

On the way to school today the kids gave me birthday spans. They walked on either side of me, counting out my age in unison, snickering when I protested that doubling up like that meant I received 102 bum taps.

Over the past year they've become *cheekier*. When Emma was little, I actively worked at ensuring she knew I was fallible, that she could poke fun at me. The younger kids have never really needed that encouragement. Still, the jokes and attitude are becoming more refined and comfortably assured. When Julie and I headed up to Yellow Point Lodge last weekend, there were no tears, just a lot of eye rolling.

Yellow Point is the rough marker for the birthday my sister Sheila and I share. My parents continue to gift us a weekend there with our spouses at the end of January. Last year, Jack and Sondra Showers joined us for two magnificent sunny days. (They were back again last weekend; the more typically wet conditions didn't dampen their enthusiasm.)

Sun in January can lead to cold. The ponds in Beacon Hill Park became so frozen in early February 2014 that the kids were able to walk out to McTavish Island on Good Acre Lake. Being Victoria, everything was back to its liquid state by the time Julie's sister Karen and son Eli came down for a visit the next weekend.

Another prevalent theme in early 2014 was fire. The kids came up with increasingly ambitious ways to make flame. The idea sparked with a candle fashioned from a concave rock filled with pitch, and culminated in a home-made torch that burned for over an hour (and almost singed Jon's eyebrows in a gust of wind).

Hmm, I've written myself into an elements theme: water, fire, wind. What's left? Earth. We moved a few planters worth into the house to grow beans the kids had sprouted on moist napkins. The scarlet runners coursed up inside the bedroom windows throughout February, the stalks surpassing the height of each of us in turn, as if they couldn't wait to reach some storybook place beyond the confines of our 10' ceiling.

Speaking of earth, in March we embarked on a roadtrip to the Happiest Place on it. With Emma, David and Ava along for the ride, we had 7 passengers in the minivan, but the drive was fun and effortless. We left on the Friday morning Coho to Port Angeles and arrived in Anaheim with Saturday night fireworks lighting the heavens. Travelling rapidly at ground level hastens the seasons along. Each rest stop offered progressively warmer weather for flicking around a Frisbee. At each gas station, it took longer to scrape insects from the windshield.





None of the kids had been to Disneyland, and it really was a magical five days. Beyond experiencing *almost* everything the parks have to offer, a heat wave our first day left us in t-shirts and shorts for the 10pm outdoor show. In a continuing whack of serendipity, Lucy and Jon also got a chance to meet the penpals they'd reached via a message in a bottle a few years before.

On the way home, we sidestepped to San Francisco. We swerved down Russian Hill, browsed through City Lights, visited Amoeba Records, beheld a naked guy strolling down the Haight and departed northward in late afternoon across the Golden Gate Bridge. The weather held until the next evening when we submerged into a wet coast deluge at the Olympia turnoff.

Back in Victoria, walks to school became excuses to spot yellow cars (Bingo, you can't speak!) and monkey puzzle trees (pinch!). We spent weekends playing games with the Slagboom cousins or with our group of 'bridge' friends. Gardening began in earnest. By April the improving weather found us weekendening in Parksville with the McClung branch.

The activity calendar kicked up in May. Lucy won fiddle awards at the Victoria Performing Arts Festival, and bought a busking licence. We sniffed the flowers at Butchart's on Mother's Day, jogged or shambled through the Victoria 10K and dangled in the tree tops at Wild Play. We waved bon voyage to our family sailboat of 30 years, and to our fighting fish, one of whom kept a stubborn fin on life for months despite a malfunctioning swim bladder. Julie is the only person I know who has hand-fed an ailing fish.

Lucy, Emma and I all performed at Daniel Lapp's Joy of Life Festival, then we were into the late spring of recitals and Wafflerama. Julie managed to track down a waffle repair guy, so some old favourites made it back into the line-up.

At the same time, I got embroiled in a fundraising dinner for the BC Fiddle Orchestra where we auctioned off bad art. The hard work culminated in a silly, successful night, which my Uncle Berk and Auntie Doris, visiting from the Philippines, attended with my parents. Julie did some visiting of her own in Toronto with Tristan, Alice and our first grand-nephew Isaac. In her absence, the kids and I hosted Berk and Doris at a picnic in Beacon Hill during their time in town (we were in t-shirts; they had their winter jackets on, such is acclimatization to heat in the tropics).





Julie had an especially busy June. She returned from Toronto the eve of Wafflerama, dealt with that craziness, then threw her mother an awesome 70th birthday party.



Father's Day, Lucy performed her violin and harp duet at Cameron Bandshell, then we took a walk around Fernwood with my dad and mom. We started at Gower Park and meandered along Dad's boyhood haunts, ending at the George and Dragon for dinner. More stories flowed from my dad in an hour than an average month. Another of Julie's inspired ideas.



A teacher's strike in the second half of June made my annual Unplug the TV for the Summer practice a bit tougher for the kids. After a few days of moaning and a thwarted regroup at the kitchen computer, they trudged outside. About the same time, my cousins Ken and Bruce organized a complete gut and renovation of the Deep Cove bathroom. These multi-family projects are always a lot of fun (and work); real labours of love. The finished product, complete with a beautiful portrait of my grandfather in full Masonic regalia, is a pleasure to use.



Our family was away from Deep Cove for a good chunk of July – and it wasn't just due to a blanket being used for the bathroom door. The kids did summer strings, then horse camp with the Slagbooms. We spent a weekend in Courtenay seeing Lucy play with BCFO at the Island Music Fest. Then we left the province the following weekend in convoy with the Macdonalds, en route for the Prairies.



Travelling with another family proved as pleasurable as travelling with Emma's clan. Of course Rob, Katie and their three kids are practically family – worthy of the Uncle and Aunt designation my parents' generation gave to close family friends. Rob had planned our shared route, so I had little more to do than steer and enjoy the scenery. Our kids experienced their first drives over real mountain ranges: up the Cascades at Hope, where we broke out of the wet coastal weather and stayed in front of it all the way through Kamloops and the central plains, over the Monashees to Revelstoke, through the Selkirks to Banff. We were treated to a spectacular storm on the morning of our third day. From the shelter of our big shared resort accommodations, we watched the lightning trying to strike down the Rockies. As we drove out onto the plains, the final force of that coastal air mass literally stopped us on the highway in a heavy curtain of rain that drummed so loudly on the roof every other sound was drowned out too.





We parted ways with the Macdonalds in Calgary to pursue our course to Julie's Aunt Roberta in Saskatchewan. Despite stopping at 2 museums en route (Spark interactive in Calgary and dinosaurs at Drumheller) we traversed Alberta in a day and arrived in the lovely town of Outlook SK in the lingering light at day's end.

In hindsight, I should have kept a travelogue. It had been over 20 years since I last drove to the Prairies (for Rob and Katie's wedding), and a decade before that when Andrew Stewart, Tim Chan and I left BC in a beat-up old van after high school graduation. Ghosts of trips past kept visiting me, even images from slideshows taken by aunts and uncles before I was born. They all added rich time travel to that 4000 kms.

And then there were the new experiences. Julie's family and family friends took fine care of us. Cousin Esme strolled us over rolling fields to the old bridge across the South Saskatchewan. Roberta and "The Girls", Margie and Marion, inducted us into new evening card games; Margie let the kids explore the meandering Keith family house at will (their declared new dream home). We left Outlook wanting more, then when we landed on Julie's godparents' doorstep in Lumsden, the Goldie clan involved us in all manner of activities, including sending me off to my first CFL game. Ken and Karen have a very special life and family, and it was wonderful to feel part of it for a few days.

I really should have kept a journal. We tracked down Julie's old family cottage on Echo Lake in the Qu'Appelle Valley. A magnificent thunderstorm gathered above our room at the Hotel Saskatchewan in Regina. In Grasslands National Park, we accidentally crossed into the US, then cooked some Prairie grass on our engine during the world's worst-executed shortcut. We camped our way home through story-worthy groundhog, coyote, mosquito, woodchuck and moose encounters.

August back in Victoria revolved around Deep Cove. The Finlays arrived from Vancouver and established the Summer of the Rainbow Loom. The kids set up a literal cottage industry, churning out made-to-order wallets and iphone holders constructed from woven elastic bands. Between weaving bracelets and jewelry, the usual happy mishmash of birthdays, wedding anniversary, minigolf, beachtime and outdoor movies (complete with one-of-a-kind meteor showers) took place.

The rapid onset of fall saw us at the Saanich and Salt Spring fairs. School restarted after another few weeks of teachers' strikes. Jon joined BCFO as its smallest and youngest member, took up squash, and switched to





Bays United in soccer. Lucy was in full music mode. She was accepted into the Collegium program at the Victoria Conservatory—which added orchestra, chamber music and theory to her violin and fiddling—and also began playing her Grandpa Peter's old trumpet in band at Central Middle School. Somehow she found the time to add a modern class to her current dance schedule. I joined a massive open online course on American poetry. The whole family took archery lessons on Friday nights.

With that much going on, it's not surprising that before anyone knew it, Christmas had arrived with its spate of concerts, visits and games. We closed out the year, as we had started it, at the Odd Fellows Hall. Our kid-friendly party had its largest showing, with about 150 Auld Lang Syners.

This year's birthday letter didn't come easily. I wrote it while a good friend dealt with the death of his mother and while my oldest uncle's health kept him vacillating between his care home and the hospital. In 2014 Ebola, famine and natural disasters coursed through parts of the world. Wounds inflicted by fanatics and zealots multiplied and festered. With that, what of this ambling account of my sequestered existence?

That question has dampened writing resolve, and certainly kept me staring at this conclusion for a few weeks. I don't have any answer yet, unless the fact you're reading this is its own response. Celebrating good things doesn't discount trying to deal with life's challenges. May we all have moments to remember, for nice reasons, in the coming year!



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