

Greetings!

A Really Brief Christmas Letter (Well, brief for me)

As most of my friends and even slight acquaintances know, for many years now I have been in the habit of writing a Christmas letter. Each year it has gotten longer and longer, and last year was 38 pages long (single-spaced, in a 10 point palatino font). Brevity may be the soul of wit, but it's never been my style.

It still isn't. However, I haven't sent out winter holiday cards in a timely fashion for at least five years, and I've decided that's going to end. How? By writing a NEW YEAR'S letter instead. This way I can send out my holiday greetings, chat a bit about the past year, and still meet a deadline. My New Year's letter should be done by the end of January--I will send it out as an Adobe attachment to everyone whose e-mail address I have. (If I don't have yours, or you're not sure if I do, send me an e-mail at lubap@earthlink.net) Those of you who are not wired, and would still like a real paper letter, please let me know--I will print some up and send them out if requested¹.

Enough. A brief encapsulation of this year's events. First there was the selection and installation of our unelected 43rd president, George the Incurious, by five unelected justices of the Supreme Court. (Do you note a pattern here?) This was followed by a wholesale looting of the treasury by his campaign contributors disguised as "tax reform". Despite Senator Jeffords' defection from the Republican party, they still control 2.5 branches of government, and have redefined bipartisan-ship as "agreeing with us". Big Oil manipulated the energy market by mothballing refining capacity to drive up the cost of gasoline and power and nearly shut down California. The economy tanked. Bush refused to intervene--and spent about half of his first 6 months in office vacationing at his ranch in Crawford, Texas.

The came September 11th--the nation united against this attack at the heart of America, and engaged in shared sacrifice. That is, all of us except business, the wealthy, and the far-right wing of the Republican party. They saw this as an opportunity for industry bail-outs, even more tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy, and a chance to push through their agenda--drilling in ANWR, a missile defense shield (Star Wars redux), destroying the environment, and crushing the unions. They resisted, to the bitter end, federalizing airport security. (Never mind that Congressional security is in the hand of federal marshals, and not people too dumb to get a job a Burger King....) Anyone who raised a voice against them, Bush, or any actions of the Bush administration, was declared "unpatriotic".

In December, it was officially declared that the economy--surprise, surprise!-- had been in a recession since March, and the unemployment rate was at a 10 year high. We were all encouraged to keep spending--it was our patriotic duty. Ashcroft, our Attorney General, decided that civil rights were a nuisance in times of national crisis, and proceeded to dispense with that pesky Bill of Rights (except for, or course, the Second Amendment, which is sacrosanct.) Habeas Corpus was just barely preserved.

On the plus side, Afghanistan was liberated from the religious fundamentalist rule of the Taliban. Women were once more allowed to show their faces and become persons, to work, to shop and to go to school. Men shaved their beards and played chess, music was heard again in the streets, and children were once more allowed to fly kites. Joy returned to the land.

My life was busy, too. Besides being on "high alert" and spending long hours sending out protest and informational e-mail to everyone unlucky to be on my e-mail list, I travelled a bit and did loads of charity work. I visited **Ecuador** in February --a wonderful country with a wide range of ecosystems (the paramo of the high Andes, the Amazonian rain forest, and the cloud forest of the western slope of the Andes) and lots of lovely birds to watch. At the eco-lodges I met lots of interesting people, and got to practice my Spanish, wear a lot of DEET, and have Lariam dreams. I spent a good bit of time in the colonial splendor of Quito (the world's second highest capitol, at 2600 meters). I visited Otavalo in the north, with its huge Saturday market and Andean musicians, and Cotopaxi (the most perfect volcanic cone I have ever see) to the south, where I gasped

¹ I can't possibly send them to everyone, though--last year's cost about \$3 each for printing, plus a dollar or so each for postage (more for Canada or international air). I just can't afford sending it to several hundred people!

for breath at 4400 meters and saw a rare endemic hummingbird (the Chimborazo Hillstar). I clambered about in the cloud forest of Mindo, with its brooks and bromeliads, orchids and mosses, and prehistoric tree ferns.

Ecuador has massive political and economic problems. It is one of the poorest nations in the Americas. Dollarization has gotten rid of hyperinflation, but many staples, including gasoline, had become very expensive because price supports were dropped. (Note that Ecuador is a major exporter of oil). The indigenous peoples had organized, and, in February, blockaded Quito. Tourists were trapped in Quito, and the Valentine's Day rose crop stuck in the countryside. The government caved in, and I entered Otavalo with busloads of triumphant protestors. While I was at Sacha Lodge, in the rain forest, similar problems caused a general strike in the nearby town of Coca, closing the airport. Rather than taking an hour-long flight back to Quito, I got to spend two days en route—one on a small boat on a rain-swollen river full of floating trees and other hazards, and another on a bus through the mountains. It was definitely an adventure.

In March I visited Paul in **Paris**, where he is studying cookery at the Cordon Bleu. The food and company were great, but the weather was fairly horrible—rain almost every day, enough so that the Seine had flooded. I visited museums—on the rare days that there was no strike on and they were open—and lots of churches. I learned an awful lot about medieval art. Paul and I went to Versailles (on our second try—the trains were on strike the first time we tried), rode the huge Ferris wheel, and ascended the Eiffel tower, and ate at sidewalk cafes. It was fun.

On the way home I stopped in **Washington, D.C.** I spent a day there with Christy Denardo (nee Pylypczuk), my first cousin once removed. I'd last seen her when she was about nine. I got to meet her husband, Dave, and we spent the day walking around D.C. We visited the Holocaust Museum, and the Korean and Viet Nam War Memorials. We ended up at the Tidal Basin, looking for cherry blossoms. Although it was Cherry Blossom Festival time, no blossoms were to be found.

I then drove my rental car and to **North Carolina**, where I spent some quality time with my cousin Helene—we visited an art museum, watched "Survivor", planted flowers (to get her house ready for sale), and listened to her son Zach scream. On the way back to D.C., I stopped in to visit Lisa at her gracious home in **Lynchburg, Virginia**. Lisa and I talked a lot and went out to dinner. I drove the Blue Ridge Mountain Parkway, enjoying the views.

In May I took my annual trip to the **UP**, to watch the raptors fly and visit with old friends. I spent a few days at Whitefish Point, then headed to the Keweenaw. There were a few rain-free days, and I saw lots of hawks and eagles over Brockway Mountain. I caught up with friends, made pysanky, attended an art exhibit, and cooked a bit.

I spent a lot of time this year working for UCARE (Ukrainian Children's Aid and Relief Effort) Inc., the organization formerly know as HUHTC, Inc. I collected clothing, shoes, bikes, toys, etc. from friends and coworkers, and stored it all in my tiny garage, and then spent many hours, along with fellow volunteers, sorting and packing. I attended lot of meetings, and spent many more hours getting ready for summer camp—researching (for my health classes), shopping, organizing medical supplies, packing, shipping. I spent August in **Ukraine**, a few days each in **Kiev** and **Lviv**, visiting relatives and celebrating 10 years of independence, and then 2.5 incredibly busy weeks at camp in the **Carpathian Mountains** being doctor (lots of stitches this year) and medical director (there were 450 kids altogether), teaching a health course, and organizing the thank you letters/photos and nail polish/cosmetics distribution.

I returned to Ukraine in late September to spent a month working on our annual Marsch-Rut (distribution of medical supplies, clothing, toys and other items to the orphanages). We had picked ten orphanages to visit this year, and had sent enough clothing to provide each child with at least one outfit and a pair of shoes, and enough medications to treat them all for coughs, colds, and various other afflictions. What we didn't have was cooperation from the government. I experienced bureaucracy first hand on this trip. Our containers were supposed to come directly to Kiev, where they would go through customs. Instead, someone in Odessa decided to open one ("looking for narcotics" was their excuse) and impounded it. It took us three weeks to get it released, then another week to clear customs. We had enough time left only for a whirlwind distribution trip to four of the orphanages—two each in Pantayivka and Bila Tserkva. Shura (from Chicago) stayed on, and did the rest of the deliveries with our Ukrainian staff.

I did not let all that time go to waste, though. I bonded with my 2.5 year old godson (I will never, ever have children!) and my Kiev relatives. I visited my orphans in **Lyubotyn** (in far eastern Ukraine, near Kharkiv) and **Kaniv**. I spent several days at the orphanage in **Tsyurupinsk** (in the south, near Kherson); the children there are all physically disabled. I'd met many of them at camp the past three years, but now got to know them even better. I visited their classes and living areas, watched them play soccer and sing, attended the local Special Olympics, and talked with them for hours. The kids painted and colored lots of greeting cards for me, even those without hands or fingers. It is amazing how much these kids, not only orphaned but disabled, can accomplish--sewing, painting, sports, crafts, and simply caring for themselves. One boy had even taught himself English from old books and movies, and had several pen pals in England.

It was quite a busy year, but, overall, for me, a good one. I will write more soon, and go into more detail. First, though, I have to decorate the tree, get ready for my party (December 22nd, everyone invited), and finish wrapping all those gifts. I can't help but think, though, especially at this time of year, how lucky I am--to have friends and family like you. I feel blessed, too, to have found a calling--working with my orphans--and to be able to do things that might make a difference in other people's lives. I hope you, too, may find such joy.

Luba