



**Y**ou need three adults to pluck a raisin from a kid's nostril. That's likely not the biggest take-away from my year, but bits of wisdom and perspective can get buried in the oddest places.

I turned 45 today, so this is my annual birthday letter, delivered to your doorstep a month or so after Christmas, when you may actually have time to read it. In the past year I've moved from an existence best described as pleasant, to something a bit less predictable. It speaks to my grass is grassier mentality that, having captured exciting work in my field of choice, I now look back at the idyllic time of last spring with a certain nostalgia. But I get ahead of myself...

Our friends Jack and Sondra hosted New Years 2008 at their family place at Deep Bay. For a few days we ate, played games and walked the frozen beach of the little isthmus between Denman Island and the Beaufort Range, which crowds that part of Vancouver Island into the strait of Georgia. I even partook of a blissful day or two snowboarding with the Showers family at Mt. Washington.

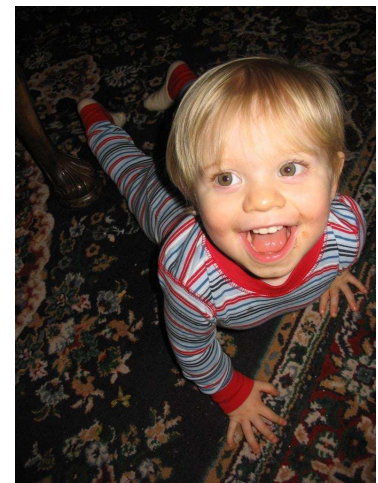


Back in Victoria, school restarted for Emma and Lucy, and with it my daily passage through Beacon Hill Park with the kids to Lucy's Montessori preschool. Those walks and bike rides along the beach or the manicured and wild paths, as our dress and surroundings altered with the seasons, will probably be some of the happiest times of my life. Sometimes the trek home with Jonathan would take over an hour, as we stopped to listen to birds in the treetops, or breathe in the earth's rich scent after a rain shower. When you are 1½ so many magical things are waiting to be discovered.

Just before Easter, Julie and I spent our first days on our own since Jonathan's birth. If retreating to a woodland shore void of any technology more advanced than the electric light, to sit and read books and walk forest paths between feasting on prepared meals, sounds like your cup of tea (which you also get twice a day), you should visit Yellow Point Lodge. My parents have given us two blissful nights here as a birthday present for several years now.

One of my favourite experiences this trip was an impromptu hootenanny that struck up around the piano. I sang my way into a group that bellowed out the music of Stompin' Tom, Woody Guthrie and all those songs from the campfire. I also found a bit of quiet to write about the kids, my daily concern:

*At 4½ Lucy directs the world around her. She creates her own homework, her own rules and solutions. I find myself*





*little more immune to her imperatives than her willing brother. He watches her, chases her, climbs upon her, squeals with delight at her newest game. She is teaching him the language of their days. “Jonny, can you say ‘backpack’? Dad, Mr. Fatty said backpack!”*

*Jonathan augments his few words with the tug of his hand. With my index finger gripped, he can lead me to the kitchen where he gestures for raisins. He steers us to the living room for a book. His is an economy of gesture and language. “Up” if he wishes down from the bed, or out of his stroller, or into my arms.*



Music was also breaking out back at home. I finally acquired a banjo, so most nights I’d play the kids to sleep with Pete Seeger songs. Emma was using the pangs of adolescent love to compose some good confessional songs on her guitar – and then took up the ukulele and accordion, instruments it is almost impossible to play without feeling better about life in general.

I set up shelves for all my records in the basement and began inventorying them (which continued until the end of the year; you can see the results at [music.wafflerama.com](http://music.wafflerama.com)). I’ve somehow infected Emma with this disease. She’s buying reissues of old Skip James anthologies – or bizarrely (from my perspective) lo-fi Daniel Johnson recordings.

The usual five months of spring was burgeoning nicely just before Emma’s 17<sup>th</sup> birthday when a freak snowfall trapped me on the runway en route to Toronto. I’ve never heard of de-icing in Victoria, and apparently the crew at the airport hadn’t experienced it much either. I arrived hours behind time at Pearson, but in a nice reversal of Canada’s weather stereotypes, the late afternoon was still a balmy 30° C.



It stayed beautiful for my four-day visit, although I barely made it outside. A technical disaster back at my client kept me working all night until 5pm on the Sunday, my alleged day for socializing. I managed a quick drink with my nephew Tristan and his girlfriend Alice (now engaged) and a nice walk through the charm of Little Italy with my hosts Elspeth and Brian (now parents of a beautiful daughter, Nico). I did make some great contacts in accessibility (my area of expertise), took in some good late night jazz, and ditched a boring seminar to sunbathe by the hotel’s outdoor pool, so the trip had its business and pleasure moments.

For the first time in years Victoria’s corporate rowing regatta fell on a different weekend than Wafflerama. Usually I am just a spare for folks who can’t make practice, so it was fun to anticipate actually racing.





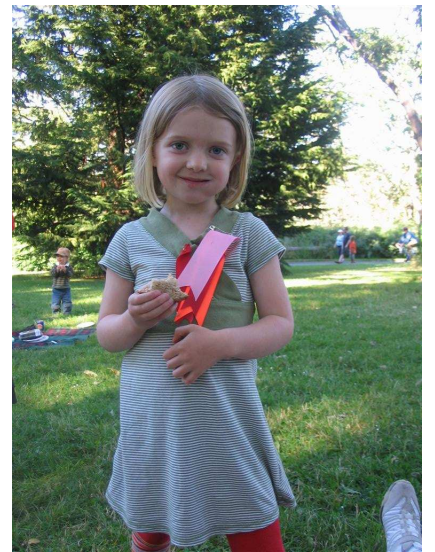
The IBM 8's team was the greenest I've ever crewed with, so I had no illusions about victory. It came as a complete surprise when we battled our way to the finals and came home with a medal. Later that year I also snagged hardware winning the Survival of the Fittest Father's Day invitational, as well as capturing my third first-place in the Cactus Jack Minigolf Extravaganza. My best haul since grade 4.

Another nice outcome of the regatta was my discovery that a friend had a singles scull she was interested in selling. I negotiated the purchase during the chaos at Wafflerama, and ended up dragging my friend Tim along to load it up, when he came over for a visit later that month.

In the last week before summer vacation, we found out Lucy's teacher, Mrs. Lange, was being forced to close the school due to regulatory changes. That news affected Julie and I more than I would have thought possible. For me, the loss of those wondrous walks, the knowledge Jonathan would never enjoy the pleasure of that perfect little classroom, and the sorrow for Mrs. Lange's situation all blended into something very much like grief. In my mind, the next few years had centered on the school; it was tough, especially as Jonathan also was looking forward to it. In Mrs. Lange's words, "I will remember June 26th 2008 when Johnny shook my hand and entered the classroom to sit around the rug and enjoy the moment before school started, thinking he was 'in' the class finally. I smile at that image and will cherish the days of Lucy being here too."

If the school closure made summer more reflective than normal, it was still a happy blur for me. Some high-points? Dancing with my extended family in the car park of the Coast Hotel in Nanaimo after my niece Kristel's wedding reception got shut down; water fights with the kids in the Tsolum River between sets at the Island Music Festival; the feel of the still ocean sliding under me during an end-of-day row across the Saanich Inlet; the smell of creosote and sawdust while helping rebuild the sea wall at Deep Cove so it can stand the winter storms for another 60 years; pulling Lucy's birthday guests along the water's edge on skim boards at low tide, feeling each of them in turn become braver and shout at me to go *faster* until water and kids were flying everywhere.

In late summer, our neighbourhood achieved a critical mass of kids with the arrival of David and Rebecca's family across the street. They join Sam and Krista as good neighbours on the way to becoming good friends. Lucy now has several houses of kids she can visit on her own when she's big enough to cross our busy road.







Come September, Lucy started kindergarten, Emma began her final year of high school, Julie was seconded to a role in research, I adjusted to a new project for IBM, and we hired a childminder, Anastasia. That's a lot of changes, and we didn't really settle into a routine until well after Thanksgiving.



My new work, on enhanced drivers licences for ICBC, included a beautiful 30-minute ride along the Galloping Goose bike path, which runs beside the Gorge waterway before swooping inland. Despite running through the middle of the city, the trail gives the illusion of travelling through nature as it wends beside streambeds and through gulleys before breaking into real greenery at the Swan Lake Nature Sanctuary.



Everyone else was discovering new pleasures as well. Emma found a passion for history as well as an ability to adopt a consistent study regime. Her grades zoomed into the top-of-class strata. This semester she's doing a directed study with her history teacher. Julie became the star of the research department. The only thing marring her 3-month secondment was the (needlessly) strict hours, which kept her from seeing Lucy's classroom until late November. Besides her enjoyment of having life-long friend Olivia Macdonald in her class, Lucy revelled, along with Jonathan, in the creative shenanigans Anastasia comes up with for their time together.



At the end of November, Julie and I made a quick getaway to San Francisco. We lucked into a warm and sunny weekend, and walked its hills until our feet ached: Alcatraz, the Mission, North Beach, Telegraph Hill, the Haight,



Chinatown ... Much as I love my kids, it's such a pleasure to not worry whether one has enough food, clothes or activities to keep the next meltdown from occurring.

Without planning it, we arrived on American Thanksgiving. I've never fully appreciated the







insanity of that weekend for the US, but it really is a 4-day shopfest – with the added bonus there are lots of things to do and see. Beyond giant tree-lighting ceremonies and other festive curiosities, we took in the premier of “Milk” at the Castro Theatre, saw “La Boheme” at the Opera House, and really didn’t stop moving for 72 hours.

Come December, Julie returned to her indexing job at Hansard, we anticipated the visit of her aunt and cousin for Christmas, and I braced for my first time “on the bench” in ten years. With the recent economic meltdown, it didn’t seem like the best time to be without a billable client. A day before my current project ended and holidays began, I got asked to help on a project as the accessibility expert – supporting technologies aimed at users with disabilities. I’ve been angling for such an opportunity for years. I ditched a week of holidays and worked 3 times my normal hours until Christmas to get the bottlenecks removed. The hours have returned to something like normal in January, the project is thrilled with me, and I’ve never been happier in a role.



I woke this morning in the predawn to a world dampened into silence, “the snow carefully everywhere descending” – e.e. cummings. Big flakes flared orange briefly in the streetlamp along the lane behind our house. The snow ended a cold snap that had hardened the ground, which was previously a bit mushy after the ark-worthy floods that immersed basements throughout Victoria at the start of the year. In the days since, as I’ve worked my way through this letter, the sun has returned and green shoots are pushing up all over the garden.



It’s taken the reflection involved in an annual letter to realize that this wet>gray>cold>clear pattern may be the regular stages of January in Victoria. If so, it’s good knowing winter unofficially ends right around my birthday. I’m happy to have light on my face again.



PS I've put more photos online: [photos.wafflerama.com](http://photos.wafflerama.com). Also, if you're motivated enough to write me back, I'll send you a CD of my compilation of vinyl finds for 2008.