

Dear family, friends, and all the people we haven't seen in the past year or more,

To borrow the words of a popular tune, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." Well, the line does need a little political modernizing. "Have" is a bit authoritative; "Merry" is archaic; "Little" trivializes the deep meaning some folks attribute to the holiday; and "Christmas" is an unacceptable religious amalgam of "Christ" and "Mass", highly offensive to those of a secular persuasion. So, if I may re-phrase, "Should you prefer, please enjoy an acceptable, meaningfully adequate, x-gathering." There, that should please everyone except the seasonal zealots.

The children wrangled more than usual this year over the suitable color coordination for the family Christmas picture. Andrew suggested orange, as several of the kids do have orange jumpsuits. Lizzy (age 11) resisted, whining that she didn't have one yet. Pete (13) always sensitive, reassured her, "Lizzy, I didn't get mine until I was twelve. Use one of James' (15); he has extras." As I look back now, I realize my Italian mother would have made a great parole officer for the kids. She never let anyone finish a sentence.

Andrew (23) graduated college with a degree in engineering and is now fully integrated into the adult economy. He is gainfully unemployed, though he is immersed in job training courses. Late at night he practices in front of the mirror, "You want to super-size that? Second window, please." He can calculate the modal vector velocity of oncoming vehicles, along with the mean exponential equivalent of fries per hamburger.

Hannah (22) has become quite comfortable with military life. When I asked her, "Why do you carry a '45'?", she responded, "Because they don't make a '46'." Recently she returned from a tour in Iraq, where she grew so deaf to the relentless noise that she was eventually able to sleep right through incoming mortar fire. While home at Thanksgiving, she shared a bedroom with Liz, but complained that Liz's speaking decibel level woke her up several times a night. This was after Hannah moved her bunk into the shed.

Jon (20) is working full-time. For years as a homeschooler, when asked his favorite subject, Jon was consistent: "Lunch". The other day I asked him what he most liked about his new job. He answered "Lunch". It warms a parent's heart to see his child leaving behind the priorities of childhood.

Joanna (20) is now living on her own. It only took me \$500 up front, with a balloon payment of \$2000, to get her to move out. Randi's big fear is that she'll try to return to the free food and lodging of her childhood. I think I eliminated that possibility. We're getting an unlisted address.

Sarah (20) continues to pursue her nursing education. Recently I questioned her, "What kind of patients do you best relate to?" She replied, "Those who are sleeping, anesthetized, or passed out." She always was our most people-connected child.

Sam (18) is very immersed in the care and breeding of animals, though I'm not sure he has the natural aptitude for it. Nine of his ten last fish have drowned. To inspire himself, he keeps in his

room a poster of Ellie Mae Clampett surrounded by her critters. I asked him if I could have the poster for my room, but Randi vetoed that. I said, "Hey, I'm just trying to enter Sam's world." I don't know what Randi has against animals.

James is going through his contrary, argumentative, I-know-everything-and-you-know-nothing phase, which started at about age three. He's fifteen. Randi has tried everything to pull him out of it; nothing has worked. Finally she sent him next door to run an errand, and we all moved away while he was gone. The next day I told Randi that probably wasn't such a good idea. James will probably just find us again. Jon always did.

Some things you never learn about your spouse until well into married life. For example, I never realized that Randi grew up on a farm, as she is quite the expert on the housing of animals. Every morning she stomps into Peter's bedroom and declares, "This is the worst pig sty I have ever seen." Last year, we discovered a Japanese soldier who didn't know World War II was over living in there.

As a sensitive, highly trained emphatic psychotherapist, I sensed that Randi may have hurt Peter's delicately developing male adolescent self image, so I was quick to affirm him: "Pete, when you were born, we threw away the mold. But it kept growing back."

Mary is a fourteen year old adolescent girl—attitudinal, moody, "whatever." But I repeat myself. She talks 200 to 400 words a minute with gusts up to 800. Always trying to sneak around our rules, she forgets about our 24 hour, whole house, eye-in-the-sky: Liz. "Father, I have some information that might interest you. It concerns a certain girl whose name begins with `M`... Aren't you glad I live here?"

Speaking of Liz, age 11-- the youngest, the cutest, the epilogue of our parenting book-- Randi and I have realized our need to crack down even further than we have already. Last week, we made her wash and wax the Corvette. She was quite resistant, but, hey, she needs to learn to take care of her things. Peter carped something about favoritism, but I informed him in no uncertain terms, "It's only a 2008, and she won't be driving it until next year." Sam was upset, too, because he and Andrew have to share the monthly payments. I soothed him, "Don't worry. She'll probably let you guys ride in it every so often." Sometimes it gets frustrating listening to kids so caught up in everything having to be "fair."

And speaking of fair, my analyst and life coach both agree: I need to step back and let Randi shoulder a little more of the domestic burden. So, I cut my three-day-a-week radio show from two hours down to one, allowing me to sleep until Noon, for all the good it has done me. Randi starts banging around downstairs at around 5 AM or so. I can't prove it, but I believe that she deliberately slams the dryer door, runs the floor scrubber at full volume, and starts the mower right under my window.

My fitness trainer and Pilates instructor strongly advise that several night a week I stay in a hotel. Not just for the much needed rest, but to allow me to catch up on my reading. Last week I finished two of my two favorite books, "The Sacrificial Husband" and "Giving Your Marriage Your All." In addition, I've been asked to be the cover story for "Modern Saint Today." I told

them I would like them to mention Randi's name somewhere in the article, even it's toward the end. And I reminded them, "It's Randi with an 'i'". Call me an emotional schlep, but I just can't stop looking out for her.

I do wish, though, that Randi would have a little more sensitivity to my own personal struggles with aging. Last night she walked in on me admiring myself in the mirror, so I quickly informed her, "The Doctor says I have the body of a 28 year old." To which she replied, "Well, you'd better give it back because you're getting it all wrinkled."

Finally, in the spirit of Christmas giving, Wives, I am available to talk to any of your husbands needing instructions in attaining my level of marital self-giving. Just contact Randi, and she'll set it all up.

Well, a blessed Christmas to all.

Ray, Randy and the family