



CHRISTMAS 2009

Greetings to Friends Far and Near—

It seems as if each year is more hectic than the one before. That was certainly the case this year. Everything just flew by in a whirlwind. It seems as if I just packed away my decorations, but already the holiday season has come around again!

My sister Margaret and I ended last year and began this one with a delightful Christmas getaway. We took Amtrak northeastward to Montreal, Canada, and we had a wonderful time there. I've always avoided Montreal, but it was a wonderfully easy city to visit. The people there were very friendly, and while I mumbled a few words of French on the trip, it really wasn't necessary. The only problem was that the city was completely covered in a glaze of ice, so we spent much of our time literally sliding from one place to another.

I'd have to wait for summer for the other big trip of the year, and it was indeed a **big** trip. After toying with the idea for years, I finally checked Hawaii off the list of places I've visited. This was another week-long trip with Margaret. We visited both Oahu and the Big Island and enjoyed almost everything we saw. I particularly had fun exploring the rainforest around Hilo, hiking on the rocks at the southernmost point in the United States, and walking around the gritty but lively Honolulu neighborhood where our President grew up.

Bishop Garrigan High School celebrated its golden anniversary last summer, and it was weird to think I'd been teaching there for literally half the life of the school. I still primarily teach math, but I also work with quiz bowl (where I took a really good group of kids to nationals in New Orleans in May and will be making a return trip next June to Washington, D.C.), speech (where we were pleased to have a couple of all-state honorees again this year), our school website (which continues to grow and grow), student council, intramural basketball, and the weekly "Bear Facts" radio show. There are also a number of other things (like working as the P.A. announcer at home football games, sorting scrip cards in summer, or helping escort students who did a volunteer project at a mission for the homeless in Minneapolis) that keep me hopping pretty much all the time.

Things were especially busy at school this year. This fall we had an evaluation by state officials, and there was a lot of work involved in preparing for that. I was also busy as the high school's representative on a committee that deals with implementing the Iowa Core Curriculum, a statewide plan to overhaul both what is taught and how students learn things. The basic ideas are certainly good, but it's one of those things that works a lot better in theory than in practice—and the legislators who passed it aren't the ones who have deal with implementing it. So far it's meant an endless series of meetings for those of us on the committee, and I can't help but think the kids would be better served by having us in the classroom actually teaching.

I also continue to work at Iowa Lakes Community College. This fall was especially busy there. I've been teaching two night classes, one live and one over television. The TV class has no students at all in Algona, so I've had the choice of either teaching to an empty room or driving to the other four ILCC campuses. That class is also made up of mostly traditional college-aged students, and they've been notorious about skipping class throughout the fall. That's showing up in their grades, which are among the lowest I've given out in a while.

I've continue to be very active in the First Congregational Church. We were delighted to get a new fulltime pastor shortly after Christmas, after a long time between ministers. While she's

changed a number of things, I like our new minister (Rev. Deborah Pope) a lot—and our attendance has stabilized and even started going up slightly since she took over. I continue to serve as “worship leader” most weeks, and I even delivered another sermon back in August. It amazed me how many people around town heard me on the radio when that was broadcast.

This year wasn't as dominated by baseball as some other recent years have been for me. My former student, Brad Nelson, started the year on Brewers' big league team but didn't do well in an exclusively pinch-hitting role. I was able to make one trip to Milwaukee, where I was pleased to see him sitting in the dugout in a Major League uniform. Just days after that he was cut. He joined the Seattle Mariners system and spent most of the season in AAA Tacoma. That was a bit too far away to head on a whim, so most of my baseball this year amounted to watching the Garrigan Bears.

Even if the opportunity had been there, I'm not sure I could have gotten to as many baseball games this year. That's because my car seems to have more problems every time I turn around. It's over a decade old now and definitely showing its age. Unfortunately, it got far too good of mileage to qualify for the “clunker” program last summer. Indeed, short of a hybrid they don't make anything that even approaches its mileage these days. They don't seem to make anything remotely affordable, either. Every single car I've seen costs more than double what I paid for my Metro (some “economy” cars are three times as high), but my salary hasn't gone up nearly so much. That creates a catch-22—I can't afford a new car, but the old car just nickels and dimes (or \$100's and \$500's) me to death.

I was pleased to see a bunch of different plays this year. I saw interesting professional shows in Des Moines, Minneapolis, and Chicago, as well as a very nice production of *The Wizard of Oz* put on by the students at Garrigan. In November I was delighted to see my brother John playing Scrooge in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. I haven't seen John on stage for years, and he did a wonderful job.

This hasn't been the healthiest of years for me—in spite of walking more than 400 miles during the summer. I spent much of the spring limping around after cutting my foot badly. Then I spent pretty much my entire health savings account on dental work after breaking a tooth—while eating spaghetti, of all things. I had back trouble throughout the fall, and since about the middle of November I've been coughing and wheezing with those dreaded “flu-like symptoms” that almost every disease seems to have. I actually felt sick at Thanksgiving. I feel better now, but I still seem to be hacking like I'm going to cough up a hairball. Hopefully that will clear up soon and let me really enjoy Christmas.

I certainly can't complain about my health, though, as many of those around me have been far worse off. I don't know when there's been a year that more people I know have been hospitalized. My minister, the superintendent and business manager at school, two of my ILCC students, and a number of more distant acquaintances have all been treated for serious diagnoses. My sister Margaret also had surgery in October, which kept her from helping out at our Garrigan quiz bowl tournament (the first time in twenty years she hasn't been here for that), and my sister-in-law Janet had emergency eye surgery. Pretty much everyone seems to be doing all right as the year draws to a close, and I certainly pray that the coming year is a bit less eventful for all of them.

Thanksgiving really stood out this year, because for the first time in my adult life I wasn't down at my Aunt Alaire's that day. Alaire got together with my Uncle Harvey and his kids, so for a change I went over to Margaret's place. We had a very non-traditional meal (the only “classic” item was gelled cranberries), but it was fun to get together.

The rest of the family is doing all right. John retired from teaching this past year, and he's trying hard to get his writings published. He's also started working as a substitute teacher. Janet continues to work as an executive assistant for an insurance company in Dubuque. The highlight of the year for the two of them was a trip to Prague in October.

Margaret has them (and just about everyone) trumped in the travel department, though. In addition to her jaunts with me, she took a train ride across Canada last spring, and she's looking forward to traveling back to Egypt after Christmas. When she's not traveling she teaches college classes and does translation for the local school district.

Retirement is on the horizon for Paul as well. This will be his last year teaching Spanish and history at Oskaloosa, where his wife retired from teaching special education last spring. Paul will be working full-time for the United Methodist Church next year. He'd like to continue as a pastor in Hispanic ministry, but he'll work wherever he is needed. The big news in their family came from Rachel, who got her master's degree in library science last spring and then spent part of the summer on a mission trip in Nigeria.

Steve is still in northern Minnesota, and he seems to be busy as ever. I was pleased to see him a couple of times during the year. I had a fascinating experience when I was over at John's to see *A Christmas Carol*. John and Janet had taken Margaret and me out for breakfast, and while we were there, Terry and her dad sat down at the booth next to us. They had been babysitting Chris' kids and were stopping for a bite on their way home. It was certainly unexpected, but we had a nice quick visit.

I was pleased to see my Uncle Bill and some of the Burrow cousins at Rachel's graduation. Bill looks good, and I'm always astonished when I see him to think how old my dad would be if he were alive today. (He died twenty-six years ago, and I still think of him that age.) On the Miller side of the family I was glad to hear that Aunt Max and Uncle Harvey recently returned to their Iowa City condo, which was severely damaged by floods in 2008. They and the rest of the extended family seem to be doing all right.

I hope this finds all of you well, too. May your holiday season be happy, and may the New Year bring you plentiful blessings.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!