

2005: The Cross and the *lankey*...

On New Years Day morning, as I was waking up and thinking of the year ahead, the words "Open to the cross" were meandering through my mind. "Could it mean something for this year?" I wondered. When we think of a cross, we think to think of the Christian symbol because it's where Jesus hung and died (recall The Passion). "I'm not going to die am I??" Suddenly I was wide awake, and I'm thinking: "I have three kids, a pregnant wife, a new house and a jumbo mortgage, and I think we ran out of diapers last night... I can't die now". This would not be convenient. It would have to wait till... well on the list of my priorities for 2005 it's somewhere right after cleaning the garage. I'm sure the cross is a very misunderstood symbol (I frankly avoided it for years myself), and so whatever "opening" to it meant, we were in for a bumpy ride in 2005. Let's see how it turned out:

We were stunned on April 7th, after months of prayer, when Lee's father went in for heart surgery, and the surgeon discovered his heart had been miraculously healed within weeks of his last x-ray - narrowed arteries were normal size and the heart was functioning normally, and not even relying on the pacemaker which earlier had been doing 98% of the beating. He was discharged in a matter of hours with a clean bill of health! The great blessing was that it became possible for Lee's parents to visit us in LA for Elize's birth-day in June. Three months after Jake had asked God to "please give my grandfather a new heart", he was being chased around the pool and catapulted into the water.

We enjoyed being outside this year: The pool got our best-idea-since award, and we had fun seeing the kids go from cautious to confident to bold in a matter of months. Friends and cannon bombs and pizza and popsicles became the order of the day.

When summer came Jake (6) finished Kindergarten, Cathy (4) performed in her ballet recital (a bunny) and Oom F and Tannie Gen came to visit. Emma (2) had a fantastic birthday on July 3rd and we capped it off with fireworks at the Hollywood Bowl. (And you are all invited for next year!)

Our gardener, Louis (not from Mexico) mowed the lawn (fairly often) this year, and gardening became a great family activity with the kids. We also did some hedges and trenches (thanks Andrew) and added gates to secure the front yard (to keep the kids inside). Our plumber, Louis (not from France), was busy fixing pipes, replacing faucets and endless sprinkler fittings - even a flushmate.

Looking back, we did a lot of building this year. Louis did do more carpentry this year than...in his entire life: installing doors, building some table space and shelves for the kids for schoolwork, and we also had a masonry wall built with our neighbors.

Our family will remember 2005 as the year we built the honor house (try it - add one lego block for honoring a family member and remove one for not). After steady progress and completion (hey it worked so we stretched it for a few months!) the reward was going to Seaworld when Uncle Ekke visited in September.

We celebrated our ninth anniversary on April 19th: simply around the dinner table with our children. We had small gifts and showed them our wedding pictures, explaining the power of keeping a promise, and they were the proof of the fruitfulness!

This year Emma-Emma-kiss-kiss slowly started talking and became decidedly facially expressive. By year's end it was "wah-u-doing?", "cum-se-dow-heye", "weh-ahh-you?", "I-doh-wan-dat" and "you-help-me?". Somewhere between blowing "lu-yu" kisses, her "lankey" (the accept-no-substitutes-even-if-you-have-to-drive-back-to-where-we-left-it-poooh blanket), doing "lieppa" (messaging with make-up), and the countless "baboo's" (bottle of milk, nuked for 45 seconds, shaken and delivered as her head strikes the pillow), this 2-year old may have calmly stole the show this year from a group of show-stopping siblings.

Oh yes, and on top of all this, Lee was pregnant and Elize was born on June 1st, right after the sun broke through on an overcast day. In many ways, this was metaphoric for the light that started breaking through in our year too.

Jake played in the basket ball league this year (his first team sport), and lost a clincher in the finals. It was great to introduce him to team sports and teach him through some disappointments, victories and reactions. And he is still talking about his trophy.

We also decided to open our house to others this year, and have truly been blessed and made many new friends. In the fall, we started homeschooling Jake for first grade and have a weekly co-operative gathering for extra-curricular group activities. This circle of friendships and what has happened through this co-op has truly been one of the great miracles of our year. Knowing we probably couldn't have the energy to do this, this venture is turning into a manifold blessing for

each member of our family. Christmas came early for us when we had 60 odd people over for our co-op's program "Sleeping in a manager". Seeing these children express their singing-dancing-acting-ballet-and-drumming talents and relationships that were being nurtured in our home each week, was a gift we will simply remember forever.

There are a few things some of us did for the first time this year: blew up a balloon; planted a tree; made a fire-pit in the back yard; Cathy wore her first pair of ballet slippers; Jake shot a hoop; we had our first "dream-night"; Cathy did the monkey-bars all by herself; Jake read his first book; sang Elize-Navidad; had lunch with my son at his school (a study shows that 77% of fathers have never done this!); mowed my own lawn; Emma began to pray; Cathy wrote her own name; bought my first chainsaw (a study shows that 100% of fathers want to do this); played our first monopoly game; read through the children's Bible together; Jake touched the bottom of the deep end; Lee waited four weeks to do her first post-partum handstand (see she is wonder-woman); and Jake catered his first family picnic dinner in his room.

There are some interesting things overheard in our family this year:

- "What if we have another Cathy?"
- "Put your hands back on the wheel, I'm about to have a baby!"
- "Mom, this is better than McDonalds"
- "Is my name written in the Lamb's book of life?"
- "Aggh...I hate kisses!"
- "Dad, we have to have more boys"
- "Wow Dad, your fire is actually working."
- "I want you to teach me to remember verses."

With the year coming to a close, Louis is changing jobs, Lee is teaching-reaching-raising-praising-feeding-pleading-holding-and-molding four little world changers, Jake is learning to be a servant, Cathy is still a princess (but can now do it while shouldering a play phone), Emma has a cult-like following, and Elize is starting to eat solid foods and enjoys laughing at the crazy people she studies from her high chair.

As our family transitions from child-bearing to child-rearing, we have determined that laughter needs to precede laundry. As parents, we are learning to listen to what our children are saying even when they don't speak. We are starting to control our urge to add something to say and to stop thinking about something else when they are with us; and seeing how much a child can respond when talking with them instead of at them. And although this'll take time, Dad is learning that their relationship is more important than getting them in the car.

As many of you know, spending time with kids is draining (and interrupted sleep is a method of torture) especially when they outnumber you. But we have learnt (actually Lee has known and I am realizing) that when one has nothing left to give, the best response is to give. It's hard to think about significance and eternity when you're holding a diaper and trying to find Emma's lankey. It just is. But that's exactly where our family is right now.

Did I die this year? No, but a lot of stuff that doesn't matter died in our lives this year. Like Emma, although it gives her comfort, and she doesn't want to consider life without it, there is no question that one day she will open her eyes and leave the substitute behind. And each of us came to crossroads between comfort and caring. A lot of time, self and functionality had to go to make room for values and relationships that, although they were a sacrifice at the time, are truly satisfying. The garage still isn't clean (well maybe that's for next year, honey), but there's new life in our family. We experienced God's miracle healing in an old heart, the miracle gift of life from a mother's womb, the endless kinetic energy of a young boy, the infectiousness of a girl's joy to overwhelm a depressive thought, the courage to swim across the deep end for the first time, and the marvel of a toddler singing songs with words she couldn't even know yet. And the miracle of friendship.

So I have concluded that it is impossible to be independent – what matters is who we depend upon. My Cathy-girl walks up to me and (even though she has done this a zillion times) throws her hands up into the air and unashamedly dependent says "I need you to pick me up". And then she waits for me. Even when I am tired, I find I can smile and lift her up, because her wanting to be with me makes all the difference in my world....

There are so many family, friends, neighbors and families we are thankful for this year for deeply impacting our lives. Each one of you has connected with us in a special way. And there are many of you who we miss and long to be with, whose memory and anticipation of seeing soon excites us for a wonderful new year.

Let's build some bricks together in 2006,

Louis, Lee, Jake, Cathy, Emma and Elize Eksteen.

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