

Christmas 2011

Dear family, friends, and folks we haven't seen since 2002,

(Merry, Blessed, Joyous, Happy, Nice, Okay, Bah) – (Christmas, Noel, Holidays, Kwanza, Winter Solstice, Earth Day, Save The Polar Bear Year) – ( day, season, vacation, snow day, retirement, nap time).

Please select one from each category to construct your very own acceptable time of year greeting. My aim is to avoid giving the slightest offense to the broadest range of Christian, religious, quasi-religious, secular progressive, and Grinchy persons. As I've gotten older, I'm realizing my need to be more tolerant and open-minded toward (intolerant, close-minded, hyper-vigilant, prickly) – please choose one – language police persons.

Speaking of older, it seems like just about every Christmas, Randi's gotten a year older. And this Christmas is as old as she's ever been. Not that I'm that far behind. That revelation hit me last time I renewed my drivers license and commented to the BMV lady, "You know, that's not a bad picture. Can I have some 8x10 glossies?"

Reflecting on nearly six years of successful parenthood (We've been at it for 25), I believe I'm on my way to becoming a Hall of Fame parent. To enter the baseball HOF, a .300 average pretty much opens the door. I only need three kids out of ten to grow up well, and I'm in. Now I just need two more.

In guy talk-- short on detail, lacking verbs, need to know basis-- here is the run-down on the older kids. Andrew(24) – college; Hannah(23) – army; Jon(21) – employed; Joanna(21) – employed; Sarah(21) – college; Samuel(19) – college; Ray(age unknown) – selling the house to make tuition. Just joking, we sold the house last year.

I'm thinking of writing a book about moving adult children toward independence. I'm going to title it, " Raise The Rent." Randi, too, is getting a little upset with the number of kids still living in the basement-- it only sleeps five. A few weeks ago she sent two of the older kids to get cigarettes for Liz (age 12), and we moved away while they were gone. Our current address is unlisted, so please don't try to send us Christmas cards this year.

The four younger children – James (16), Mary (15), Peter, and Elizabrat..., uh, Elizabeth provide the main action in our home these days. James can't understand why he's not allowed to drive yet. So as a sensitive father, I recognize the need to give him hope. "James, when you can pay your own insurance with your first social security check, then we'll talk."

Mary is going through all manner of adolescent female angst. I try to affirm her self image daily. “Mary, when you were born, they threw away the mold, but it kept growing back.”

Peter lives to play basketball while his schoolwork dies. All is not loss, though. He is finally learning to count by twos.

Lizzy is our most sensitive child. When she heard we needed to put our old dog, Max, to sleep, she was emotionally devastated – for about twelve minutes, until we told her she could get a hamster. Sometimes I wonder what it would take to replace me. I hope at least a gerbil – a large one.

The years have seen Randi's and my parenting getting sloppier. Just the other night, she startled me awake from the recliner, screaming at the kids, “This is the last time I'm going to tell you. Quit shooting your paint ball guns in the living room!” I was aghast. Randi never used to get that upset over little stuff.

With the kids moving out – well, with a couple of them ready to consider that option in the next five to ten years – Randi and I are realizing the need to work harder on our marriage. So I looked into one of those marriage encounter week-ends. I was skeptical at first, but I think it did some good. In fact, I was excited to learn all about it when Randi came home on Sunday night. Because she was a bit cool toward me, I shared my feelings, like those groups tell you, “It doesn't seem like you learned much this past couple of days.” She mumbled something about communication and about being the only wife there without her husband, prompting me to gently point out that I did make Andrew accompany her to help take notes for me to read later. She may not have been totally honest with me about the real reason for her distress: Andrew's handwriting is hard to read.

I'm also recognizing my need to be more patient with Randi. She may simply need more than one encounter week-end. As I routinely remind her, “I didn't become the spouse I am overnight.”

Taking no chances with our marriage, I purchased some self help books: “The Sacrificing Woman”; “Wives Without Whining” ; and “365 Days and Ways To Serve Your Husband.” Randi asked me, a little sarcastically I might add, if I planned to read any of them. I calmly reminded her, “I write books; I don't need to read them.” Honestly, sometimes I get exhausted repeatedly pointing out reality to people.

Every Tuesday we attend marriage counseling. Because that's my softball and weight lifting night, I do try to make the last ten minutes of some of the sessions. And I feel it's helped me gain some valuable insights into Randi and her mode of communicating.

For example, last summer Randi kept yammering something about my either mowing the lawn or taking down the Christmas tree. One August afternoon she started clipping the grass with a pair of scissors. Even though my hammock was facing in the other direction, I sensed her meaning. So, after I woke up several hours later, I went into the house, got a toothbrush, returned and handed it to her, quietly suggesting, "When you're done with the lawn, you can sweep the driveway."

The doctor says I will walk upright again, but it could be some months.

Blessed Christmas to all – these are the words we selected for our greeting.

The Guarendis