

2006 Wagner Family Christmas Letter

Opening

Greetings, dear friends. I know you haven't heard from us in a long while, and for that I sincerely apologize. We have a house full of good excuses, but just know this - we are back (having never actually left) and would like to update you on some of the happenings with the Wagner family over the past year (ok, ok, two years).

The best excuse for our silence has been the slow and stunted development of what we have come to know as "The Plan." The Plan is, in short, *big*. Some would even say *bold*, and in any case, it most certainly should have been a prominent feature of any newsletter of family events.

But, alas, The Plan was elusive. It was continually evolving – now Spain, now Chile – now renting, now selling. And the whole RV thing, well, it just came out of nowhere.

So, it all boils down to this... we just didn't know what to tell you.

But now, even though it has so far gone completely awry, I feel that we are sufficiently committed to its execution that we can, at last, let you in on The Plan...

The Plan

The Plan, in its bare essence, is this:

- 1) Sell the house
- 2) Buy an RV
- 3) Travel the US
- 4) Sell the RV
- 5) Move to Argentina
- 6) Learn how to speak Spanish, dance the Tango, and drink *yerba mate*
- 7) Return to the US
- 8) Buy a house
- 9) Repeat with modifications

Now, I know what you're thinking. "You're crazy!.... Why in the world would you sell the RV? The depreciation would be outrageous." It's a good point, and I have to tell you that we have considered keeping the RV for the sake of efficiency (*see item 9*). But perhaps now you are beginning to appreciate the complexity of The Plan and why we have been cautious in divulging its details until now.

"That's all well and good," you say, "but where exactly *are* you in the execution of The Plan?" I'm glad you asked as this is yet another illustration of why we have kept our proverbial mouths shut. We are, at the time of this writing, hopelessly and perhaps inexorably stuck at item 1. I have employed the best project management practices, learned through years of software development, and this could perhaps be the problem. The project is now overdue and over budget. We put the house on the market six long months ago, and the market abruptly buckled under its weight, getting squashed flat like a pancake. We now eagerly await its recovery.¹

¹ While there are those who now deny the existence of limbo, I can assure you that it is in fact a real place, because that is precisely where we are.

Southern Crossing

In May, Lori and I went to South America on a preview trip for The Plan (see *items 5 & 6*). My Rotary club had participated in a project with a club in the south of Chile to provide equipment for several rural schools. Lori and I took the opportunity to attend the local District Conference, participate in the presentation of the equipment, and do some scouting of the area. This was Lori's first time in South America and my first time in Chile. What a fantastic trip. Not only did we get to explore the capital city of Santiago and the towns of the central coast - Valparaiso & Viña del Mar, we also got to make quite a few new friends in the stunningly beautiful Lagos region of the south. We hope to be able to visit again soon.

The trip was also a turning point in the development of The Plan, because Lori and I both fell in love with Buenos Aires and decided that Argentina should be our primary destination (*item 5*) to achieve our goals (*item 6*). I had been there several times before but this time saw it with new eyes. We imposed horribly on our friends and relatives (yes, it's complicated) in BA, and even spent a little time looking at apartments. Mostly, though, we tried to get used to the impossible eating and sleeping habits. (Dinner usually starts about 10 p.m. and lasts regularly past midnight. And that's just the start of the evening.)

I should mention at this point that this three-week trip was made possible only by the help of friends and family: First, by Lori's mom, Caprice, and her husband, Bill, who took over parenting duties while we were away. We try to reciprocate by watching their dogs whenever they're out of town, but I don't think that quite evens things up. (Of course, they don't have to pick up poop either, so it's all relative.) Second, by our friends the Rojas, who made their brand new Santiago apartment available to us during our stay. (And, yes, although it was newly furnished, Lori still found a way to organize it.^{1.5})

Boys of Summer

In April², Hunter and I made our first "guys trip" to visit my brother, Derik, in Ft. Lauderdale. Hunter had never seen the land of my youth – the Intracoastal Waterway and megayachts, the gold sand beaches and warm surf, the Cuban cuisine and all of the tourists covered in oil (and not much else). This was my second trip back in a year (I had been out the previous September for my high school reunion), and I have to admit to feeling somewhat nostalgic about the place for the first time since leaving twenty years ago. There's just something about pink plastic flamingos in the front lawn that can touch you deep inside.

Mom and Bob flew out from California for the trip, and Mom had a great time teaching Hunter to snorkel. While the winds kept us off the reefs, Hunter was content to demonstrate his piscine prowess in the pool. Every night there was a scuffle as we forcibly extracted him from the warm water to begin deprimification.

^{1.5} "How do you say 'motorized hepa-filter vacuum' in Spanish?"

² That's summer in Florida.

North by Northwest

Lori and I spent a good part of the summer researching (and test driving) many of the nearly-300 makes of RVs, finally narrowing down to what we think will be the ideal vehicle for The Plan (*item 2*). Having done our homework, we were ready to begin serious negotiations³, just as soon as we signed a deal on the house (*item 1*). Still, as summer's end approached, we found ourselves *domus stillus* and *motodomus nillus* (that's Latin for "no deal"). So, with places to go and people to see, we piled into the Suburban and made our way up the coast in our "miniRV."

Time and space don't permit me to delve into the details of this sojourn, so I will save that for another venue, but you can get at least some sense of the trip from the pictures. I will tell you that what we had planned to be a three-week trip turned out to be a three-month odyssey with ports of call all the way up the West coast and into Canada. Most of the time was spent in Seattle with Dad and Roni (where we got to re-experience the forgotten joys of living in a house during renovation), and they joined us on many of our side trips throughout the Northwest.⁴ When the school year started, and we found ourselves just outside of our school district (by, let's say, 1,000 miles), we skipped ahead in The Plan (*to item 3b*⁵), registered ourselves as a California private school, and began larnin' the kids ourselves.⁶

In mid-October, we came to the realization that our beloved house was still *our* beloved house, and that it was time to go back to it, pay the mortgage, and make sure the fish were still alive.⁷

³ We got far enough into the negotiation process to learn a number of useful tidbits. Some of these are the same for buying a car, but as you may expect, since large RVs are part car, part house (with the price tag being closer to the house), some are more exaggerated:

- 1) The salesperson with whom you spend 95% of your time will never close the deal – for that the salesperson will introduce you to "my good friend, Hank, who really is the expert on this vehicle." This person is "the Closer."
- 2) The Closer's job is to first laugh hysterically when you suggest a price for the vehicle and then squeal like a pig when, after several hours of negotiating, you finally arrive at a reasonable price.
- 3) If you do not hear the Closer squeal, you have not gotten a reasonable price. For RVs, this generally hovers at about 25% below list price (really).

⁴ In truth, we made two separate trips, including virtually all modes of travel except the RV: up by car, down by plane, up by train, down by car (with several boat trips in the middle). As a result, we have come to the uninformed conclusion that the only way to travel with three children must be an RV.

⁵ Not listed above. What? You didn't think I would tell you *everything*, did you?

⁶ The name of our school, *Natura Rerum*, was divinely inspired. No, it does not mean "naked bottom."

⁷ A note on pets. A few kudos are in order to those who managed our responsibilities during our wayward gallivanting. First, to Lori's sister, Emily, who is the proud, adoptive parent of Sasha II, the cat between which and myself there is no shared love. Next, to Lori's brother, Jonathan, who was the caretaker of Hunter's beloved (now three-plus-foot-long) Ball Python, Slither. (And need I point out that there is poop detail in both cases.) Finally, once again, to Caprice and Bill, for careful management of the Wagner Reef. Caprice is now a certified marine aquarist and can tell you, for example, exactly why the pH fluctuates daily and in inverse proportion to the oxygen redux potential. Thank you, all!

Climbing Mt. Whistler Interlude

While I have promised not to force on you the details of the great odyssey, I am unable to pass up this *one little story*. On The Second Great Trip up the coast (in mid-December), we found ourselves on a closed, mountain road just miles short of our destination, stuck in our vehicle for what would turn out to be the entire night. We had planned to be at Whistler by nightfall, but planning often takes a back seat when the back seat is filled with children, and so there we were, hours behind schedule (but hours ahead, as it turns out, of a major storm, which knocked out the power for much of the Northwest for a good part of the week to come). Having just made our final pit stop, fuel tanks (the car's and our own) were full, bladders were empty, and we were well equipped for a night on the mountain if that's what it came to. There were rumors that the road may be closed ahead, but faced with a three-hour trip back to Seattle or a search of indeterminate length for the last remaining hotel room in the area, we chose to press on the remaining twenty five miles.

As we continued up the hill, the snowfall, light at first, began to thicken steadily as dense wads of slush thwapped down onto the windshield like half-frozen flapjacks. We found ourselves tailing a police car for the first mile or so, which was comforting, until it pulled off to assist a vehicle that had slid off the road into the rising snow. Seeing tail lights ahead, we continued on. In minutes, we overtook the car, which turned out to be a small hatchback wholly unsuited for the present condition of the road. The car was steadily making its way up the hill, fishtailing and slip-sliding across one lane then the other, pretending, it seemed, that this was precisely how one ought to climb a mountain road. The Suburban, on the other hand, is a different beast. Now in four wheel drive (for the first time ever) and sporting new tires, our Soccer Mom Mobile was as solid as a rock.

I should tell you at this point, and I know some of you will be surprised, that Lori was in the driver's seat. The Suburban is Lori's car, and what's more, she (as Colorado girl, well accustomed to snow) was not about to let some "Florida boy" take her family up a snowy, mountain road. I tell you this because I am comfortable enough in my own skin to know that this is not an assault on my manhood. I also tell you this, because the next thing that happened was we ran over a tree. It's true, one doesn't usually expect to find a tree growing horizontally, and especially not one camouflaged as a snowy, mountain road. But there it was, and we both managed to spot it, immediately before we traversed it with all four wheels. The truck treated the hapless tree like nothing more than a speed bump with pine needles, and we decided to push on a bit further, figuring that we could always just run it over again on the way back down. It was at about this time, we learned from the radio, that our mountain road was closed to traffic at points A and B. We rightly guessed that these points, which actually have real names, known only to the indigenous peoples and not printed on any map, were probably ahead and behind us, respectively. And so, with going on just as good as going back, we forged ahead.

Before long we came to the frozen, red river of tail lights that effectively meant the end of progress. Lori made an impromptu bed for the kids in the ample midsection of the truck, and we began to take turns excavating the windshield from the constant caking and monitoring the line for any signs of movement. The kids were down for a good 30 seconds before they suddenly all had to pee. Normally, this would not have been a problem, but the deepening snow and the stage lighting (quite a few cars managed to sneak in behind us – they must have done some tree hopping of their own) meant that forays into the bushes were out of the question. So, Lori devised the Double Door Dangle method, wherein, with both passenger-side doors open, the girls could squat at the edge of the front passenger seat and, holding on to Dad for dear life, dangle their little butts over the side out of sight of the spectators. It was a clever scheme, and it was ultimately successful, but it was not without its challenges. Sarah, who was in the most

urgent need to test the maneuver, discovered that, once her bare derriere hit the air, she was suddenly unable to go. Of course, it didn't help that I was yelling at her to hurry up (as I was supporting her weight and sharing in the cold night air) and that Lori was yelling at me to stop yelling at Sarah and that Nicole and Hunter were both yelling at Lori and at each other that each was the next one to go and Sarah was screaming all the while that she couldn't. The boys were a little better equipped under the circumstances, and, in the end, all parties were, well, relieved.

The rest of the night passed without incident, especially for the kids, who slept just like they were home in their beds. Some time during the night, we inched past a jack-knifed truck and beyond it a near-endless line of cars waiting to get down the mountain. When we pulled into the condo just before dawn, Lori and I were ready to relive our repressed memories of sleeping horizontally. Just for a couple of hours. Then, we knew, we would no longer be able to restrain the little monsters, who were just itchin' for a good snowball pelting.

Boundless Blue

As alluded to in last year's letter (which I never wrote), I am no longer working at, for, or in the general vicinity of NASA. (Not at this very moment anyway.) Shifting political winds left the Mission Simulation Facility project in the doldrums, and following a six-month stint at JPL, where the same winds were (not) blowing, it became apparent that it was time to find a new ship (preferably one without sails). So, in October of last year, Boundless Blue, my part-time, on-the-side, pet-project pastime became my full-time enterprise, and my one-page website became... well, a one-page website with a really cool logo. (The cobbler's kids, you know.) In truth there was little visible change in daily life. I continue to work from home (or wherever), doing software development and technology consulting, but now the checks come from different places (and are frequently late).

Take a Walk

Another very good excuse for not getting to last year's letter was my obsessive involvement with Rotary and, in particular, [West Coast Walk](#). The club presidency, which had been time-consuming in 2004, became all-consuming in 2005, when we conducted one of Rotary's largest projects to celebrate its centennial year and to help in its global humanitarian service. The project was the brain child of Nathan Auerbach, a then-twenty-six-year-old member of the club, who walked from Tijuana, Mexico to Vancouver, Canada – over 2,000 miles – and, as a result, raised over \$100,000 toward worldwide polio eradication. The three-month walk was a nine-month project, and many of the members of our way-too-small-club are still recovering.⁸

This year, the club has chosen a fundraising project a bit closer to home. The Calendar of the Canyons provides a sampling of some of the natural beauty of the canyon communities in which we live. [Check out the website](#) – whoever created it did a *really* good job.

In 2005-2006, I participated in the district level of Rotary as an Assistant Governor, where I got to see how some of the other clubs do their great works. My favorite has always been international service, and I was pleased this year to see a long-term project come to fruition. The Rural Clinic of Tecate, Mexico opened its doors, behind which were the rooms furnished with medical equipment procured through our club's matching grant.

⁸ Some for different reasons than others. I had the privilege to walk with Nathan on several occasions. During these trips, I made the following observations:

- 1) 4.5 mph is a LOT faster than it sounds
- 2) So this is why they invented automobiles

Spanglish

In preparation for The Plan's most crucial elements (*item 6*), I started taking Spanish lessons late in 2005. By the time of our trip to South America, I had managed to elevate myself to the level of a two-year-old. Our hosts were most impressed at my lack of accent as well as my lack of vocabulary. When asked what we'd like to eat, for example, I was able to say with the intonation of a native speaker, "steak... good... yummm." Now that our allowance for language instruction has been spent, I mostly watch Mexican television. I can tell you who kidnapped *Rosalinda*, and I can sell used cars and spiritual oil like nobody's business.

Dog Watching Interlude

In August, Lori, the kids, and I joined a sizeable number of family members to participate again in the Alzheimer's Association Memory Walk here in Orange County. As it happened, Bill and Capi were out of town, and we were dog-sitting the shelties (remember, we're way behind on that score). It turns out that this event is big for dogs, and the canines were out in force, leading their people pets all over the park. Lori and I had a great time pointing out the bizarre similarities between the different breeds and their respective owners: there were perky, long-curly-haired golden retrievers leading long-curly-blonde-pony-tailed joggers; playful, puffed-up poodles pulling bubbly, bouffanted bleach-blondes; squat, drooling, scowling bulldogs dragging pumped-up, bow-legged, jowly gymnasts... well, you get the picture. It was uncanny, we decided, how people start to look like their dogs, and we had a good private laugh. Then one of the cousins came up to us and pointed out that, in the sun, my beard shone red, brown, and white, matching the shelties' coats perfectly. I handed the leashes to the kids and went home to shave.

What's in a Name

Speaking of business, I (would have) told you last year about Lori's entrepreneurial debut. Following sage advice to "do what you love," Lori created her own company, *Diva Domestica*⁹, in January 2005. She now does professionally what she has been doing as her pastime for most of her life, namely, home organization and management. After two years, I can report that the business has been a solid success, limited only by our own priorities (see *The Plan*). Lori manages to maintain the delicate balance between work and home life (something with which I continually struggle) and has found a way to make a living at a profession that most people have never heard of.¹⁰

In an effort to remedy that, I have asked Lori to share with you some of the principals of her business. In case they are not self-explanatory, I have also provided my own useful commentary.

It's all about flow¹¹

Only handle it once¹²

Surround yourself with things that you love¹³

When we do manage to get to The Plan – item 2, we will be putting these maxims to the ultimate test as we reduce our daily living space by about 92%.

⁹ The company name was divinely inspired. Of course, now that everyone loves it, Lori and I both claim credit for it. But I can tell you here that the instrument of this revelation was, of course, me. It's important, though, that you take this on faith, and refrain from consulting Lori.

¹⁰ I must point out that, on our trip to South America, we did a little marketing for *Diva Domestica*, to see if such a business would be viable in the Latin countries as well. There may be some issues. It appears, for example, that the name (which, of course, is Spanish) conjures images of latex and leather, something equivalent, say, to the English phrase "Domestic Dominatrix." We will (most likely) have to take a different tack.

¹¹ Stuff comes in. Stuff goes out. Mail in. Recycling out. Paycheck – money in. Bills – money out. When stuff comes in but stuff doesn't go out, you get clutter. (Or maybe you just need more fiber in your diet.)

¹² This is a pro-efficiency, anti-procrastination rule, which is self-explanatory. But sometime I will share with you my theory of selective procrastination. Sometime later, that is.

¹³ This is most clear in the converse: get rid of the stuff you don't really love. And Lori is very good at helping you figure out what those things are. Like those T-shirts I had since college – the really comfy ones with the holes in them. I didn't love those. I thought I did, but I didn't.

Family Time

Lori is still the Domestic Diva at home as well and somehow keeps the house looking like a model.¹⁴ We also enjoy entertaining.¹⁵ Ok, Lori does the entertaining. I typically make myself scarce until the guests arrive, at which point I emerge from my office and am relegated to providing drinks.¹⁶

Up until now, I had been doing most of our home schooling, but as we endeavor to balance work and school (here in limbo), Lori and I have started sharing these responsibilities more. Our areas of expertise complement each other well: Me – math, science, social studies, and humanities; Lori – reading, writing, athletics, and how to be a well-rounded, well-mannered, self-sustained human being. We try to focus on practical lessons such as our recent [Mentos and Diet Coke](#) experiments.

¹⁴ I think all (three) of the prospective buyers who have come to look at the house in the last six months were surprised to find that we had children... and that they actually lived in the house.

¹⁵ I need to point out to friends in the area, lest they think they are not worthy of the guest list, that most of these events in the past year-plus have been either family or Rotary events. It's high time we open it up to a wider audience, and I have taken this as a New Year's Resolution. Really.

¹⁶ Turning a handicap into a calling, well that and just getting bored with the usual fare, I have taken to inventing drinks of my own. (Often, I create these with other people, but I don't give them credit.) Here are some of our latest concoctions (notice the emerging Pirate theme):

Rum Barrel: 3ish oz. Bailey's Irish Cream, 1-or-so oz. Bacardi Dark Rum, and touch of nutmeg.

Ship's Surgeon: about 2 oz. Captain Morgan's Spiced Rum, ice, something like 4 oz. Diet Dr Pepper, and a splash from this bottle of dark stuff with no label.

Napoleon (Martini): 3.1 oz. Kettle One vodka, 2 squirts chocolate syrup, and 2 ½ raspberries. I can't remember why this is called the *Napoleon*. I think it's because it makes you put your hand on your stomach and you feel very, very small.

Girls, Inc.

Lori continued her work with Junior League this past year, this time as an advisor to Girls, Inc., an organization that "inspires all girls to be strong, smart, and bold." Lori took the tag line to the next level by arranging for the girls to take self defense classes. She also managed to get the classes featured in the newspaper several times, usually with a full-size photo of her rolling around on the floor with some big, sweaty guy who was not me.¹⁷

¹⁷ Our friends took great pleasure in sending me these photos, and I expect that we have not seen the last of them. The photos, that is.

Chewy Center Interlude

Congratulations! You've done it. You've found the Golden Ticket - the Secret of Life, the Universe, and Everything. You now know exactly how many licks it takes to get to the center of a Tootsie-Roll Tootsie-Pop.¹⁸

Seriously, though. If you've gotten this far, you deserve something good, and here it is, a pillar of the Wagner Family Philosophy: It's all about balance.¹⁹ Wax on, wax off. A little work, a little play. A little teaching, a little learning. A little love, a little... okay, never mind that, just a whole lotta love.

We're trying not to get too caught up in the rat race, not to take anything for granted, and not to take ourselves too seriously. We're trying to make the moments last and to make the most of each and every one. Balance. And there you have it, the real impetus behind The Plan and probably whatever comes next.

¹⁸ 42.

¹⁹ Ok, so Lori said it was all about flow. Well, it is. It's all about flow. And balance. Balance and flow. And really good Italian food.

Karate Kid

Hunter, now nine, is a model son and a gentle and loving big brother. Up at six a.m., he is usually dressed and has his bed made before the rest of us are conscious. He will then read, play with his Bionicle creations, or practice a little Karate *kata*²⁰, something in which he has taken a decided interest lately. It's true, he has always loved to wrestle and can often be seen doing imaginary battle with invisible opponents, but we were never really sure until now if this was a forte or a foible. It turns out he has a real talent for the martial arts, which comes as a relief, since our forays into team sports have been less than successful. I am convinced, in fact, that there is some kind of weird magnetic attraction between just about any athletic ball and Hunter's face. We are hoping his improved speed and dexterity will help him dodge and block more effectively in the future as this will no doubt be necessary on the football²¹-crazed continent of South America (see *The Plan – item 5*).

²⁰ This at least is what my spies tell me, as I am usually still involved in the detailed inspection of the backsides of my eyelids during these activities.

²¹ That's "soccer" for the gringos.

Zoo Tycoon

Home School Assessment: A

Hunter has maintained his love of all things reptilian, and while he may not exactly be able to spell *Coelophysis*, he can pronounce it, and he can tell you exactly what habitat this dinosaur prefers. This fascination has lately been reinforced by Hunter's new favorite game, [Zoo Tycoon](#). And now with the *Marine Mania* and *Dinosaur Digs* add-ons, Hunter (who will occasionally let Nicole play as well) is able to create shark encounters and orchestrate orca shows as well as hatch *Tyrannasaurus Rex* eggs and recapture escaped *Allosauruses*.²² Before he discovered the cheats which now provide him an endless supply of cash, he was getting pretty good at managing a budget and keeping the tourists happy, balancing entrance fees and loans against research and operations costs.²³

²² *Allosauri*?

²³ One down side to his newfound avocation is that trips to Sea World are not as much fun. While the rest of us are content to see the animals, Hunter is usually busy determining if there are sufficient food venues and if the rest rooms are optimally placed throughout the park.

Call Me Bob Interlude

Halloween caught us a bit off-guard this year, since it arrived unexpectedly just after The First Great Trip. With the stock of ready-made plastic costumes sorely depleted, it was time for some domestic creativity. *Lori!* The girls were pretty easy – they have a sizeable costume wardrobe, always ready for those occasions where one may have need of a fairy princess. But Hunter wasn't too keen on making it a trio, and anything we had on hand with the slightest bit of masculinity left in it was also generally a few feet too short. So, after a failed costume run to the usual places, Lori made an unexpected stop at Lowe's²⁴. One bright yellow hardhat and one oversized toolbox later, she was home with the beginnings of a very creative and decidedly unique construction worker costume. Add some goggles, toss in a tape measure, and finish it off with a tool belt and hammer, and *voilà!*, there you have it, "Bob the Builder." Or so I thought. And then I said so.

Now, Hunter, a product of the microwave generation, was already on edge about this "home made" costume. He knew full well that his many neighborhood friends would be decked out in the latest Star Wars and Superhero and SpongeBob SquarePants. And nobody, not anybody, not one person, would look anything like a construction worker. What's worse, I had just uttered a curse in the language of pre-adolescent boys... Bob the Builder. *Bob the Builder is for babies!*

This was an inauspicious start to the evening. Hunter took off running, shedding parts on his way back to his room, as Lori and I chased after him, scooping up yellow plastic pieces all the way. It took some serious convincing and dedicated double-teaming to cajole Hunter back into his hard hat and down to the street for some trick-or-treating. Lori assured him that I was just out of touch and that he did not look like Bob the Builder; he was a construction worker, and he looked great, and he should be proud of his costume, and just get out there and have some fun. And it worked.

It worked, that is, until he got to the first house. (*Trick or Treat!*) *Hey, look, honey, it's Bob the Builder! Isn't he adorable? Here you go, Bob. Here's a lollipop.* And so it went, house after house after house. To his credit, he made it half-way down the block before he packed up his toolbox of candy and came home.

Shortly thereafter, with the girls now ready for their rounds, we convinced Hunter to pick his chin up and give it another shot. And this time, I told him, "I'll give you a buck every time someone calls you 'Bob.'"²⁵ So, off we went, and Bob, I mean Hunter, had an entirely new attitude. "Go ahead," he said in his demeanor, "I dare you to say it." And, wouldn't you know it? From that point on, not a single person did.²⁶

²⁴ This maneuver was, I believe, divinely inspired.

²⁵ Ditto.

²⁶ Ok, in truth, one person did. But it was a kid and not a real person. And he had already been working the Bob thing earlier in the evening and was just following up with another round to maintain dominance. If you don't have kids or never were one yourself, you may not know this, but kids are mean. They're a lot like adults, but they're usually shorter and meaner.

iMusic

Nicole is still our most avid reader. It's possible that this habit has been enhanced by Grandma Caprice's root beer float reward for each completed chapter book. (This also explains how the people at A&W know Nicole by name.) Nicole has become a huge music fan as well, and the rest of us find ourselves paying her rent for the use of the family iPod. It's gotten so bad that Santa Claus had to intervene this year and bring Nicole a Nano of her own. I loaded it up for her yesterday, and she was thrilled. That is, she was thrilled at having anytime access to Sheryl Crow, her all-time favorite, but she was miffed that it was hidden among all the other yucky (horizon-expanding) stuff that Dad put on there. This will no doubt be the source of many a "discussion" in the future.²⁷

²⁷ I was thrilled the other day to learn that she was listening to something new – a little *Bob Marley & the Wailers*. I thought, "There you go. Give them the opportunity, and they will take advantage of it." Then I discovered that she had accidentally come across "I Shot the Sheriff" while doing a search for, you guessed it, *Sheryl Crow* (S-H-E-R...).

1-2-3

Nicole is a crafty child, and she likes to figure out how things work (this includes people) and, in particular, what happens when you do... *this*? She recently acquired a digital alarm clock for her room and immediately set about experimenting. Alarms began to go off regularly and randomly, often in the wee hours of the morning. On one night at bedtime, I caught her setting the alarm for 1:23 a.m. I thought she had lost her mind, but no, she explained, she just liked the sequence, 1-2-3. That's absolutely not going to work, I explained. You can't go waking people up at one in the morning, just because you like the number. That's absurd. Not going to happen. Period. I turned off the alarm, kissed her goodnight, and turned to go. Then, knowing Nicole as I do, I stopped at the door, looked her in the eye, and made it very clear that I did NOT expect to hear that alarm going off at 1:23. She assured me that it wouldn't, and I went to bed. And slept perfectly well until startled awake by the shrill beeping of a digital clock. Sitting up in bed, I rubbed my eyes vigorously with my fists²⁸, and strained to read the clock in my own room. Finally, the numbers came into focus. It was 2:34.

²⁸ This has been scientifically proven to do absolutely nothing.

Pig Sweat Interlude

Home School Assessment: A-

The other day while walking past the laundry room, I was surprised to find the laundry hamper agape and choking on children's clothes. This is an unacceptable state of affairs in our house, and so I chose this moment to launch into an oration on what really happens to clothes as they magically move from the hamper through the laundry room and back into neatly folded piles in children's bedrooms and, most importantly, why clothes don't necessarily need to be washed just because they have touched our bodies. I then made the mistake of employing metaphor²⁹ to emphasize the point. "Unless you've been sweating like pigs..." I said, with deep conviction. Nicole interrupted me, without expression or emotion. "Pigs don't sweat," she said. *Silence.* "What?" said I, paused in mid-sentence, a hammer ready to deliver the final verbal blow. "Pigs don't sweat," she said again. "It's true!" chimed in Hunter cheerfully. "We read it on funbrain.com."

Can you believe the audacity? How do you respond to a full frontal assault on your credibility like that? I was stunned, but I would not be outdone. "Well," I said, "they don't wear clothes either."³⁰

²⁹ For the English majors, yes, I know, it's actually a *simile*, but cut me some slack, will you? (There, that was a metaphor.)

³⁰ For the skeptics, yes, technically, pigs do sweat, but not very much. (And they almost never wear clothes when they do.)

Happy Place

Sarah is now five, and this is significant, because there were a number of things we weren't yet ready to do at four of which five-year-olds are apparently magically capable. Swimming and riding bicycles are two examples that regularly got the "when I'm five I'll do that" response. I'm happy to report that she was right, and though it's a bit cold for swimming at the moment, Sarah is rarely seen lately without her wheels.

When not cruising the neighborhood, Sarah can often be found in her own little world. Although I've never actually been there, I can tell you a few things about it. First, it is a Very Happy Place. When you are there you are prone to sing and skip and dance un-self-consciously, and nothing can disturb your daydreaming. Next, time there moves very... very... slowly. The simplest tasks have been known to last for hours. Consequently, it is sometimes a challenge to motivate Sarah to do whatever thing it is that you think needs doing. I'm not saying she doesn't listen. She listens. It's just that it's hard to hear well when you're singing and twirling. And so if you ask often, this thing that you feel is so important that it must get done, certainly will get done. Eventually.

GPS

Home School Assessment: B

During our travels this year, we added to our arsenal a new weapon – a portable GPS navigation system. How we ever lived without it, I have no idea. Sarah was justifiably curious about it, and so one time while sitting in the car waiting for Hunter, we had an impromptu lesson on how the global positioning system actually works. Sarah seemed satisfied with our detailed explanation of satellites and receivers, triangulation and time delay, and we felt pretty good about chalking up another real-life lesson for home school. Then as we set off on our way and were greeted with the usual "please drive to highlighted route," Sarah blurted out, "Hunter, hear that lady? She's in space!"

Famous Quotes Interlude

I think if I could only include one thing in this letter, it just might be these quotes. They are the verbal snapshots of our life, each one uttered with the sincerity and complete lack of self-consciousness that are the surest sign of innocence.

Hunter (8-9):

Driving past a house which had been tented for termites – “Hey, look, a Clown House.”

“Great White sharks get a *lottttt* of money from the Tooth Fairy.”

“Statues are usually people who are dead.”

Nicole (6-7):

Following a diatribe on the virtues of proper annunciation – “Is gibberish in New Jersey?”

“If so many people love you, you live forever. It said that on the Discovery Health Channel.”

Sarah (4-5):

“I’m a good thornfeeler. That’s someone who can feel thorns.”

Standing in the doorway with rubber dishwashing gloves on her feet and an extra pair in her outstretched hands – “Dad, do you want to be a chicken?”

While spiraling a Vaseline-coated Q-tip³¹ in her nostril – “It’s just like roasting a marshmallow really fast.”

“Hunter made me annoy myself!”

³¹ Before you write to admonish us with the ‘nothing smaller than an elbow’ axiom, you should know that this is a pediatrician-recommended method for preventing nosebleeds.

Finale

Ok, you've done it. You've officially caught yourself up on Wagner family happenings, great and small.

This is usually where we tell you that we hope you'll visit and maybe make it soon and stuff like that. But, if you've actually read this far without cheating, then you know that we're probably past that. So, this year, prepare yourselves for a visit from us. That's right, you're going to have to clear a nice wide space in the street for the Intrepid Traveling Wagnermobile, coming your way immediately (as prescribed in The Plan - item 3c³¹).

We wish you all peace and joy and a Very Happy 2007.

Love,

Michael, Lori, Hunter, Nicole, and Sarah Wagner

³¹ Did I forget to mention that?