

Dear Friends and family,

December 7, 2002

Only a few weeks ago it was Christmas and now it is Christmas again somehow. I suppose it was actually a year ago, but I do not know how. Wife for some reason suggested that I do the letter this year. I am sorry to have to let you know I accepted the challenge. Given that my quick description of the past year is “same old thing”, I have to admit to some doubts as to what to write that you might have the slightest interest in. Well, I cannot guarantee the “interest” part, but let’s see what happens as I contemplate the year gone by.

My attention is drawn immediately to Igor, our 18-year-old nephew. He just arrived from Brazil to spend 6 weeks or so with us... his first trip out of Brazil. You would be proud of the efforts that the US consulate made to protect our country from invasion by dangerous foreign job-stealing riff-raff. But, after a few tense emails flew back and forth, they decided that maybe he was, instead, just a normal tourist, excited about getting to know his American relatives better and seeing something completely new. I hope the visit goes well; we are off to a good start.

Tonight was the last performance of a musical at Bellaire High School and Claire is at the cast party. This year she said **NO WAY, NO HOW!!** to orchestra and went for drama instead. I guess that the contest/honor-orchestra pressure at Lanier burned her out. But she is happy as a clam doing the drama, and she decided to continue with private violin lessons. From here on out, it is her choice. I am happy to see that she is taking classes seriously and doing well. She has a tough schedule in general and the biology makes my mouth drop open. She is doing good work and has reason to be proud.

We have a dog (technically it is Claire’s). “Big deal, who doesn’t have a dog?” you may ask. Well, I considered myself a cat person and Maria tends to melt down at things that cause messes, give off smells and make trouble. But Claire did her research well. Honey is a delightful little creature, doesn’t yap, doesn’t smell, doesn’t shed, and (now that she is past puppyhood) doesn’t make messes... usually. Well, the garbage is occasionally too much to resist, and she does still display some disagreeable culinary habits that are best left unmentioned. But she and Maria have lasted together a year and a half now and so I think she is a permanent member of the family. At the risk of offending the sole of my dear departed kitty Felicia, Honey is better than a cat... Oh! I cannot believe I said that!

My “2 ½ to 3 week” consulting job that I started in August of ’97 is still going strong. I am now in research and development and have now outlived 5 company presidents, 5 engineering managers and several layoffs. There is now only one person that has been there longer than I have, and I am not even an employee! Thank goodness I did not accept the job offer to be software manager! If I get tossed out tomorrow, I would still have to rate it as an amazing run of good fortune.

Today I performed with the band (www.houstonbrassband.org) at the Pearl Harbor Memorial ceremony at the Battleship Texas. The band is slowly getting better and I am really enjoying playing the tenor horn. It is an opportunity to boost my ego by being top dog in the section... something that never could have happened on trumpet.

I am also still involved with the Lanier Middle School auditorium. After engineering the sound system and then riding herd on its installation and the lighting renovations for almost 2 years, I have had all of HISD than I can take. I am really close to finishing a user's manual and handing the systems off to the teachers. I also modified and rebuilt the sound and lights that I had put in some years ago at Mark Twain Elementary. But I have not dived into the fray at Bellaire High School yet. After 9 years of pulling wires, setting up computers, and playing tug-of-war with HISD, I need a rest. The teachers and principals are great, but the system is a mess.

Maria has been after me for years to tear the garage down and build another one with an apartment. Well, we did it. Go to www.mcadams.info and click on Maria's Labyrinth. The "house" on the left is the garage. The shack on the right is the house. And all that bad stuff you have ever heard about contractors... well, most of it is true. Trust me.

After only 15 years, I was forced to replace the Toyota Van. It was practically new! Between the "garage" and the new Honda van, I expect to be applying for food stamps any day now. (Do they still give food stamps?)

About a year ago, when you should have been getting a letter from us but did not, Maria went to Brazil and had surgery done on her face. I dragged my feet and opposed it from the start, while she said "tough rocks, it's my face". It did not go smoothly and recovery was longer and more difficult than either of us wanted. But she is happy and I have adjusted ok. It has been the topic of conversation more than once in my weekly "wife coping classes"¹.

The "classes" are working pretty well, by the way. Maria and I just had our 24th wedding anniversary a few weeks back, a mark I was afraid we would not reach. You'd think that over all these years I would have learned earlier how to deal with an explosive Latin temperament, but the classes help. I recently realized that if I did not have Maria, I would be drawn right back to another passionate Latin brunette with a cute accent. So I am counting my blessings, giving thanks for my family, and moving forward.

Mom had a brush with cancer. It was a strange one, very rare. But it was all contained in one place, readily operable, and is now moldering in some biohazard dumpster. She has recovered remarkably fast given that they had to almost cut her in half to get at it. We have every reason to believe that episode is over, but it gave us all a heck of a scare. To quote a song I heard recently, "So tell all the people you love that you love them. There's no time to waste...".

In spite of the trials and irritations, I am blessed with a loving family, an awe-inspiring child, a comfortable income, and the opportunity and ability to give some things back to others. I am not sure how it could be fundamentally much better than this and I give thanks for my good fortune virtually every day.

I wish you a Merry Christmas...
James McAdams

¹ Mixed (men/women) group therapy sessions... I never cease to be amazed at how many different ways the same struggles can be played out and at how blind we all can be.

