



Christmas 2011

We had the first snow of the season on the first weekend of December. While that made for a slow drive back from a quiz bowl tournament we'd been at, it also started putting me in the holiday mood and reminded me that it was once again time to send off greetings to friends and family far and near.

I was certainly reminded this year that time is a relative thing. The years in my forties have gone faster than those in my teens or twenties, and 2011 just sped by. This was a very busy year, but really quite a good one as well.

It's been a strange year weatherwise—with a bitterly cold winter (which definitely tested my aging car), a wet and stormy spring (that led to my seeking shelter during a tornado warning at our school's Gala fundraiser), a summer that started late but rapidly became stifling, and a warm and extremely dry fall. When they average out the statistics at the end of the year, it will probably come out to "average", but the different parts of it were anything but that.

As is almost always the case for me, the highlight of the year was travel. The big trip this year happened in August, when my sister Margaret and I went to Iceland. While the place is treeless and other-worldly, it's definitely a favorite among all the places I've been. I particularly enjoyed going to Jökulsárlón, a glacial lagoon where we took a boat ride amid icebergs and got to handle and even taste 1000-year-old ice.

I also took a long weekend getaway down to Texas at the end of the school year. I saw my former student Brad Nelson playing baseball there and saw a host of different sites in and around Austin and San Antonio. Finally after Thanksgiving I headed over to Chicago where much of my time was spent watching plays. I saw the Broadway show *Memphis* as well as two Christmas performances, and they definitely put me in the holiday spirit.

It's hard to believe, but I'm now in my twenty-ninth year at Garrigan. Back in the early '80s I'd never have imagined myself here, but today I can't imagine myself anywhere else. I continue to teach math, and I work with student council, speech, broadcasting, intramural basketball, and the school website. I announce home football games, and I serve on numerous school committees. That all keeps me very busy, but I'm not sure I'd know what to do with myself if I wasn't busy all the time.

My biggest school activity is quiz bowl, and my team was very successful there this past year. We made another trip to nationals, heading down to New Orleans over Memorial Day weekend. The kids ended up with a 3 – 3 record in that tournament. That's about as good as a small school can expect to do, and it ties our record for most wins ever at nationals. To raise money for the trip to nationals, the kids hosted a community quiz bowl tournament. They did all the work for that themselves, which allowed me to be a competitor for a change. While my team (which included two fellow teachers and a student) didn't win, we did make a good showing, and it was kind of fun not to have to worry about all the behind-the-scenes details of a tournament.

The bulk of our top quiz bowl players graduated last spring, and we've had fewer tournaments than usual this fall. In spite of that the team is continuing to do well—to the point that I'm looking at details for another trip to nationals next summer. I was amused to hear a kid from another school refer to Garrigan as a "quiz bowl dynasty" in the same way people refer to our perennially successful football team. There certainly are worse things we could be known for.

It's been eighteen years now that I've been in my "second" job at Iowa Lakes Community College. There have been a number of changes at the college in the past couple years that I don't really care for, and the poor economy has meant more and more badly prepared students have made their way into my classes there. Mostly I still enjoy my college classes, though, and I certainly appreciate the income they provide. I often tell people I pay my bills with my salary from Garrigan and "live" off what I make at Iowa Lakes.

I also spent quite a bit of time this summer tutoring one of my former Garrigan students in a calculus class he was taking. The course was entirely online, which is definitely not the best option for a difficult math class. Calculus also had nothing whatsoever to do with the kid's major (construction management); it was just one of those "hard" classes they use to weed people out. To his credit, though, the kid worked his tail off at it, and he ended up with a decent grade.

I spent a lot of time this year working on websites—something I have no formal training at all in but have gotten to be surprisingly good at. In addition to daily updates to the school website (bishopgarrigan.org), I created a new website for my church (algonaucc.org) and I also did a lot of updates for the website of St. Cecelia's Church (stcecelialgona.org) that was originally created by one of the students I taught in my web page class I even made a couple of updates on my personal site (davidmburrow.com). By current standards these are all "old-fashioned" sites (without the latest bells and whistles), but they all serve their purposes pretty well.

I also continue to serve as webmaster for the Iowa Council of Teachers of Mathematics (iowamath.org), and I edit the newsletter for that organization. My work on the ICTM board has been more than a bit aggravating this year, because there's been some rather silly in-fighting among other board members. Hopefully that will settle down, and we'll get back to the job of trying to help the state's math teachers.

I've continued to be busy at my church, though the work there has settled down a bit. This summer we finally hired a new full-time minister for First Congregational Church. He's fresh out of seminary and a bit "green", but he's settling in well and the congregation seems to like him and his family a lot. That means I'm no longer responsible for details like preparing the weekly bulletin, though I do still serve as a lector and as a member of the church board. It is nice to have less responsibility, though, and not to feel I'm betraying people if I happen to be gone from church once in a while.

The rest of the family is doing pretty well. As always I keep in closest contact with Margaret. I talk with her by phone almost every week, and we see each other from time to time. Though officially retired, she keeps very busy working as a Spanish/English interpreter for the local school district and also teaching Spanish and social studies classes at Northeast Iowa Community College. She and a friend are looking at taking a cruise in the Mediterranean next year.

John (who is two years retired from teaching English) spent much of the year working for the government setting up traps for parasitic insects in woodland areas around eastern Iowa. He also continues working on various writing projects and spends some of his free time updating his blog (wajdunkaga.wordpress.com). His wife Janet continues to work as an office manager for an insurance company. The two of them had a wonderful vacation in Budapest, Hungary this fall. This fall they directed a very successful show for the community theatre in Dubuque.

Paul continues to thrive in his second career as a United Methodist minister. He and a Hispanic woman serve as co-pastors of a circuit of three churches in the Perry area. He's **very** busy (probably even more so than he was as a teacher). He also spent part of the year working shifts as a chaplain at the enormous Iowa Methodist Medical Center in Des Moines, and I had fun shadowing him in that role when I visited at Easter. Paul and Nancy's son Tim was married in July to a very nice young woman named Jessica, and I was pleased to visit with the whole family when we were down in Ankeny for the wedding. Paul and Nancy had two vacations this year. They went out to the Canadian Rockies in summer, and they also had a nice getaway to Door County, Wisconsin in October.

My brother Steve is still in northern Minnesota, and I see him the least of anyone in the family. Margaret and I were able to get up there before our trip to Iceland, and I also got to see him in early November. In the extended family, my Aunt Alaire had a bad fall earlier in the year, but she was doing fairly well when I saw her at Thanksgiving. I was also pleased that Uncle Harvey and Aunt Max spent Thanksgiving with their entire family in Evanston, the first time in years they've all been able to be together. On the other side of the family, we were saddened to hear of the death of my cousin John Blair right after Thanksgiving.

Christmas is always a time for traditions. I was reminded of that this weekend as I prepared to decorate my classroom at school. Each Christmas since I've been at Garrigan I've hung a paper chain with the names of all the students I teach on it, and as I write this I'm in the middle of putting together a chain honoring this year's students. I've always liked the symbolism of that paper chain. It shows that we're all connected to each other—and what better time than Christmas for that message. I'm pleased to send these greetings to all those people I'm connected to. I hope all of you have had a good year, that you have a happy and meaningful Christmas, and that 2012 brings wonderful things to you and to our world.

Merry Christmas!