

## **2009 – Faith like corn fields and balance beams**

*“...And the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice, even with joy and singing... You crown the year with Your goodness, and your paths drip with abundance. They drop on the pastures of the wilderness... the valleys also are covered with grain; they shout for joy, they also sing.” Isaiah 35:1-2; Ps. 65:11-13*

The Eksteen family theme in this year of gratitude was “farming”. You see after a few years of traversing the wilderness (aka our back yard) with thoughts of “we should do this here”... and “what if we did that over there”... and “why did Adam have to ruin this gardening thing for the rest of us”, we finally just... began. As the Boers would say we “tackled” it - graded the thing, built some curved terraces, planted two vegetable gardens, laid irrigation to it all, recessed a circular trampoline, ran electricity to “the Shack”, planted some sod, raked mulch... and generated enough project potential for Family, Inc. to last their combined lifetimes. The metamorphosis was a marvelous redemption of territory – sunflowers stretching to the sky; tomatoes overtaking our accelerating consumption; zucchini’s bigger than rugby balls and watermelons the size of balloons; carrots and artichokes and radishes and beets and proliferating pumpkin squashes. All from seeds planted with faith and water.

Spending time together as a family outdoors was the real goal, and a surpassingly wonderful gift. The teachable moments abounded, and a Top-10 came early one morning while standing next to the towering cornstalks with our offspring: their eyes wide opened, their minds grappling over those little kernels their tiny fingers had poked into the ground a few short weeks before, when suddenly these words are sown into their fertile hearts: “If God can do that with a seed, imagine what he can do with you!” For years, Lee and I will remember sitting on a shaded wrought iron bench, sipping coffee, our kids bouncing on the tramp, giggling, laughing, doing shows, telling stories, and dogs racing around vying for attention. These are the days my friends...

In February, our family grew by one – a hyperactive chiwawa-and-weiner mix (don’t ask), the size of two soda cans, named Foxy. Ringo (the last dog Dad was going to get) now has a partner in crime and our kids have twice the memories... and twice the amount of poop to scoop.

Jake, our resident 5<sup>th</sup> grader, will in a few short months be statistically smarter than most Americans (by gameshow standards), and according to a recent survey, more qualified than a majority of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade public school teachers in Southern Africa. His 10th birthday was a laser tag fest with his friends, and since last Christmas Jake became a Wii master at Mariokart and Star Wars Lego among others. And as Jake reminds us, there is always a mission for Nerf (guns). He loves waking up with Dad and spending time in the morning together (He’s started to shave (with the back of the razor) and enjoys picking his Dad’s brain on assorted topics), making breakfast and coordinating family nights. A lot of our spare time this year was spent at the gym - Jake competed in February and favors the rings (upside down). Jake has an advanced grasp of the Bible and participated in a Bible memory contest. This year he picked up guitar and continued with drama and piano. In short, he’s a brilliant, athletic, well-balanced 10 year-old with a bright future. ☺

Cathy (8) persisting with her love for Gymnastics, was awarded the “Artistic Excellence Award” for outstanding performance at a regional meet and was one of only 695 girls who qualified for the State Championships in Long Beach in November. She surpassed her personal bests in Beam, Floor and All Around and at her level finished 16<sup>th</sup> in her age group. On the balance beam (her favorite event) she fell from a handstand (a 0.5 deduction), without breaking her neck, and still managed one of the best scores - 8.975! Beyond athletics Cathy loves caring for children like her mom, reads, plays piano and helps around the house. For a young girl she has an acute sense of responsibility and dedicates herself to the task at hand. Unfortunately there is an ancient ancestral tradition that postpones dating to the parentally arranged marriage somewhere in her 30’s.

Emma (6) finished Kindergarten, did ballet in Spring, sang a short solo in a musical “Candy Cane Lane” and played a flawless “We wish you a merry Christmas” at their piano recital. She went to work with Dad for the first time this year, loves her family and spends a lot of time in “Emma’s world” as we call it, talking with her imaginary friends, her stuffed animals and planning dances and parties. She cleans, makes beds and sets tables with elegance. Emma dreams of “beautiful dresses and beautiful shoes” (prospective suitors beware).

Elize aka “Hurricane Liesie” (4) likes Batman, still wants to be Michael Phelps (see last year’s letter) and has a supernatural ability to attract permanent markers. She’s an all-or-nothing kind of gal – mostly busy running somewhere. For example she hates falling asleep, but when she sleeps she does it with intense abandon. In July Lee took the kids for advanced swim

classes at the Y, but the instructor, who couldn't fathom her being with the 6 year olds, kept her with the baby beginners and almost choked on the whistle when Elize, without floaties, spontaneously launched into the deep end and just kept on swimming. By the time she got to the other side she had graduated to her new class... and a new trainer. Elize plays two-fingered Jingle Bells on the piano, debuted in the Lamb's choir and can dress up in pajamas. She is remarkably practical, unassumingly alert, and has a contagious smile.

Other than a week skiing in Northern California (Bear Valley), we didn't travel much this year. Summer was laid back, but we went camping, spent afternoons in the pool and many nights feasting on home-made popcorn and cookies. We also enjoyed ten-pin bowling, roller skating, putt-putt and time at the park up the street. Favorite meals include Islands, Outback steakhouse, Fish & Chips and Mama's and Papa's pizza. For Thanksgiving the pilgrims inside us made cherry pie, cheesecake, and roasted turkey breast. Our new "kids-kitchen" now self-serves continental breakfast daily, snacks, beverages and even coffee for parents... all at discounted prices.

In the fall we re-upped for a year of schooling at home, now with the whole bunch. It's been great to have everyone home and see the older kids helping the younger ones. They are excellent readers, love math and joined a creative writing class using American history to learn poetry and prose. Fieldtrips this year included the Nethercutt museum (vintage cars), Getty Center (arts), Disneyland (consumerism), Malibu beach (maritime studies) and Dodger stadium (sports education). For those of you keeping track, we've packed away the TV again. In 21<sup>st</sup> century America it's enlightening to follow this pathway of media detoxification - from self-convinced boredom through the valley of frustration over the bridge of creativity to the land of meaningful, memorable relationship-building activity (and do it again tomorrow). Not a journey for the faint hearted.

Despite the oscillating physical condition of our house, it is always a home. Our kids need the fundamental knowing their home is the safest place on the planet. And we are striving to cultivate such an environment where they will always feel welcome, challenged, are allowed to fail, and able to share their deepest concerns. In that soil their characters are growing like those kernels and strawberries. On top of this parenting, educating, pool cleaning and homemaking Lee still manages to host dinners periodically, all with her age defying beauty and farm-girl finesse. Louis is enjoying his diverse CFO role at our church, which continues to grow in size and influence. He survived another bootcamp session in the gym this fall, but then succumbed to a double dose of bronchitis. Like our garden outside, there is life in the family ground, the seeds are producing fruit, and our sacrifices allow the roots to go deep. And likewise, there are many of you that have sown seeds in the dry places of our hearts, and blossoms are budding. Thank you!

Along the way we've discovered that happiness is...

... Grilling marshmallows till just before they catch fire

... Sunday night ice cream

... Being unsupervised in Mommy's bedroom (Elize)

... Going somewhere new (Jake)

... Moving furniture (Lee)

... Barbequing Rib-eye steak medium rare (Louis)

... A thumb and a blanket (Emma)

... Driving to Disneyland

... Finishing a tough job

... Being upside down (Cathy)

... Walking on the trampoline (Ringo)

... Being smuggled into bedtime unnoticed (Foxy)

... at the end of a jam-packed year coming to pause at the simplicity of the Nativity – a place where the One who had everything came to be with people like you and me, with cows and hay and shepherds. Or if you will - to be the Seed waiting to be planted in the hearts of men, able to make the desert blossom and rejoice, and even sing.

May you have long seasons of happiness and a bumper crop in twenty ten.

The Eksteen's

Louis, Lee, Jake, Cathy, Emma, Elize, Ringo and Foxy.

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