

Dear Family and Friends,

Merry Christmas (oops, blatant religious reference). I mean, Happy Holidays (sorry, variant of "holy day"). I'll try again: Season's Greetings (can't say that, Season has "son," clearly a subtle reference to a male dominated, patriarchal, gender exclusive triumphalistic culture). Once more: Good...(nope, the word connotes a value judgment). My last effort: An appropriate mid-winter day to all.

Randi strongly advised: No more Christmas letters. She says by now people are sick of our uppity bragging, and besides that, nothing much has happened to crow about this past year. Not true, in my opinion. The family continues to blossom, both psychologically and calorically.

Andrew looks to be closing in on graduation, after cramming four years of college into six. For his senior project in biomedical engineering, he is designing a walker that won't bang Randi's shins like the one she has now. He and I are having more heart-to-heart talks, too. Last night, totally unexpected, he shared with me, "Dad, can you take the inverse hyperbolic cotangent of Z, and get the Maclaurin series Σz^{2^n} ?" It warms my heart that at age 22, he still seeks my guidance on the deeper questions of life. Our souls touched.

Hannah is officially in the Army. Her first tank driving class went well. Next month she is scheduled to have the training wheels removed. She is in Signal Corp, which is the communications branch. I asked her, "So how did the Army decide that's what you were suited for?" She said, "Well, duh! I mean, you know, because I was, like, really articulate and stuff." She always knew what to say and how to say it.

As noted in a previous letter, we thought naming our son, Jon, would help in his toilet training. It didn't, and it never has. He still misses. Randi put a sign on the bathroom mirror for all five boys: "Our aim is to keep the bathroom clean and dry. Your aim will help." To which, James, age 14, responded, "Mom, we're guys. The world is our bathroom."

Joanna, age 19, has been going through puberty for the last 10 years or so. Lately, she has been reading all kinds of self-help books to better understand her repressed preschool inner child, and has concluded that she is not yet over her birth trauma. When I told her the "birth trauma" stuff was a bunch of psycho-bunk, she fired back, "Oh yeah. Well, if it wasn't a trauma, how come I couldn't speak for a year and half after it?" Whereupon, I replied, "Well, you've certainly made up for the lost talk time." My guess is that in accumulating word totals, she's nearing 73 years old.

Sarah (age 19) is struggling in her Nursing program. She flunked her phlebotomy class. (That's blood drawing, for you medical illiterates). It seems during her clinical training, she punched her instructor in the nose, and blood gushed out. Sarah explained, "Dad, that's how I always drew the most blood from my brothers." During her nursing practical, she fainted four times in the first two days. I reassured her, "Sarah, a lot of people have to get used to the sight of blood and 6-inch needles." Sarah replied, "Dad, it happened when I saw a band-aid." Maybe she should consider Sociology.

Sammy, age 17, is thinking more about girls, and of course, has sought my expert guidance. "Take her horseback riding. That's always fun." After his first date, he came home all excited, "Dad, you were right. We had a great time, until I ran out of quarters." "Sammy," I gently chided, "if you're going to impress a girl, you need a whole pocketful of change. That's how I got your mom's attention."

Peter (12) still can't grasp why it's important to be able to read and write above a first grade level, though he is getting better at putting his academics into a broader context. Just the other day, he showed me one of his report cards, along with an impressive list of successful entrepreneurs who never finished high school.

Because Mary (age 13) is smack in the middle of adolescence, I realize I need to be more gentle with her psyche. I affirm her often, "Honey, when you were born, we threw away the mold. But it kept growing back."

This past summer, we cancelled our home security system. It was unnecessary duplication. We realized that, for several years now, we've had a whole house, 24-7, state of the art, fully monitoring eye in the sky: Liz, the ten year old. She is acutely aware of what anyone anywhere any time is doing remotely inappropriate. Her conscience is completely and solidly formed, for the conduct of all other human beings.

Not everyone in our family is doing as well as the kids, though. Our dog, Max, seems a little more unsettled these days. Financial hard times are hitting him, too. Last month alone, Alpo went up a dollar a can. That may not seem like much, but that's almost seven dollars in doggie money.

Randi is mellowing with age. I think it has a lot to do with our marital counseling. I upped her schedule to twice a week, and ever so often I'll drop in toward the end of the month for a few minutes. I'm well aware that I have a little room to grow as a person, too.

For instance, Randi told the therapist that I give too much advice, always trying to solve all her troubles. Sometimes I just need to just listen, give her a hug and tell her "It'll all be Ok." So, the other morning, she called me outside, sobbing because the van had two flat tires. Acting upon my therapeutic lesson about a woman's love language, I quietly listened, hugged her, and told her "It'll all be Ok." Then I got into my car and headed for work. The therapist was right. I felt good about myself, and I think Randi felt much more connected to me.

Sometimes she still gets upset because, as she told the counselor, "Roy always corrects me." I said, "It's Ray." She said, "See what I mean."

But overall, we are ironing out the wrinkles. As Randi told the kids recently, "Between your father and me, we know everything. He knows everything except that he's an arrogant know it all. And I know he's an arrogant know it all." We're becoming quite a team.

As a sensitive post 90's guy, I offer this final lesson to all the husbands. Let your wife know how much you care for her. When Randi was upset on her birthday, whining that I didn't give her enough affection, I tenderly held her hand and reminded her, "Didn't my people call you and tell you how much I love you?" Sometimes it's really hard to keep her happy, no matter how much I give of myself.

Well, God's blessings to you all. You are special in our lives. Our people will be contacting you with more details.

Ray, Randi, and the kids