus.

In Muenchen steht ein Hofbrauhaus,
ein, zwei, g'suffa!

EIN PROSIT DER GEMUETLICHKEIT

Ein Prosit, Ein Prosit der Gemuetlichkeit
ein Prosit, ein Prosit der Gemuetlichkeit

BEER-BARREL POLKA

Rosamunde, schenk mir dein Herz und dein Ja,
Rosamunde, frag doch nicht erst die Mama

Rosamunde, glaub mir auch ich bin dir treu,
de n zur Stunde, Rosamunde, ist mein Herz grade noch frei.

YOU CAN'T BE TRUE DEAR

Du kannst nicht treu sein,
nein, nein, das kannst du nicht,
wenn auch dein Mund mir
wahre Liebe verspricht.
In deinem Herzen hast du fuer viele Platz
darum bist du auch nicht fuer mich der richt'ge Schatz.

WER SOLL DAS BEZAHLEN

Wer soll das bezahlen, wer hat das bestellt
Wer hat so viel Pinke, Pinke, wer hat so viel Geld?
Wer soll das bezahlen, wer hat das bestellt
Wer hat so viel Pinke, Pinke, wer hat so viel Geld?

NACH HAUS GEHEN WIR NICHT

Nach Hause, nach Hause, nach Hause gehen wir nicht
bis dass der Tag anbricht,
nach Hause gehen wir nicht.
Nach Hause, nach Hause, nach Hause gehen wir nicht
bis dass der Tag anbricht,
nach Hause gehen wir nicht

Dude, Where's My Flying Camper?

From LOOK magazine, 10 August 1965 (an electric co-op advertisement)



Today, abundant electric service brings modern conveniences to the campsite.

Wherever you look today, electric service makes good things possible.



Flying mobile camper of the future may be electric powered – plugging into any electric outlet for recharging.

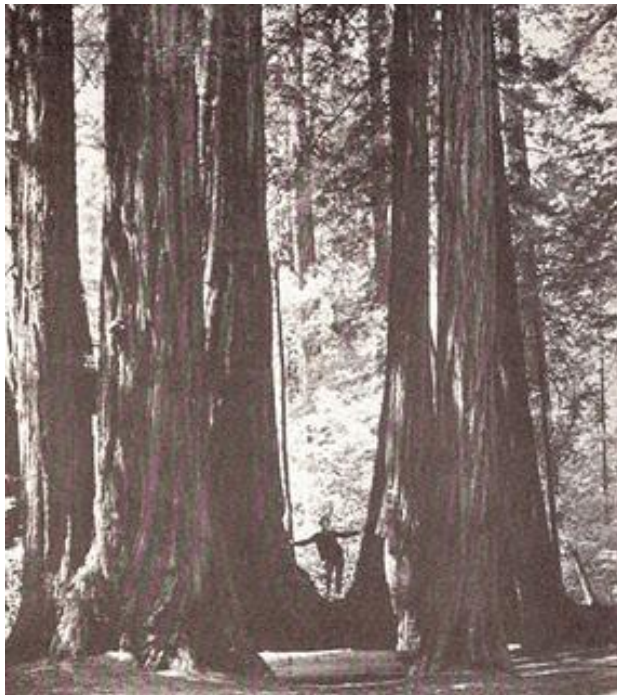
Imagine what it'll do for you tomorrow.

"Flying mobile camper of the future may be electric powered -- plugging into any electric outlet for recharging."

Muir Woods, 1968!

Wow. I'm digging through some old magazines the other day, reading all kinds of cool stuff, when I find a random picture that was taken around June of 1968, in the exact same location as my current blog profile picture. The area is Muir Woods, a Giant Redwood forest not too far North of San Francisco. Ironically, that particular twin tree is not an iconic picture-taking landmark in the park; several others are preferred and this one is now sectioned off. Yeah, the trees' base has grown significantly since '68, with the bottom of the vee being probably seven or eight feet high. Because we weren't allowed to get close to the tree, Petra and I were caught and lified out by a tree Nazi (a National Park Ranger lady in a Smokey). She was hysterical. "Do you know why nothing's growing around that tree?!" "Ummmmmm, because you didn't plant anything there?" "No, it's because of Smart-Alecs like you who don't respect nature! Some of these trees have been here for almost 2,000 years and it's *MY* job to ensure that they're here for 2,000 more!" I stood down, apologizing, though I really wanted to say so much more. *Really, Lady? Just how long do you plan on living? Besides, if these formidable trees were here since the time of Christ, then that means they've withstood fires, floods, lightning strikes, high winds, hail, snow, and pretty much every imaginable critter that wanted to eat them or otherwise destroy them... I'm sure they don't mind us taking a few pictures with them. ...Now hiring--FREAKY, TREE-HUGGING LUNATICS! If this sounds like you, head to your nearest National Park Ranger station and fill out an application! The NPS Rangers could use more like you!!!*

Ah, memories. Here are the pictures, then & now.



Hampton Roads 1968: A Booming Cinema Scene

Sunday, August 15, 2010

These excerpts represent about half of the entertainment ads found on a single page of the Virginian-Pilot, on Saturday, June 8th, 1968. Looks like they really knew how to have fun back then! In the year 2010, why do I have to drive all the way to Ohio to visit a Drive-In?

The Fun Starts Today & Sunday 12 Noon at

OCEAN VIEW AMUSEMENT PARK



LOCATED AT END OF GRANBY STREET--TAKE VTC GRANBY BUS TO ENTRANCE--1500 CAR PARKING LOT!

FISHING PIER
NOW OPEN
24 HOURS DAILY!
Tackle & Bait Available
FREE PARKING FOR FISHERMEN



• 26 •
BIG RIDES



FREE TONITE 10 P.M. FREE
FIREWORKS
Huge Aerial & Standing Displays!

"TALK TO THE ANIMALS"
at our Popular **"Animal Zoo"**

--Featuring--

- * "ELSA" the African Lion
- * "GENTLE BEN" the Bear
- * "LUCY" the Dr. Doolittle Llama

... PLUS scores of friendly baby animals to love and pet. Lighted for day & night visits.



TODAY SAT., JUNE 8th
--- 12 NOON TO 6 P.M. ---

ALL RIDES 14¢

EXCEPT SKYROCKET

FREE Sunday 2 P.M. FREE

"Country Music Show"

-in person-

- "Rudy Wesley", Singer
- "The Progressive Strings"
- WCMS' Joe Hoppel, M.C.


Bath House and Picnic Area Open 9 A.M.

TODAY--2:30 P.M.

"CANDY THE CLOWN"
THE CHILDREN'S FAVORITE CLOWN IN PERSON ON OUTDOOR STAGE!
Last Appearance For The Season

"GO-GO" Contest Sunday
in the O.V. **"DANCE HALL,"** Cash Prizes!
Cool Jam Session SUNDAY From 1 P.M.

"EASY TO REACH - RIGHT AT THE BEACH"



SEASIDE
Amusement **PARK**

ON THE OCEAN FRONT
31st ST. and ATLANTIC AVE.--Virginia Beach


RIDES OPEN . . . TODAY & SUNDAY 12 NOON
BATH HOUSE & REFRESHMENT
STANDS OPEN Daily At 9 A.M.
• Picnic Area • 300 Car Parking Lot

DANCING NIGHTLY
Today!
In Person . . .

"Carlyle" & "The In Set"

THEY'RE COOL!!

In "The Frolics Room"
-- LIVE MUSIC --
★ Continuously From 2 P.M. ★
Saturdays & Sundays



"THE IN SET"

EXCITING FIRST DISPLAY OF

FIREWORKS

FREE!! TONITE
10:00 P.M.

In Person On Our Outdoor Stage
FREE-SUNDAY at 2 P.M.

"UP WITH PEOPLE" A wild, clapping show
to thrill your heart!

Azalea


DRIVE-IN

AND

SOUTH

DRIVE-IN THEATRE
FIRST NORFOLK SHOWING

BOX OFFICE OPENS 7:30
SHOW STARTS 8:30



FIVE
MILLION
YEARS TO
EARTH

20th CENTURY FOX PRESENTS

A SEVEN ARTS-HAMMER PRODUCTION - COLOR BY DELUXE

PLUS

COLOR BY DELUXE **THE VIKING QUEEN** A SEVEN ARTS-HAMMER PRODUCTION

RIVERVIEW

PLAYHOUSE

3910 GRANBY ST.

PH. 627-9189

SHOWS: 1:00-3:00-5:00-7:00-9:00 P.M.

POSITIVELY LAST 3 WEEKS

NOT FOR CHILDREN

"THE FOX"**ROSNA**

THEATRE

628 W. 35TH ST.

PH. 627-1446

2 SHOWS: MAT. 2:00 P.M.-EVE. 8:00 P.M.

POSITIVELY LAST 10 DAYS

"GONE WITH THE WIND"**MEMROSE**

COLLEY & RALIGH

OPEN 12:15 P.M.

PH. 627-1456

CONTINUOUS FROM 12:30 P.M.

FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT
ROMANTIC-FUNNY-TUNEFUL

TOMMY STEELE

"HALF A SIX PENCE"**NARO**

1507 COLLEY AVE.

OPEN 12:45 P.M.

PH. 622-4140

CONTINUOUS FROM 1:00 P.M.

**Charlton
Heston** IN**"Will Penny"**

TECHNICOLOR

A PARAMOUNT PICTURE

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE GRADUATES . . .

Today's graduate has learned to enjoy the better things in life. One of them is Sir Buddy's Lounge. So why not enjoy a prime charcoal broiled steak, topped off with a stein of imported beer at . . .


Sir Buddy's Lounge

American Express &
Diners Club Cards
Honored

Thirty-Five-Fifteen Granby Street
Opposite City Park
Two Free Parking Lots

JANAF Cinema
8746
JANAF SHOPPING CTR.
VA. BEACH BLVD. at MILITARY HWY.

FEATURE TIMES:
1:30-3:25-5:25-7:25-9:30
LAST 4 DAYS



ROD STEIGER HAS DONE 'IT AGAIN!


Also Starring...

LEE REMICK **GEORGE SEGAL**

NO WAY TO TREAT A LADY

FOR MATURE AUDIENCES

IN COLOR



GENERAL CINEMA CORPORATION

BARGAIN MATINEE TUES., THUR. & SAT. 1:00 TO 2:00 ALL SEATS 60c

Garden THEATRE
1760 E. Little Creek Rd.

NOW 2nd Week

Features
1:15-3:15-5:15-7:17-9:20

Anthony Quinn **Anjanette Comer** **Charles Bronson**

Guns for San Sebastian

FRANSCOPE and METROCOLOR


Princess THEATRE
3177 Va. Beach Blvd.

NOW PLAYING

Features:
1:25-3:25-5:25-7:25-9:25

ROSALIND RUSSELL AND STELLA STEVENS

"WHERE ANGELS GO... TROUBLE FOLLOWS"



Eastman Color

RT. 60 SHORE DRIVE

SHORE DRIVE-IN THEATRE

OUR ADMISSION PRICE IS JUST ONE DOLLAR PER ADULT
ONCE ONLY ... AT 10:42

LEE MARVIN
in **'Sargeant RYKER'**
A UNIVERSAL PICTURE in COLOR

Based upon the TV Production "THE CASE AGAINST SERGEANT RYKER"

PLUS ... AT 8:45 ONLY

RICHARD ELHE
JOHNSON · SOMMER
SILVA NIGEL
HOSCINA · GREEN
SUZANNA LEIGH

DEADLIER THAN THE MALE
TECHNICOLOR
TECHNISCOPE
A Universal Release

SUGGESTED FOR MATURE AUDIENCES

TODAY
SATURDAY, JUNE 8th
12 NOON to 6 P.M.
All Rides
14¢ Discount Coupons Do Not Apply!
(Except Skyrocket)

OCEAN VIEW
AMUSEMENT PARK
NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

• Located at End of Granby St. •
Take VTC BUS to Entrance--1,500-Car Parking Lot

Sub Screen 499-2011

Now Open For Your
Movie Enjoyment
The only DRIVE-IN on the
East Coast with 2 Different
Pictures Going At One Time.

PARAMOUNT PICTURES presents
YUL BRYNNER ROBERT MITCHUM
VILLA RIDES!
S.M.A.
CHARLES BRONSON

AND

MAROC 7
TECHNICOLOR PANAVISION & A PARAMOUNT PICTURE

Sand Screen Independence Boulevard
VIRGINIA BEACH Phone 499-2011

LEVY GARDNER-LAYEN and ROLAND KOBEE Present
BURT LANCASTER
"THE SCALPHUNTERS"
PANAVISION COLOR UNITED ARTISTS
AND by Deluxe

AN ABBEY SCHENK PRODUCTION
"KILL A DRAGON"
starring **JACK PALANCE** **FERRUCO LANDAS** **ALDO RAY**
COLOR by Deluxe UNITED ARTISTS

FREE GIFTS TO ALL TONITE

NORFOLK
DRIVE★IN

LEE MARVIN

HIS TWO BEST PICTURES


First at 8:40 P.M.

**The Dirty
Dozen**

PLUS AT 10:30 ONLY

"POINT BLANK"

**V.B. BEACH
DRIVE-IN**

 **WINNER OF 6
ACADEMY AWARDS**

**INCLUDING BEST ACTOR
"ROD STEIGER"
THIS YEAR'S WINNER
ONCE ONLY - 9:00 P.M.**



**DOCTOR
ZHIVAGO**

IN PANAVISION® AND METROCOLOR

Turns On Tonight



**the
other
place**

**AT THE RECREATION CTR
NEAR MILESTONE 12
WAGS HEAD**

Light and sound and motion. A complete entertainment environment for teenagers. Friday and Saturday night The Hang 5 Mann. 8 to 12 midnight. Ride the Butterfly!
Adm. \$2

WARREN BEATTY
FAYE DUNAWAY



BONNIE
AND CLYDE



Written by DAVID NEWMAN and ROBERT BENTON Produced by WARREN BEATTY Directed by ARTHUR PENN

TECHNICOLOR® FROM WARNER BROS.-SEVEN ARTS



AT 12:05-2:00-3:55-5:50-7:45-9:40

Loew's

340 GRANBY

MA 2-5400

MAN CAGED! FORCED TO MATE!

CHARLTON HESTON

IN **PLANET**
OF THE **APES**

IN COLOR

LIFE Magazine Says-

**"THE BEST
AMERICAN MOVIE
I HAVE SEEN SO
FAR THIS YEAR!"**

Feeling Defenseless

(as written for the Virginian-Pilot, August 14th, 2010)

In this hard-hit economy, even federal jobs are susceptible to budgetary fat-trimming. When Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced the drawdown of Joint Forces Command, it instantly affected the future of roughly six thousand Hampton Roads area employees—namely DoD civilians and contractors—as well as their families and day-to-day business networks. The dissolution represents less than 4% of Secretary Gates' August 11th announcement to save \$100 billion in defense spending over the next five years.

The question is whether the fat is being trimmed in the right areas. In May, Gates called on the Pentagon's Defense Business Board (DBB) to conduct a fiscal review of the Defense Department, with recommendations for reducing overhead. By July, rumors of JFCOM's disestablishment were widespread. That the 25-member DBB was able to reach a conclusive recommendation so quickly is astounding. In an All-Hands email, Gates told JFCOM members that their 1999 charter mission "to lead the transformation of the U.S. military into a joint warfighting force" had been "accomplished."

Understated, residents of Tidewater and the greater Commonwealth are upset. Key arguments against closure are as follows:

1. The decision was made independent of BRAC, the organization responsible for today's base closure decisions—usually made with regards to long-term regional effects, and ultimately balanced by Congressional oversight. Whether JFCOM qualifies as a base is an ongoing debate as Virginia leaders battle to keep the command. Also, JFCOM may be a better candidate for mission re-alignment than outright closure; a forward-thinking integrator by design, no U.S. Major Command is better poised to save defense dollars.
2. Many feel that these deep defense cuts are simply being used to pay interest on trillions in federal debt, largely incurred through the passage of controversial legislation such as the national health care bill and numerous ad hoc social programs. The soundness of such actions will inevitably be gauged over time.
3. What's next? Does some broader political strategy have areas like Hampton Roads in the crosshairs? If 'organizational duplication' is the new replacement buzz phrase for 'joint interoperability,' should we brace for more regional blows as other role-overlapping commands such as TRANSCOM or SPACECOM are dismembered?

This year's Quadrennial Defense Review, signed by Gates in February, focuses entirely on restructuring and building national defense systems. The "preservation and enhancement" of the All-Volunteer Force, and its civilian support structure, is a

resounding priority. Major defense cuts were not presupposed. Perhaps the QDR itself should be cut from the defense budget, seeing as the coordinated effort behind the document—a historically valuable four-year defense architectural plan—couldn't follow its own feckless agenda for six months.

The world is watching. The only NATO headquarters on U.S. soil, happens to share ground with JFCOM. Our country's 'fundamental' values, strategies, and critical infrastructure shift with the ebb and flow of each new presidential administration. When leaders force hasty, substantial changes to our national defense, it incites internal conflict, airing our laundry. High emotions, heated politics, and lack of interagency cooperation highlight our defensive vulnerabilities as we lose semblance of a unified front. Meanwhile, the patient enemies of freedom exploit backward moves such as the overnight announcement of a rapid MAJCOM dissolution. Here's a novel idea: let's put the phrase 'unified solidarity' back in our vocabulary, slow this horse down, and think of sustainable defense solutions that work.

Photo PT in the Dismal Swamp

Tuesday, August 17, 2010

Nature abhors an ipod. When I take my exercise routine to the great outdoors, I leave the tunes in the truck, replacing my motivational staple with a camera. On Monday, I ran the Jericho Ditch trail—a three-mile path on the Suffolk side of the Great Dismal Swamp. The trail is one of several that follow the interconnecting canal legs between Lake Drummond and the James River. Lover of all things wild, I run the swamp in hopes of spotting a basking moccasin or an ever-elusive cane-brake rattler.



I'll take what I can get. Instead of dangerous vipers, I found the place where the Schmetterlings are, those beautifully wild winged creatures that we know in English as butterflies. With the area being in somewhat of a drought, the butterflies were 'puddling,' or swarming together along a muddy basin where three feet of water might have otherwise been. I was very fortunate to photograph a zebra swallowtail—which has the longest tail in its family—in a rare pause from its rapid and fitful flight pattern. An added bonus, my feet were treading on history. Remnants of brick pavers are visible along the entire route; bricks which were emplaced by slaves under General Washington in the late 1700's, when the canals were dug for timber removal.



Because the 80mm lens for my—rather, my wife's—digital camera was not focusing properly, I opted to blow the dust off my antiquated film camera on Tuesday morning before returning to The Swamp for round two. This time, I rode a mountain bike to Lake Drummond along the 4.5 mile Washington Ditch. I highly recommend doing this... be sure to bring water and bug dope. A clean, composite deck with an inviting



bench offered a perfect view of the large, placid lake, which looked like a reflective sheet of black glass. Small cypresses stand alone in the water there, and in the peaceful solitude of that place, it is not difficult to see why so many influential writers have visited the Dismal Swamp for inspiration. Writers like Stowe, Moore, Longfellow, Poe, and Frost.





On my return from the lake, I was re-taught a valuable lesson in 'film discipline. 24 exposures go fast, and I hadn't been paying attention. Much to my amazement, a familiar black object stood in my path. I approached within 150 feet of the creature before carefully dismounting from my bike. I walked slowly toward the bear cub, removing the lens from my camera and snapping a new picture at every other step. Once within thirty feet (and closing, listening carefully for evidence of mama bear), I took the fatal photo that sent my camera loudly rewinding its spool of film. As the startled cub disappeared into the woods, I blasted my decision to not bring my wife's digital camera with its perfectly functional telephoto lens.



Excited at what I witnessed and angry at myself all at once, I pedaled back down the trail—catching a flock of wild turkeys off guard. Understanding perfectly that my odds of striking gold twice in the same day were slim, I returned anyway... this time armed with the digital camera and a 300mm lens. I saw a second bear! This time it was an adult, who strolled leisurely down the path until my bike was too close for its comfort (and too far for a decent picture). The bear slipped off the trail and back into the woods, but not without leaving me brimmed with the fulfillment of an adventurous day. Sure beats running on a treadmill.

Getting outdoors is a great way to mix up your exercise routine and experience nature's best at the same time. The Dismal Swamp offers opportunity to connect with the wild, explore America's history, and find solitude and inspiration. And who knows what you'll see. The only advice I have, to reiterate: bring water, wear a good bug spray, take your camera, leave your mp3... and for the sake of all you might miss, don't move too fast!

Dismal Swamp Photos 8-17-2010

Digital camera lens is broken, had to revert to old-school film loader. Some photos are blurry. P.S., Wal-Mart doesn't do film processing any more, at least not in Suffolk.

















Passionate Patriotism vs. American Extremism

Friday, August 20, 2010

This country is in desperate need of a common uniting cause. Everywhere you turn, there are split polls covering such important issues as national defense right down to what whether we think Obama prefers Corn Flakes or Rice Krispies. In this era of 'tolerance,' we are as politically divided as we ever were.

In the history of humankind, no nation has ever been so conceptually free. Free to express our opinions. Free to change laws. Free to worship Who, and how, and where, we please. Free to defend ourselves against tyrannical impositions and oppressions. Two centuries of unprecedented national freedom have been peppered with divisive conflict, largely due to our own shortcomings as humans. We slaughtered Native Indians in the name of freedom. We perpetuated slavery in the name of God and country. Our conquests were not always just. Our "heroes" were not always honorable. After a long and bumpy road, we find ourselves today in the highest state of cross-cultural equality that the world has ever seen.

The Mosque Debate

I am both a patriotic American and a Christian. Every ounce of blood in my body opposes the idea of a mosque at the 9-11 site. The situation is difficult because, while the location is the property of the City of New York, every American is an intrinsic plank owner of this hallowed ground. It is our home field, our turf, our own Mecca and Medina all in one. Deriving their power from the consent of the governed, U.S. elected officials should not be our enemies in the fight to keep Ground-Zero mosque-free.

The issue falls under the guidance of the First Amendment to the Constitution, but not necessarily where freedom of religion is concerned. Filtering this issue through the Supreme Law of the Land, it is important to note that (1) Congress cannot make any law respecting the establishment of religion, (2) Congress cannot prohibit the free exercise of any religion, (3) Congress cannot abridge the freedoms of speech or free press. Congress cannot, and it has not, entertained any such notions. The third part of this Amendment is critical: Congress cannot abridge the freedom of the people to peaceably assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

An August 20th Time poll states that 61% of Americans oppose construction of the Park51 / Cordoba House project, and over 70% see the move as an insult to the victims of the WTC attacks. It would then stand to reason that this popular public grievance qualifies for a properly framed Congressional petition. A solution, however, may not be so simple. If the American public has no factual, tangible ownership of the site—that is, as a national monument area—then a petition would be a moot point, as the federal government can neither manipulate nor reverse the

decision of the State of New York on matters relating to its own real estate.

The Dangers of Federal Meddling

The greater issue facing Americans is the nullification of Constitutional law. Every time the federal government finds or creates (through liberal interpretation of the law) a loophole that allows it to force its agenda on an individual State, the validity of fundamental American law is subtly degraded. This moves us closer and closer to the development of a new Constitution, one which will rest on the shaky foundation of modern 'morality.'

As previously stated, the road to equality and tolerance has been a bumpy one. Our nation's founders conceded that they themselves were imperfect, thus relying on God's hand to guide the decisions and actions of future leaders. These imperfect men had the foresight to design a Constitution that has impressively withstood the substantial technological changes of our society: the harnessing of electrical power; the inventions of the light bulb, the telephone, the combustion engine, and electrical appliances; the development of railroads, highways, modern farming equipment, aircraft, spacecraft, nuclear power, radio, television, coaxial cable, satellites, and computers.

At the root of our government's law, a series of overlapping checks and balances, notably the de-centralized relationship between the Federal government and that of individual sovereign States—which proved necessary for the long-term administration of a large country. The Constitution passes to the States, the power to handle any matter not expressly designated as a national concern. This is one of the reasons that the recently passed National Health Care bill was so controversial—the Constitution says nothing about a nationally-regulated system of health care.

In recent decades, the federal government has found ways to manipulate the States to bring them into alignment with its own political agenda. This has often been accomplished through the unethical practice of withholding funds. Every time the federal government gains ground inside of a State's boundaries, the State loses its jurisdiction over matters pertaining to said property, and of any establishments thereon. National forests, waterways, and ecosystems; federal prison facilities; military bases; national historic landmarks; federal highways... the State has no final say on matters pertaining to these areas, some of which are growing in size and number.

What we've seen in recent years is this: when a State fails to adopt the proposed laws of, say, the *National Highway Traffic Safety Administration*, this federal entity will then threaten to withhold hundreds of millions of dollars in regular annual funding (which the State has become dependent upon), until the State buckles to the will of the federal government. In a recent example that is important to my own region, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates pulled the plug on the *United States Joint Forces*

Command, forcing a rapid dissolution of a DoD agency that employs around 6,000 people in Virginia. The move, which came without warning, left Virginia officials feeling jilted, as they clean up the mess during a pre-existing State unemployment crisis. Meanwhile, State boards across the country are buckling to the almighty dollar in a federal takeover of the most precious traditional State-held resources: *schools*. Colorado is the latest State to take the bait, relinquishing their Constitutional right to educate children under their own programs and curriculums.

Some States are wising up to the sly, tactical imposition of federal mandates. In June, Oklahoma's lawmakers developed a bill which would ban the practice of Islamic Sharia Law in their State. The move, which has drawn comical criticism seeing that the State is far removed from Muslim influence, may prove to be an insightful and important one in the forthcoming decade, as the U.S. Muslim population is projected to grow by one third. Oklahoma's move stirs debate, as it should. It is a subtle Call to Action: States need to beef up their pre-emptive measures against federal control.

The Islamization of America

I will not linger on the subject of Islam in America, as there are many far more qualified sources from which to draw information in a simple Google search. The point-blank truth is this: Islamic law and American democracy are far from compatible—in many areas they are polar opposites.

Because it is human nature to believe more of what we see and less of what we hear, any group that speaks of Islamic extremism or radical Muslim activity in 2010 without showing tangible proof is labeled 'insensitive,' 'intolerant,' a 'heretic' or a 'conspiracy theorist.' What you do not see can be attributed to policies that prohibit gruesome torture from being captured on film and posted on video / image hosting sites such as YouTube. In 2010, women are still stoned to death, children are forcibly maimed and crippled, and men are dismembered, paralyzed, or killed under Sharia Law. Husbands can now divorce their wives by text message, while wives cannot divorce without husband's approval. The punishment for homosexuality? Death. Western European nations have adopted elements of Sharia Law to allow rapidly-increasing Muslim populations to 'take care of their own.'

Do not be so naïve, America. We can still uphold the freedom of an individual to practice Islam without adopting Sharia law, in whole or in part. To do so would be the beginning of the end, as the enemies of freedom gain a foothold and corrupt our sacredly-held Inalienable Rights from within.

The Lateral Limits of Politics

Our elected officials, however moderate and cool-seeming while on the campaign trail, are quickly sucked into the vortex of the extreme left or the extreme right. Mud-

slinging has been replaced by political stoning as We, the [Little] People occupy the middle ground. While it is true that the people will usually have beef with whichever administration holds office, some Presidents fare better than others.

I side in the opposition of President Obama's policies in general because, through and through, they undermine and devalue the Constitution. His subversive move to appoint "Czars"—regardless of the fact that they were not vetted in the manner of Cabinet members, that many of their American taxpayer salaries are "unlisted," that they are answerable only to Obama, that they rule over private corporations, and that their backgrounds and views have been so harshly criticized—are in direct constitutional conflict. The Constitution provides explicit guidance on who the President can appoint under him, and the law also states in Section 9 of the Constitution, "No Title of Nobility shall be granted by the United States." A Czar is defined as "an autocratic male ruler or monarch," "the ruler of Russia before 1917," "a man of great power," "a tyrant." Obama blew off one Senator's letter that warned of the unconstitutionality. Since then, I have keyed in on Obama's supreme reign, as he dangerously blows off Constitutional mandates without batting an eye. Furthermore, both President and Mrs. Obama do not know their place, kicking Presidential impartiality to the curb to jump on the sides of obscure groups during heated debate (such as the NAACP, during their backing of the New Black Panthers during the voter intimidation case). When Obama opposes the American majority on an issue where he has no jurisdiction, he needs learn to stand down and swallow his feelings.

On the opposite end of the political spectrum, I cannot watch Fox News for more than one hour per week. The only news that makes Fox headlines is in regards to Democratic liberals. If House Speaker Nancy Pelosi sneezes, it makes the news. While I support the conceptual ideals of a Tea Party movement, such as those underlying the original Boston Tea Party's actions, I cannot side with the present movement because the organization lacks a critical infrastructure. Since anyone can be a member, anyone can also be a planted infiltrator. If one person—planted or otherwise—does something rash, it reflects upon the whole organization. Also, like Fox News, the Tea Party (and the GOP, for that matter) will not concede that liberal Democrats do anything good for our country. Remember, it was not conservative thinking that enabled women's suffrage, or advocated women's rights in general. Conservative opinion kept the blacks enslaved. Conservatives fought against every measure of technology that promoted forward-thinking since the inception of our nation, citing "the Devil" as the reason behind every advance in science & medicine, electronics, transportation, or sports ("fooz-ball!").

Unfortunately, such tactical word ploys and tools of propaganda are still heavily in use by both Democrats and Republicans. Americans are not simpletons who chase snipes and ogres through the swamps with pitchforks and torches—or are we? My grandmother believes with all her heart that she will win the Publisher's Clearing House jackpot this week. And that's what she's believed every time she received a

“Top Finalist Official Envelope” in the mail since the fifties. I’ll say this, when something is promised to you that sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

In his book *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine offers this insight: *“Society and government... are not only different, but they have different origins. Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness positively by uniting our affections, the latter negatively by restraining our vices. The one encourages intercourse, the other creates distinctions. The first is a patron, the last a punisher.”* He goes on to say, *“Society in every state is a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one; for when we suffer, or are exposed to the same miseries by a government, we might expect in a country without government, our calamity is heightened by reflecting that we furnish the means by which we suffer.”* The Thomas Paine form of government is drawn from a principle in nature... *“The more simple any thing is, the less liable it is to be disordered, and the easier repaired when disordered.”*

Here are the facts. We as Americans have enjoyed unparalleled freedoms for so long, that we have forgotten what it’s like to have those freedoms stripped. We’re out of practice at recognizing propaganda and political chess strategy for the mousetrap cheese that it is. If we do not recognize the precursors of envelopment, then we will not be prepared to defend ourselves against our enemies, whether external or internal to our Government. That’s when we lose our freedom. Be prepared, America. Do not give the enemies of freedom a strategic foothold through exploitation of our useless bickering over party-related issues. I’m calling for a unified front. **START TAKING BACK YOUR COUNTRY.** Communicate with your elected officials. Take fifteen minutes out of your day... make them feel the heartbeat of their constituents. Grow some balls and stand for what you know is right—and make that type of determination a part of your everyday core ethos. United we stand, divided we fall. Let’s roll up our sleeves and get some.

BlackHawk Up, MJ Down!

Saturday, August 21, 2010

2001--4th Ranger Training Battalion, Ft. Benning, GA.

I was a student at the Long Range Surveillance Leader's Course. We were conducting 90' fastrope insertions into tall pines from Army UH-60's (Blackhawks), the day before our FTX. Full gear, 75% combat weight. Last run of the day before the HAC is Bingo for fuel. I'm the last man in the last stick. After four other motivators scream down the rope, the Sergeant First Class in front of me reaches out and grabs hold. His feet meet the rope and he zips away just as my leather-on-liner gloved hands grab the rope to follow suit. The next few seconds were a blur.

I'm no stranger to heliborne insertions. As a HRST Master and a certified Range Safety Officer, I rig ropes and tie knots and certify Marines to fastrope, rappel, SPIE, and helocast from helicopters. I've got lots of hours on rigging and descending fastropes.

The only problem was that in this particular instance, the rope was burning through my hands but I was only barely descending below treetop level. You see, the helo driver had to quickly take off from his treetop hover, straight up into the sky, so the 90' rope could clear the trees in this tactical scenario. He was supposed to wait until the rope was clear. To this day, I'm convinced that a Marine pilot would not have made that mistake. Nevertheless, on this day, at this moment in 2001, I have just watched the last of the rope disappear through my hands, as I go falling with an SFC about 40' to the ground.

When we hit the ground (I thankfully landing beside him and not on top of him), it sounded like two shotgun blasts went off as his, and then my, right tib/fib snapped. My foot was in my crotch and his bone was sticking straight through his leg. We were each biting our own wadded sleeves as the hatchback HMMWV drove us over every ditch and bump--out of the woods and [No, not back to the Gulag, which was 10 minutes away] 30 minutes down the road to the hospital at mainside.

That little antic left me with a 'Course Completion' certificate in lieu of a 'graduation' certificate, for inability to complete the FTX. Thankfully, unlike the Army, the Marines make no distinction between the two documents. The bones in my leg healed without incident, even after I cut my cast off with a grinder three weeks early.

Ascending the Zugspitze

Sunday, August 22, 2010

Once upon a time, there were three American teenagers in Germany who decided to climb the highest mountain in the German Alps, the Zugspitze. They were ridiculously qualified to accomplish this task simply because they were high school football players, and therefore invincible.

The time that transpired from the idea's conception, across the thorough planning phase, to the purchase of train tickets to Garmisch... 3 hours. Ah, if only politics were as simple. All of the world's problems would be fixed by next Saturday.

Shoes? Check. Jackets? Check. Humongous video camera from the 80's? Check! Don't forget the Tang and the gallon ziplocks of homemade granola. Fags!!!

So we arrive late in Garmisch. Broke as three hobos. Slept in the train station, on the

ground. Polizei woke us up around five AM, gave us the boot. We're off! Day one, hike to the base of the mountain. The wide path was right next to a spring-fed stream. We hiked it for hours, filled canteens from the spring. Tainted the all-natural Alpine water with artificial orange drink powder. The path narrowed. Kept hiking. The stream disappeared. The path turned into a mountain goat trail with a piton-mounted cable. The cable eventually disappeared into the mountain. We bowled for mountain goats below us. Then the tiny path disappeared... into an icy, dripping hands & knees cave with just a pinch of light at the other end. And a belly crawl through the stream in the middle.

The other side of the tunnel was colder! Snow was scattered in small patches along the mountain. Our two backpacks were soaked after crawling through the tunnel, to include our sleeping bags, the video camera, and the 'safely' packed granola. We found a patch of earth that would support the three of us without falling to an icy, stony death, we zipped two sleeping bags together, and spooned like newlyweds, shivering and shaking and soaked in 15 degree weather. Freakin' geniuses.

Next morning, we woke up with ice in our hair, much like Leo DiCaprio at the end of Titanic. We grabbed handfuls of wet granola from inside one of the packs for breakfast. Rolled up the ginormous blob of a sleeping bag, stuffed it into the other pack. Took turns carrying it as if it weighed 200 lbs. Video camera was frozen for the rest of the adventure.

Hiked up a steep mountainside into a high hidden valley, where lo and behold, a climber's bed and breakfast sat, chimney smoking. At the end of the valley, the base of the Zugspitze, and a huge waterfall dumping into a valley pool. Stood around the base of the waterfall, getting wetter and colder, yelling and hooting and hollering as if we had discovered fire. This was the gateway to the Zugspitze. We began our ascent.

Not three hours into our ascent, our way was barred with icy snow that had covered one side of the mountain. We only had to traverse about fifteen feet in order to continue, but if we fell, we would die, plain and simple. No ropes, by the way. Invincible, remember? So we took turns cutting out footholds and handholds in the frozen wall of the cliff with a knife. Each man would cut a hole, then shimmy back to the more stable rock, which was not quite a path, but not quite a sheer cliff. Finally, we had cut the footholds and handholds we needed. First man to cross slipped and almost died. That's when we pulled him back and argued with each other for 30 minutes. On one hand, we really needed to stop being Sallies. On the other hand, better to live as a Sally than die as an idiot. We tried to find a different way to the top, but the snow was pretty much everywhere, and we didn't even have gloves. Once we finally decided to make the "chicken out" decision unanimous, we got slaphappy and descended.

We set up our bivy at the bottom of the mountain, that is, where our journey began

and the path was wide. Though the air was slightly less cold than at altitude, the wind was biting nastily and our sleeping bag bundle was twice as wet after having crawled through the cave / tunnel again on the way back. This time, we organized a spooning rotation so that each of us would get a little time in the middle, relatively warm and away from the elements.

Frozen, wet, almost out of Tang... we woke up early and headed back to the train station. Lessons learned? More granola next time. Snyder, Martinez--thanks for the great memory, guys!

The Gospel According to Lily

When Lily was only a year old, she found my Bible on the coffee table and opened it to reveal a long-revered child's treasure... a marker. A highlighter, actually, but she knew what to do with it. She indiscriminately turned to random pages and marked them up, before I walked in and caught her blue-handed. Later, I thought about the incident and wondered if perhaps the Lord sent me a biblical message through my daughter.

Profound? Who's to say. Certainly not me. Cute, certainly and without a doubt. Now, I will admit to you that I rarely pick up the Good Book. I'm not proud of that statement, but hey, I'm honest. In the instance that I picked up the Book to locate her random scribbles, nothing seemed to grab me.

Today was a different story. I was actually looking at a list of quick one-liners that I could use as blog stories, when I noticed, "The Gospel According to Lily." I reached across my desk and picked up the Bible, a two-pound beast of a weapon that I am altogether proud of because my wife bought it for me in 1997 or 1998. It's got a big sword inscribed on it, my name on the cover, and everything. Battle scars? Ha! You can shake the dust of a dozen countries out of its pages. I sacrificed a two-quart canteen of invaluable water, just to hump this Bible in my ruck across Iraq. I fervently underlined passages while fasting behind bars; it was the only personal belonging I was allowed to have, which offered both spiritual sustenance and personally-intrinsic value.

So back to today. I reached across the desk a few minutes ago and grabbed the Bible. Flipped it open, looking for scribbles. Ah, there's one. The first Psalm; one of my favorite chapters in the Bible, retained in memory since I was a wee lad. A likely spot for the discovery of one blue highlighter. *"Blessed is the man who walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law doth he meditate day and night..."* AHA. I just had an 'aha' moment.

Profound indeed. Profound and insightful. Bravo, young Lily. To be continued...

A Tree By the Water

Monday, August 23, 2010

Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. I have sworn, and I shall perform it, and I shall keep Your righteous judgements. -- Psalm 119:105,6

This is a really long post, but a very personal one with an excellent Bible study juxtaposed. Read it when you have time, but read it!

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The apples from God's tree of wisdom all ripen and mature at different times. Lily scribbled in my Bible two years ago, and the act was seemingly insignificant until now. For the first time since the occurrence, I picked up the Bible to look for the scribbles, so that I could write a story about how cute my daughter is. God revealed something to me in the middle of writing the story! It was an *in-my-face* puzzle connector.

To preface, last week a \$235K construction contract bottomed out after two months' administrative toil following the signed contract. I've been the sole provider of my 6-person family since its inception fourteen years ago, and I had cleared my calendar of projects to make way for this one, which I had counted on. My family's current financial situation has been less than desirable for the last three years (intermittently), and I am no longer ashamed to admit that on several occasions over this grueling period, we've been broke. I don't mean broke like 'forced to tap into savings' broke or 'let's cut back on impulsive splurging' broke. I mean bottom-of-the-barrel, where's our next meal coming from, siphoning gas from my gas hog to put in Petra's more economical vehicle, couch cushions devoid of spare change "BROKE." It's those times when the weight loss compliments have nothing to do with discipline and everything to do with mild starvation, that you really feel low. On the flipside, our kids have learned to appreciate simple things like tree swings and family bike rides, and have learned to treasure the rare occasions when we go out to eat.

I share this openly, not for pity (nor for judgement), but because I believe with all my heart that there are great things in store for myself and my family, to include a more-than-adequate financial situation. If I am wrong, then let stories such as this lend credibility to the theory that I am a perpetual douchebag. If I am right, then this story will someday lend great credibility to my testimony.

So we've given our situation to God, numerous times, both publicly and privately. The problem is, I have held onto numerous personal vices that are contrary to the very laws of God that promote blessing and abundance. And I've known this. In recent weeks, the convicting reminders of my responsibility to resist sin have been culminating like a foreboding storm cloud, as if in preparation to pull the carpet from under me for the umpteenth time. I believe that my personal spiritual shortcomings

are largely to blame for my family's trouble, simply because, to be the leader that God wants me to be, I have to follow His way to the letter.

So I open my Bible now, for the second time in the last hour, to read between the lines of Lily's scribbles again, this time with *God* goggles on. Psalm 1 has been seared into my heart, and mind, and tongue, since I was a boy. In essence, it says that **if you surround yourself with the company of scornful, sinful, ungodly folks, that your life will be without substance, and then you'll die; but if you steer clear of such influences, and focus rather on the Word of God, then you'll be as blessed as a tree that is planted on a freshwater shore, whose leaves never wither and whose fruits always prosper.** My daughter, who was one year old, highlighted this chapter with a few scribbles. Part of her scribbles extend to Chapter 2, directly over verse 8 (David is quoting the Lord, words in red): *Ask of Me, and I shall give you the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thine possession.* Chapter 2 ends with "*Blessed are all they who put their trust in Him.*"

A few days ago, I went for a bike ride to Lake Drummond. To get to this lake, you must ride through 4.5 miles of the Great Dismal Swamp, covered in deet. Perfect loneliness. At the end of the trail, the most serene and peacefully still water I can ever remember having seen. Thought-provoking. Prayer-provoking. Praise-inspiring. A few small cypress trees are growing in the lake. Neither I nor my wife had ever been to this place, or known of this place before. She did not know where I went to PT. I rode back from the lake, and when I returned home, I kid you not, this is the note she left by my computer: Jeremiah 17:7-8 "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in Him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought, and never fails to bear fruit." I love you, Matt! I hope this encourages you today. - Petra

The preceding verses say "Cursed be the man that trusts in man...whose heart departs from the Lord. For he shall be like the heath (bush) in the desert, and shall not see when good comes; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land and not inhabited." I now feel that the physical path I traveled to Lake Drummond, is a very near manifestation of these verses. Lonely Dismal Swamp. *Parched places in the wilderness. Uninhabited.* Trees planted by water. Trees growing in the water. Cypressess at that (evergreens, whose *leaves don't wither*)! Amazing similarities to our situation as well. The dismal, lonely path to serenity. I Feel like I'm living in Bunyan's *Progress*. I'd already likened my thirst for exploring The Swamp, to God's habit of calling men to the wilderness before affecting the their ministry.

The next stop in Lily's scribbblings? Out of nearly 1,200 chapters in the Bible, her highlighter just so happen to fall two years ago on a portion of text I'd never read or heard until yesterday, when Pastor Matt shared a powerful and pertinent message

that was built around the story. "Endings Lead to Beginnings," from Matt's Endings and Outcomes series, was rooted in a story found in Jeremiah Chapter 29, in a letter Jeremiah wrote to the exiled Israeli slaves of Babylon. *"Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all that are carried away captives, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon; build you houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them; take you wives, and father sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; **that you may be increased there, and not diminished.**"*

God is telling the captive children of Israel to claim the space they occupy. Pastor Matt expounded upon this, calling Christians to stop living in the past and follow these three steps: (1) Believe the best for the future. (2) Speak to the future. (3) Commit to the future. *"Claim territory in the Name of the Lord."* Ironically (and you'd have to know me to understand that I draw godly wisdom from a number of sources in my life), my last set of marching orders from the Lord, were passed through Pastor Matt's wife, Lori. She prayed for me and pointed me toward Colossians Chapter 3: *"Whatsoever you do, do it heartily, as unto the Lord, and not to men; [knowing that of the Lord you shall receive the reward of inheritance: for you serve the Lord Christ. But he that does wrong shall receive for the wrong that he has done: and there is no respect of persons."*

Finally, Lily's marker found its way to Matthew Chapter 6. She scribbled ALL OVER IT. Locate a Bible, and read it--it's pertinent to both my situation, and to yours, today. I'm off to football practice with the boys.

Be blessed, my friends, and walk in the way of the Lord.

Letters to Pascal

Tuesday, August 31, 2010

Rosetta Stone, roll over! I have found an effective way to keep on top of language learning using two free internet tools, and I was able to make a friend in the process!

Several months ago, I was trying to brush up on my French. Using this amazing thing called the internet, I decided to investigate whether there were French people who were in my predicament, trying to brush up on their English. My search led me to an international pen-pal website, "InterPals.net." I entered my information, reiterating that I was interested in language learning, and that I was in no way looking for an internet girl fling.

Through this website, I found a guy of similar age to myself, living in the Loire Valley in Central France (an area which I had recently visited, and love), who himself was

married to a Hungarian (like myself). Using this common ground as a building block, we began writing back and forth--first in French, then in both languages. We now write each other every two or three weeks.

The second tool that I use in language learning, is Google Translate. Though no translation engine is perfect, for English to French translations, it seems to be the most accurate. I will write a letter to Pascal in English, and then copy / paste segments of the letter into the translation engine for interpretation. Then I will copy and paste the translated text back into my letter before emailing it to Pascal. Slowly but surely, my mind is adapting to French phrases and sentence structure more and more.

Probably the most important aspect of this type of integrated learning, is that you are not just learning a language. You are learning a culture. I have learned which vegetables Pascal plants in his garden. I have found similarities in what motivates each of us; things that transcend geographic boundaries. I have learned through Pascal, some of the nuances of municipal government in France. These are things that cannot be experienced through language learning CD's or software.

I have found a friend in Pascal. In many ways, distant friends are easier to confide in. Though I've shared no mind-melding, soulful, "man" experiences with him, I look forward to building a stronger friendship as time progresses.

Thank You Amedeo

When Amedeo Obici chose our current home town of Suffolk, Virginia, for the headquarters of his newly founded Peanut company, I don't think he could have imagined the impact it would have on future generations.

This is not a long blog post about how much Amedeo and his family changed the Suffolk community, which they did; that story will be saved for a later time. I'm simply talking peanuts.

Suffolk has one of those quaint Main Streets that is typical of small towns. In the 20's and 30's, Main Street dead-ended into Washington Street, and from what I can tell from archived newspaper photos and articles, during that time it was booming with people. Over time, the automobile would see more people behind the wheel, "just passin' through," and fewer people out for leisurely strolls, "just because." By the mid 80's, Washington Street had become the gateway to Suffolk's slums, and Main Street was all but dead. Today, in 2010, the area at Main and Washington has rebounded. More than ever in the past decade, people are filling the streets. Store fronts have been remodeled. Night life has slowly revived. Folks drive all the way from Virginia Beach to catch some of the best Sushi around. Business is booming.

The one amazing element that sets this small town's Main Street scene apart from others, has absolutely nothing to do with the sights, sounds, or tastes that we often associate with tourism and commerce. It's the smell... the smell of roasting peanuts. Half a mile from Washington & Main (as the crow flies), lies Amedeo's Planter's peanut processing facility. In late evenings year-round, and at intervals throughout the day during the late summer and fall (peanut harvest season), the smell of freshly roasted peanuts emanates the downtown scene. On occasion, when the winds are favorable, the aroma will cover the entire town!

It's things like this that will never be experienced through a 360 degree, live online downtown camera. You will not experience this through a Chamber of Commerce brochure. You will have to visit Suffolk; and when you do, the corner of Washington and Main in the evening... then glance toward the statue of that old familiar character under a top hat who's shaped like a peanut, and tip your own hat to the man behind the vision.

Thanks, Amedeo.

Spetsnaz Step Aerobics

There's a reason I don't attend group workouts. "Reebok Step Aerobics." This morning I was reminiscing with Petra about a hilarious workout incident that took place in 1997. My workout partners and friends, Brandon and Jack, decided that for PT one morning, we would 'mix it up.' So we drove through Slocum housing area at MCAS Cherry Point, to try out a different fitness center--every Marine base I've been to has several.

Today's PT will be easy. Looks like we three motivators will be taking a step aerobic class. We're the only guys, surrounded by thirty-five mothers who just dropped their kids off at school. Because I'm a jack stud, I always up the ante. I eat two meals at every restaurant, I take twice as many vitamins as you, and there's no way I'm going to use the recommended maximum of two risers underneath my cheesy plastic step. *Blah, blah, blah.* I hear ya, lady. Let's try five.

So the three of us guys have some serious steps going on, and the music starts. We have absolutely no idea what's going on, but it's going on FAST. I can barely come back off a step by the time the instructor's moving back up onto hers. And this is just a warmup. Not knowing the moves, we look like a trio of newborn giraffes. About forty-five minutes into our workout, I glance over my shoulder at the big standard GSA clock on the wall. Actually, only six minutes has passed since we began. Surely, I am in hell. How long is this thing supposed to go?

Okay, so seriously, twenty minutes have passed. I've got sweat dripping off my

knees, and I'm a good three seconds behind everyone else. Jack is ten steps from a heart attack. Brandon is crying out to Jesus. My big oaf feet keep kicking the way-too-high step every time I jump up. We are freakin' DYING!!!

At the forty-minute mark, we're flailing like fish out of water. I could actually care less how weak I look in front of Octo-mom on my left. Two ladies have had to help keep Jack on his feet. Brandon stopped sweating and started humming lullabies. I've kicked my steps, inch-by-inch, halfway around the room. I might as well just share with two-step Sally over here. Maybe she won't mind. Brandon is eyeballing the room, apparently to see if it is conceivable that we are the least aerobically fit individuals in the entire room. We are. At this point, the ladies stopped being polite; the entire class is beyond themselves with laughter. *Silly! There's no basement in the Alamo! HAAA HAAA HAAA!!!!*

Forty-one minutes later, I'm thinking about rescuing Jack, because it would look noble and I would get a break. Brandon is acting like he's got a problem with his step. I hear him mumble, "is this thing broken?" Jack is slack-jawed and foaming at the mouth, staring as if through the wall at the front of the class.

The next nine minutes were a blur. Brandon's life passed before my eyes. I glanced at myself in the mirror to check my form, only to see huge streaming tears running all the way down my neck. Or is that snot? Brandon got his second wind, but if he loses his balance, he's gonna take out mamasan. Jack? He's here. I can hear him sucking air through a whistle-pop. His face is beet red and his eyes are bulging. My feet are numb. My legs are screaming. *Sweet Savior, please make her stop!* Ha! She stopped. I run around the room, high-fiving all the creeped-out girls. Probably freaked because they saw me wiping snot rockets off my shirt with that hand the whole time. Brandon is asking about our certificates. Jack is already curled up sleeping in the back of Brandon's vehicle.

So help me, never again will I take your iron-man communist step aerobics, Reebok. You can tell all your spinning beserkers and Pilates whip-crackers the same thing. And you can forget about the militant Malcom P90X! I'm onto you... all of you, you cruel sado-masochists!

Video: How to Catch and Skin a Copperhead

This morning I go for a bike ride. On my return, I meet a copperhead. If it was out in the woods, away from the house or anywhere my kids might play, I'd pay the snake no mind. However, on the property, a copperhead is a potentially deadly threat to my young children. Today, this snake will become an instructional tool. This video is not of particular interest to normal people. Please pause the music at the bottom of this page before playing the video.

Video shows blood and minor graphic content.

(Link to Youtube video: "How to Catch & Skin a Copperhead," not available for viewing except through *Despite All Obstacles* website)

Reviving Peanut Park

Suffolk, VA -- Every evening between the end of July and the end of October, Peanut Park is bustling with the excitement of small town football. The Suffolk Titans, part of the city's Downtown Athletic Association, are the Pop Warner football league that call Peanut Park "home."

Peanut Park is located at 388 S. Saratoga Street, and is sandwiched on the opposite end by Carolina Road. The field is a five minute walk from the intersection of Washington Street and Main, just over the bridge and on the right. During regular nights of practice, the field has a classic appeal. Cars full of spectators and parents park along the field's edge on one end, while the other end is towered over by ghost-town industrial peanut factories and grain bins--it hints of Gotham's Axis Chemical Plant in Burton's 1989 film rendition of Batman. The glow of the field's big lights can be seen for miles.

Last Saturday, our four Titan teams proudly stepped out onto Peanut Park Field suited up for game day--the first the field had seen in over twenty years. With exception of the flag team, our teams lost. Among Hampton Roads' lowest budgeted league, the Titans have--for the last decade--had the sad reputation of germinating quality players that simply move to another league as they progress in age and experience. As a result, the players have not been receiving the first-rate training environment they deserve, in order to remain competitive against such teams as, say, the Virginia Beach Mustangs.

"We're going to change that," says the program's patriarch, President Steve Eley. Between the efforts of himself and Danny Eason, the Titans' Vice President, the Suffolk Titan football program is being stirred up to promote the long-term retention of quality players and coaches. This change is not exclusive to football players and coaches, but also the Titan cheerleaders and their coaches.

From the looks of things, they're certainly stirring things up at Peanut Park. What's needed now is increased awareness, and community support and involvement. Visit the Titan's website here for upcoming game schedules, or check back periodically on this site.

Ayla's First Handful of Words

Wednesday, September 8, 2010

Here's a video of my babygirl's first handful of words. Pause the music at the bottom of this page before viewing the video.

(Link to YouTube video: "Ayla's First Handful of Words," available for viewing through the *Despite All Obstacles* website)

Relating to People 101: Recognizing Childhood Behavioral Indicators

Monday, September 13, 2010

And the word of the day is... .."Perspective." Because people have different experiences and life circumstances, each person's perspective is unique. I am the father of two incredible boys and two amazing girls--each of the four being a well-behaved, beautiful blessing and contribution to this family. Presently, I'm in my fourth year of youth sports coaching, and while I make no claims to my coaching ability, I can boast having made a solid impact on my boys' football team this year. Our 30-player team of 7-to-9-year-olds--largely comprised of lower-class, broken family kids--is undeniably the loudest, sharpest, and most disciplined group of Pop Warner football players to walk the field. I am extremely proud of each of them, and of what they are achieving at the personal levels that far exceed tangible pigskins and yardlines. Using this criteria alone, to the end of relational development with my team, I have assessed the critical circumstances that form individual perspectives. Once the taproot of personal perspective is inferred, a proper relationship can be established.

In one's formative years, when social activity and status are each being developed, it is important to be esteemed. Every child wants to be picked first, or stand at the front of the line, or receive the smiley face sticker or the 'game ball.'

For some, being picked first was a norm. As social Alpha types, they always received stickers. To these kids (the over-achievers), and to their adult selves later, the idea of 'not being the best' can be devastating. These individuals will often make brash, irrational, and spontaneous decisions--laying it all on the line in an attempt to regain the pole position in life. Those who succeed are likely to do extremely well, conversely, those who do not succeed may prematurely end their life in pursuit of greatness.

Many kids were not often picked first, but they were usually picked. They were A and B students, striving for A+, but lacking the competitive drive possessed by the Alpha. For these types of people, whom I'll call "the achievers," the idea of failing--of not

being picked--represents the worst imaginable outcome for any given situation. Eventually (as adults) it is this fear of failure that will cause them to play the safe bet. Fewer risks will be undertaken and, historically speaking, these individuals will not reach the full potential of their success in life.

The "socially disadvantaged," as children, grew accustomed to perceived failure. They hoped to be picked, but were prone to letdowns. These types of individuals are most likely to value a smiley face sticker more than the previous two types. Their outcomes are varied, but on the social ladder, they have through predetermination been dubbed the followers and not the leaders, the wage-grade blue collars of society who simply settle for what is dished out.

In the fourth and least desirable of these categories lies a wild card: "the bullied." As children they were picked on, abused, made fun of, beat up, or cheated, often due to physical traits (skin color, height, obesity) or disabilities (eyeglasses, speech impediment, cripple). Whether they received gold stars on their homework or not is of little consequence, because the complex duality of their lives caused them on one hand to be accepted--praised even--by their parents and teachers; and on the other hand physically, psychologically, and verbally battered by their peers or other adults. The well-intending adults in their lives, that is, the parents and teachers and coaches whose responsibility it was to guard and equip and empower them against the cruelties of society, have miserably failed. The outcomes of such children are varied. In one extreme, a bullied child may turn out to be broken-spirited and deeply apathetic. On the opposite end of the personality spectrum, one who is bullied may become spitefully devious, violent, and/or abusive as an adult, perpetuating the cycle. Neither outcome is healthy or positively productive.

In the latter case, it is of utmost importance as adults to recognize and effectively protect against abuses, not only regarding your own children, but others. If your own children are not generally subject to this type of treatment (I say generally because at some point, most children will find themselves 'picked on' for one reason or another... this is natural so long as it is not a prolonged trend), at the very least, teach them how to recognize the forms and indicators of abuse, so that they can report incidents to yourself or proper authority. On that note, do not force them to confide in just any authority. Teachers, coaches, even police--all being human, are subject to fallacy, and you do not want your child to be afraid to come to you if one of these exemplified leaders is the perpetrator.

The fifth and final type of child has experienced early trauma of some sort. Perhaps the loss of a mother, father, or sibling. Perhaps, the child witnessed something horrific. These children, similarly with the aforementioned 'abused,' may also eventually fill the shoes of undesired 'extreme' personalities, such as apathy and violence. The key difference is, because they are not subject to continued buffeting, they have the opportunity to heal, building protective layers around their emotional vulnerabilities. Dissimilar to the abused, therefore, the traumatized child--if properly

fostered through positive role models--has the opportunity to achieve unparalleled successes due to heightened emotion and the tremendous potential for self-discipline and drive.

Regardless of personality or age, every person can relate to at least some part of the childhood behavioral characteristics above. Understanding these indicators, and recognizing them in others, will help each of us to maximize the meaningful extent of personal relationships and long-term bonds as adults. Furthermore, the same can help us to positively and effectively shape the futures of not only our own children, but the children we by chance may encounter and impact--knowingly or otherwise--throughout our lives.

46 Powerful Leadership Traits

This post is always living and growing... at the time it was written in 2010, I believe there were 23 leadership traits. Then I opened it up to others. Leadership is not right-protected, or seasonal, or ever out of style. It grows and adapts. Up to 46 powerful leadership traits as of 12/26/2011.

Justice Fairness. Equality. The consistent meting out of impartial reward and punishment according to actions.

Judgment The ability to weigh facts against potentially sound courses of action, preceding a decision or action.

Decisiveness The ability to observe your surroundings, orient yourself to the situation, and sharply determine a course of action.

Integrity Uprightness of moral character; doing right even when you know no one is watching.

Dependability A historical measurement which lends credibility to one's ability to do something correctly, all the time, every time.

Tact The ability to deal with others without causing offense. Respect, as a way of life.

Initiative Taking action in the absence of orders.

Endurance Mental and physical stamina, measured by ability to withstand pain, fatigue, and stress.

Bearing How you carry and present yourself; "whole package;" combines appearance, gait, tone, &

personal conduct.

Unselfishness Avoidance of comfort and advancement at the expense of others.

Courage Aka *gumption, guts, nerve, balls, intestinal fortitude*; the firm mental determination that something is more important than fear or criticism. "The fear of waiting a minute longer to act." (Patton)

Knowledge Range of one's intellectual information, including science, art, and human understanding.

Loyalty A quality of faithfulness to God, country, family, friends, peers, subordinates & superiors.

Enthusiasm A display of sincere interest and motivation toward the performance of duties.

PMA Positive Mental Attitude. A consistent belief that the glass is half full.

Wisdom A quality that combines knowledge or fact with the elements of judgement, tact, and discernment in order to make sound conclusions or decisions.

Ethics Ethos. Pillars. Core Values. Fundamental values that reflect uprightness of character with respect to moral principals. "It's never wrong to be right."

Confidence Complete, reliable, and assured belief in one's power or ability.

Boldness Boldness - The ability to forcefully project one's idea or agenda, even when the decision to do so is unpopular; combines courage, ethics, strength, and conviction.

Discipline Discipline - Highly refined conduct/behavior of character, brought about by rigorous training, control, and self-restraint.

Timing Timing - The quality of leadership that controls the speed of delivery (of a statement, a letter, a throat punch, whatever) to maximize its effect at the point of impact.

SA Situational Awareness - The cognitive processing of all elements and events within an environment; this includes the deductive reasoning ability which presumes a situation's history, and the foresight to anticipate the future effects of the actions of all interconnected elements.

Training The element that bridges the gap between mediocrity and excellence in the pursuit of perfection. A revered soldier named David Hackworth coined the term, "The more we sweat in peace, the less we bleed in war." The Marines say, "If it ain't raining, we ain't training." The gist is that training opportunities abound in every action of every day.

Courtesy Excellence of manners or social conduct; polite behavior.

Speed The ability to move as quickly as possible without sacrificing safety or integrity of action.

Simplicity Freedom from complexity. The ability to convey complex ideas or concepts in a manner that is easily understood. In his pamphlet *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine states that "the simpler [a government] is, the less likely it is to become disorganized." (*John McInerney*)

Cool Level-headedness. The quality of being mentally steady, even-tempered, calm, reliable, and emotionally controlled, especially under fire or when stress is applied.

Perspective "That sounds good on paper. But what's it look like?" (*Ron Swegheimer*)

Spirit Aka *heart*, an influential, passionate, and contagious attitude that inspires action.

Strength Mental, moral, spiritual, or physical/muscular power; firmness, sturdiness, hardiness, toughness, Grit. "*Is that you, John Wayne?*" (*for Ron Clayton*)

Consistency An established pattern of continuously adhering to the same principles or form of quality.

Mentorship The quality of a top-rate leader which continually fosters a learning environment. Do not hoard the keys to success...it is a sign of fear-based, weak leadership. Hold nothing back; instead of taking pride in your own ability to lead, take pride in building high-caliber leaders of the finest degree.

Organization The ability to compartmentalize and maintain a state of order at all times.

Humanity The quality of being humane or sympathetic; compassion, kindness, benevolence; the trait that sets leaders apart from tyrants.

Balance The ability to maintain harmony in an environment through equitable or symmetrical apportionment of all factors; the ability to conjure all leadership traits for combined use in any situation.

Common Sense The trait which maximizes the utility of the human mind, to find the simplest viable solution to any problem. "So rare it's a freaking super power."

Drive Vigorous, direct, intentional, determined movement toward a goal or objective; the relentless, ambitious pursuit of excellence; the quality that separates the good and the great.

Competition In order to stay on top, a leader must surround himself or herself with individuals of the highest caliber, to promote a healthy „spirit of competition“ or challenging environment. Only by pushing each other's limits do we truly know what we are capable of achieving. Likewise, if the members of a team do not continually push each other to achieve greatness, they are bound to fail in the end. *(Mike Unrein)*

Esprit de Corps Taught widely as a leadership principle within the Marines, it literally means the spirit of the body--interpreted as a body or group of people. This particular leadership trait is the shared motivational spirit that is made manifest through group struggle toward a common goal, commonly found where there is a strong sense of Ohana, family, teamwork. Pain breeds loyalty. Loyalty breeds Esprit de Corps.

Follow-through The ability to finish what one starts. "You're not finished with any task until you're mentally and materially ready to do it again." *(Clayton 'Bo' McDaniel)*

Imagination A flameless lamp in a glass bulb? *Yeah, right! That'll be the day!* The television... the telephone... a horseless carriage... once upon a time, these were just the impossible ideas of one lunatic or another. Imagination is the act of forming a mental picture or concept out of something that is not actually present to the senses. It continually inspires and creates a new reality. *(John Natcher)*

Audacity "Shameless boldness." Goes hand-in-hand with imagination and conviction, especially when applied to testing or trying something new or traditionally unpopular. Unlike courage or boldness alone, audacity is exercised when the negative consequences of action are firmly defined and matter-of-factly known, but the action or challenge is undertaken anyway. *(John Natcher)*

Empathy In order to earn the respect of your troops, you must be able to relate to them—to connect with them at the lowest level. (*John Natcher*) Your people don't care what you know, until they know that you care. (*Henry May*)

Inspiration The quality of a leader that motivates and compels ordinary individuals to accomplish extraordinary feats. (*John Natcher*)

Action Anyone can be a critic. Anyone can have great ideas. But cities are not built, wars are not won, and families are not fed on good intentions. If you disagree with someone else's actions, then act. *Produce*. In the real world, extraordinary concepts will never trump simple, tangible results. (*Ryan McAdoo*)

Role Reversal When I evaluate the character of leaders who are assigned under me, I always ask myself honestly, "Would I be willing to work for this person?" (*Mike Holcomb*)

Carpe Freakin' Diem

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I implore each of you to seize the day. Today you face some fears you've been avoiding. Reach out, reach in, dig deep. Wherever you go today, hold your chin high, roll your shoulders back, stick out your chest, lean back at the waist, and strut. Smile, baby! You really look great. When you see an opportunity to do good, take it. When you don't have a template solution, make it. Be bold, be strong, be courageous. Be contagious. Win. Be the head and not the tail. Move mountains. Slay giants. Be salt and light. Be fruitful in everything. Today, you take back your God-given 'inalienable' right to live in freedom and pursue happiness. Do not look down, do not look back; shake the shackles and dance! Be FREE! Achieve your goals. Finish your projects. Crush your obstacles. Blow negativity out of the water. Create. Explore. Conquer. Encourage. Set the example. Motivate and inspire every person you meet, even if the encounter is brief. You are a winner! You have a powerful Creator with a purposeful intent for your life. You have a powerful purpose! May you come to know it. Walk it. Live it. Today, choose success. Speak it. Believe it. Know it. May your endeavors uplift, positively impact, and affect your environment to the Nth degree. May you grow spiritually, physically, morally, mentally. Walk in the light. Resist the devil. May you increase in wisdom and knowledge. If you seek love, may you find it. If you have love, give it. May your every step be warmed by the footprints of the One who leads you. Cast your cares on Him--trade your sorrows, your sickness, your pain... for the joy of the Lord! He will heal your marriage, He will fix your family, He will mend the pains of your past and satisfy your soul! He has given you the power over every addiction. Lose your fears. Laugh out loud. Find happiness. May you be richly blessed, in every sense of the word. May your life have meaning. May

your job, your house, and your children be blessed. TODAY IS YOUR DAY. So throw another log on the fire, kick it up a notch, gain ground, occupy, and hold! Stand firm! Today, you are determined to be more than a conqueror. You are a mighty warrior, a rock--you have been chosen with a very special and uniquely specific destiny--and today is your day to begin fulfilling it!

A Refreshing Visit at 3n1

Sunday, September 19, 2010

Never a dull moment at our church, 3n1 of Suffolk, VA. Last week, we had a 70's theme night at the local YMCA, to celebrate our 1-year anniversary. Today, we were blessed with the refreshing outside perspective of Christopher Hadsell, who has since last December been traveling the world to make an impact for Christ. His opening prayer, his message, and his delivery were packaged in a unique flavor; one that was distinctly not of domestic origin, rather formed by obedience to an international calling. His prayer for our church was that the Lord would cause the cataracts to fall from our eyes, to see that 'it's all about Jesus.' That the Spirit of God would disrupt our lives, to effectively make us Kingdom Christians, recognizing our rightful place at God's banquet table--as full, joint heirs with Jesus Christ.

An added bonus, Hadsell's girlfriend was in the lobby, raising donations for various worldwide ministries by distributing many of her beautiful photographs, taken throughout Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Her name is Jennifer Mitchell, and her website can be viewed [here](#).

With an All-Star leadership team in place at 3n1, namely Pastors Matt & Lori Stewart and Steve & Shelley Bellavia; a passion for global impact; and a mission to reach out to the 'unchurched;' (not to mention a great House2House ministry and a full spread of fruit, pastries and coffee before Sunday service) our movie theater-church is anything but dull. Christopher Hadsell added to the flair today, messing up our comfort zone for Christ's sake; Jennifer Mitchell did the same through her beautiful gift... both did so with the uncommon humility that is a common virtue among our very real church leaders.

Mama Bear & Cub -- Video Clip

Tuesday, September 21, 2010

Not five miles as the crow flies, is my new favorite exercise destination and super quiet prayer spot. Yesterday, all I had on me was a phone, and in the middle of my bike ride to Lake Drummond in the *Great Dismal Swamp*, I hit the brakes to film a mama and baby bear cub for about three solid minutes. My phone camera sucks

though, and I'm shaky with excitement--here's the last fifteen seconds.

(Link to YouTube video clip, "Daaaaa Bears," available for viewing only through *Despite all Obstacles*)

94 Days Left Until Christmas!!!

Yesssss!!!

I've got a thing for Christmas. A serious thing. In fact, I'm pretty sure there's an official medical condition for people like me. I look forward to Christmas all year long! Chances are, I'll start shopping in August. Our official Christmas season begins on Thanksgiving, when after watching the Macy's Day Parade in the morning and gorging on every type of traditional food in the book to the background noise of a football game in the afternoon, we watch our first Christmas movie of the season (in recent years, the choice has usually been a toss up between Jim Carrey's *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* and Tom Hanks' *The Polar Express*).

Every day after that, Christmas time is officially ON, BABY!!!

On Camaraderie

Wednesday, September 22, 2010

This is the poem that got me through Amphibious Reconnaissance School:

*Wenn einer von uns müde wird,
der andere für ihn wacht.*

*Wenn einer von uns zweifeln will,
der andere gläubig lacht.*

*Wenn einer von uns fallen sollt',
der andere steht für zwei,*

*Denn jedem Kämpfer gibt ein Gott
den Kameraden bei.*

Herybert Menzel, 1944 (1906 - 1945)

— — —

(Translation is not entirely literal; intended for understanding in English)

*When one of us is tired,
The other stays awake for him.*

*When one of us feels down,
The other laughs out loud.*

*When one of us has fallen,
The other stands for two;*

*Because God has given unto every warrior
A comrade.*

Lake Drummond in Photos

Thursday, September 23, 2010



The cypress-blackened waters of Lake Drummond provide the perfect canvas for beautiful reflections such as this one.



This reflected stick appears to be floating in nothingness



Chad on a morning ride at Washington Ditch Trail



The lookout at the end of Washington Ditch Trail





Affecting the Will of God

Friday, September 24, 2010

Every good father has a soft side. It can usually be reached through the posing of simple, innocent questions by his doe-eyed children. When my little girl asks for a gween wing pop--please--cause it's Fwiday night and Fwiday nights are 'posed ta be special, she's probably gonna get one regardless of how much sugar she's ingested in the last two hours. As all of my children do at some time or another, in this instance she has a way of affecting my stone-faced will.

Our Heavenly Father is no exception. He was set to destroy Ninevah until the king of Ninevah humbled himself and his people before the Lord. God, having compassion on his children, changed His mind. God is willing to spare Sodom on Abraham's behalf, if Abraham finds just ten righteous people. God whisks Elijah away from this earth--counter to His own physical law of natural death. Samson, bound and blinded and shorn, cried out to God. "Remember me! Strengthen me!" God heard his son, and gave Samson super-human strength to defeat the Philistines. At the request of His people Israel, God granted their request for a king--until that point, only heathen nations had kings...

These and other examples show that God loves His children. And that he listens. To affect His will, we only need to repent, ask, and believe!

A Brief History of Christian Music, 70's through Today

Sunday, September 26, 2010

Once upon a time in the not-so-distant past, Christian music was subdivided among three sub-genres: classic hymns & spirituals, black gospel, and southern gospel. These days, the Christian music industry is teeming with divinely inspired talent--through individuals and groups that cover every genre of modern music. I experienced the transformation as the son of my mother, a fanatic convert from Catholicism in the late 70's. All of my early musical experiences were Christ-based, with exception to the occasional pepperings of 'heathen' music by both my friends and my father.

There was one group that I believe to have had the greatest consistent spiritual impact upon the development of modern Christian music. They were the room-shakers, the ice-brakers, the pushers of the envelope. I will be sharing more about this amazing group in the blog post immediately following this one... but first, I'd like to present a brief history of the transformation of Christian music between the 70's and today.

Most of the records my mom owned bore the logo 'Maranatha,' the 70's equivalent to modern Hillsong or WOW Worship CD's. Back then we also listened to the Gaithers, Pat Boone, Keith Green, the 2nd Chapter of Acts, and the Imperials. The mid-80's brought Leon Patillo, the Winans, Sandi Patti, Amy Grant, Russ Taff, Twila Paris, Larnelle Harris, Steve Camp, and Farrell & Farrell. The latter part of the 80's brought Harvest's Holy Fire and I Won't Be Denied, Stephen Curtis Chapman's For the Sake of the Call, and the much-debated in-your-face dramatic music of Carmen (The Champion). Amy Grant's keyboardist, a reformed substance abuser, broke away and went solo under his own name, Michael W. Smith. One of Harvest's members, Paul Wilbur, would eventually go solo and lead the Messianic Jewish music genre.

Pushing the envelope. I remember a time in the late 80's, when Amy Grant was alienated by Christians--hung out to dry for producing an album that was not expressly 'Christian.' By the early 90's, more and more musicians pushed the contraversial boundaries of 'Christian.' The bands Whiteheart and Stryper were subject to harsh criticism for mixing God's message with the 'satanic' sounds of (soft) heavy metal. I remember these guys named Toby Mckeehan and Michael Tait (DC Talk) rappin' about how God is doin' a Nu Thang in a low-budget visit to Germany during Desert Storm. Christians then were anti-rap and anti-nu-thang. Then this one group, who called themselves the "Oi Boys," came out with this song called Boycott Hell. Christians would not let their kids sing along, because of the word hell. Their music was the topic of many rants and sermons about 'compromising and lukewarm' Christians. Nevertheless, the Newsboys persevered to become hugely popular in the following decades. Jars of Clay? They were classified by Christians as 'New Age' musicians, largely because their song 'Flood' went mainstream and was broadcast on secular music stations. The group emerged victorious from their rough beginning,

and their initial CD is now touted as one of the most powerful albums in Christian music.

The 90's and 00's would see a slew of Christian artists, catering to the ears of a different kind of Christian. Increasingly more, the idea of hearing Christian music on mainstream radio was becoming popular. Artists 'spread their wings' across every genre of music known, and sometimes even created their own. Jeremy Camp. Kirk Franklin. Third Day. MercyMe. Mary Mary. Rich Mullins. Nicole Nordeman. Barlow Girl. Chris Tomlin. Yolanda Adams. Relient K. Natalie Grant. Matthew West. David Crowder. Casting Crowns. Sanctus Real.

The domino effect of powerful Christian music? Worship leaders emerge, churches explode their attendance rosters, and the Spirit of God moves in mighty ways. More people are touched in one sitting than ever imagined in the times of Christ. It was a broad learning curve that brought us here, much of which can be attributed to the individuals and groups mentioned herein. There is one group which is not mentioned, and their story will comprise the topic of my next post.

Shakin' the House

Christian music has come a long way, and there's one under-recognized group that has facilitated the change like no other... the Christian rock group *Petra*.

In full recognition of what this sounds like (to an unbeliever, I'm a nutcase; to a Christian, I'm a burnout... and a nutcase), I would like to educate you, the reader, on why I believe that this group has so powerfully impacted Christian music today.

For starters, the group was formed in 1972, when the peaceniks were dying down in the U.S. and God was making a comeback. His U.S. comeback was not borne on the waves of chapel hymns, rather on the airwaves of radio rock & roll. Petra, Greek for 'rock,' released their first album in 1974. Their second album, *Come & Join Us*, was released in 1977. The hit song on this album was *God Gave Rock and Roll to You*. Albeit extremely controversial, the song was a ground-breaking, boldly revolutionary anthem for believers in the 70's! The song was later recorded by *KISS*. Petra released another album in 1979, *Washes Whiter Than*, and it was ho-hum. In 1981, however, another track made a huge impact on the Christian community: *The Coloring Song*. Despite its outdated style, this song is still used to promote the gospel around the world. Check YouTube. While you're there, look for their next major hit, *It is Finished*, which came three albums later in 1984's *Beat the System*. *It is Finished* falls in the category of "victorious Jesus" songs that cover the death and resurrection of Christ, such as Carmen's *Champion* and Michael W. Smith's *Secret Ambition*.

Something happened in 1986. This group, which had already proven powerful in the

furthering of God's message to the world, now performed with the visibly apparent and powerful anointing of God. This was the year that *Back to the Street* was released, the first of several 'impact' albums that speak to both believers and unbelievers in a way that has only recently been paralleled. The songs and the message therein were way ahead of their time--and most importantly, they were so deeply and profoundly rooted in the Word of God. Their music continued to impact listeners throughout the 90's and up to 2005, when their *Petra Farewell* album was released.

And so begins my tribute to the unsung heroes of Christian music. While their dated synthesizers fall on deaf ears in 2010, and while the band is five years disbanded, Petra's message continues to be God-inspired and powerful. I can't wait to hear some modern renditions of the songs that I will highlight in my following blog post(s).

The God-Inspired Lyrics of Petra

This blog post is third in the continuation of my meager tribute to Petra, the inspiring Christian rock group that released 24 albums from the time they formed in 1972 until the time they bowed out in 2005. I found a website listing the lyrics of many Petra songs that impacted me throughout my life, and would like to direct you there. Through and through, if you read the lyrics to these songs, you will notice the Lord's anointing on their works. Though the tunes may have lost their fizzle, these powerful scripture-based words are timeless (all of Petra's songs have accompanying scriptures upon which they are based, which began in the 80's). Furthermore, I encourage you to look up some Petra songs on YouTube. I believe several could be dusted off and covered by modern bands to make for some powerful re-spins. The following links are for five consecutive albums, beginning with Petra's 1986 album, *Back to the Street*. This was the first produced by John and Dino Elefante.

Here are the links:

[Back to the Street](#)

[This Means War!](#)

[On Fire!](#)

[Petra Praise: The Rock Cries Out](#)

[Beyond Belief](#)

Courtney's Birthday Party—The Video

(Courtney Hildreth's B-Day... Links to otherwise private YouTube video, only available through blog)

Effortlessly Beautiful



This is my wife, Petra. She was not posing. She was just wondering what I was up to. "Hold still," I said. Snapped a few photos. She has a beauty that is naturally unsophisticated, yet undeniably amazing. I'm proud to call this gorgeous femme the love of my life.

The Secret of Lake Drummond

Wednesday, September 29, 2010

I went to Lake Drummond with Matt H. We rode there via the Washington Ditch Trail on bikes in a thunderstorm. We rode back in the dark. Shook two 8-point bucks along the ride...

When we were at the lake, we discovered something amazing. To discover it for yourself will require a little faith. At the end of the trail, where the composite-decked pier stretches out over Lake Drummond, there is a small sandy shore where you can fill your canteen with the red-black water. Do so, and drink. Drink all you'd like, without fear. You'll be shocked at the flavor of the water. Then stand up and closely survey the path before you. Looking down, you can see the massive timbers disappear into the dark water where a boat launch ramp must've once been. Now, to discover this secret, you'll need to remove your shirt and enter the water where the

boat launch ramp was, staying close to the pier. Swim to the end of the pier if you can, but be careful. The surprise you'll encounter will be worth the leap of faith. Before you know it, you'll be exploring other parts of the lake in a way you'd never have imagined, in search of similar surprises.

P.S. If you are a photographer, and you are searching for an award-winning photo, take this challenge with a friend on a windless sunny day... the possibilities on this massive, insanely calm, and highly reflective body of water are endless.

My World View: 1986-1991



Luzern, Switzerland



Bahnhof in Switzerland



Venetian gondolier... we'll call him Giuseppe



The South of France



A German Metzger, making weisswursts at a festival.



The Alpspitze--Germany's second-highest peak.



Big Bizzle.



The white cliffs of Dover, England, as viewed from a ferry via Calais, France. This was our normal mode of transit before the Chunnel.



Old Turkish guy. He looks tired.



The fish market at Izmir, Turkey.



One of five horrible photos taken by my folks during a visit to two viking museums in Oslo, Norway. Was able to see one of Lief Erickson's ships.



Stonehenge.



Alpspitze again. Glad not to have a freakazoid mother. Mine was thankfully adventurous.



Beefeater.



The Temple Mount (Dome of the Rock). Dad lived in Israel for a while, because of work. Mom visited there all the time from Germany. I got to stay with him once, but was too uninterested in taking pictures. I could kick myself. Somewhere, though, I do have a tape from a huge 80's video camera, with which I swam in the Dead Sea, visited Masada, shopped the streets of Joppa and Tel Aviv, visited the International Diamond Exchange, was baptized in the Jordan, transited the Sea of Gallilee, the whole 9. Wouldn't mind going back as an adult.



Brandenburg Gate, East Berlin. When the wall was still up, we used to enter East Berlin through Checkpoint Charlie. Vivid memories of that place.



Turkish ships.



This Bobby guy ain't amused.



Our travelin' VW van, "Kermit."



Sister Renee, me, mom, and our travelin' Volvo, "Gonzo."



South France again. Got chased by this huge hornet which finally stung me. Hated that place.



Neuschwanstein Castle. Visited this spot with every swinging family member that came to visit us in Germany. Sometimes we'd walk, other times we'd take horsedrawn buggies; Petra and I once took the trails high into the mountains behind the castle, and went swimming in the pools below a very large, very cold waterfall.



South France again. Me, my sister, some squid hunters.



Me at Konigsee, Germany, stylin' my jams and the classic behind-the-head shirt look. Check out the crystal-clear water in that lake. I remember finding some nazi coins in there.



Konigsee again... waded/swam out to a big stump floating in the water. Again, fortunate not to have a freakazoid mother.



And..... Yeah, Konigsee. It is beautiful there.



Ah, London. The safe American's adventurous getaway. They speak the same language there, right? Good luck understanding it! Our first of several such visits found us stranded during the Great Storm of 1987--a massive blizzard that froze the area solid for nearly a month!



The Wood Carver at Triberg



Visiting with Onkel Leo

Tante Miele & Onkel Wendel Hans

Thursday, September 30, 2010

My father's mother was a war bride from Germany during WWII. She was the daughter of a famous French opera singer and a German businessman. Grandma was born in Chateau de Sallee along with her brother Hans and sister Emilie. Her family then moved to the neutral Saar border between France and Germany, into a small town called Saarwellingen. Her brothers Leo and Peter were born there. The Hoffmann family became the owner-operators of the town's bakery. Eventually the Saar region became a part of Germany, and the family relocated to the adjoining villages of Zweibrucken and Homburg. This is the story of my great aunt Emelie (Miele) and her husband, my great uncle Wendel. They would eventually become my adoptive 'grandparents' for the nine years that we lived in Germany.

When we first moved to Germany in 1986, my father took us to his aunt & uncle's house in the tiny town of Zweibrucken, Germany. Dad grew up with his German family during the eight years that his father was stationed in 1960's Germany, and hadn't since been back. He couldn't wait to introduce his wife and kids to his favorite aunt and uncle.

The introduction was cold. Fresh from the United States, I had no cultural experience outside of Canada and England. I was not used to a cold culture, one that was impressed by the bland utility of modernism, one in which children were seen and not heard. Before we stopped in on Tante Miele and Onkel Wendel, we stopped at the Pirmasens Army Garrison to buy Charmin 2-ply toilet paper from the PX. Grandma had asked us to take some to Miele. As we turned off the steep hill on the outskirts of Zweibrucken, I noticed a few kids playing on a meager playground. On either side of us were rows of boring, colorless four-story apartments, akin to Army barracks of old. We drove until the road dead-ended into a hill. Atop the hill was a TV/radio tower. In later years, I would chase wild hares through the field on that hill--ones so large they'd put a Texas hare to shame. We walked up the sidewalk and buzzed the black button next to the name Hans. Miele leaned out of the third story window and looked down. Wer isn dass? Ayo, Karl! Her German was, I would learn, thickly accented with a draw. We climbed the marble steps in that cold stairwell, only to be received into a cold apartment with paper-thin carpet. Tante Miele beamed with excitement at the soft toilet paper. In 1986, Germans still used TP that was akin to those fibrous brown economy bathroom paper towels. The apartment was indeed cold, but it smelled marvelous. Even though Miele had long since lost her sense of taste, she was a masterful cook of unparalleled skill.

Here are Tante Miele (Aunt Emily, Auntie Em, e.g.) and Onkel Wendel, in their normal chillaxin' spots. Across the table from them was a couch, where we would usually sit. I'd peruse their version of the TV Guide (Star, I believe) and would occasionally stumble upon a set of boobs. In the TV Guide. The TV always remained



on the same station, but there were only two to choose from, even well into the 1990's. Now, Germans do not typically have closets built into their houses; instead they have large (often wall-to-wall) ornate cabinets called shranks. In the bottom center part of the shrank behind them (shown above) was enough

chocolate to choke Willy Wonka. As kids, my sister and I would eagerly await the moment when Onkel Wendel would bust out the purple

Milka bars chocked full of hazelnuts, or the Yes kuchen, or the rare and elusive Kinder eier.



Onkel Wendel was rough around the edges. He acted like he was allergic to kids, but when no one was looking, he was the first one to spoil my sister and I with goodies. He was grouchy and didn't smile much, but when he did, boy, was it treasured! When he laughed, it would light up the room. I always remember him eating tangerines... and not just any tangerines; whoever supplied their Sunday market tangerines were in possession of the sweetest knowledge--the knowledge of where to grow the sweetest, most easily peeled tangerines in the world!

Onkel Wendel left a dent in that chair. He was always watching TV, wearing his house slippers, sitting in that chair. The window beside him is the one that overlooks the parking lot, which Tante Miele would always lean out of whenever someone would buzz the doorbell/intercom. The radiator under the window was the only source of heat in the house, and it would burn the crap out of you if you touched it. The radiators in the other rooms were always off, and the bedrooms were cold as ice... to include the thick down comforters and pillows that would hang out of the open windows all day. In the picture above, you may notice some framed photos in the background.



They were photos of their son Herman, their daughter Erika, and their grandkids, Mischael und Marcus.

This is normally where Tante Miele could be found, slaving away all day to make us all happy. I believe from the bottom of my heart, that it's what made her happy too. She would make the most amazing feldsalad, endivesalad, and creamed knoblough. Her swartzewurtzel and kohlrabi dishes were to die for. She could make melt-in-your-mouth chicken or schnitzel on a whim, and would woo the family with her fried savory crepes, called pfankuchen.



Dad would go crazy over her Leberknoedel Suppe. In the true mastery of her skill, she could make an amazing meal entirely out of turnips--of course, she would never set the table with less than seven different types of foods! There were two occasions in which Tante Miele and Onkel Wendel watched my sister and I for extended periods (a week each time), and it was Tante Miele that taught me German, and patience, and food appreciation.



Here's Tante Miele at the Beckerei. Mohnbrotchen, Wasserweck, and Siebenkorn brot were her normal purchases. She walked several miles to the bakery every morning.

When Onkel Wendel died, Tante Miele's time in the kitchen waned--as she spent more and more time at his grave site. Eventually, she fell to Alzheimer's, and her daughter Erika whisked her away and kept her location secret from the rest of the family until she died. It was a devastating way for Miele to be torn from the family. Honoring this noble woman, I have spent my lifetime since trying to recreate and master the flavorful dishes she left seared in our memories.





And here's an extraordinarily rare and precious photo of Onkel Wendel... goofing off.

I was able to introduce my wife Petra to Tante Miele, as well as to my great Onkel Peter und Tante Hildegard, before they passed. Since then, dad is the only one to have visited the area. He walked the beautiful Zweibrücken Rosegarten, and the marktplatz, and the Fassanerie... all favored weekly ventures of the Hoffmann and Hans families.



8-year-old me at the Zweibrücken Fassanerie

2 comments:

Anonymous said...

Did your aunt and uncle have a brother named Hans also? Was Peter married to Hildegard? Just curious because I am Hans youngest daughter. There were 5 kids, Hans, Leo, Peter, Miele and Betty.

December 12, 2011 2:09 PM



mj said...

Yes! Your father was my great uncle. Peter was married to Hildegard. My grandmother, your aunt Betty, lives in Suffolk, Virginia, USA. What is your name? Will you tell me about yourself? Can you tell me anything about the family? MJ (Matthew Jacob) Speights

December 16, 2011 3:11 AM

A Prayer for My Children

Sunday, October 3, 2010

Father God, who has blessed me so completely, Holy is Your Name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done in our lives, in our home, on this earth... as in Heaven. Thank You for the gift of my family. I thank You for my wonderful wife, for our incredible children, for great family and friends, and for your unending provision and compassion. Please continue to lift my head and order my steps, as I strive for right in Your eyes. Grant me guidance in the leadership of my family, and again--may Your will be done in our lives.

I cannot thank You enough for our children. Thank You for blessing us with them. Thank You for blessing them with us. May Petra and I ever be deemed good and faithful stewards of these beautiful gifts, growing in the knowledge and wisdom of how to bring them up. For our children, Lord, I ask protection. May their hearts, souls, minds, and bodies be continually kept safe, sound, and whole; covered by the strong and loving hand of their Almighty Father. In Your mercy, wipe clean the curses of generations past, that our children may walk in Your way without a cripple caused by the vices and sins of their fathers. May they each meet the mark of their calling.

May our children grow to possess the wisdom, discernment, uncompromising nature, and propriety of their mother. Her beauty is given them already--for which I thank You! May they grow to possess the passion and determination of their [earthly] father. Help us to affect their right choices and decisions through positive example. Let them see the light of Your way, that they might each choose--of their own free

will--to follow You. May they inherit the rich blessings and favor of their Heavenly Father, and know the guidance and comfort of Your Holy Spirit. May they never, in their lifetimes, feel forsaken or alone. Remove from their lives any spirit of fear. Bolster their faith.

Give our children the willingness and audacity to always stand for right, even when the decision to do so is unpopular. Give them the courage and strength to physically confront bullies and other obstacles, in whatever form they come. Stand with them in defense of those who are weaker; the downcast, handicapped, scorned, disadvantaged, weak, elderly, effeminate, or those lacking in physical stature. Equip my children to stand in the face of their own adversaries, and in the adversaries of these weaker vessels.

May they be rooted in goodness and truth, so that through recognition of the same, they may build solid and meaningful relationships. Bless each and every relationship in each of our children's futures. I pray for the future husbands, wives, employers, employees, peers, in-laws, and other acquaintances of our children. For my boys, may their future wives and children be blessed. For my daughters, may their future husbands and children be blessed. May these future husbands and wives be even-tempered, fair, soft-spoken and not given to strife. Let them be bold when required, but always humble and thankful. Let each of their future families walk rightly; protect them spiritually, mentally, morally, and physically. Remove them from unnecessarily stressful situations. Let our children, and their children, and their children's children, live long on this earth, if Your will allows.

This and every day, provide for us. Forgive our sins. Help us to forgive others. Finally, from the top of their heads to the soles of their feet, cover our children, Father God: Joshua David, Caleb Conlan, Lily Ava, and Ayla Charis. I pray this covering over them for the rest of their long, fruitful, abundant, and exciting lives! Yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. In Jesus' name, Amen.

One-Liner of the Day

Monday, October 4, 2010

Your challenges in this life are great. Have great faith!

Husband... Father... Marine

AS A MARINE, he was legendary. Most Marines can rattle off the incredible stories of White Feather during VietNam. When I attended Scout Sniper School at Stone Bay, I learned of the details of how he transformed the Marine Corps' sniper program, developing it into what it has become today.

HIS ROLE AS A FATHER has been documented on several occasions, chiefly because the son who bears his name also joined the Marines, also attained the rank of Gunnery Sergeant, and also became a Distinguished Shooter in the Corps. Marines know this son as 'Sonny;' I knew him through occasional contact when I had to run flightline support equipment in and out of his shop from my next-door hangar at Cherry Point. I learned more about Sonny through my buddy, John Natcher, who worked directly under him. I still have the autographed copy of Sonny's *Marine Corps Times* story, *Son of a Sniper*, packaged next to a copy of the book *93 Confirmed Kills*, which was autographed by the old man himself.

FEW MARINES know the nature of this man as a husband. In a brief internet search, all roads point to the solitary line: "Hathcock married Jo Winstead on November 20, 1962." It is a shamefully bland statement, shadowed by the glorification of wartime events which the sniper himself humbly downplayed.

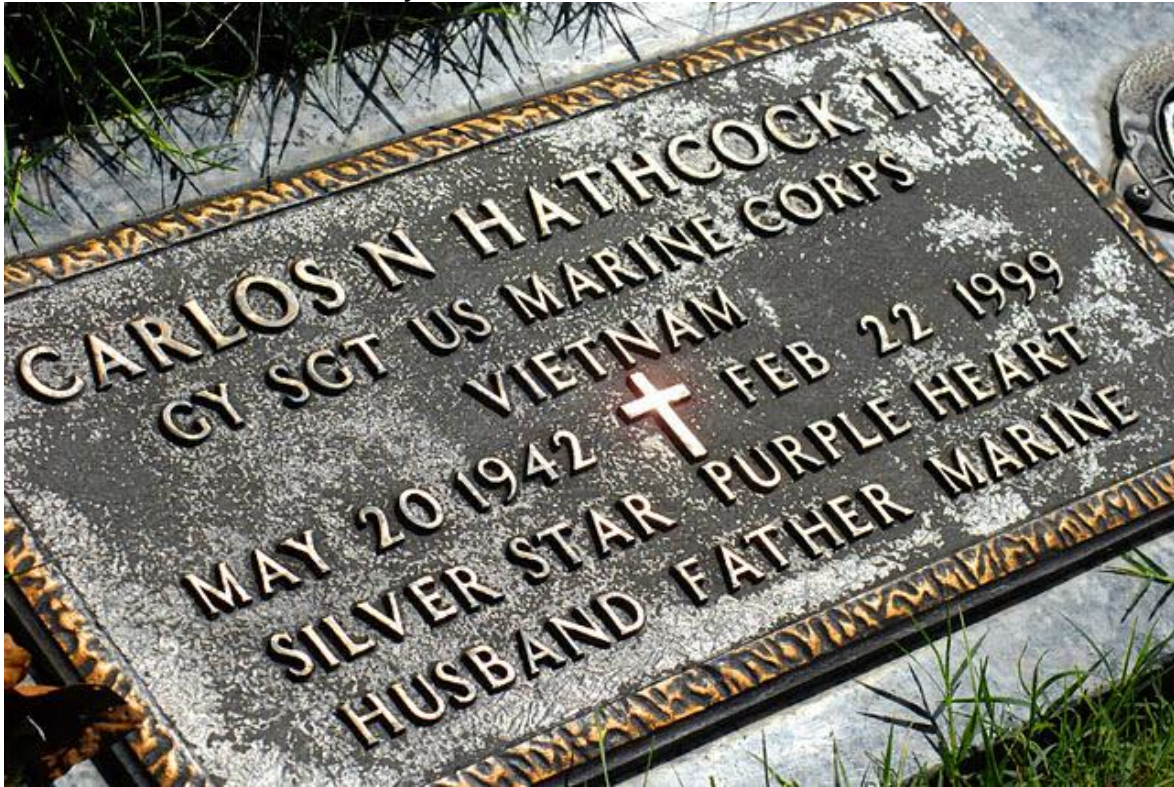
I do not know who is responsible for designing the epitaph on his grave, but when I visited his final resting place yesterday with my family, I was surprised at first to see nothing relating to his service as a sniper. Neither his Silver Star nor his Purple Heart awards were related to sniper activity. More importantly, I was amazed to see the *arranged order* of the three words which highlighted his accomplishments in this lifetime...

"Carlos N. Hathcock II"... HUSBAND FATHER MARINE

Gunny Hathcock had his priorities right. His family recognized this. We as Marines, or as military men, or as law enforcement types, or as hunters... are quick to emulate the man as a Marine, as a sniper. Similarly, many of us dedicate our time, our lives to being good at our job. Meanwhile, our home life is a train wreck. It is my humble opinion, that above all else, it is the role of *husband* and the role of *father* that Gunnery Sergeant Carlos N. Hathcock II would have loved for his Marines to emulate.

Carlos Hathcock is buried under a simple grave marker at Woodlawn Cemetery in Virginia Beach, located on Virginia Beach Boulevard between I-64 and Newtown Road. Upon entering the cemetery, turn left and follow the perimeter road to the corner of the cemetery, where the road turns right. Drive slowly until you see another road approaching from the right--stop before you get to this road. Now, walk up the

[only] hill, to the fifth row from the road where your vehicle is parked. Scan the grave markers on the fifth row, and you will find Hathcock.



On the Road Again

Monday, October 11, 2010



Day 4, Santee Cooper power facility, Georgetown, SC. I miss my wife, I miss my kids, I'm sore, tired, and whiny. And tired. Fourteen hours of each day is dedicated to working or driving to work. Man work. One additional hour for eating, one hour for soaking muscles and scrubbing dirt out of every pore, one hour for misc. (phone, computer, laundry)

They have the most beautiful sunrises and sunsets here. I see the sun set behind a mirage-like haze of invisible, light-bending steam vapors coming off a wide industrial cooling stack. I see foggy sunrises that remind me of boot camp in Parris Island-- must be a coastal South Carolina thing. Of the pictures I've taken with my crappy camera phone, there's only one that I like... perfectly unedited and captured within a short walking distance from my hotel.

Will write more in a few days... it's way past my bedtime.

Man Work

Wednesday, October 13, 2010

There's a saying the Army Rangers have: "Not for the Weak or Fainthearted." A large sign just inside Ft. Benning's 4th Ranger Training Battalion serves to constantly remind Rangers exactly what sets them apart from an increasingly soft society.

Last night at around 3 AM, I was extracting tubes from an industrial heat exchanger. While tying a bowline around the handle of my third smoldering, 80-lb., tube-pulling 'walker' gun--to lower from the three-story scaffolding we just built--the image of that Ranger sign flashed through my head. This work sucks, plain and simple. It's extremely heavy, labor-intensive, requires serious teamwork, and allows for no slackers. Like every job I've held since I was 17, this is *man* work. Not for the weak or faint-hearted.

What exactly is *man work*? Man work is the sort of work that most women simply cannot physically do (consistently). Humping a 100-lb. ruck and 20 lbs of deuce gear/ammo through the swamps at night? Man work. Logging, working a crab boat, mining coal... man work. I doubt you'll find a female rough neck working an oil rig. Man work is often back-breaking, itchy, muddy, and foul-smelling. At any time, working a man's job may expose you to toxic fumes, molten metal, explosive debris, bone-crushing tools, fistfights, ridiculous heights, tightly-confined and dark spaces. Tell Susie there's a reason you can't wear your wedding band... it can rip your freaking finger off.

Man work takes place in an Alpha-heavy environment. You've got to buck up, knuckle down, stay alert and stand your ground. It is in this environment that 'assertiveness' leaves its desktop definition in a skirt, and becomes a very physical element of crew leadership. You see, as testosterone would have it, there are only two types of individuals in the man's working environment: intimidators and the intimidated. The guys with no balls will take what they're handed, which means that they'll be forced to confront seemingly insurmountable obstacles with the leftover scraps of non-functioning tools and substandard equipment. In the end, such individuals will be hung out to dry, after the wolves have done their damage.

My advice to a new worker in this environment? Piss on everything. Better to take an adoptive mentality... "My gun." "My break room." "My [workplace]." For example, "Don't you dare leave tools scattered around my tool box!" Do NOT get sucked into the age-old bad advice to 'slow down,' under the accusation that you're sucking up, or making everyone look bad, or that you'll fizzle out quickly, or that you'll cause a project to be completed too quickly. I tell guys that my brain only has two work settings: **fast** and **stop**.

Here are a few more pointers: be situationally aware, keeping your head on a 360-degree swivel. Unsafe conditions and backstabbers abound. To play this game properly, be a hard-working jerk. Treat everybody with a tinge of shortness, as if they're all bothering you or interfering with your work. Work harder than anybody. Do everything--be flexible and versatile. Your reputation will precede you from job to job. Do not choose sides... some feuds have been longstanding and will continue to be. Recognize and call out the individual efforts of workers around you. Make sure everybody knows that Big Mike is a beast when it comes to rigging, e.g. Make people smile. Inspire everyone around you. I personally believe that this is best done with the combined elements of motivation and yelling. Recognize when guys are beat down, catch them by surprise with a loud, firm gesture like the NRA handshake and you're sure to get a smile. Smiles are like doggy treats... solicit them sparingly so as not to create a joking slacker. A properly-solicited smile, under physically-demanding work conditions, will individually equate to one hour's work at 200% of the previous hour's work effort.

These nuggets are just a few that I've adopted over the years, which have resulted in great jobsite successes. You'll develop some processes on your own, and the rest will come out in the rinse. Just remember to be a leader, in every sense of the word... and if you're working with me, find your own freakin' fire hydrant. All these ones are mine. *Play the game.*

Meet the Crew: Driving Hard with DZ Atlantic

Thursday, October 14, 2010



I'm on my third job with DZ Atlantic (*The Atlantic Group, formerly*)--a Norfolk, Virginia-based *Day & Zimmermann* company specializing in industrial power plant construction, maintenance, and management services. We're currently working a condenser retubing project at the Winyah Generating Station, a coal-fired steam plant operated by Santee Cooper in Georgetown, SC. I'm on the night shift; we're in our sixth day at 100% crew strength, working 7/12's (7 days per week, 12 hours per day--feels like 14 hours

when considering drive time and early arrival on site), and we're a week ahead of schedule. I can't tell you much about the day crew, other than that they're busting their humps as well. This story is written to give props to the 14 tough guys that I have the great pleasure of working alongside each night.

Terry Huddleston is the grand old man of the crew. He's been working at DZ since dinosaurs roamed the earth, and he's been the tool tech on my crew for three jobs. The man thrives on cigarettes, Tootsie Rolls, and Werther's hard butter candies. He's easygoing and knowledgeable, and in fact like a dinosaur, has no apparent natural enemies (everybody loves him). The guys bust his chops by calling him Atlantic's four-foot-tall mascot. To this, he just grins. Most call him T-Rock. One thing regarding T-Rock that I believe to be a travesty: that his loyalty to this company has long since deserved him a better position, even if such a position must be created (Master Tool Tech, trainer/instructor, e.g.).

Harvey Kaye is another old-timer. He works hard and is a natural at running the "walker"--a beast of a tool that is critical to this job (it extracts and flattens long heat exchanger tubes which must then be walked out to a tube chopper, hence the name). He's worked for DZ Atlantic in the past. He's quiet and lets his work ethic speak for itself. His wrinkled brow and facial features show signs of a lifetime of respect-demanding hard work. Harvey is one of three Native Americans on the night shift (there are three or four others on day shift)--he's part Hopi and part Navajo. He looks the part. I call him Walking Bull. The Bull was my guardian angel two nights ago--using good old Indian muscle power, he suspended a monster magna-drill above me with a cargo strap at regular intervals throughout the night, taking the load off of me so that I could drill some beefy precision holes in the two condenser outlets in which to mount thermocouples. A lesser man could not have held that gun up all night.

Wesley Dale is among the younger Native Americans. He's got a great attitude, and a metal spike stud in his bottom lip whenever he's not on the job site. Wesley's a big dude, and he definitely pulls his weight. His persona is very cool and collected, even under continuous stress. That's a rarity in this field. I haven't had the chance to get to know Wesley very well, but I like what I've seen so far.

Brett Mullins is exceptionally knowledgeable for his age (early-to-mid-20's, I'm guessing). A great outside-the-box thinker, he can usually find or develop a solution to a problem. Dedicated to his job, he told me the other day after work, "Man!! I wish we could've gotten that last tube out of the left side box." I had, in an early incident, pegged him for needing attitude adjustment, but he quickly showed that he could man up and take responsibility. I believe that a man's character is not primed by always doing right, rather by the corrective actions he takes after doing something he knows to be wrong. What I like best about Brett is his bold, hearty, mouth-wide, teeth-bared laugh. Wide open and likeable individual. I just found out that he was a machinist. He told me how he had to make his own claw hammer at school, cut from

a band saw and grinded/filed to specifications within .003. We need more men like that. Heck, we need more schools like that.

One of these guys isn't too far from his own neck of the woods. Carleton Holden hails from some island between here and Wilmington, NC. He's a younger guy, and I asked him why he never joined the service. He was going to, then he didn't, and now he's thinking about it again. Great option for a young, healthy guy or gal, particularly in this economy. Anyway, Carleton is a solid worker, and he's got a good head on his shoulders. I hope he makes it back onto future jobs, because he'll fit in like a natural. I'm actually proud to say that we don't have even half a slacker on our shift.

Jason Bolton is good people. He's assertive, so when he yells something at me, it reads loud and clear. If I ask him to grab something, he's on it, no hesitation. Jason's got his boy in football this year, so with that common ground, we were able to share a lot with each other about family values and such. Jason's a hard worker and he's one of the guys who always moves with purpose and without hesitation. Last night, the the guys got him with the old "fetch me a bucket of steam" gig (akin to the 'keys to the hummer,' a 'PRC-E7 that works,' or a form 'BA eleven hundred November'). Hook, line, & sinker, J picked up a bucket and sought some steam. The project manager furthered the game by telling him that there was a steam hose at the top of the stairs. "It's the one with the red valve," he said. The PM stopped him halfway up the stairs, fearing that there might actually be a red valve up there. All joking aside, Jason's a tireless and alert worker--a great asset to any team.

Ryan McAdoo, a man who stands apart. From what I observe, he's wound a little tight, but only because he's passionately focused on whatever he sets his mind to. Ryan strives to always do things right the first time. He attributes his focus partly to lessons learned during a year's stint in the big house. Ryan looks like Patrick Swayze's character, *Brodie*, from the movie *Point Break*. Like Swayze was, Ryan's a health nut. When my bags are smoked from holding some big freakin' gun over my head and pressing it into the brass sheet in front of me, Ryan's doing pull-ups and dips while he waits on me to move out of the way...to keep his gun-slingin arms warmed up. On topic, the ride back to the hotel from work this morning was nauseatingly boring, thanks to the blaring 'prostate gland supplement' infomercial McAdoo was intently listening to. I was in the back, and boy was I giving him a load of crap about it! Ryan's worked at least a few jobs with DZ Atlantic, and is very versatile. Mechanic. Welder. Rigger. He wants to be a pro rigger for DZ. The two of us rigged a massive inlet housing for crane hoisting on this job. If the right folks from DZ Atlantic saw him rig that inlet housing, he'd get that paid training. Even the plant supervisor applauded him [us] for it. "Nice pluck. If you had tried to do it any other way, I would have shut you down." Ryan's striving to succeed in this lifetime. If he keeps driving the way he does, I believe he will.

Brian Pike--he's the Clydesdale in this group. He pretty much single-handedly removed every single bit of trash from inside the hot well--no small task. That meant

that he was running double 5-gallon buckets back and forth for about 10 of the hours we worked. Brian's got a great sense of humor and a humble spirit. I wouldn't exactly go making him mad, though. He's great at organizing and cleaning; usually, he and I are sweeping up next to each other at the end of the night. Mechanically, he seems good to go. I don't know his background, but he seems pretty locked on. Like the other new guys on this job, and just like I and the others did when we were cherries, he's paying his dues (if you can call it that... everybody on our shift overlaps roles). Haven't been able to spend much time around him besides that, but he's part of this A-Team for a reason: when he goes to work, he goes to WORK, baby.

Of course, one good Marine deserves another... Julian Saunders, bless his heart, is responsible for sending Jason to go fetch a bucket of steam. He was in the Corps during Beirut & Grenada, and spent time in El Salvador, Kaneohe Bay (Hawaii), and in a handful of WestPac locations from Thailand to Guam to Australia. As a fellow Gyrene and storyteller, we can keep each other busy for hours to pass the time during tedious work like scaffold erection. He's been working with Atlantic for a long time too, but I know there was a big gap that spans the time between his last Atlantic Job and his current one here. Julian is an excellent teacher. He taught me a few things when we were busting 2" bolts off the inlet housing, and since then I have noted that he has a high instructional capacity. Oh yeah, and he's got some serious old man strength. That 140-pound 50-year-old man can knock my slinky in the dirt when it comes to the use of his brute forearms and solid grip. Not that 50's old, but you know what I mean.

There are two guys that don't talk too much. The first one is Shane Addison. He's no less of a good worker than I am, but I'm usually not working around him enough to give an honest opinion of his grind ethic. I like his demeanor, rather calm, clean cut, kinda mysterious... on that note, probably a ladies' man. He got stuck with the crap job of separating the 70/30 copper/nickel chopped tube scrap from the 90/10 scrap... as far as I can tell, it's basically the equivalent of separating a swimming pool's worth of 16 penny nails according to which end the nail head is on.

The second guy who doesn't talk much is James Simpson. Now, because he's quiet, I only know a few blips. He's a welder, he's got a helluva woman, he's got an honest smile and a right decent handshake. Shooting from the hip, I'd say he's the guy that Lynyrd Skynyrd describes in the song *Simple Man*. And that's good enough for me.

Chris Girard. He's also new, but he's been around the block a few times. Haven't seen much of him on the site either, which probably means he's been doing the toughest job around, cutting up the back water boxes and gutting the hot well. I see him at chow time, though. Every morning at 1 AM. One morning, he was sitting in there getting big-chested and mouthy with some guy on the phone. "You'd better get outta my house now, sucka!!!" "Put my wife on the phone. REMOVE YOURSELF FROM MY HOUSE, MAN." (of course, it sounded much more exciting, and richly colored with vibrant expletives from A to Z). "If you don't give the phone to my wife

and leave now, I'm gonna call my buddy Mike and he's gonna come over there and jack you up a few notches!" At this point, I've had it. I start yelling my opinion. "Call freakin' Mike!!! Gimme his number, I'll call him myself. Where's this guy at? I know guys that will travel across the State to open up a can on somebody! Dude, if you get Mike over there, I'll give you ten bucks. If Mike can make it there NOW, during our lunch break, and you can put it on speaker phone, I'll drop \$25." Laughter ensued... I'm chiming in because I'm assuming the worst: some dude's encroaching on his den, his cave, his crib, his woman. Turns out, it's his nephew, who just embarrassed himself at a family reunion by saying something inappropriate. I guess Chris got it all straightened out.

Eric Seschillie. I think I spelled that right. I still haven't the foggiest on pronunciation. He was my right-hand man tonight on QC, shortly after Ryan had to take off to serrate the inlet tube sheets. Thanks to his solid grasp of numerical sequences, he was able to help me mark test holes and QC holes in the back water boxes. Eric is the third little Indian, and is a fellow comrade-in-arms. He served aboard the *U.S.S. Boxer (LHD 4, "America's Golden Gator")* during his four-year Navy tour. Ironically, Eric was the first guy I met on this job whose name stuck in my head like glue, for no apparent reason. He's been a good, hard worker. Oh yeah, and he's another quiet one... except when his loud and thunderous Navy voice kicks up to read off numbers... "TWO, SEVEN, WUNN, NINER!" Okay, so he doesn't say 'niner.'

Matt Elkins is not quiet, even by a long shot. He puts the the spice in our otherwise boring crew, both literally and figuratively. Literally, when everybody else is eating sardines and crackers for lunch, Matt busts out a full sandwich, soup, and salad bar, complete with sesame seeds and croutons, chipped beef, crasins, hot sauce, hot mustard, chipotle mayo, and freaking balsamic vinagrette. Okay, not entirely, but the man brings a ton of gourmet crap to our greasy, nastified workplace. Not that it bothers me and my cold clam chowder or anything. Seriously, I think its awesome. Anybody who loves me, knows I love food and I can't stand a mamby-pamby, finnickier eater... at least not as a full-grown man. Matt is most certainly not. Now, on the figurative end of that long ago, faraway sentence at the top of this paragraph, Matt puts the pizazz in this crew by being a wisecrackin' wisenheimer. I love it. Oh yeah, and he's got three other killer traits: (1) he's got mad experience, (2) awesome 'get some' work ethic when we're tired and under the gun, and (3) he's cooler than two fans.

The men on top are TJ Toler, who is the Project Manager; and Josh Lamb, the Foreman. TJ is third in a familial line of Project Managers, a cock-diesel clan known simply as "the Tolers" or by their broader family and friends group *the Christianburg Crew*. What I like most about TJ, is that he has the capacity to be an in-your-face jerkoff, but has the collected attitude of a guy who has been battle-weathered. In the Toler tradition, TJ's a trailblazer. He doesn't need to follow a plant-driven progressive timeline / schedule. He cuts his own path, and in the case of this job, knocked the

plant schedule out of the ballpark. A born leader of hard men--you know, the type of guys that don't just follow anybody. Reminds me of Chris Jewell from Recon.

Josh Lamb has the Midas touch when it comes to the process of tube extraction. If you only had one cutter gun & pack of blade bits, or one extractor gun, and no way of fixing either... Josh is the guy you'd give the tools to, to get the job done quickly and efficiently while mitigating loss or waste. And he's a super nice guy. No one at Atlantic deserves to be Foreman more than Josh--he busts his tail and he's always looking out for everyone else's safety. I was able to work with both TJ and Josh in France. Solid guys, great Batman and Robin leadership team. If the age-old adage holds true, and the attitudes of a group are the reflection of their leadership, then it's no wonder this crew is moving mountains, every single night on this job.

Songs You Grow Into

Monday, October 18, 2010

Last night, I was sitting in the break room during chow time. Two guys were cranking some tunes out of their cell phones, blues on my left and metal on my right. We all got to joking about the musical mix, at which point others started busting out cell phones and ipods to chime in and add to the noise. I did the same, but first I had to download a song to my otherwise empty phone--a feat in itself for my not-so-cell-savvy self. I added to the musical cornucopia with Billy Joel's *Piano Man*, at which point all the older guys started fist-bumping and singing along. The young guys rolled their eyes. It was at that moment, I began to think about how some songs have no appeal to a person until that person has reached certain milestones or key points in his or her life.

Until the Fall of 2002, I was adamantly opposed to country music. I deployed aboard the USS Nassau at that time, and I took a Fender acoustic/electric guitar with the intent to learn how to play. Turns out, the guys who would teach me were largely country fans. So I learned the basic chords, and learned a few songs. On the Marine Corps birthday, November 10th, 2002, I was sitting next to a barrel fire milking a precious warm beer, when an Army Sergeant with a bald head passed his weathered guitar around to the Marines. When it got back to him, he played a beautiful rendition of *The Little Girl* by John Michael Montgomery. Every swinging Johnson around that fire got a cold chill up his spine. I re-developed my guitar goal: I wanted to return home from this deployment with the ability to play and sing at least one song to serenade my wife. That song would be *The Good Stuff*, by Kenny Chesney.

That was only the beginning. It was at that time in my life when the years of being away from my wife and kids really took its toll. Country music has so many songs that soothe the heart of a soldier; they speak to what you're feeling about God,

family, country, love, fatherhood, and separation. I was sold.

Many of my favorite songs today were inspired by my wife. She introduced me to Josh Groban, Chris Tomlin, Todd Agnew, MercyMe, and Casting Crowns. Crowns' *Praise You In this Storm* has become my own personal anthem in troublesome times, as have Steve Hindalong's and Marc Byrd's *God of Wonders*, Jars of Clay's *Valley Song*, and Groban's version of *You Raise Me Up*.

Being a father alone will broaden your musical horizon. Five years of marriage passed before Petra and I learned that she was pregnant with our first child, Joshua. We had wondered for years up to that moment, to the point of frustrated tears, why Petra hadn't become pregnant. In the same month that we learned the news, the rock band Creed released their hit song *Arms Wide Open*, which brought a different kind of tear to my eyes. Bob Carlisle's *Butterfly Kisses*, Luther Vandross' *Dance with My Father*, Kenny Chesney's *There Goes my Life*, or Chuck Wick's *Stealing Cinderella*. Add the difficult element of separation to parenthood, and you can then relate to songs like Lonestar's *I'm Already There* and Harry Chapin's *Cat's in the Cradle*.

Kenny Chesney eventually became my favored artist for inspiring nostalgia. Some of his songs that cause me to reflect are *I Go Back*, *Live Those Songs*, *Where I Come From*, and *Don't Blink*.

Others are more personal--obscure even. When I was a kid, some of my fondest memories with my dad took place to the background music of some classic oldies... dad, a hot-rodder, was particularly fond of the Beach Boys, and of oldies in general. I remember him singing along to some random 70's and 80's songs in the car... *Mellow Yellow*, *Man Eater*, *Land Down Under*, *Cat's in the Cradle*. These become more and more special to me with each passing year, some only for their connection to fond memories.

Growing up has inherently brought new musical flavors into my collection of favored sounds. Spanish guitar, classical piano, violin, steel drums, and the Italian mandolin--each are beautiful and welcome additions to my ipod. Certain songs like James Taylor's *Fire and Rain*, Billy Joel's *Piano Man*, and a lot of Clapton songs... they're timeless to me now.

My taste is varied enough today to have its own genre. The fact is, up until I was 23 years old, I had two types of music that I liked: old school rap and alternative rock. Okay, maybe a few classic rock songs or oldies. But no other types of music. Certainly no 80's songs, and NO COUNTRY. The thought of actually enjoying 'classical' anything, or a foreign song that I couldn't understand, or just musical instruments without lyrics... out of the question. When it came to that type of music... to those kind of songs... I had to grow into them.

Two Photos

Georgetown, SC. Sprint camera phone with a busted lens shield. #1 is the sun setting behind the outlying steam exhaust building, Winyah / Santee Cooper Power Station. Would have loved to have a telephoto lens. #2 is a dewy spiderweb at the marina. Would have loved to have a macro lens.



Gays in the Military: No Longer a Laughing Matter

Wednesday, October 20, 2010



Big write-up on the front page of USA Today. Openly-gay recruits have been given a green light, as of yesterday. Thanks, Obama. In the article, only the Marines are cited specifically. Commandant of the Marine Corps General Conway said that most Marines, from the bottom to the top, oppose open homosexuality in the Marines. He also said that the opposition was particularly strong within combat units.

"There's Gay, and then there's Army Gay." Expressions like this thrive safely in the confines of the Marines. It's a tough service branch made of tough people. We ask Marines to do the dirtiest type of work for our country. We put them in harm's way. We expect them to be tough. Then we're appalled that they have so many tattoos, that they drink so much, fight so much, that they have the filthiest mouths and filthier minds, and that they're opposed to intimate contact with a homosexual. You heard me, I said intimate.

To understand why gays shouldn't serve openly in the Marines, you've really got to understand Marines. Marines get intimate. They get closer to each other physically at the individual level than the other service branches generally do. Of course there are exceptions. Marines spoon to stay warm. It's funny to you, even to them, when recounting the story over a beer in your living room. It's the truth in a cold

environment. It's core-temperature survival. Marines sleep together, shower together, and poop together with nary a wall between them. Marines wrestle shirtless in the mud wearing the same skimpy shorts of old. "Silkies." "UDT's." They openly talk about their weenies--in fact, it's scarcely-known by the public that most Marines know a handful of 'dick tricks.' Put *that* on a recruiting poster for your mom.

Marines have many other eccentricities. They probably dip more Copenhagen, and chew more Levi Garrett tobacco, than the rest of the country as a whole. Ever see a 17-year-old who prefers to smoke fat cigars over cigarettes? You do in the Marines. See a hole full of water deeper than two feet and everybody's clothes come off, cause where there is water and Marines there will be naked swimming. Marines still do and always will conduct 'pinnings' on the quiet, to draw blood in a symbolic gesture of high-achievement. You call it hazing. You think all these things are crass, vulgar, disgusting; you just don't get it, and I understand and respect that. Most Marines are understood best by other Marines. But the big picture is that Marines without their traditions, without their mannerisms are not Marines. They're something else, but not Marines. You get it? Didn't think so. Bottom line is that this country loves its Marines—always has—but now we're trying to turn them into the tree-hugging, eco-friendly, limp-wristed pansies that Marines have opposed for centuries.

I know what you're thinking. There are women in the Marines, right? Of course there are. Not in combat arms MOS's (infantry, artillery, mortars, tanks, e.g.), and certainly not in Recon or sniper billets. They fill support roles--not to be misunderstood--they deploy to combat zones and they will split your skull in a hot second... naturally. They're Marines. But their primary job is not to aggress the enemy as an infantry lineman (e.g.). The Marines have longstanding traditions outlining the woman's role in combat, not merely for physical limitations but for reasons of propriety, and to maintain good order and discipline between the sexes. All that crap I just talked about, with exception to alcohol, language, and tobacco, doesn't take place in the presence of Women Marines (or WM's). The Army has long been plagued with cases of sexual abuse and misconduct within the ranks. In the 1990's, the Air Force actually maintained a statistic for how many women became pregnant... during Basic Training. The Marines are the only branch that wholly segregates and separates the sexes during boot camp. They also do this in a number of other environments.

Now, for the same reason that society separates the genders for propriety, the Marines do. And yet we expect men to shower with other men that may now openly profess their attraction to them. We put Marines in awkward situations that we ourselves would not want to be in. In fact, we'd cry foul if Wal-Mart took the stalls off the toilets and made us double up on urinals with gay men. Yeah, Marines do that too. "You forty guys got one minute to piss. Double-up, triple-up, no wick-dipping or sword-fighting." You know good and well that the only gays this law affects are the ones who want to be vocal about it, and that's asking for a fight. You know why the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy went into effect? Because Marines killed the

homosexuals that 'told.' And our whole country said "Bad Marines" and hung them out to dry. I AM NOT condoning their actions or the outcome--on the contrary. But the point I'm trying to make is that you are forcing Marines to make moral decisions according to a "new amendment" to morality, and it will not work. People, Marines ain't smart. We don't pay them to think. We pay them to kill. You put a few gazelles in the lion cage, and the lions rip them to shreds, and then you punish the lions. You should be punished instead, moron. Why? For thinking that you know anything about being a lion. You know who knows about being a lion? Major Doug Zembiec, the *Lion of Fallujah*. Thank God he's not alive to see this, because he'd be choking people up and down the chain.

Congratulations everybody, we are the United States of Cowardice, and we buckle to every freaking gay Muslim extremist that tries to destroy our morals or our very existence. Mosque at Ground Zero, no problem. Feminizing our defenses, no problem. Doping all our primary school-aged boys? No problem. It's not your fault. In fact, nothing's your fault. You're a victim. No problem. Have a cookie. Well America we've got a freaking problem. Our resolve is weak. We are the victims of the simplest forms of propaganda. And now? A defenseless defense. Our military is going to crap. Better start stockpiling your ammo and heading to the hills.

Beverage Maps of the U.S.

Tuesday, October 26, 2010

The discussion came up over a Midnight lunch in S.C. Where are the dividing lines for soda and pop? Or where do they call it coke, as a generic term for fizzybubbly ("What kind of coke you want? We've got Dr. Pepper, Pepsi...")? In Boston-ese, a soda pop is called a 'tonic.' Then the discussion shifted. Where, geographically, is the sweet tea divide? A lot of guys took theoretical stabs at the answers to where and why. Today, I watched 30 guys in Pennsylvania overwhelmingly choose cans of A&W root beer over Dr. Pepper, Mt. Dew, Coke, and Sunkist combined (Roughly 7:1). I'm certain that such a decision would not be so slanted amongst my friends in Virginia. I love root beer, but I wonder where the influence comes in to affect so many others? Heavy root beer advertising in PA? For that matter, where is Barq's preferred over A&W and vice versa. Why is a drink as amazing as the Orange Julius restrained by a non-oceanic border? For that matter, why could I not find Yeungling beer in many parts of Ohio, when it is produced in neighboring PA at America's oldest brewery, and is found at least as far South as S.C.? Where is the Faygo nation, do they still have RC Cola (and if so, where), and where can we still find Sasparilla? All of these questions must be answered, in one big fat beverage map. We the people need more data. A national beverage census of sorts. Then we can create the map and share it to alleviate confusion and give Americans new reasons to visit places like Baltimore, little-known home of the best malted milkshake. Until

such a map is created, I've found this one: (click here) --it's a decent soda/coke/pop map of the U.S.

Switching Hard Hats

Wednesday, October 27, 2010

It was an absolutely surprising and amazing series of events that had me removing my DZ Atlantic coveralls and hard hat at the Santee Cooper--Winyah Generating Station in Georgetown, SC on Monday morning, only to be donning a Patterson-UTI hard hat and coveralls that very afternoon at an oil rig near Eighty Four, PA (Pittsburgh region). The opportunity that God provided, by way of buddies Natcher and John Mac, is a lucrative one with a long-term scope. Petra and I are enthralled, though the move will physically disrupt our recently-developed bond with a very close circle of friends. Where He leads, we will follow.

For now, I must learn the ropes of oil rig operations. This means that, prior to formal schooling and permanent placement, I've got to work some different rigs as a roughneck. What an amazing, exciting opportunity! I head back up to Pittsburgh on Monday; in the meantime, I'll be soaking up time with the family. Pet & I took the girls shopping today, tonight's an advanced version of our Friday Night Free-for-All, and tomorrow will be fun time with the boys. Then Friday we're heading to TN for a pre-planned camping trip with Melissa & Mark... we're pretty excited all around.

Condenser Rebuild Video

October 5th - October 25th, 2010

Before pressing PLAY on the video, you'll need to pause the playlist music (scroll down--right side of the page)

(Links to YouTube video detailing a DZ Atlantic condenser re-tubing operation;
visible only via website)

A Great Weekend in Tennessee

Sunday, October 31, 2010



This weekend, we spent some time with our longtime friends Mark & Melissa. The four of us, along with all our kids, rented a cabin at Roan Mountain State Park, in the Appalachian Mountains near the North Carolina border. Our days were filled with high-altitude hiking adventures (well, high for this part of the world) and beautiful mountain vistas. The leaves had apparently dropped from the trees--for the most part, anyway--the week prior to our visit, due largely to some storms that passed through the area; nevertheless, we were fortunate to capture many quality photos and make some great memories. In the evenings, when the kids were in bed, the four of us would quietly play games (Pass the Pigs, Monopoly--the card version) over wine-filled plastic cups. It was a really enjoyable time. Here are a few photos... the post to follow in a few days will contain



some more, once they've been cropped or edited (we were having some lighting issues with Pet's camera).





Okay, a Really Great Weekend in Tennessee!
No stress, no worries, great company, great pictures!



















High Flying Fun at Big Rock

Saturday, November 13, 2010











New Job, New Home, Hip-Shot Assessment

Sunday, November 14, 2010

Two weeks ago, I started a new job. Correction--career. For anyone who knows me (us), this is a huge answer to prayer. Though I've enjoyed the autonomy of contract work, I can't stand the downtime between contracts, or the blank paychecks that accompany such times. So now I'm a Field Maintenance Supervisor for Patterson-UTI, a Texas-based drilling company.

I work in Patterson's Appalachian Division, based out of Eighty Four, PA--hometown of my longtime favorite lumber company (84) and a stone's throw from Pittsburgh. I'm impressed with the company. It's got a family feel--and it seems like everybody's got a pack of kids. Nice perks, too. From a 'new employee' perspective, the company certainly puts its best foot forward.

I've got a virgin perspective of this line of work. I've previously had no family, friends, or acquaintances who had the foggiest inkling what goes on at a rig. Well, in the last two weeks, I've learned more than I can condense into a single blog post, but here are a few bullets. We're drilling the Marcellus Shale, a rock formation which encompasses portions of at least four States. Drilling for natural gas, not oil. Same general scheme from what I gather. A lot of companies have moved up this way in the last few years, to latch on while the region is booming for precious natural

resources... the majority of which could be depleted tomorrow or extend into the next few decades. Folks who have worked a lifetime directly in the drilling industry, or who have been involved in some third-party capacity for the same length of time, are seemingly strangers to fiscal starvation. On that note, the only third-party business that I do not see in operation? A roach coach. A traveling hot dog man with overpriced snacks and drinks and a trailer grill could make a killing bouncing between rigs all day and night.

I'm impressed with the field of work (the drilling industry). Ten to twelve guys, split equally between 12-hour day and night shifts (or 'Tours,' pronounced *towers*), make magic happen at their rig for fourteen days on, fourteen off. This hardy bunch has a mirror crew that covers the opposite 14-day period. The top dog on site is called a Rig Manager, though most refer to him by the classic title 'Pusher,' short for *Toolpusher*. When I learned this, I realized that I would quickly have to curb my vernacular in this community, since I've always used the term 'pusher' to describe any whip-crackin' hard worker. What I love about the roughneck crews is this: because the crews are so small, there is no room for hitchhikers or strap-hangers. Everybody has to pull their weight.

My first day on the job, Rig 622...lasted nine days. Rain, snow, mud, sleeplessness, and high places. Day six, a shotgun firehose blast of hydraulic fluid to the face throws me backward into the comforting clutches of a safety harness. Training by fire. Feels like home, Oo-rah. In the last few days, I've been out running some service calls on my own, to a few of the twenty-some Patterson rigs in the region. I'm presently in my hotel room, waiting for a blower motor starter block to be delivered so that I can go swap it out in the VFD (control) house at rig 324.

The only two gripes I've got: (1) No knives allowed on Patterson rigs besides these cheesy self-retracting box-cutters, so if you've got to strip large wire, or cut yourself away from a harness to avoid entrapment or 'death by pinch point,' or for any other of the 150 functional reasons that a man needs to operate effectively in an industrial environment, then you're kinda out of luck. You should have seen me gnaw through those zip-ties when my instinctive pocket quick-draw left me disappointingly empty-handed on my first day. (2) No cameras allowed on a rig. I understand the reason (*COUGH!YouTube*), but pictures are essential to training and troubleshooting. I hope that these issues will be given further consideration as others have similar concerns.

Uh-oh, part just arrived... gotta go! Write more later.

A Putz and a King

Monday, November 15, 2010

I am the King... of Jamochas at Arby's; the sketcher of cars and the fixer of Barbies. I command forts made of blankets and pillows, drag sleds behind cars and hang swings in the willows. I am the cleaner of scarce-nibbled plates, the anchor who's sturdy to hold when on skates. The sharer of Cokes who drinks backwash-a-plenty,

...Yeah, that's when the buzzer went off. I was sick of trying to find something that rhymed with "plenty." I folded my Sharpie-marked napkin and put it in my pocket, grabbed my laundry and headed back up to my hotel room. That was fifteen minutes ago.

You know what I love most about being a dad? I love being the unconditional hero. I'm not the strongest, fastest, or the best... at anything, really. I routinely butcher bedtime stories and that "All the Pretty Ponies" song. But in the eyes of my kids, I'm amazing! I can see it written on their faces, every single time I come home from work. The experience intensifies my smile instantly. I was thinking about that today, after talking to the kids on the phone in our usual daily routine (while we're separated). The first to talk to me after Momma is usually Lily. She's giddy with excitement, laughing while talking to me. The boys chime in in the background. Hey Dad!!! Baby Ayla sees Lily with the phone. "Dada! Dada!" When it's her turn, we will share a long, incoherent, and perfectly wonderful conversation with all the proper tonal inflections of the English language. I'll listen for her kiss, at which point she'll take the phone to momma. The boys each jump in, long enough to tell me something exciting that happened to them, but short enough to be considered cool. I can see through that macho crap, but I respect it... for now. The bottom line? I love my kids, and I love how they make me feel 10-foot-tall, gold-plated and bulletproof despite my imperfections.

I'm flying into Norfolk on Thursday to temporarily reclaim my throne, spending the weekend with my family. Can't wait! It's good to be the King.

Skirt Alert!

Thursday, November 18, 2010

So I'm standing next to this pilot, waiting for my coffee at Starbuck's. Just a plain coffee. I can't stand the coffee, personally, but it's either that or a longer line at Burger King. I'm at Charlotte Airport. The pilot guy is rather studly-looking: tall, dark, & handsome with the chisled face and the wavy hair and the chin butt. Then the barista--a guy who could otherwise have passed for a wall-bangin' street thug from tha hood, hands the pilot his pumpkin pie spiced latte or whatever, followed quickly by another queer drink from the fruitbasket. Then the pilot does the unthinkable. He

argues with the barista about the creaminess of the pumpkin drink... and then he throws a straight-up Rosie Perez hissy fit. My gosh, where was my video camera on that one. I looked at the 70-year-old guy behind me and said, "Look at what Starbucks is doing to the men in our country!" The pilot did the *bend & snap*, whisked his gorgeous hair across to the other side of his head, and stormed off in a whirlwind of fury & perfume. The only missing elements from the whole scene was a shoulder-tight Prada bag and a set of loud high heels.

Gentlemen, please don't be women. It's confusing.

People vs. Stuff

"People matter more than stuff." Pastor Matt had the congregation repeat this statement with him at the end of Sunday's message. When the words rolled off his tongue, I glanced at my wife and cracked a grin. She grinned back, purposely avoiding eye contact with me but fully aware that I was looking at her. I chuckled.

It's been just over two-and-a-half years since the Stuff War, which took place at Adalay Bay apartments in Chesapeake, Virginia once upon a fading evening. The events leading up to the War were as follows: Josh had carved a secret password on the inside of the top safety rail of the boys' new wooden bunk bed. Petra was furious at his failure to respect his belongings. I was proud of his carving skills and, given the assessment that no one could see the scratches unless they were on top of the bunk bed, I played a rare devil's advocate (usually we're in agreement when dealing with the kids). Of course her logic had merit, but she refused to meet me in the middle on this one... which brought out the hothead.

Heat. Friction. Escalation ensued. Arming myself with a Sharpie marker, I began an offensive movement from the boys' room through the living room, finally making a last stand in the master bedroom. My objective? To teach my wife a valuable lesson by striking at the heart of her Pottery Barn-style empire. Looking back, this would be just another one of my bonehead moves this lifetime. "People matter more than stuff," I said to my wife. "You can't take any of this crap with you!" I stomped down the hallway, scribbling the word "STUFF" on every tangible item within reach. New leather sofa. "STUFF." Entertainment center... "STUFF." Lampshades, books, dresser... "STUFF, STUFF, STUFF!" At some point, I realized that I was being a friggin' lunatic. "You're being a friggin' lunatic!!" Said Petra.

In the end, to be perfectly clear, I regret my delivery... but stand whole-heartedly upon the ideal, however bad the story makes me look. In fact, the concept is one of three cardinal rules of our household (1. Respect momma. 2. People over stuff. 3. Solid table manners). Our kids have no option in our home, but to share with each other and respect each other. If at any time I feel that a PlayStation is treated with

more importance than a sibling, so help me, I will break the video game system over my knee and they can buy their own system several years down the road. And they know I'll do it. Strict? Sure. Small price to pay for well-behaved kids.

These days, when the lights go down in our home, there stands out a soft backward projection of the word "STUFF" from one of our lampshades onto the wall... it serves not only to remind us all what a jerk dad was that night, but more importantly, as a continual reminder that people are more important than stuff.

A Day in the Life

Tuesday, November 23, 2010

Flew into Norfolk Thursday via Charlotte. Cold milk, four warm batches of chocolate chip cookies, and a movie that night. Lotsa snugglins. Friday morning. Early milk & diapers run. Where did Petra score this phenomenal pumpkin cheesecake?! And something that tastes like Cinn-a-bon pie? Off to PTA meetings. Caleb all A's, bumper sticker and all. Always swore I'd never display a 'proud parent' honor roll sticker. Buckled at the sight of my beaming son. Let Caleb choose which vehicle to apply it to. He put it on my sticker-laden truck, right between '*Eat. Sleep. Pillage.*' and '*I'd Rather be Whacking Tangos.*' (Model father here). Josh got prematurely excited. "Where's *my* sticker?" "Hiding behind that 'C' in Science, son." Now, if his substandard Science grade was due to, say, a moral stance opposing evolution, I'd make him a sticker myself. No such content in Virginia's curriculum until 6th grade. Took boys on a 9-mile Dismal Swamp bike ride to Lake Drummond--in fulfillment of a 2-month-old promise. No bear sightings, bummer. Home in cold, wet clothes. Lit an oaken fire with wet shoes/boots on the hearth. Dinner at OG (Olive Garden). Josh, 2 orders of mussels. We call him mussel man. Waldenbooks... to feed our bookworms (all four love books!). Candy and a movie at home (Toy Story 2). Tiramisu [to go] is the usual post-OG snack for Petra and I. Saturday morning... sleep in!!! Stock firewood. Push kids on tire swing. Momma raked a leaf pile. Leaf fight!!! Front yard football game. Grandma & grandpa babysit, Petra and I off to join our church (3n1) and New Life Church (near downtown Suffolk) to serve needy families hot meals in a seated restaurant-type atmosphere. Really good time. Leftover pecan pie, German chocolate cake, pumpkin spice cake, and big pink cupcakes. All delicious. Just sayin.' Sunday, great church service. Russell back from Afghanistan, visiting wife and children. He returns in a week (ouch!) I've Got to check out his PashtoNinja blog. Good to see everybody. Went to Pastor Matt & Lori's briefly so the boys could practice something relating to the upcoming Christmas play. Ooh, more pumpkin spice cake! Learned about ibuddies!!! We're big iCarly fans as a family; another blog to follow concerning ibuddies. Sunday night... Home, James! Monday... chopped & stocked firewood with the boys, vegged out the rest of the day, soaking in family. We all watched more ibuddies. Fly Norfolk to Pittsburgh via D.C.





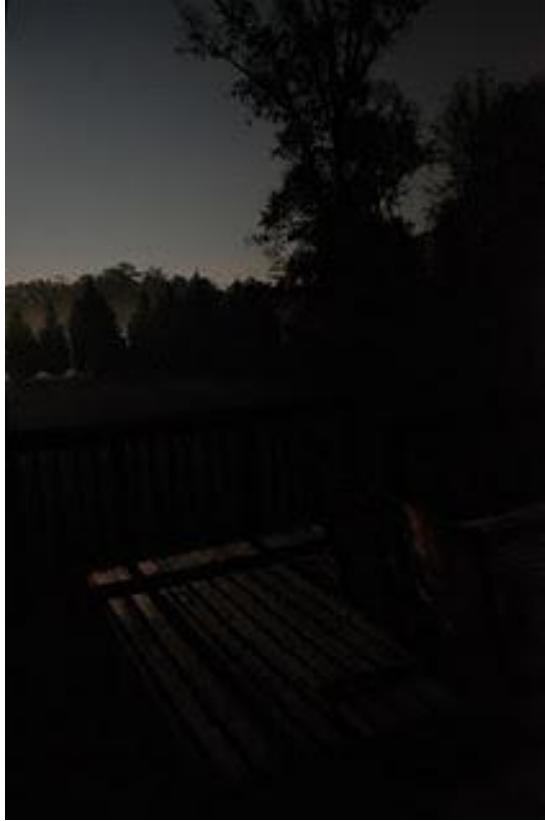


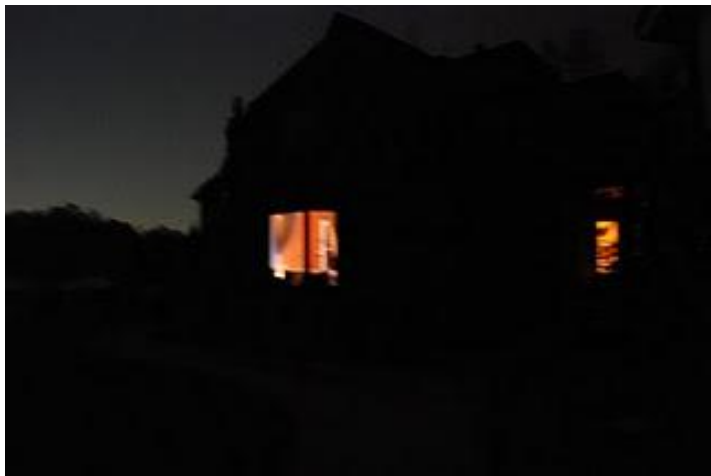












The Source of Happiness

"What are you thankful for?" ...it's the singlemost burned-out question of the day. It prompts cookie-cutter answers: God, family, friends, food, a house, a job... all important, but often spouted off instinctively, with no thought involvement. If you'd like to really say what you're thankful for, answer this: what makes you happy? What makes you smile or laugh? What do you daydream about?

You've probably heard it before, but here's your reminder: happiness is directly proportional to thankfulness! I myself was reminded of this at the start of the week, when Rebekah at church read Proverbs 15:15 and gave her spin on it. In an instant, I realized that therein lies both the cause and the cure. If you're not happy, re-evaluate what you've got--your tangible assets and your intangible inventory (life, health, wits). Now think of where you'd be without all those things, and give thanks. See, you're smiling already! There are plenty of unhappy people in the world today. There are also a lot of ungrateful, spoiled rotten people in the world. "I want it now. I deserve this. Me, me, me. Bigger, faster, shinier. I want MORE." Granted, most of us have a tinge of this type of selfishness, but again--let that attitude go, be thankful for what you already have, and you'll be happier! Historically proven.

I must've needed a second reminder, because in a random scroll down the *Titus Two Friends* blog, I read Proverbs 15:15 again: *He that is of a merry heart hath a continual feast.*

Have a *HAPPY* Thanksgiving, ladies & gents.

--MJ

Taking Back Christmas

Thursday, November 25, 2010

Every once in a blue moon, society will realize a grievous error they committed, and rectify it. I do not know what iconic event occurred in what courtroom somewhere in this country this year, but I'm thankful for the results (did someone nuke the ACLU?). A recap: The communists in the sky that marketed the U.S. "Happy Holidays" slogan over the last few years, did so to censor the Christ-centric word "Christmas." Every large chain store, restaurant, or business that you'd visit during the holidays would decorate their building in religion-neutral holiday motif. How gay! Same gimmick they pulled in the 70's & 80's with the "X-Mas" buzz. Pulse check, 2010: Stop the Presses!!! "Merry Christmas" signs all over the stores. Still haven't seen a bell-ringer at Target, but hey, I'll take what I can get. I heard the word 'Jesus' in a Christmas song, played PUBLICLY over a Wal-Mart speaker system today. We're not in China anymore, Toto!

Unfortunately, many iconic events of the American past still leave us clouded in stupidity... it's kinda hard to turn back the clock on that lady's hot McDonald's coffee; as a result, today they put warning labels on warning labels. This morning I saw a permanent warning label on a chair. "Do not tilt! May cause injury or death." What's next? Warning labels on fruit. For reals. Bring on the National Stupidity Clause!!! If only they could do something about those pesky city permits for conducting garage sales and Christmas caroling!

Merry Christmas... again.

--MJ

Good King Wenceslas

Friday, November 26, 2010

I was about 10 years old when I first heard the words to this song. By the end of that season, I knew the song inside & out. I never forgot the words... and it's still my favorite Christmas song.

Good King Wenceslas

Good King Wenceslas looked out, on the Feast of Stephen
When the snow lay round-about, clean and crisp and even
Brightly shone the moon that night, and the frost was cruel
When a poor man came in sight, gathering winter fuel.

"Hither, Page, and stand by me--if thou know'st it telling--
Yonder peasant, who is he? Where and what his dwelling?"
"Sire, he lives a good league hence, underneath the mountain;
Right against the forest fence, by St. Agnes' Fountain."

"Bring me flesh and bring me wine, bring me pine logs hither
You and I will see him dine, when we take them thither."
Page and Monarch, forth they went, forth they went together,
Through the rude wind's wild lament, and the bitter weather.

"Sire, the night is darker now, and the wind grows stronger...
Fails my heart, I know not how--I can go no longer."
"Mark my footsteps, my good Page, tread thou in them boldly.
You will find the winter's rage freeze thy blood less coldly."

In his master's steps he trod, where the snow lay dinted;

Heat was in the very shod that the Saint had printed.
Therefore, Christian men, be sure, wealth or rank possessing
He who now will bless the poor, shall himself find blessing.

Excerpt from: My Small and Mighty Corps

Saturday, November 27, 2010



I wrote a book a few years back, entitled *My Small & Mighty Corps*. It's a collection of funny stories from my time in the Marines. Never published it. I've decided to share a couple of those stories on the blog.

THE "DI"

Few entities in this world (who are actually real and not just TV creations) can intimidate someone quite as effectively as a Marine Drill Instructor. A perfect portrayal of a Marine 'DI' was played by R. Lee Ermey in Stanley Kubrick's "Full Metal Jacket." Upon arrival at Parris Island, recruits are welcomed warmly by these beasts, the recruits' loving caretakers for the next three months (recruit training varies annually between eleven and thirteen weeks of training).

A typical encounter with a DI would be as such: you're using the lidless toilet, which sits alongside twenty others of the same (no dividers), and you've been there for maybe a minute. All of a sudden chills run down your spine, from the nape of your neck all the way to your pooper. A DI has just entered the 'head' and he's furious. His over-the-top loud voice is thrice amplified by the acoustics of the small hallway-style bathroom. Before you know it, he's in your face – literally – spitting and hissing and yelling at the top of his lungs. "Squeeze it out; pinch it off, you disgusting turd-burglar! Get off my daggum toilets!"

The bus pulls up, the tired and nervous new recruits scramble off the bus, and a handful of 'handlers' yell from every direction, pushing their way through the crowd of confused recruits and herding them onto the pre-painted infamous yellow footprints – 'it has begun.' These handlers are in fact DI's, but they are

(unbeknownst to the recruits) only temporary as far as the recruits are concerned; they're used to move recruits through the necessary formalities of induction. Uniform issue, basic rules and regulations, indoctrination, and initial haircut are some of the first orders of business in this temporary 24-hour stage.

The Marine Corps recognizes the influential role that families, specifically mothers, play in an individual's decision to join the Corps. To keep the flow of fresh young bodies to boot camp from being altered, the Marines let mom know that Johnny is gonna be all right. The first thing that happens once you're off the yellow footprints is a forced letter home. A DI makes the recruits to sit down at a series of big tables, then stands over them and says, "You will now write a friggin letter to Suzie or Mama or whomever." He dictates...

DEAR MOMMA

"Dear Momma, comma. New paragraph. I made it safely to Parris Island, period. My Senior Drill Instructor is taking good care of me, period. I am in good health and good spirits, period. New paragraph. Love, comma. New paragraph. Now sign your name--Recruit Johnny or whatever. Now fold the letter. Fold it again. Place it in the envelope. Lick it. Seal it. Pass it to your right. Stand up, face the right... MOVE! MOVE! MOVE!"

NAVAL PARLANCE AND MARINE-ISMS

Marines, and the Naval Services in general, contribute greatly to the cornucopia of words and phrases in the English language today. This is learned quickly by the Marine recruit, who adapts and absorbs for fear of a DI getting up in his junk. A floor instantly becomes a 'deck,' a door becomes a 'hatch,' a window is a 'porthole.' The ceiling is now the 'overhead,' stairwells are 'ladderwells,' the bathroom is now 'the head.' 'Scuttlebutt' is the term for both a water fountain and for gossip. A bed is a rack, wall is a bulkhead and all cardinal directions (left, right, front, rear) are replaced with 'port, starboard, forward (astern), and aft' respectively. These are your primary examples of 'Navy-speak.'

In addition to the language of the Navy, recruits must learn Marine verbage. Junk food is collectively referred to as 'geedunk' or 'pogey bait,' a flashlight turns into a 'moonbeam,' running shoes are 'go fasters,' and a writing pen is an 'inkstick.' At boot camp, the words 'daggum,' 'freakin,' and 'stinkin' can be inserted in the place of any adjective or adverb. Likewise, 'yoo-hoo,' 'nasty,' or 'booger' can take the place of any noun or pronoun. Here's one, "Hey there, Yoo-hoo! Grab that daggum friggin daggum rifle and freakin point it at the friggin stinkin target, cornball. Yeah, that's right, sweetheart, I'm talking to you. Hey Pinocchio! Yeah, you! Pay friggin attention to the daggum stinkin target, dingleberry!"

The Marine Corps favors three superlatives above all others, in the following order:

1. Outstanding, pronounced Out—STANding or Out-freakin' standing. 2. Stellar... pronounced in such a way that the word just hangs in midair, similar to Tony the Tiger's Frosted Flakes line, "Theyrrre Grrrrreat!" Like this: "Stellarrrrr." 3. Fantastic. Usually preceded by "that's" and followed by an interrogative, like "yunderstand that?" or "good-to-go?" Example: That's fantastic, is it not? Common 'hybrid' superlatives are "good-to-go," "locked and cocked," "AJ squared-away" and "high-speed, low-drag."

You may have noted that in the last paragraph, the phrase "good to go" was used in two separate examples, both as a statement and as a question. Yes, it's both. The Marines do that to a lot of words and phrases, chiefly "Er" (it's a word in the Marines, but I wouldn't argue that in Scrabble) and the classic "Oo-Rah." In question form: We're all gonna run up that hill, Oo-Rah? The appropriate answer to the question would be "Oo-Rah!"

Now, the word "Oo-Rah" (again, not a Scrabble word) comes in many packages. Some Marines pronounce it to the T, others stretch their mouth when they say it (Eww-Raaah). For some, the "Rah" is silent, others omit the "Oo." Many Marines simply bark it out, and it sounds like they're clearing their throat. Lastly, it is increasingly popular among modern Marines to sharply say 'ARAH' in the back of their throat, thrusting air out of their diaphragm or using their 'chest voice,' as my wife would say. I usually fell in the latter category. I saved my Oo's for special occasions.

Grrr and Yut are also Marine words. Free agents, really. GRRRRRR is actually more like it, and Yut is pronounced either with exaggerated elongation (Yuuuuuuuuuuuuut), or in the quick, chopped version "Yut-Yut." The meanings vary depending on the situation. Okay, at this point, you're thinking Marines are pretty weird, right? Well it's like the joke goes, 'Where does a 600-lb. gorilla sit? ...Wherever he wants.' The Marines being the gorilla, they can make up whatever words make them happy.

Kimberly

Kimberly, at her least, is an alcoholic drug-addict on the South side of Pittsburgh. Her speech was not polished. It was blunt. Point-blank. Apathetic and broken. "Mister, could you just give me the change in your pocket." It was neither a question nor a demand. It was a suspended statement. I locked eyes with her. "I've got no change, sorry. Why do you need it?" "I need another bottle. And a hit." I studied her face as I contemplated a response. She continued. "You know, I'm sick of everybody. I'm sick of people. I'm 42 years old, I've never had a family, my friend kicked me out and I wonder every week if this is gonna be the week I just f***in' kill myself." Her eyes were glazed. It's hard to lie through a bottle of liquor.

I wasn't her lotto ticket. I couldn't have looked like much. My clothes carried the

grime of the last rig I worked on--my hands and face the same. Truth is, I was filthy. The only thing clean on my body was a cross-body-slung black duffel, new--which I picked up for \$15 at Wal-Mart. She could not have known that I'd been looking for her for five hours... and with my parked truck finally in sight, I'd all but completely given up on walking bridges, bushes, and bus stops in the dumpy areas of Steel Town (the whole time praying for guidance).

I found Kimberly in her worst condition. Mine not to judge. We sat and talked for a while. No preaching... never was my strong point. I did tell her that I couldn't fix her situation, that nobody could, probably not even her. That God could. But I firmly believed I could help brighten her outlook on people. "Remember this," I told her. "Speak to life, not death! Affect your environment, don't let it affect you." I gave her the bag, filled with clothes and food, holiday goodies, flashlights and zip-ties and basic necessities. Wal-Mart gift card to fill in the blanks. She gave me a hug, tears on her face. I left feeling really good.

— — —

Kimberly, at her best, is a daughter of the Living God. Her Father is The King. He heard her desperate, disparaging cries for help and he sent me to deliver, just as others in the past have answered His call to deliver when the beneficiary was myself. I'll never forget the day that Christmas was brought to my family. Three kids and a pregnant wife, Christmas Day minus two, no food, nearly starving. No gifts, not one. One amazing blessing, to be shared with you at a later time. This one's for Kim. I ask your prayers for her, that her situation will turn around miraculously, and that she'll be used to bless others and further God's kingdom.

Father and Sons of the Revolution

The LatLongs for Rig 261 are incorrect on the Rig Locator sheet. So I'm driving the wrong direction this morning, down one of many dirt roads in the upper Northeast corner of Pennsylvania. I pass a very small cemetery in the middle of nowhere, roughly 20' x 30' in size, and glance over. My eye catches a meager, solitary American flag planted beside a very old headstone. I stop, back up, exit the truck and go for a look. Kneeling down at first, I was unable to read the markings. I stood and scanned the other stones, noting that they were very old. As I turned to leave, I glanced back at the original marker. The shadowed portion of one of the words read "evoluti_n. No way. I moved slowly side to side, trying to decipher the word. "Revolution." Then I tried again.

The cemetery is located at coordinates N 41.59395 / W 76.09293, in Mehoopany, PA. The gravestone is ten steps straight in through the rusty gate. It reads:

JOB WHITCOMB

died

March 24, 1802

aged 78 years

A veteran Soldier at

the Revolution, himself

and three sons bore arms

to gain our liberty.



As God is my witness, it gave me chills as I stood on this hallowed ground, and again even as I just typed it. Truly, some gave all. I am thankful for their service, for their passion, for their sense of duty. I'm honored to know that Job lived to see the fruits of his labor... a home and a country free from tyrannical oppression.

The document below has not been added to *Despite all Obstacles*. I found it in December of 2011 on Ancestry.com! The inscription is slightly wrong, and there's no farm in sight! I actually began tracing Whitcomb's family back through Connecticut.

Form MAGO-41-200M-4-35 Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Military Affairs		RECORD OF BURIAL PLACE OF VETERAN		Wyoming County	
NAME Whitcomb, Job			DATE OF BIRTH		DATE OF DEATH
VETERAN OF Rev. WAR			SERVED IN ARMY (X) NAVY () MARINE CORPS ()		
DATES OF SERVICE 1776		ORGANIZATION(S) Militia, Conn. Capt. Judd's Co. in 1st. and 8th.		RANK Pvt.	
CENETERY OR PLACE OF INTERMENT		NAME Whitcomb. LOCATION On farm of John B. Fassett, Scottsville, Pa.			
LOCATION OF GRAVE IN CEMETERY			HEADSTONE Old style marble and Gov't. Marker		
SECTION Eastern		RANGE GRAVE No.		GOVERNMENT () COUNTY () FAMILY ()	
INFORMATION GIVEN BY Mrs. Jos. Oliver			REMARKS Inscr. on stone "A Veteran of the Rev. War and three sons bore arms to gain our liberty. F.		
DATE 5-28-33					
After being Recorded in the County Veterans' Grave Registration Record This card is to be sent to THE ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, for final Record.					

Grandma and the YesterMen



My father's mother has seen a few things in her day. Daughter of a French Diva soloist and a German businessman, she was raised in the autonomous post-WWI border region known as Saarland. She was the sibling of one sister, one regular Nazi soldier, one Waffen-SS officer, and one brother who was the 7-language personal translator to Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, the 'Desert Fox' military tactician of Afrikakorps campaign. She was the 'war bride' of an American Airman, who served honorably during WWII, Korea, and Vietnam. He (my grandfather) was interred at Arlington in 2006. Grandma (Barbara Babette Hoffmann Speights, called Betty) settled with Grandpa in Indianapolis, Indiana after he retired from the service. She now owns a home in Suffolk, Virginia. Her stories, which are few and far between, grip my attention.

Last weekend, I was showing her how cameras work these days, without film and all that. She was amazed. She started to reminisce on the extraordinary changes she's seen over the years, regarding technology, transportation, communications, and people. Most of the changes, she views as 'good.'

Then she shared a story with my wife and myself. "I was working at Indiana Veneers Corp. Let me tell you, I ran that place. Well, this one day, I'll never forget it, they were doing some work on the concrete slab floor inside the office, and I forgot all about it. I walked in the door and the lights were off, so I went to turn them on. I didn't know that the power was out. All of a sudden, I stepped into a hole and tripped on one of those metal bars they put in concrete. I fell face-forward onto the ground, and my purse and everything in it went flying everywhere. I remember it like yesterday... every single man in that office came running to pick me up, and to pick up all the things I dropped. There was probably fifteen men in all. They picked me up and stood me on the floor, dusted off my knees, and they were all asking, 'Miss Betty, are you okay, are you all right?' And I told 'em all, I says 'I'm fine, thank you.' You see, that's how it was back then. All the men would always help the women, and I

always felt safe and protected whenever men were around, no matter where I was."

"These days, men scare me. They make me feel uncomfortable. They'll push any old lady off the road when they're driving and not give it another thought. I've had to actually go find help for some lady who slipped and fell in a busy store. There were plenty of men around, but none of them came running. It's a real shame what happened to men over the years. They're not the same."

When grandma had finished her story, I instantly felt ashamed of all the generations of men that followed her own. It made my resolve a little stronger, to affect the visible character of a man in my own actions. If you're a man, I hope her story has the same effect on you. Thanks for reading. --MJ

Once Upon a Rig

Sunday, November 28, 2010

I drove up the the check-in trailer at Rig 251 today. Waited for the security person to come out. Gave the horn a love tap... Ah, movement. Here she comes. "Sorry," she says. "I was lost in my book." I take the clipboard to fill it out. "Whatcha readin'?" "Oh, just a paperback. *Lovey-dovey* stuff." "By whom?" "Danielle Steel." "Ha! My favorite author." She started laughing at me and my big truck and my greasy hard hat. "Yeah, okay..." She started to walk away. "Hold on, check it out!" I reached for my aviator bag that wasn't there. She came back to my window, big smilin.' "Crap, I left them at the hotel. I've got **Honor Thyself** and **Matters of the Heart** in my bag at the hotel right now!" She was floored. "Oh my gosh! You're serious!" I'm reading **Big Girl**. "Oh yeah, the new one with the lollipop-licker cover. How is it?" "It's good! I've only got about that much to go (pinching 1/8" of air). I still can't believe that. I thought you were messin' around with me." I told her the story about how I started reading Steel's books in the Marines, when no other books were available, and how I got hooked. I didn't immediately fall for Steel's writing style, rather her detail of, and passion for, certain geographic locations. Chief among these are Paris and San Francisco (I believe that's where she lives). Before too long, I was a full-fledged subscriber. Anyway, as the adage goes concerning books and covers, it's easy to misjudge a person based on his or her appearance. Or based upon the type of books they write, for that matter.

You're all familiar with "the nod," right? "The nod" is gesture shared by two people with similar interests or possessions, usually seen with certain breeds of vehicle owners. There's the Harley nod, the Jeep-owner's nod, the tuners' nod, the Vette-owner's nod... occasionally even two separate duallie truck drivers will nod at each other from across a stoplight. As I exited the rig, Me and Miss Security Guard shared the D.S. nod.

Here's another quick post regarding Danielle Steel. ([Link to another story](#))

Friends of the United States

Monday, November 29, 2010

In a world of ever-increasing political drama, strain, and tension, I would like to personally thank the allies and friends of the United States, for watching our six both physically and politically.

This particular post gives props to the English-speaking countries:

Canada, you're awesome. And yes, I recognize that you are also a French-speaking country. I don't know what we'd do without you. We don't ever have to worry about your military sneaking in and blowing us up in the middle of the night. Because of that, my children will not grow up knowing the kind of fear that some in this world do. On the contrary, you are a quiet, strong defense to our Northern border. If only every country was so fortunate to have a neighbor like you.

England, you're eccentric. But you've got some hard Marines, RAF types, and military in general. To the English ladies, I love how you call everyone "Love." We've got posters up honoring the leadership of Winston Churchill along our highways these days. Thanks for the Beatles. Your loyalty to HM the Queen is highly honorable and commendable. Tony Blair, you're good in my book.

Ireland, what can I say. Everyone loves you for your beauty, your beer, your whiskey, and your tough reputation. That doesn't mean you have to live up to it. We'll love you anyway.

Scotland, you're in my blood, what can I say. You're awesome.

Wales, I never hear anything about you. I hope you're doing well. You should write more often.

Australia, I've never visited you, but I never met an American that didn't love you. You're known in military circles for your hard men and your beautiful women. Aussie Marines, you're crazy. Don't ever change.

New Zealand. Home of Speights beer. Can't wait until you finally send me some. Maybe I'll catch it the next time that bar floats around the world.

South Africa, you're in a tough part of the world. Over here, we all saw that American movie about your rugby team, entitled *Invictus*. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did.

To all of our primary-English Carribean island nation friends, and to U.S. territories like Guam and Puerto Rico, you're beautiful!!! We love to visit. Be safe each hurricane season (typhoon season / Guam)!

Pakistan, three hours ago, you were listed in a news source as being the "most bullied American ally" who lists English as their primary language. I'm sorry to hear that. Your proximity to Afghanistan doesn't help, I'm sure. Hopefully we'll be out of there soon. The USA isn't perfect, but I believe in her cause. Please be patient. As for the nuclear argument, I have mixed feelings. Good luck with all that.

Rwanda, I didn't know that English was your official language! Along with French, I understand. Sorry about the genocides in 1994. I know that doesn't mean much, but boy, that hurt the whole world after we all learned the full details of your story. I hope that you have found some success in the rebuilding of your lives and relationships.

For anybody I'm missing, I deeply apologize. To all of you, may your nations, people, crops, livestock, industries, and political friendships flourish. Be blessed.

Giuseppe's Pasta House

Tuesday, November 30, 2010

About forty miles East / Northeast of Scranton, Pennsylvania, is a little town named Dushore. It is quaint, weathered, and far from anything of importance on the tourist radar. Sunday evening, I passed through Dushore on an empty stomach. As I entered the town, I noticed a sign on my left: "Giuseppe's Pasta House." Giuseppe's sits nestled inside a small strip of stores, none of which had a car in the parking lot. Being a Sunday, I wondered if anything was open.

I tested the door at Giuseppe's. Open! Great. A local gal named Charlotte told me to sit where I'd like, so I did. Looking around, I noted simplicity--nothing super fancy about the restaurant, which seems par for the course around this area of PA--but I also noted authenticity. Modern Italian music played in the background. The posters on the wall appeared to be blown up from someone's personal photos. I would learn later that I'm looking at pictures of Napoli's port, taken from a vantage point near the restaurant owner's mother's house. There are a few signs hanging on the wall. One says "Mocha." Another, "Espresso." There's an ornate wall hanging which says "Tiramisu."

I ordered the first special of the day that was recited to me. Sounded better than good. I was served a basket of hard crust bread with butter when Charlotte brought out my water with lemon. The soup of the day soon followed: Italian Wedding soup with pearl pasta and spinach... amazing! I couldn't wait to receive the main course. In a relatively short time, I was served a very thick salmon fillet on a bed of creamy pasta. I forget what it was called. Petra makes something similar, but this had its own unique flavor. I was thoroughly impressed.

Once I'd finished my meal, I was greeted by Gianni, the owner and chef of Giuseppe's. Gianni is a younger middle-aged guy with a slight accent and a good smile. Long after I'd finished my meal, Gianni and I sipped espresso, which he prepared expertly. I watched him pack the fine grounds for several minutes before starting the machine. We talked a long time about the region, about hunters and gas drilling and the local economy. We talked about family, about Italy, about small business, and about the struggles of running a restaurant. Before I left, Gianni sent me off with a large styro cup, packed full of tiramisu. "The ingredients all come straight from Italy," he said with a proud smile. It was the best tiramisu I've ever had! I talked to Petra about how good it was later that night, and I shared the whole dining experience with her. I went into this small place expecting spaghetti, and what I got was an experience. Also, I left having made a new friend.

I intend to stop in whenever I drive through the area; with my new job, that should be roughly every other week. I told Gianni that I'd like to take some pictures and conduct the proper interview to give his restaurant a polished write-up, to which he's agreed. In the meantime, should you find yourself driving through this part of Pennsylvania and you're looking for a decent meal, know that there is hope. Giuseppe's Pasta House is a small goldmine of Italian cuisine in a casual setting, tucked away in the unlikely, unexpected town of Dushore. Regardless of whether you stop in to eat, or just to share some of that amazing tiramisu over a cup of coffee--when you stop in, tell him Matty said hi!

TSA Debacle: What's the Wrong Right Decision?

Wednesday's front-page news highlighted America's majority opposition to TSA's abrupt move to beef up airport and flight security, by getting up-close and personal on passenger searches. Presently, I'm sitting at Pittsburgh International Airport, and was just subjected to the same. For the record, the pat-down I experienced was not outside of professional boundaries in any way. I, however, maintain opposition to the practice simply because it goes against the will of the people.

In mid-March 2003, American troops crossed the Line of Departure from Kuwait into Iraq, racing towards Baghdad to unseat Saddam Hussein and his corrupt military arm. As part of the Reconnaissance Detachment to the 24th MEU, Task Force Tarawa, I was required to conduct snap / hasty VCP (vehicle checkpoint) searches for weapons and explosives. No non-US military vehicles were allowed to drive anywhere in the country after dark, and regardless of what our mission of the day was (unless clandestine), it was our responsibility to stop nighttime travelers, search their persons & vehicles, and send them home.

Initially, while our Rules of Engagement were wide open (kill if you feel threatened), our hands were tied on pat-downs. Because of the Muslim religious culture, we were not allowed to so much as look at the women or children, let alone touch them.

Before long, the bad guys caught on and exploited our loophole; they started loading the women down with weapons and explosives, underneath their Hijābs (dresses/clothing). After several reports of accidental discovery, our checkpoint rules changed. Search EVERYBODY. Man, woman, boy, girl, goat, chicken, corpse. The Iraqis were more cooperative than we'd expected! No one seemed to mind, and we as Marines felt safer. This rule was in effect for two months. As things go in the military--in politics--in life--before long, there was a new sheriff (Army General) in town. His rules for the region were to stop searching women, and give the Iraqis back their weapons. One per household, for self-defense. Violence exploded in Iraq. Later, another guy would take charge, and order the weapons collected back up... and then a reversal later still. It was a cluster. The 'no female pat-down' rule stuck, in honor of Muslim religious customs.

Which brings us back to today. The dichotomy presented is this: our same government that aims to protect the American people from [radical Muslim] airline attacks, even against the will of the public majority, is also the same government which removes the defenses of our troops... to protect Muslim traditions.

We really need to think this through a little bit. If 'We the People' do not want pat-downs, then no pat-downs. A line must always inevitably be drawn against security posture, because 100% security = 0% liberty, and vice versa. What comes next, cavity searches? I'm going to go one step further to oppose TSA security. Posture was down today at the airport. Doubtless, after a week's media bombardment and yesterday's front-page headlines, an all-hands email trickled down from TSA's PR gurus, to make the 'customer interface' end user (the agents who search you) put on a smile and treat people nicer today. It was very, very apparent. Well, 'nice' goes against security. Today, I could have been dipping a wad of C-4, datasheet or other composition explosive. My ceramic boot toes could have been press-molded from C4. My A7A cargo-strap web belt may as well have been doubled with a stitch pocket, or made of tubular nylon. I could then have laced two full windings of detcord inside my belt, which I 'accidentally' forgot to take off, and which didn't go through the X-ray. Blasting cap? Ha! My computer's USB bluetooth adapter already looks like a blasting cap. Guarantee that would fly. And who needs a lighter? Heck, you actually have inverter-fed electrical outlets on many aircraft these days. If you're a terrorist, and you're killing yourself anyway, strip your earphone wires to jump positive to negative for your ignition arc. Bottom line, I thought of all this, and other more complex possibilities, in ten minutes while getting searched. Terrorists plan for years. TSA isn't always going to stop them! A laptop alone is a virtual tool room of parts that can probably be used to blow up a plane.

Well, I'm done. Don't worry, I didn't share anything a very dumb, fly-by-night terrorist hadn't already thought of. Get ready to start flying naked, folks.

My Greatest Honor

Monday, December 6, 2010

For not writing this sooner, an apology may be reasonably expected. I offer none. I have not previously, I do not now, nor will I ever, possess the words to do my subject justice. I've only just recently come to grips with this.

How can I in my writing ability form the words to adequately pay fitting tribute to the person whose every noble characteristic is added to with each passing breath? Even as I struggle to portray her goodness, her character becomes more noble, and my humble words are instantly rendered obsolete.

Make no mistake, I reference my extraordinary wife of nearly fifteen years. Born Petra Erzsebet Kasaroczky, known today as Petra Elizabeth Speights, she is my most valuable earthly possession--if I may so fairly call her so, in that I am also wholly hers. In fairness also, that I call her imperfect, but in perfect honesty, she is perfect for me!

I am everything that she is not... Rude and obnoxious. Loud and overbearing. I have been dishonest with myself and others. Unorganized. Procrastinator. Unrealistic planner. Poor decision maker at times. I am quick to anger and I have a biting tongue.

She is none of those things. In fact, her organizational skills and her timeliness are impeccable--or would be, were she not attached to me. She is truly a noble woman of character, unparalleled in a great many ways when compared to most people I know. Petra will strive to do what is right in every situation. She does not back stab. She will not lie. When she says that she'll do something, she will! She is adamant about keeping a clean and orderly house, both spiritually and physically. Petra is wise beyond her years, and possesses a very strong sense of intuition. When it comes to right and wrong, she does not refer to a sense or form of morality, rather a set of strong and unwavering convictions. Again, recognizing that she is human, and ergo flawed like all of us, I can still say that over the years I have come to deeply value her assessments and opinions on most subjects. Though my actions have not always painted this picture clearly, I truly, truly respect my wife above all others. Make no mistake that I am the bonehead in our marital equation, but put to the test, she wins. She is usually right.

On top of all these things, she is a lady. She steps aside to let me be the leader of our family--the God-given place that I must rightly fill. This single element, combined with her genuine respect for me, is so incredibly valuable to the health and longevity of our marriage... not because I 'need' to be in charge, rather that we both believe the leadership in the home to be a man's role. It is a role that I assume with great care, and Petra keeps me prayerfully covered. I do the same for her.

Petra has a beautiful spirit, a beautiful body, a beautiful voice, a great sense of style, and a knack for cooking the most flavorful foods. Her interests and skills beyond that are for me to forever cherish. There is a reason that I must talk her up... because she never would advocate on her own behalf. She's incredibly humble, except in jest, and she does have a phenomenal sense of humor--usually very quick and subtly sassy. And although humble, she is not a pushover. My voice will never be too big for her, and she will tell me--or anybody--when I am (they are) wrong, regardless of the person. She is my sugar and spice, she drives me wild and I will never hesitate to admit it! I am head-over-heels in love with that girl.

For reasons I've yet to discern, she has never ceased to be all over me, and in so doing, makes me feel great about myself. She is the blessing in a wife that I pray my sons will find when they seek wives. I wish such a woman upon every good man in this world. Amazing woman, wife, and mother. An honor in every way, one in whom I am truly proud and for whom I am truly grateful. Words alone will never do her justice; her reward could never be anything less than a heavenly crown of glory, reserved for the purest in spirit.

Christmastime in Kosovo, 2002

Saturday, December 11, 2010





The above photos were taken by myself in 2002, around this same time in December. The location: Globocica, Kosovo--in the mountainous Southern region, controlled by the German Army operating under NATO. The biggest thing in Globocica? A big mural of "Jessica," a character from the movie *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. The painting was on the side of someone's house right smack in the middle of town. The name of our military outpost there was Camp Globohill; it was a very small tent city housing maybe 200 German and American troops. The majority of my platoon lived farther North, in the town of Alloc.

In the top photo, a typical foggy morning shrouds the chow hall, which was operated by the Deutsche Bundeswehr. It was the fog that kept you warm in that snowy atmosphere... whenever it was burned away, the temps in those mountains became biting cold. Our mail was backlogged in Spain while we were in Kosovo, and many of the Christmas packages heading our way would chase us all the way into Africa and the Middle East. This chow hall was our only portal to Christmas--the food and meager decor was reflective of the holiday season.

In the bottom photo, Tyrone Rennick, our platoon Communications Tech, is seen walking from the main gate at right to the Reconnaissance Operations Center (ROC) section of the main Command Post (CP) tent. The light is there to illuminate a large American flag (obscured by the fog); I always thought it would make a good picture.

Ayla's First Cognizant Christmas

Sunday, December 12, 2010

Ayla is about 1 and a half. Everything about Christmas is new and exciting to her right now! Here are some random pictures of our little cutie getting into the season, as well as a few randoms. The veiled pictures at the bottom make my mind flash forward... one year old and I already don't want her to get married!













Christmas at Grandma's

Tuesday, December 14, 2010



Mom & Dad have a huge place on Lake Meade, in Suffolk, Virginia. With monster fireplaces and high ceilings and twinkle lights everywhere, cheery music playing throughout the house, something good always cooking, and the constant flow of family, friends, and strangers who live-in or pass through, it makes for a perfect holiday scene. Here are some snapshots of the kids setting up the tree with grandma. Grandpa's somewhere nearby, as are myself and Petra--helping at intervals. This all took place a couple weeks ago.









Pennsylvania East to West

Friday, December 17, 2010

Here's my Pennsylvania, as viewed from behind the windshield of a Chevy Silverado.

























The Night Before Christmas, Rig 622

Monday, December 20, 2010

'Twas the night before Christmas, Rig Six Twenty-two,
Ol' Ernest just readied a fresh pot of brew.
An ice storm passed through with the bite of the South Pole,
Not a spot was uncovered, not even the mousehole.
The hands were removing the ice from the floor;
They'd made 968 in the last twenty-four.

For both tours this hitch, the only Christmas they'd see
Was in golden Cope-lids on a tiny fake tree.
Now David, the Pusher, whose face was cold red,
Had visions of curling up snug in his bed.
He worked without cookies, or candles all scented,
In hopes that a blowout might well be prevented.

When up in the derrick, there arose such a chatter
The hands looked to the sky to see what was the matter
With wide eyes they dashed for the doghouse with haste,
As the derrick rained marbles, and sticks of craft paste.
Then Legos and Barbies and more toys fell down...
It appeared Santa's sleigh had just caught in the crown!

And then fell the games—Stratego and chess,
And Jenga, and Rubik's, and boy, what a mess!
Then Charlie scored triple on his made-up word "Totsy,"
As the AD Passed "GO," and another yelled "Yahzee!"
Then down fell a jolly red box with a 'crunch,'
And Juan cracked a smile at the cooler—marked "LUNCH."

"Now Jacob, and Shorty, don harnesses quick!
And go give a hand to good ol' Saint Nick!"
Then Jed fetched two lanyards from the bin where they lay,
And the crew gathered 'round for a quick JRA.
"The reindeer may bite!" and "Santa's real heavy"
"Santa? Heck, the sleigh weighs as much as a Chevy!"
Then Emilio spoke under his ten-gallon hat:
"We'll just torch-cut the sleigh skid, and that'll be that."

"On Andre, Ricardo, now Juan get 'em goin;'
Let's get this sleigh moved, before it starts snowin!"
With a torch and a grinder and pry bars in tote,
They climbed straight up toward the bright red-nosed goat.
As the roughnecks got closer, the critters got flustered,

And they bent loose the skid by the weight of their cluster.
Once he was freed up, there was no stopping Santa:
“Get back to your drillin! We’re off to Atlanta!”

Then Santa said something we ne’er thought he’d say,
“I once was a Derrick Man, back in the day.”
I broke out on rigs like you never will see
On Siberian slopes back in 1903.”
Then he waved with his wrench, and a smile and a wink
And then—just like that--he was gone in a blink.
Now, no one could tell by the grease on his cheek,
But the old man had just fixed their manifold leak!

Since then, whether magic, or whether the weather
The top drive and drawworks have never run better.
The pumps and gens have not run this strong,
No other rig’s drill bits have lasted this long.
Now most who would visit Rig 622
Would never believe that this story was true;
But the crew will remember, as long as they live
The sound of those sleigh bells just over the sheave.

— — —

...For last year's Night Before Christmas poem (Alaska Marines), [click here](#).

The Trumpeter at Granby



To the people of Norfolk, Virginia... Have you spent any time outside MacArthur Center this Christmas? Ice skated maybe? Dined along Granby? How's 'bout the Norva? The theater? Pool at Scottie Quixx? Well, if you've done any of these things over the last few weekends, you probably noticed the echoes of a soulful holiday trumpet, coming from the general direction of Freemason Abbey. May I introduce one of the artists behind the soundtrack of your life. Followed his beautiful sounds a mile to the source... his name's LA, and he's great. Friend of Melvin Basnight, by the way. If you hear him again, go put some bread in his jar. Life needs more [good/free/live] background music.

--MJ

Solstice Eclipse

Tuesday, December 21, 2010

Petra called me at 0315. The first Winter Solstice lunar eclipse to occur since the year 1638, was occurring right now. "You've got the camera!" She reminded me, "Go look at the moon, quick!" I fired off a few shutter rounds at 0317--the predicted peak moment--and then lost the moon to an eternally-rolling barrage of heavy clouds. Talk about timing (thanks Babe!)... These other photos were taken earlier in the evening. The mysterious vertical beam is actually a controlled well burn, visible over 50 miles away. I got within a few thousand yards of it, because the site shared the same mountain as the rig I was headed to. What a strikingly alluring, beautiful night sky. Photos don't do justice.







Photos of our Comfort Inn Christmas

Thursday, December 30, 2010

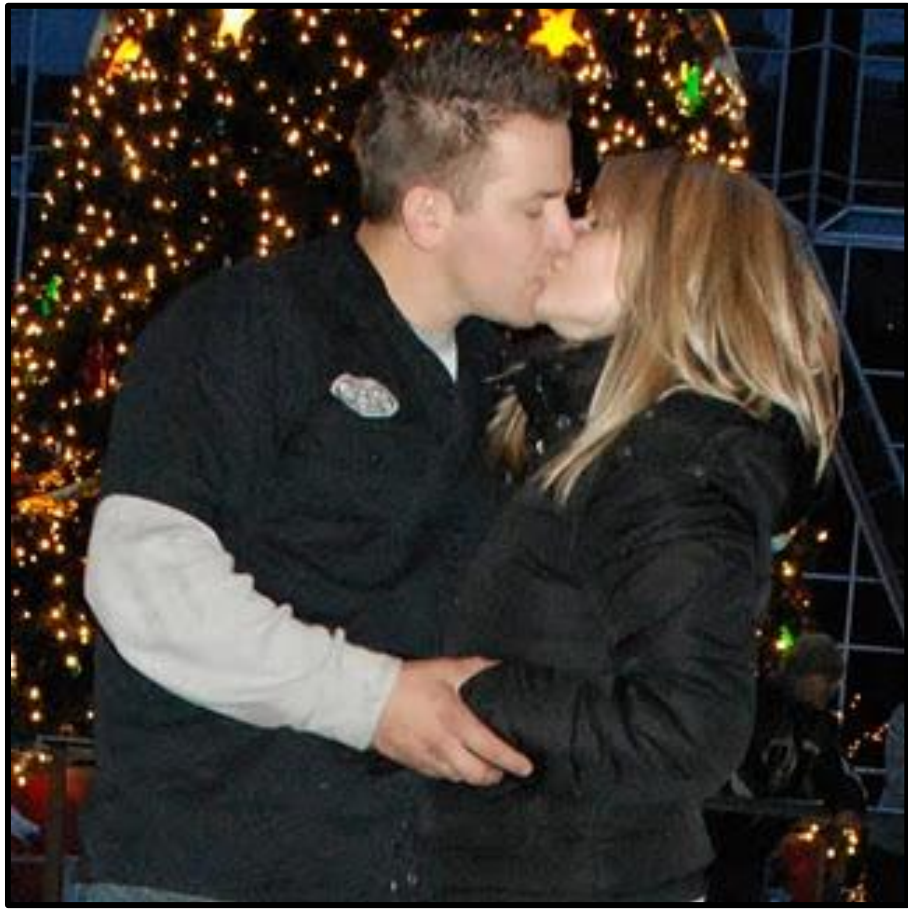




























Petra brought the kids up to visit me on Christmas weekend. Lackluster accommodations at the Comfort Inn in Washington, PA, but we were together and we had a great time. On Christmas Eve, we hung out in Market Plaza, downtown Pittsburgh. Primanti Brothers for lunch, then 200 yards around the corner to The Rink at PPG Place. Watching Lily was the highlight of the day; she let me push her around the rink twice before telling me to let go so she could skate on her own. She skated around like a champ until dark. Of course, the boys were in heaven--speeding around and shredding ice and making friends whom they know will not be able to come spend the night, but they ask anyway. We let the kids open presents that evening, breaking our "one gift only" tradition on the night before the big day. What the heck is the deal with "Pillow Pets?" Uncomfortable pillows, not overly adorable as pets... so why all the hype? Must be all the Slap-Chop, Snuggie-type marketing. Oh, by the way, Mon-chee-chees are back! Identical to the old ones. I had one as a kid, Petra had one as a kid, now Lily's got one (thanks Anyu & Apu)! On Christmas Day, we had dinner at my boss' house, and after a bit of wine & dine, ended up stacking the coffee table in a cut-throat game of Monopoly. It was certainly a good Christmas all around. Petra then returned with the kids to a snow-laden yard in Suffolk, VA, and I returned to work up North, between Binghamton and Scranton.

Eat Your Rice: On Manners, Hygiene, Family Values

Friday, December 31, 2010

Some of the most valuable learning experiences for kids occur during sleep-overs. On these occasions, children first encounter activities and rules [or lack thereof] that conflict what they know to be 'normal.' I can vividly remember several such encounters from my youth.

I was staying with my buddy Matt, and we were sitting at the dinner table with his mom, sister, and stepdad. Each dish was passed around the table, from which we would each help ourselves to a portion. I was on my third scoop of meat or vegetables, when Matt's little sister said, "Boy, that's gonna be a lot of rice!" My confused look was met by more confusing looks, until Matt's mom spoke up. "Matt's step-father is Filipino, and his rule is this: for every portion of food that we eat, we must eat an equal portion of rice." I don't think I batted an eye, but inside I was thinking, WEIRD!!! I don't know whether that practice was part of an ethnic norm, or what... but now that I'm older, it really does make sense.

Another practice that makes sense is shutting off the water while brushing your teeth. My family never did; still doesn't. My friend Scott taught me that. He couldn't believe--at ten years old--that I could be so indignant as to leave the water running. Barney (the dinosaur) feels strongly enough about shutting off the water during

brushing, that he sings about it.

Another time, I was staying with my buddy Jacob. I had just finished using the bathroom at their house, when his little sister asked me how much toilet paper I used. "I dunno," I said honestly. Her face blanched and her face displayed the shock you'd expect if she had just been slapped. "You're only apposed ta use one square for number one an' two squares for number two!" I think about that to this day. How on earth could anyone, child or adult, use only two squares of toilet paper when they poop?

One of my friends in Ohio once told me--after I had already lived in Germany for four years--that German people were all Nazis and that they all hated Americans. "How would you know?" I asked him. "My mom told me," he said. His mom knew everything about everything. "*Bobby Bouche, little girls are the DEVIL!!!*"

Andy was freaked out by the sight of my parents kissing, even just a peck on the cheek. He was honestly disgusted by it. If my kids had friends like that today, they'd all be puking whenever they visit us... we're kissy kinda people.

The conglomerate of these and all other childhood experiences helped to formulate my thinking today. We are all products of our environment, subject to propaganda in some form of a parental manifesto. Growing up offers the opportunity to dump the weirdness that we inherited, and replace it with something a little more, um, normal. Step one, we have to recognize the areas in which our own families are oddballs. Then recognize that many childhood friends had wacky families, so forget their wacky ways. Step two is to STOP REPEATING THE PROCESS!!! Be cool with your kids, teach them stuff, but don't hold back. Teach them about what others say to their kids. Prepare them for the sleepover effect!