



CHRISTMAS 2017

GREETINGS, ONE AND ALL:

I happened to be in the Twin Cities on Black Friday this year. While I didn't do much in the way of shopping, I did see what to me is the definitive sign of the holiday season: a Salvation Army Santa ringing a bell in front of Walgreen's. While I've lived in small towns my whole life, I'm a city boy at heart, and hearing those clanging bells above the urban bustle lets me know that Christmas is here again.

This has honestly been a rather bittersweet year, and a large part of it dealt with my sister Margaret's death from leukemia. Margaret was diagnosed last December. She and I were planning to spend Christmas 2016 in Chicago, but instead I spent it with her at the Mayo Clinic. My brothers and I went to Rochester repeatedly throughout the winter and spring as she underwent a wide range of chemotherapy treatments. She remained in good spirits, helped by countless calls and e-mails from friends and family members. The staff at Mayo worked tirelessly. Unfortunately Margaret's cancer had an unusual genetic mutation (FLT-3) that made it almost impossible to kill, and at the end of May she died. My brother Paul was the clergyman at her funeral, and she is buried beside my parents at Wilson Grove Cemetery north of Sumner.

After her death I made countless trips over to Decorah to try to get Margaret's house in order. She was far from a meticulous housekeeper, and I think the seclusion of her place in the woods created an attitude of "out of sight, out of mind". She appeared to never throw anything away, and it all just accumulated. I couldn't begin to count the number of bags of trash and recyclables I've hauled away. My brothers and I have made quite a bit of progress in cleaning the place up, but even months later it's still far from finished. We'll continue working on that throughout the coming year.

While Margaret's sickness and death cast a somber note, it was far from the only event of the year. It's noteworthy that November marked the start of my thirty-fifty year at Bishop Garrigan High School. I've become one of the most senior members of the staff, and it's amazing just how many of today's students are children of people I taught back in the '80s or '90s. The school staff is a lot smaller than it used to be, and that means I'm busier than ever. When I started at Garrigan I had three preps and taught six periods a day. Now I teach eight periods a day and have to prepare for six different classes. Mostly I like my job, but it's certainly different than it used to be.

One change in my duties this year is that I'm no longer in charge of student council, which means I'm also not responsible for Homecoming or intramural basketball. While I definitely miss the money I earned for being student council moderator, the trade-off for a bit more free time was worth it. I continue to work with quiz bowl (where we made our 18th trip to nationals in May and have already qualified for another trip next summer), large group and individual speech (where we sent two more kids to all-state last spring), the "Bear Facts" radio show (which aired its 1000th episode in October), and the school math team. I also still serve as the P.A. announcer for our football games.

I continue to attend almost every school activity at Garrigan. That's partly because I'm always getting pictures for the school website, but I do genuinely enjoy watching the kids compete and perform.

I particularly liked following our baseball team this summer, and this fall I saw the school do an outstanding production of the musical *Little Shop of Horrors*.

Right after Easter I joined a number of other Garrigan staff members in heading to St. Louis for the National Catholic Education Association convention, where our school board was presented with a special award. It was a useful and informative conference and also a fun getaway.

I also continue to teach for Iowa Lakes Community College. I teach college courses at the high school, and I also work on and off as an adjunct instructor teaching night classes on campus. A major negative change there is the college's switch to the Accuplacer placement exam. Lots of students (both high school kids and traditional college students) have had trouble placing into the courses they want to take. The kids did fine on the placement test they used to use, but since the switch they're doing horrible. Back in the stone age when I went to college (the 1980s), people just signed up for the classes they wanted and flunked out of them if they were too hard. That's still pretty much how I think things should be. I don't think anything should depend on a single test score. I don't have a lot of time for these tests, particularly since the skills on them have almost nothing to do with what the kids need to know to be successful in the classes they'll be taking. I'm told they'll be adjusting the cut-off scores in the future. Unfortunately that doesn't help the kids who want to take courses now.

Outside of school I continue to serve on the board of the Iowa Council of Teachers of Mathematics. The organization honored me this fall with their Friend of Math Award, basically a lifetime achievement award for math teachers. It really is a nice honor, and I was both surprised and very pleased to receive it.

I'm also still on the board at First Congregational United Church of Christ, and most weeks I serve as the lector at our worship services. We've managed to attract a few new members this past year, and while we're still a very small church, things definitely look better than they did a few years back. Hopefully that will continue.

I didn't travel quite as much this year as I sometimes have. My main vacation was right before school started. I took the train out to New York City. I spent five days bumming around the area and also enjoyed a day each in Philadelphia and Chicago en route. As a little side trip from the city, I went up to Connecticut—which allows me to say that I've now set foot in all fifty U.S. states.

I spent part of that vacation tracking down monuments or homes of my ancestors. In her final years, Margaret did a lot of genealogy work. She showed that my father's side of the family was descended from Dutch and French immigrants who were among the earliest settlers of New Amsterdam and from a Welsh Quaker family that included William Penn's personal physician. It was really cool to see the Walloon Settlers Monument in New York's Battery Park (whose honorees include my Huguenot ancestors), as well as the Riker homestead in Queens and the Wynnestay house in Philadelphia where members of my own family lived back in the 17th and 18th Centuries.

Of my modern-day family I've seen the most of my brother Paul this year. Paul continues to be a Methodist minister, serving a bilingual charge with three churches near Perry. As an alumnus of Mt. Pleasant High School, he was selected to do the ecumenical service at Midwest Old Threshers Reunion over Labor Day weekend, and I went back to my hometown to hear him preach. I hadn't been to Old Threshers since graduating from college, and it was fun to experience the event as an adult and a tourist. Paul did a nice job with the service, and I was pleased to hear him preach again at the community Thanksgiving service in Perry. I've also been up to Minnesota a couple times to see my brother Steve, and I'm looking forward to seeing John at Christmas.

Unfortunately the main time I saw the more distant family this year was at Margaret's funeral. Hopefully the coming year will provide some more pleasant opportunities to meet up. While of course everyone is getting older, they seem to be doing pretty well.

Here's hoping things are also going okay for you. May the holidays be a beautiful time for everyone, and may the coming year bring peace and happiness for everyone.

MERRY CHRISTMAS & HAPPY NEW YEAR!

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