

For Father's Day last year, Julie gave me a book called "Habit," which explores how humans establish routines and tiny rituals that ultimately guide so much of our daily lives. I'm not sure where habit leaves off and traditions begin, but though I tend to focus on the big photo ops in these birthday letters, I realize that the Every Day fills most of our lives. So I'm trying to be more mindful of the daily stuff, whether it's the walk to school, violin practice, morning cuddles or bedtime stories.

Life *can* be a literal walk in the park, past Goodacre Lake and the stone bridge in Beacon Hill en route to school. I'm trying to instill such habits in the kids despite their constant if rarely realized hope that we'll take the car. We have small rituals for most sections of this walk – the hunt for the latest breed of duck, the race down the chip trail, the limbo under the Edgemont Villa apartment sign, the shortcut behind the hedge near Pic-A-Flic.

So here follow some celebratory notes on the habits that made up 2012 and the improvisations and new events which kept it all from the "foolish consistency" the writer Emerson once derided.

Victoria got a rare gift of snow shortly after school recommenced in January. Walks across the park transformed into extended Arctic explorations. When it melted two days later, the marathon that is spring tensed to start; snowdrops were out before we left for our weekend at Yellow Point Lodge at month's end.

Our children remain traumatized by Yellow Point. Despite leaving late (amidst tears) on Friday and coming back early on Sunday to see Lucy's performances in Victoria's Dance Days, we've put up with a year of recriminations for 'abandoning' them: "How can you want to go to a place that doesn't even allow children!?"

(We returned from this year's Yellow Point experience today—being my official 49<sup>th</sup> birthday—and I'm happy to report that the carefully planned departure and kid-focused weekend of activities by the grandparents meant we were merrily waved on our way.)





Two weeks later we spent Julie's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday on the slopes with some families of Lucy's friends. You never know how the chemistry will work between 8 adults and 7 kids thrown into close proximity for a weekend. Happily, the goofy merriment of daytime 'Olympic' tobogganing and the varied conversations after the kids shutdown at night were a pleasure all around. Except that I managed to lose the car keys in the snow. I don't recommend the white stuff as a storage medium. One has the feeling that every exploratory probe simply buries things more effectively. A diligent search and small miracle later, I found them and discovered a new metaphor I'm sure I'll get a chance to use sometime soon.

Back in Victoria, Emma and her boyfriend David moved into a cute little house in Tillicum together, about the time she finished her certification as a Hospital Unit Clerk and began working in the local Emergencies and other units. That's obviously worked out well for them, as they just announced their engagement at Christmas with a wedding this summer at Deep Cove! We've decided we'll be "Grandpa Mike" and "Nana Julie" for David's daughter Ava, who is the same age as Jon.

Spring break lasted for 2 weeks in early March – a long enough time that the kids created their own schoolhouse *a la* Little House on the Prairies in the living room. To great cheers, my cousin Gabe arrived to be their school mistress. Week two, we spent some lovely, relaxed days with my parents at Harrison Hot Springs Hotel. It was snowing on arrival, so the kids delighted in swimming outdoors in hot water while miniature snowdrifts gathered on their heads. We bookended our leisure at the resort with an educational stop at the Gulf of Georgia Cannery (a national historic site) and a sunny drive down the Fraser Valley to Port Moody, where my cousins Bruce and Patrice spoilt us at their fabulous new digs.

On return Jon started his first season of T-ball, and I continued my great experiment with indoor horticulture. I'd never started tomatoes from scratch before, so double-planted my flats to







counteract the old seeds my friend Brian gave me. When they *all* germinated, and my various brassica and onion seedlings also started pushing their wee stems out of the soil, I suddenly found myself with many hundred growing plants. They don't stay tiny long. All household surfaces near windows were soon covered in domed trays, constantly demanding my attention. I built strange cantilevered platforms and stuffed them in the skylights. I constructed a greenhouse out of sliding glass doors and stacked it as full as a Kowloon apartment. I made my family take the bus to Deep Cove so I could transport full grown plants in the van.

Late last night, when we'd stolen an evening to ourselves after the kids subsided, Julie and I got to talking about The Tomatoes. They really did take over the house. They also agitated an already busy time with another distraction. I spend a lot of time in the garden from May until September. The tomatoes extended the madness from early spring until fall canning.

"It's when you get quiet."

"What?"

"That I sense you're starting a new project. You get pre-occupied, and that's when I know something's coming."

This so much echoes my mother's description of me getting into trouble as a boy -- "It's when you got quiet that I worried" -- that I'm forced to admit the truth of it.

I've *always* got one -- okay, several -- things in the works. Last year a few would have been The Tomatoes, the Joy of Life Concert (and post-concert party I spontaneously volunteered to host), creating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary Wafflerama mementos, entering pies and produce in the Saanich Fair, developing an iphone app for jungle croquet, creating the programme for Home for Christmas... These stack right on top of the usual seasonal rituals like gardening, Wafflerama, closing the Summer Place, the Salt Spring Fall Fair, canning, choir and Christmas, not to mention the normal kid/school/work activities.

Last night, when Julie figured out I'd planned a surprise Tiki Party a month before our big trip (more on that later), she took my hand and said "Don't start anything else new." Maybe I'm kidding myself thinking consistency is a habit of mine. Maybe consistent effort on day-to-day activities *should* be my habit. Maybe the household could do with a little bit more of that mindless consistency.





Between tomato transplants, life in 2012 continued. Lucy was asked to join the Junior Company in ballet, which meant 4 or 5 practices a week all spring. She also assisted with Jon's beginner class. Besides the dancing, the kids' social calendar was full of brownies, beavers, swimming, soccer, violin.... You wouldn't think there was much time for relaxing, but we frequently hosted Friday night movies, and the neighbourhood was flush with kids migrating their play between various houses. Weekdays, Julie and I swapped time to do ballet and running (her), and ping pong and choir (me).



Our small oscillations around the Pacific Northwest continued through the spring: Julie and her mom spent the May Day weekend in Seattle. A few weeks later, Lucy and Julie ferried to the Hands Across the Borders event at the Peace Arch crossing south of Vancouver. Thousands of brownies, girl guides and their chaperones took over the US-Canada border and exchanged a bunch of hat pins. Jonathan and I, meanwhile, rode a smaller ferry to Sidney Spit for a picnic with the beavers. No pins, but lots of boys with sticks. It was a beautiful weekend to be outside.



We floated over to Saltspring for the first of our two weddings on the island in 2012; friends Brian and Peri lucked into a blissful day in May for an outdoor ceremony and reception in their apple orchard. We stayed with my sister and her fiancé Henry – who gave the kids one of the greatest mornings of their lives: rides on a tractor, punting on a pond, shooting bb guns at cans, playing a symphony worth of odd instruments, and holding Henry's *real* swords and weapons.



June started with the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Wafflerama, complete with commemorative t-shirts, aprons and postcards. Lucy rode the







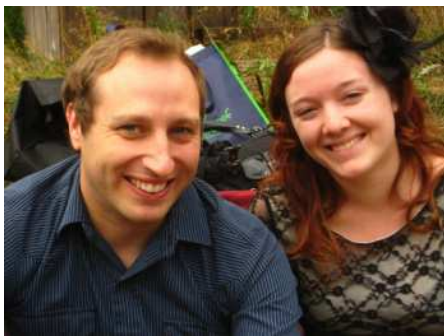
Scrambler by herself at the Oak Bay Tea Party. She and Jon both performed in their year-end dance finale. The brownie and cub trips already mentioned took place. We spent Father's Day canoeing and shooting arrows at Camp Thunderbird. Tomato plants were distributed across the city. I helped put on my 30<sup>th</sup> high school reunion. School ended (as did Jon's involvement in ballet and cubs) and summer officially kicked off, although the weather continued to suggest an extended wet spring, right through much of July.



If there's a place best summarized with a collage, it's summer at Deep Cove: square dancing at dusk in our neighbour's field; easing the first ripe fruit off our new Veteran peach tree; nibbling a dainty during a tea party on the raft; anchoring loaded tomato plants with coarse twine during an August storm; sucking the brains out of just-caught, just-sautéed spotted prawns; sleeping under the stars on the sailboat; skimboarding in the bay on the warm, incoming tide; beachcombing the long, varied bays from Warrior Point; playing night-time games under the lit pavilion; sculling across an ironed-flat ocean at sunset.



We solved the mystery of the bubble snails, got wine and dined by Bruce and Patrice, helped terminate a vast colony of carpenter ants, slack-lined with Gabe, and celebrated anniversaries and birthdays. Lucy did a week of violin camp, but most of the kids' time was spent excelling at badminton, delighting in the company of neighbours and building odd, secret treasure troves high up in the crooks of the apple trees.



Further afield, we ventured to Parksville with Julie's family and experienced the ultimate Salt Spring wedding with the entire Frank Gower clan present. Although our showings at the Odd Fellows summer picnic were unimpressive, the







family cleaned up at the Cactus Jack minigolf tournament: 1<sup>st</sup> place, Women's, Couples and Under 12 trophies ornament our house.

The summer weather – which had finally arrived in late July – continued on through September. It got hot enough that avocado seeds sprouted in the compost. Jon started grade 1 and Suzuki violin, Lucy joined the BC Fiddle Orchestra, Julie began another secondment in the Research department and I began swatting badminton birdies on Tuesdays. One of my favourite memories from those first weeks of school was Jonathan getting a new bike. He was so thrilled and told everyone all about it. "I ride all the way to school! – with my pack on my back! – and my bike has a hand brake! And a bell!" The lucky fellow has Mme Dunsmoor for his teacher, as did his sisters.



One of my worst hours in years happened at Jonathan's first soccer practice, when I found myself volunteered to coach ten 6-7 year olds whose names I didn't know, without any pinneys to divide them into teams or cones to contain them on a massive soccer pitch. Every 2 minutes someone's shoelace came undone. I'd stoop to tie them while other kids spun around on the ground, or ran screaming with their shirts pulled over their heads until they collided. Parents witnessed the carnage from the sidelines. With 25 minutes to go, one boy tugged my arm. "Coach, I don't want to play soccer anymore."



The next weekend, we sailed over to the Salt Spring Fall Fair. It's a lot longer to Ganges than my glance at the map suggested. Our electrical system failed, and we came into the harbour after dark, piloting by flashlight and Google maps. Other small trips while the weather lasted included a bike ride out to the farm animals and model airplanes on the Lochside Trail. Jon rode over 25 kms on his own. Julie got away for a girls' weekend at Sondra's family place in Deep Bay.



A less fun transition in the fall was the departure of Rebecca and Dave's family to the wilds of Vic West. Their house, which now sits vacant and forlorn across the street, was if not the heart then one of the ventricles of the neighbourhood for the kids. Fortunately their lovely new home is only a 15-minute bike ride away.

The weather held through Thanksgiving, allowing us to host the Frank Gower clan on our deck for cocktails. Inside, the bounty from the garden spilled across the table. The plants loved the damp, long spring and hot, late summer. The harvest from the trees at Deep Cove alone filled bushels, helped along I suspect by pruning and caterpillar eradication Ron, Paul and I undertook back in early spring.





Family figured even more prominently than normal in 2012. Through the late fall, my folks and Rosemary helped out with extra after-school pickups, as I tried to wrap up some of my local client work. My folks enjoyed the rare gift of their first great-grandchild's newborn cries, when Kristel had her baby in Victoria during a visit and stayed on at their place while Matt completed a course at Royal Roads. Most family welcomed Anya within two weeks of her arrival.



We changed neighbourhoods for Trick or Treating, making the rounds with Rob and Katie's family under the atmospheric wet Garry oak trees of Oak Bay. We were back a month later when Lucy and I performed in the Oak Bay Light Up. They also hosted New Year's, along with some pizza nights and quiet Saturday afternoons. It's lovely to have friends who share the pleasure of tea and newspapers around a sunny table.



Last year's letter ended with an ode to our own back yard. Apparently Julie didn't agree that anywhere *can* be Paris, and hinted broadly it was time we visited the real thing. We depart this spring. I bought the tickets in November, the same month we bought a van in Nanaimo (with Fran and Bruce's help), turning my goal of the lowest credit card total ever on its head. Hers was a much more interesting ambition, I'll admit.

Christmas came late. Lucy performed as a lamb (!) in the Nutcracker at the end of November, but Santa didn't arrive at the Odd Fellows party until the middle of December. School let out on the Winter Solstice, one day before the Home for Christmas Concert. The delayed start, strangely, made the holidays a much more peaceful time, at least for the second half. We had almost a full week to recuperate after New Years. Julie kept reading her way through Dickens. We alternated between consuming guide books of London and Paris and reconstituting jig saw puzzles on the card table by the window. As she says, we rarely just hang out at home – no Deep Cove to visit, no afterschool practices to whisk children off to. Peace on Earth.





More photos at [wafflerama.com](http://wafflerama.com)

