

Seasons' Greetings 2005



It was the best of years, it was the worst of years; it was a year for jealousy, it was a year for generosity; it was a year for suits. Let's begin with hair. Brennan had been growing out his locks of love for a year and a half, and couldn't wait to donate his mop to a worthy cause. We've since been saving handsomely on shampoo, but it did used to serve so admirably to pick him out of crowds. Accompanied by paparazzi and enthusiastic onlookers, Brennan's surgery



yielded a slightly lopsided noggin that was nonetheless admired by a friend who had badgered him for over a year to lop it off.

Despite his shearing, this Samson lost none of his powers, pursuing a course of policy debate and middle-distance running in track. For those unfamiliar, policy debaters love to "spread," which is short for *speed read*, a phrase that is evidently too languorous for such busy obfuscators. Policy debaters practice spreading "cards" of evidence into the oral record approximately 37.62% faster than

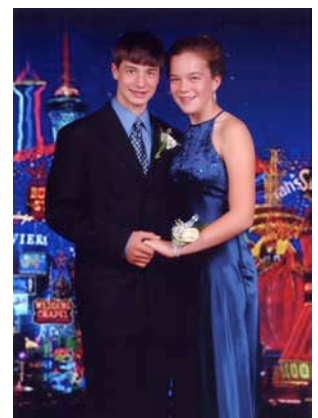
their tongues and lips can manage, since the purpose of debate is to out-snow your opponents, rather than to shed light on admittedly interesting issues of social policy. Unfort 4 the 'baters, they get stuck with mommy judges who have no clue 'bout spreading or e'en 'bout rules 4 the jousting tourn 'n' just end up voting 4 friends or the best suit, which is like totally unfair. Whatever.

As decrepit parents of a vigorous policy debater, we are obliged to judge at some of these tournaments, where we do our best to avoid judging policy rounds, and hence, the scourge of being mommy judges. The whole family took a road trip to Stanford for one tournament, which included an interesting adventure in engine overheating. As it turns out, you really can air-cool a Windstar's engine at highway speeds. Linda had a most excellent hot-tub adventure protecting some of Claremont's finest from a beached whale, and I made great friends at a Pep Boys trying to make sure we could drive home.



Brennan shipped off to France on the High School French Exchange and reacquainted himself with the glorious Parisian Métro system. Highlight? Despite evident genetic handicaps, he managed to earn varsity letters in both cross country and track his freshman year. His letterman's jacket is a prized possession—sometimes a little too prized. At the end-of-year awards assembly, he insisted on wearing it every time he was hauled up on stage. However, as it was quite warm in the auditorium, the jacket came off promptly after each trip, so the donning and doffing of his peacock feathers became quite the ordeal for his mother and the rest of the audience. No sacrifice, however, was too great to show the world that he is neither a dumb jock nor a smart wimp.

Truth be told, his mother was responsible for announcing one of the awards. It has been a source of family mirth that when he was in middle school, his name was universally mangled at these affairs. When Linda came to read the name of





one of the geometry award winners, it came out “Branden Satay”—just the way it had once before. This inspired a wave of chuckles starting at the front of the auditorium and gradually working its way back as people learned that is own mother can’t even pronounce his name!

Ethan hit the saddle hard in the El Roble bike marathon, outdistancing by plenty all but one of his peers in a grueling yet fun-filled 24-hour ride around the track at the middle school to raise money for the Red Cross and Preparation-H.

Mr. Yoshida’s approach to spinning U.S. history was a real highlight of Ethan’s middle-school career. Evidently, the dose of irony and sarcasm he gets from his father goes well with U.S. history at school. He also enjoyed science and shop, not to mention dance lessons.

The real highlight of his year, though, was an exchange with his best friend from the year in Strasbourg. In view of continuing issues with the cooling system of dear Willy the Whale (our blue ’95 Windstar), we invested in a 2005 Honda Odyssey just a day or two before Arthur arrived at LAX. Unfortunately, Ethan developed a migraine headache at the airport while we waited, and suffered cruelly in the car on the way home from the airport as we fought rush-hour traffic to get out to Claremont. Natu-



rally when I had managed to get into the carpool lane, he announced he was going to be sick. I somehow made it across five lanes of traffic and onto the off-ramp; close, but no cigar. Sigh. Much washing and spraying later, the car was once again habitable.

Arthur is a champion climber, and so his destination of choice was Yosemite. After a trip to Disneyland, the beach, Universal Studios, and few other essential Los Angeles-area sites, we headed north to Sequoia, where we enjoyed a couple of nights near the General Grant

grove. These trees are truly extraordinary, and the bear and her cub we nearly ran into in Zumwalt Meadow made for a bit more excitement than we bargained for.

Local climbing experts told us where to take Arthur in Yosemite valley so he could practice bouldering,

and we found a group of twenty-somethings with a crash pad working on their moves at Camp IV on the valley floor. Arthur watched a pair trying to ascend from a reclining position on the pad to the top of the boulder.

After they failed a couple of times each, Arthur asked if he might have a try. He made it up the first time, and rather quickly, too. These guys were impressed. After they translated his climbing grade from French to American, they were *really* impressed! We were happy that he could get some climbing in without having to track down all the gear and an insurance policy.

I can’t resist pointing out my latest and greatest triumph of athleticism.

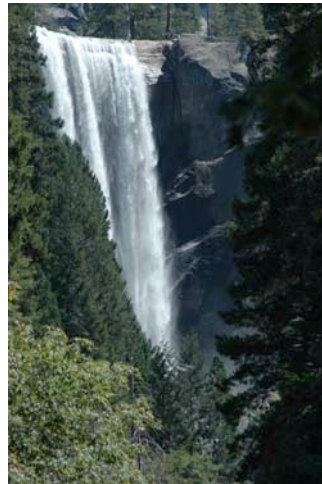
The boys wanted to get a run in—up to the top of Nevada Fall from the valley floor. Brennan set off running while I hiked at a “brisk” pace.



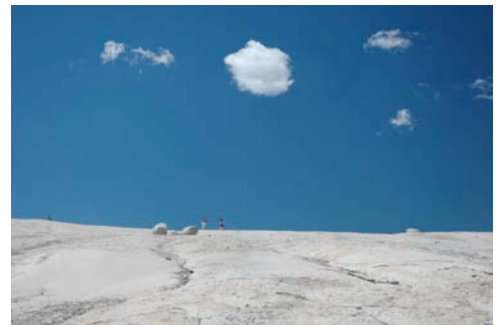
Ethan ended up taking an alternate route up the John Muir trail. This turned out to be longer, but not nearly as steep and Ethan arrived first, then Brennan 7 minutes after. Dear old dumb dad joined the running duo a

scant 3 minutes after Brennan. (In his defense, Brennan *claims* that he had to rest at the top of Vernal Fall due to asthma. Jeez, some guys will go to any length for an excuse!) I suppose it was only fair that I get a nasty blister on the way down.

Arthur was impressed (positively) with Yosemite, as well as with the enormous size of American automobiles (negatively). While there was a touch of the *cocorico* in our French guest, as Americans we have *much* to be humble about, not all of it concentrated in Washington DC. All in all we had a great time with him and another great visit to perhaps our favorite place.



Mid-August we packed Ethan and Arthur onto a plane for Ethan’s turn at the exchange business. And speaking of business, the lucky



dogs were upgraded to business class, where Ethan learned that one is graciously provided a razor blade, amongst other goodies. Terrorists, make a note. Arthur’s mother, Laurence, had asked whether Ethan enjoyed « du bon poisson, » a question that inspired considerable mirth in his parents. We wondered how Laurence would make out with a full-fledged

teenaged appetite to worry about, but Ethan seemed none the worse for wear at the end of the fortnight. In fact, we were all quite jealous of his adventures in Brittany and the Loire.

Meanwhile, the rest of us headed down to cross country camp north of San Diego, where we served as kitchen hands, photographers, nuisances, and general busybodies. Brennan and pals got in a lot of running, socializing, and of course, a whole pile of eating.

Ryan is the only kid who remains at least remotely attached to a musical instrument, at least when under duress. Despite a lovely bicycle, concern for the traffic and quality of drivers around the elementary school has discouraged us from having him locomote himself to school.

He has read many of the *Unfortunate Events* books, savored *Harry Potter VI* when it came out, enjoyed both the Christopher Paolini books, and is now busy playing in *Narnia*. It brings his father a smile to see him curled up in his comforter with a book and Bixie, instead of glued to infernal video games, despite the obvious strong tug to videoblivion.

Ryan had a fun fall soccer season on the Grass stains with his buddy, Adam Cave. He has a nice sense of the field and is always looking for the open teammate to pass to. The 'Stains had a slow start to the season, but gelled midway and were a serious contender down the homestretch. Although AYSO still unofficially stands for **All Your Saturdays Occupied**, thanks to double headers and reffing duties, with only one kid in the game it seems more manageable.

I am now married to Madam Chair, as Linda has traded a one-year stint in the union executive for chair of the math department, chair of the DAC¹, chair of the professional development subcommittee of the high school planning committee, as well as continuing BTSA² duties, team motherhood for Ryan's fall soccer team, and god knows what else. She has also been able to don her legal eagle hat in a fight to have a mismanaged union election redone, an experience which



may have rekindled a certain fondness for the law.

By the way, she's still teaching math to packed houses—most classes have near the 37-head enrollment cap that trumpets the sad reality of long post-Proposition 13 education funding in the golden state. This fall, two of those heads are providing especial feedback on her teaching: Ethan's and Brennan's! Although there is an alternative teacher for Ethan's honor's geometry course, he's a happy camper in Linda's class and she's thrilled to



have him. Sometimes at home he comes to me when he's stuck, but Linda's a much safer bet (if she's not at an afternoon or evening meeting, or stuck on the phone arranging the next meeting). You see, dad is not quite so persuaded that life without geometry (and our getting all those theorems introduced in some order or other) would be pointless, but I digress. Brennan hardly worked in summer school to take two P.E. courses to free up time for an extra solid during the school year, since he wanted to take Linda's A.P. Stats class.³ As a

sophomore, he's darn low on the totem pole and it looked for a few days like he wouldn't make it into the class, but he was persistent and others decided the course looked too hard.

He is rather low-key in class, and to my astonishment, Linda hooted and hollered at dinner at some point in November that it had taken Brennan and her ten weeks to blow their cover. Evidently, she could sense that Brennan's raised hand and facial gesture meant he was going to nitpick some point of a presentation she was making, and she told him to put his hand down, explaining to the class that after all, he was her son and she could tell what he was up to. "*What?!*" exclaimed several kids in the class. "He's your son? You have been so professional! We had no idea he was your son." Perhaps the highlight of her fall was when Brennan shared that her class was his most interesting and challenging.

I had a challenging spring semester, teaching the Quantum Mechanics course once again after an eight-year hiatus, a course on Energy and the Environment for the first time solo, the Computational Physics course, and advising an interesting Clinic project on the optical properties of coated carbonaceous soot particles. Although not as "chairful" as my wife, I'm also chairing the curriculum committee, I suppose to keep me off the streets.

At issue these days is the shape of the Harvey Mudd curriculum, which insists on greater breadth in both technical subjects

¹ The District Advisory Committee, which seems to be concerned with standards, district-wide consistency, and the "dread" benchmark testing felt by some in the community as equally potent as fluoride in sapping vital bodily fluids.

² Beginning Teacher Something Arother.

³ Quite evidently, running cross country and track provide insufficient foundation in conditioning, athletics, and physical awareness for a person of his tender years and general ignorance.

and the humanities and social sciences than any other institution, so far as we can tell. Mae West famously claimed that “Too much of a good thing is wonderful!” We ran a series of conversations in the fall trying to determine whether the faculty believes that the West doctrine also pertains to academic requirements. Tune in next year for the answer... maybe.

Should you be having trouble sleeping at night, I encourage you to check out an article by Kolthammer *et al.*, *Phys. Rev. B* **72** (2005) 045446—should help a lot. Much of my summer was spent revamping a core laboratory course, with reasonable success. Eventually, I’ll get back to working on that book...

With sadness I report the demise of the Kolka Trio. We turned in a handsome performance of Haydn’s *Gypsy Rondo* and a movement from a Mozart trio on the occasion of Aunt Sonia’s 77th birthday celebration in February (and in anticipation of her emigration to Israel in September). Cross country practices and meets, speech and debate practices and meets for both Brennan and Ethan have sent their violin and cello into cases and closets, unfortunately. Maybe over the summer I can tease out another trio or two from them.

It seems inconceivable that two of my children have feet appreciably larger than mine, and one has overtaken me in height. Before we know it Brennan will be heading off to college, and if he remains true to cur-



rent philosophical and moral principles, it will be at a fine institution of higher learning satisfying the primary criteria of featuring four seasons and being more than 3000 km from home. In yet another reminder of my advancing age, I have attained to the wisdom of bifocals—my neck muscles are getting ever-so-much stronger as I bob and weave trying to figure out where I’m supposed to look. All semester long I had done my best to align the student spectrometers (about a 1-minute job for me, but up to an hour or more for them). “You are allowed to adjust the eyepiece *only* to account for the difference between my eyeball and yours.” By the end of

the term I had ascertained that my eyes agreed with precisely none of the sophomores, and so I paid a little visit to the optometrist at Costco. In my defense, I had always been farsighted and have now somehow become nearsighted. Sigh.

I have been counseled to avoid the political drivel that often accompanies the brag and gag, and you must admit that I have managed up to now. I offer but one or two chunks of red meat. I foolishly answered the plea of a Pitzer student seeking to organize a 5-college debate on the Iraq war and wishing the participation of a cross section of professors. I spent some time preparing, but it appeared that the event would be canceled because they were having a terrible time finding anybody willing to defend the Bush administration. Fortunately, a pair of brave souls did their best, and I was released from active duty from the anti-war camp. Finally, when news came that we had found chemical weapons in Iraq—because we used white phosphorus on civilians in Falluja—amidst Dick Cheney’s continuing efforts to support U.S. freedom to torture, I wrote a mash note to Congressman David Dreier, asking “*Are you now, or have you ever been, an advocate of torture?*” Somehow, his form-letter reply didn’t quite address the issue. There are signs, finally, that better days may lie ahead, and we all wish you the best in the new year.

