

My 48th year began with a segmented grapefruit half, bedecked with a lit candle. That may seem like a weird cake substitute, but my wife has learned the odd and fanciful ways to my heart. We celebrated a dozen years of marriage this past summer, and I have come to realize that bliss comes from celebrating such small changes and favours undertaken for love. Putting the cutlery into the dishwasher the 'right' way can lead to a state of harmony.

The time since last January 27th has been filled with quiet pleasures. My sister and I got a chance to celebrate our birthdays together with our spouses at Yellow Point Lodge. My folks have been giving us this wonderful two-day present for many years, but 2011 was the first time we'd been there together near our shared birth date. The bleaker weather at the end of January, compared with our prior days in warm, budding March, was more than offset by the chance to talk and laugh with Sheila and Rob. The move to a January weekend also got us out of the main lodge into a coveted cliff cabin.



We shared a Mt. Washington ski weekend with friends in February which included the most awesome day of cross-country skiing: a foot of new snow, a blue sky and no wind. The cold soon followed us south to Victoria for what would be the only real snowfall in 2011. Lucy and I had a magical walk to school one day. The laughter of her and her friend Isaac and the squeak of snow under our boots formed the only sounds in the whole world.

Julie's sister Karen arrived in town by train at the end of this patch of winter, so the kids got a chance to throw snowballs with Eli. He's the same age as Jonathan -- the only first cousin born in the same century (the only first cousin, period, on the McClung side) -- and the three of them love spending time together. It would be the first of several visits over the year.



Once our brief spate of cold weather melted, we resuscitated Tuesday afternoons on the Dallas. The cliffs along Beacon Hill Park lift the cold breezes above the beach and enhance the warmth from the sun. For a few years we've invited adventurous folks down after school. The adults vegetate on blankets while the kids strip off their jackets and get busy with water, stones, clay and seaweed.



In March we took a day-trip to the mainland, where I attended my friend Chris's cancer benefit, put on by the Vancouver film festival (a screening of *Distant Voices, Still Lives*), while Julie and the kids braved the spring break lines at the Vancouver Aquarium.

The rituals of spring began in earnest in April. Around Emma's birthday, cherry blossoms began to blow off branches and spin in the gutters like invulnerable snowflakes. That cued the first major plantings in the garden. This past year Jonathan discovered his green thumb. He planted most of the peas, beets and



carrots, and really enjoyed breathing in the rich earth scents. We were late doing pruning and yard clean-up at Deep Cove, but our procrastination was rewarded with a full show of lilies on the point for my Dad's birthday.

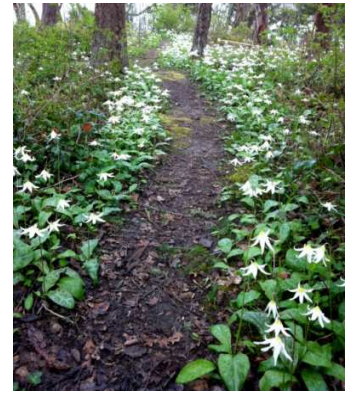
For Mother's Day, Julie booked us on a horse-drawn carriage tour of James Bay with her mom, which took us past the royal purple fields of camas in Beacon Hill. We drove the tour guide nuts with all our anecdotes.

The rest of spring was a blur of parades, face paint and school fairs. June started with Wafflerama and ended with sleepovers at Deep Cove. I made it to Vancouver with my friends Cathy and Kim to attend a lounge night at the Waldorf with Lisa and Dean. Jonathan said goodbye to his friends at Christ Church Junior Kindergarten, where he'd spent weekdays for two engaging years. We ushered in a July of pies and chocolate fondue with Canada Day smores on the patio at Deep Cove, as the sun set.

Summer was a gift. With Julie doing commutes on the bus and my cousin¹ Gabe looking after the kids while I worked, we managed to enjoy a fabulous stretch at Deep Cove despite the fact we had almost no vacation days. For the kids, this was especially delightful. They became prodigies on the badminton court. Cousins Hannah, Kaillee and Phoebe frequently made it out with their parents or grandparents, and all five of them would bash a flock of birdies about the court at the same time. With more time to explore, the kids also discovered new playmates next door and around the bay. Many afternoons in August, the children of neighbourhood kids that I ran with in *my* youth found their way into our yard for games of Wiggles Wanted and Sardines in a Can.

Outside of Deep Cove, July will be remembered as the year Julie got garbage sport credibility. She nabbed the Ladies trophy at the Catcus Jack Minigolf Extravaganza, then crushed the competition in virtually every event at the Odd Fellows summer picnic. My favourite moment was when she

¹ For the sake of brevity, I'm just saying "cousin" instead of "first cousin twice removed" or "second cousin once removed". If you really want the details, I'll send you the family tree.





stepped up to race with a book balanced on her head. She'd already captured the pie-plate toss, shoe kick, and Sir Walter Raleigh contests. I heard a woman in her 20s next to me whisper to her friend, "Oh, watch out. She's really good."

We had both kids' parties and our anniversary in August, but the most fun was walking on water on the Sjoffels. Our neighbours gave us these blow-up shoes as a thank you for entertaining their kids so much. Imagine yellow inflatable rafts downsized to shoes for Big Foot, and you might have an inkling of what it's like to get dunked on these things. We produced some faux Euro instructional videos on youtube you can watch if you search for "Sjoffels". Unfortunately, I failed to properly document the other phenomenon in August – the "Yoquet" movement that began when the girls combined yoga with croquet.

September marked my first experience with two kids in the same school. Lucy and her third-grade friends adopted Jonathan in their games of Grounders (an inspired hybrid of tag and Marco Polo acted out on the jungle gym). One of the pleasures of hanging at the school is seeing the growth of young mentors. The K-5 programme nurtures that interchange; no one is too old to have fun.

Another benefit of both kidlets at Sir James Douglas was that my "commute" was halved. There were rushed days in September when we had to get Lucy to cross-country practices for 8:15, but most mornings we left at 8:25 and I came back in the door 30 minutes later. As my life got simpler, Emma headed back to college while continuing to work fulltime. She'll complete her Hospital Unit Clerk certification this spring.

When cross-country ended in October, I got the idea of taking *longer* trips to school by walking. Ever since Emma was Jon's age, I've insisted on riding to school (or at least rejecting the car). I've worn through two bike trailers and a trail-a-bike in those 20 years. Lucy has been riding her own bike since pre-school, but while there are many bonuses to wheeling through the park and side streets, I'm too much my mother's son to say the constant vigilance against erratic steering and errant cars is entirely relaxing. Nor do shouted,





the Salt Spring Island Fall Fair, our time was pretty committed. We made a second trip to Salt Spring in October to help our friends Brian and Peri with their new orchard during the Apple Festival.

Through the fall, we shared many Sunday dinners with parents. When we hosted we'd throw a musical from the middle of the last century on the turntable and sing along as we all solved a jigsaw puzzle. That last sentence



may have labelled us as the Boring-tons, but I confess a roomful of people belting out "Surrey with the Fringe on the Top" is my idea of fun.

Music has been swelling in the house. My banjo playing still lulls the kids to sleep, Lucy and Julie are doing Suzuki violin, Lucy began piano, and Jon is at the age where any quiet activity is accompanied by his tuneless humming. I'm still doing choir, and we've all been singing to the collection of kids' records I brought upstairs, not to mention those musicals.

Amidst the Lodge party and other preparations for the holidays, we experienced a small but literal downer. The massive cedar tree which had been slowly taking over the entire northwest vista of our property got chain-sawed down to firewood in the course of a morning. I'd grouched mildly about its affect on my garden for years, but it had been a perch for crows, racoons and hummingbirds since before we lived here. Its demise was a small, sad echo of the family and friends who've departed this earth in 2011. I'm still startled at the window by its absence. We celebrated Christmas morning at



our own place for the second year running. All the grandparents woke early enough to come over and witness the explosions of wrapping paper. Emma, her boyfriend, Dave, and his daughter, Ava, made the second round of presents that followed breakfast. We spread out family visits over the next few days – dinner at Rosemary's, Boxing Day at Mom and Dad's, then lunch at Fran and Bruce's on the way up to Mt. Washington on the 27th, where we had a marvellous three days of winter wonderland as part of the Macdonald's 'extended family'.



2011 ended with a memorable Kid-Friendly Party at the Odd Fellows Hall, the first in several years. We filled the place with friends and family ranging from 6-months to 95-years old. I'm hard-pressed to say whether I had more fun square-dancing to my dad's calls or calling the numbers for bingo. My karaoke renditions could use some work.

When I began drafting this write-up in early January, predictions of our coldest winter in my kids' lifetimes had proved groundless. The days were drier and warmer than any I could recall. A hummingbird scolded me while I was taking my parent's Christmas lights down after Epiphany. I was going to end things with a quote from the Song of Solomon: "For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come".

Then in mid-January, it snowed. Usually it doesn't stay white in Victoria for more than a day, but we caught a nice blast from the Arctic that sent ducks skidding across frozen

ponds in the park for days. The weather has been a crazed miasma of battering winds and belligerent rain since. A warm vacation is starting to sound pretty enticing.

Last year we experienced an almost perfect 100 Mile Diet. But not the eating kind. We survived on strict rations of travel around the lower island. Except for one 2-night consulting trip to Montreal, the closest anyone got to a plane involved driving past the airport en route to the summer place.

I'd like to pretend this confined sphere of movement resulted from a noble plan for greenhouse reduction – eat, act and live locally—but while I did conscientiously forgo the Chilean sea bass, the home-body phenomenon just happened. As a family, we reached the mainland *once*, for a day-trip to Vancouver.



So if we barely set toes beyond our backyard pond (and that's a metaphor; we do not have water features in the garden, except in December), how did we have such a great year?

Last night, after the kids succumbed to the inevitability of sleep, Julie and I settled on the couch (beneath layers of blankets against the cold) to be charmed by "Midnight in Paris". Woody Allen gently and tenderly makes the case that the present may lack the gilding of an idealized former belle epoque, but *when* we live isn't nearly as crucial as how. Today can be our golden age.

I'd expand the theme and say *where* we reside possesses the same veracity. Anywhere can be Paris. Even my own backyard. Or, as Aldous Huxley once flashed in the middle of a different sort of trip, 'Of *course* the Dharma-body of the Buddha is the hedge at the bottom of the garden.'

Even on a bleak January day, the kids chase around the yard past the bare, tangled Marion berry canes on the south wall. Soon enough the new growth will bud where this year's berries will dangle and swell. In the summer, small hands will secret the dark fruit into purple mouths, and in the fall the kitchen will be heady with the rich scent of berries, reducing to jam or baking in pies.

Here and now is more than sufficient.



More photos at wafflerama.com