

❄️ Season's Greetings! ❄️

I put up my Christmas tree right after Thanksgiving. So far the lights on my tree are the only decorations in the immediate neighborhood, and I do like seeing a festive touch in the window when I come home at night.

The biggest news for me this year involved travel. After a three-year delay due to the coronavirus, I finally made my long-planned trip to New Zealand. I spent nearly a month there, and I must say I preferred the mild Southern Hemisphere winter to Iowa's stifling summer heat. I had an absolutely wonderful time in New Zealand. My favorite part was probably flying at low altitude from Milford Sound (a gorgeous fiord on the west coast of the South Island) to Queenstown (the main resort in the Southern Alps). I also enjoyed taking a full-day train ride from Wellington to Auckland, through the ever-changing landscapes of the North Island. I did a lot of hiking as well, and I especially enjoyed walking on rugged trails through the other-worldly scenery of a rainforest made up of ferns. It was also fun to tour a movie studio where one of my former students once worked, explore a small provincial city where one of my mother's penpals used to live, and make my way to the southernmost point in the country where only the Southern Ocean separated me from Antarctica. It truly was the trip of a lifetime, well worth both the cost and the sixteen-hour flight from Chicago.

I made another trip late in the summer, this time heading out to New York City. That was actually supposed to happen last Christmas, and it would have included things like seeing the Rockettes at Rockefeller Center. The original trip was postponed due to December snowstorms. My summer itinerary was quite different than what I'd originally intended, but it was also very fun.

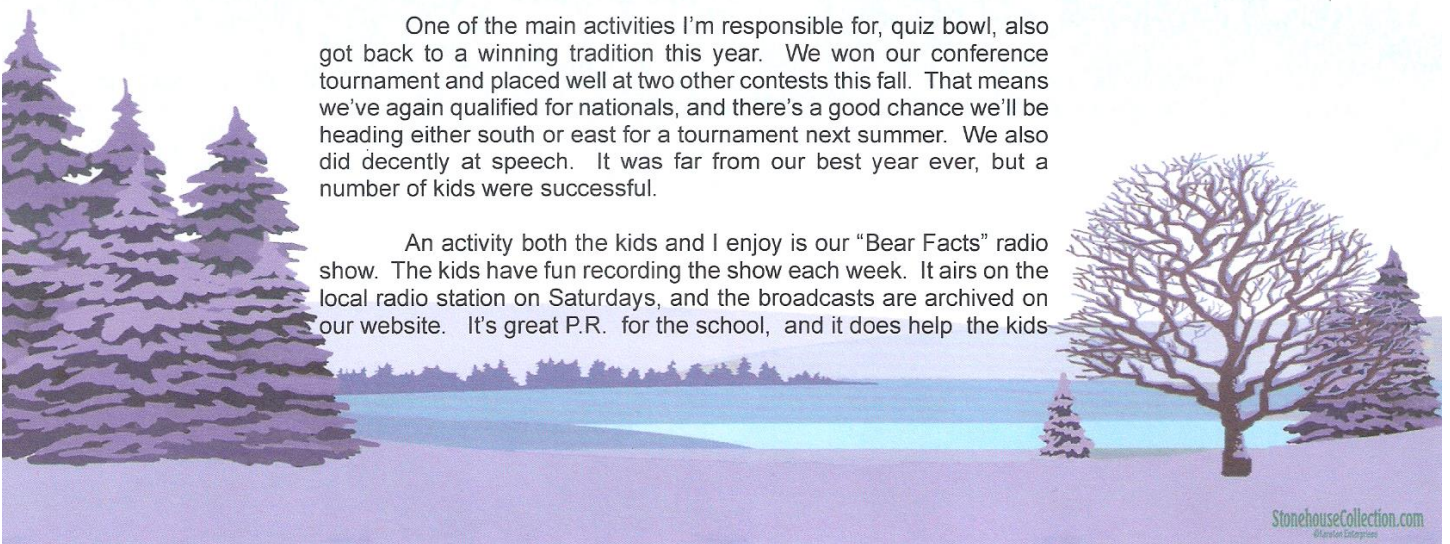
While travel set this year apart, of course most of my time was spent working. I'm now into my fourth decade teaching at Bishop Garrigan High School. It's weird to think that when I first applied for the job I'd never heard of Algona and never imagined working in a Catholic school. Now that I'm well into teaching my second generation of students, I guess I can say things worked out.

The big news at school this year was our sports teams' success. In winter our girls basketball team continued a tradition of winning at state. Our baseball team had their best season in years, surpassing expectations to win the conference championship. Probably most exciting, though, was Garrigan's football team. After losing their first game of the season, the "experts" wrote them off and considered them underdogs the rest of the year. They embraced that and kept winning and winning—eventually winning the state football championship, the school's first since 1985. Most of the playoff games were at home, and I had fun being the P.A. announcer for some very exciting games.

I go to sports events and lots of other activities to document them with photos for our student website (bggoldenbears.org), which I've been in charge of for about as long as there's been a world-wide web. I've got a good group of kids working on the website this fall, and we continue to get compliments on it.

One of the main activities I'm responsible for, quiz bowl, also got back to a winning tradition this year. We won our conference tournament and placed well at two other contests this fall. That means we've again qualified for nationals, and there's a good chance we'll be heading either south or east for a tournament next summer. We also did decently at speech. It was far from our best year ever, but a number of kids were successful.

An activity both the kids and I enjoy is our "Bear Facts" radio show. The kids have fun recording the show each week. It airs on the local radio station on Saturdays, and the broadcasts are archived on our website. It's great P.R. for the school, and it does help the kids



develop their speaking skills. Amazingly, the show is now in its thirty-first year, and it seems to be as strong as ever. It amazes me how many people who have no clue I have anything to do with it will comment on things they heard on the show.

Several people have asked me this year if I still work at Iowa Lakes Community College. While I do teach dual credit college classes (Statistics and Calculus) to my high school students, I haven't taught on campus since COVID. That wasn't really my choice, though. The college has been dealing with much lower enrollment in recent years. In response they've slashed their adjunct staff and switched the classes I used to teach to online courses that are mostly taught by staff from other colleges. I can't say I really miss working at the college, since each year they seemed to add more and more pointless paperwork. My budget is tighter without the extra money, but I do have more time to enjoy myself.

I continue to be very active in the First Congregational United Church of Christ. I serve as a lector most weeks, I prepare communion, I maintain the church website, and I've prepared recorded accompaniment at times when we were unable to find an organist. I've also continued to fill the pulpit from time to time—preaching twice this past year. Like many “mainline” churches, ours has had some struggles with attendance and finances lately. We celebrated the church's 165th anniversary this past year, and hopefully we can get past those challenges and continue well into the future.

While the rest of the family is mostly good, there was some sad news for my brother Paul when his wife died in August. He's adjusting to the loss and moving on. Paul continues to work as a part-time minister in two small United Methodist churches. He has some big travel plans for next year. In spring he and his daughter Rachel will be taking the train across Canada. (The school where Rachel teaches will be on spring break at the time). Then later in the year he'll be heading to Greece and Turkey. Paul has also made a couple of trips to visit his son Tim's family. They moved from Ankeny to Rock Island this past year, and they seem to really be enjoying living in Illinois.

I visited my brother Steve a couple of times, most recently at Thanksgiving. He continues to work as a quality inspector for the Pella Corporation, and in the new year he should be moving to working on the first shift. That should help him to have a more consistent sleep schedule. He's really gotten settled into his home in Oskaloosa, adding a lot of major pieces of furniture. Steve took his first vacation in years this fall, joining Paul for a trip to see many of southern Iowa's attractions.

I also visited my brother John and his wife Janet in Maquoketa at the start of my trip out east. John continues to spend his summers trapping invasive insects for the U.S.D.A. While Janet is officially retired, she agreed to go back to her old job temporarily as an emergency replacement—for much more money than she was earning when she left. Last spring they joined longtime friends for a trip to Scotland, and they've also had some getaways in the Midwest and upstate New York.

I often think of the students I've taught over the years as my own extended family, and it's always nice to know how my former students are doing. I'm writing this letter right after returning from a quiz bowl tournament. One of the coaches was a former student, and I was pleased to visit with her and find that she'll be getting married next summer. I also ran into lots of people I'd taught at state football and at the mass for deceased alumni the school held before Thanksgiving. When I had my job interview before I began teaching at Garrigan, the priest who hired me asked why I'd gone into education. Twenty-one-year-old me gave the cliché answer that I hoped to make a difference for my students. It's nice to find out years later that I did manage to do that now and then.

... And so we wrap up 2023. I hope the past year was a good one for all of you and that the new year is even better. May you have a wonderful holiday season, and may 2024 bring increased peace and joy for everyone.

❄️ Merry Christmas! ❄️

David M. Burrow