

Dear Friends,

December 2007

By the time you get this we will be late for wishing you a
Happy and Blessed Christmas
but I believe the window is still open to wish you
Peace in the New Year!

The first chapter of Luke is such great backstory for the Christmas story. My favorite verse is Luke 1:45, where Elizabeth tells her relative Mary, "You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said."

Most of us don't have that experience of the Lord sending an angel to tell us that something highly improbable is going to happen. But I think that, at the very least, we must believe that God loves us and wants the best for us. So many in our hurting world need to hear this Good News, that because God loves us so much, He sent His son into the world to be our Messiah and Savior. For this reason we celebrate Christmas, with amazement at what God has done and continues to do.

Part I - Catching Up

Some of you haven't heard from us for a few years. My apologies for that. I'm just really bad about finishing things. A recap:

* On our wengerd.com site you can find: A Boy and His Dog, from 2001; our 2002, 2003 and 2004 Christmas letters.

* December 2005: Baked cookies instead of working on a 2005 Christmas letter.

* January 2006: Tried to write a 2005 Christmas letter — didn't finish.

* October 2006: Tried to write something clever to sequel our two dog stories and get a head start on a 2006 Christmas letter — didn't finish.

[See Part II.]

* Nov.-Dec. 2006: Finished the 2005 letter but it didn't get put on the website until — now. I even had pictures of the dogs to send you. "What?," you say. "Did she say dogs, plural?" See Part II.

Part II - Let's Review:

Phil wanted a dog. Gail is afraid of dogs.

Many years pass. God tells Gail to let Phil get a dog. Gail tells Phil he can get a dog - a Bernese Mountain Dog, to be specific (this was mutually agreed on) - but not a puppy (Gail's stipulation, not God's). Phil finds Rushmore. At 11 months old, Rushmore is technically still a puppy. But Rushmore is a BIG dog. He has bad hips and joints. He is neurotic. He was not socialized very well by his previous family.

Two years pass. Gail is finally starting to walk Rushmore. She does not like walking Rushmore, because he is not friendly when people try to pet him. He is such a handsome dog, people always want to pet him. He snaps at the people. He looks for junk food on the ground. He pulls on his leash. For Gail, walking Rushmore is not relaxing or pleasant. But two budget seasons (where Gail and Rushmore are stuck at home with each other while Phil works hard at his office) have bonded them. Gail cannot imagine life without Rushmore.

Gail knows that the next dog will have to be a puppy. He will have to be a friendly puppy. He will have to be friendly from the get-go. But Gail is not ready to be home alone with a puppy. It is a scary thought. And Gail has become too fond of Rushmore to replace him with a puppy.

Five years pass. Rushmore is not doing so well. He is probably in a lot of pain. He cannot go on long walks. He cannot get around the house very well. He is only 6 years old. Gail cannot imagine putting him down. And she cannot imagine getting a new dog after Rushmore. It is too painful to think about.

Gail has had 5 years to psych herself up for getting a puppy. But getting a puppy is not a happy thought for Gail. She knows that puppies are hard work. They poop a lot. They chew on anything you have not put up out of their reach. They wear you out with their puppy energy. Sure they're cute, if you're not the one cleaning up their messes, staying up half the night until they're house-broken, pulling trash out of their mouth, chasing them around trying to get your shoe back.

If you haven't figured out where Gail is going with this, she will break from her third-person story-telling mode and get to the point:

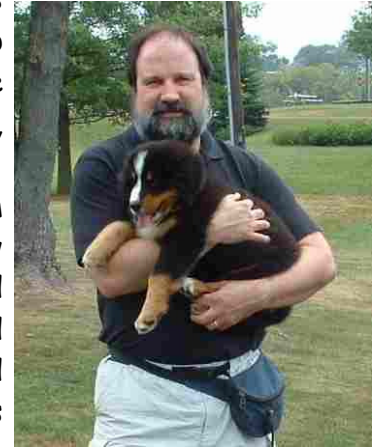
WE GOT A PUPPY.

We did not plan on getting a puppy. It was *serendipitous*. But that is too long a word for my short story, which we shall now call: A Girl and Her Puppy.

Part III - Year of the Dog(s)

That was our big exciting news of 2006 that trumped all other news of what was going on in our lives. We laughed all the way home from Lancaster County PA, where Raffi was born on May 25, 2006, about a 10-minute drive from Harold and Jody's house. Rushmore probably had a suspicion that something was up because (1) we had been cleaning the house and put a crate in the kitchen, and (2) we were constantly laughing, looking at Rushmore, shaking our heads and saying, poor Rushmore, you are in for it.

On August 17, 2006, we brought Raffi home and introduced him to the Top Dog. Friends asked how Rushmore was doing with the new puppy, to which we responded: we think Rushmore would like us to send the puppy back to where he came from. We really thought he would enjoy having a companion. But months went by and, as much as we tried to give him lots of praise and attention, he was not won over by this small nuisance who had too much energy, chewed on his tail, sat on his head, got way more treats, stole his bones, took over his mat and his favorite spots in the backyard, and got to go on lots more walks. And his squeaky toys and running around were all very irritating. (Click on the Pictures link on our website and see what Rushmore had to put up with - although the pictures make it look like they got along.)



That fall and winter I barely kept on top of the basic housework stuff. (Phil doesn't vacuum every day, that's all I will say on the subject.) Much of my energy was spent trying to keep the puppy occupied and out of Rushmore's way. My major task/goal was for Raffi and I both to survive his puppyhood. I'm happy to report that that was accomplished. ☺

Things would have been a little easier if the two dogs got along better. But Rushmore was clearly jealous and demanded more attention than I could give him. By the time Phil got home from work, I was usually exhausted and ready for him to take on the task of watching the puppy and keeping him out of trouble. Rushmore did try to tolerate the puppy to the best of his ability, but by the end of many evenings he had had all he could take and they would get into a little shouting match, which usually ended (after Phil and I stopped laughing at them) with Raffi going into his crate for the night. (I wish I had recorded this!)

Raffi proved to be a very sociable and friendly dog. He likes people and he likes other dogs. When I first starting walking him, it was a totally different experience than I'd had walking Rushmore - I had no anxiety with Raffi. It was actually fun. He was happy to greet anyone and everyone who stopped to say hello to him. When he was 5 months old I began walking him to a park two blocks away where others take their dogs in the evenings. He loves going to the park, and we know dozens of dogs and their owners now. [Sometimes as I stand in the middle of the park surrounded by these dogs, big and small, I am still amazed that I am standing there at all!] I learned early on that if I take Raffi for a long walk to try to wear him out and burn off some energy before we go to the park, it usually just wears me out, which is not the desired outcome.

For those of you who know me and know that I was terribly afraid of dogs - which is why



it was such a Major Work of God when we got Rushmore - and those few who know that my fear of dogs persisted all the while we had Rushmore due to his not-so-wonderful temperament, you will maybe appreciate that having Raffi, a friendly dog, has been literally life-changing for me. I actually SMILE at dogs now when I pass them on the street, rather than cross to the other side to avoid them. (I usually laugh at little dogs, I just can't help myself.) This



past summer I realized I can no longer say that I am afraid of dogs. It's a pretty awesome, humbling yet encouraging feeling to know that God can work that kind of change in someone even at my age. Raffi is definitely MY dog.

The flip side of the laughter and joy that Raffi has brought to us is that Rushmore was not doing very well. Last summer (2006) he aggravated an old injury in his back knee joint. Surgery was an option, but it would be expensive. Neither of us was comfortable spending thousands of dollars on surgery for a big, neurotic, not-so-friendly, 110-pound dog. So we gave him pain pills and tried to face the fact that, although he wasn't that old, we would probably have to put him down sooner than we wanted to. Raffi was - as our young friend Rachel Eggert put it, with that uncanny wisdom of youth - the Back-up Dog.

God gave us a year longer with Rushmore than we thought we would have, for which we are very grateful. I do believe Raffi was part of God's plan to keep Rushmore around awhile longer. But this past fall was a hard one, as we grappled with letting Rushmore go. He still had a lot of spunk in him, chewing me out royally when I got ready to take the puppy to the park without taking him out first, trying to come upstairs to sleep with us the one time we left the gate off, making the effort to drag himself from the living room to the dining room just to be with me at the computer. But he deteriorated rapidly toward the end, and we put him down on a dreary rainy Friday, Oct. 26. We all miss him in our own way, even Raffi. My eyes still well up with tears and my heart tightens when I think about him, even now as I sit at the computer - he was always here with me when I worked on the computer. I don't so much remember the bad stuff with Rushmore, only that he was my constant and faithful companion for the last number of years, and all he wanted out of life was just to be with us. Who would have thought, seven years ago, that I would be so broken up about a DOG? Only God in His great wisdom knew.

We put together a slideshow of Rushmore's time with us that you can see by clicking on the Pictures link (please ignore the genealogy links - they're quite out of date). If you haven't yet seen it, please take a look - you might be in it.

God bless Rushmore - by the end, he was my dog as much as he was Phil's. A HUGE THANKS to all of you who loved and appreciated him, and supported us, in spite of his loud barking and neuroses. We're still getting used to the quiet at our house now when friends come over or someone rings the doorbell. And Phil reminds me, now that Rushmore is gone, his promise to vacuum every day no longer stands. Ha-ha.

Part IV - Highlights and Lowlights of 2007

Phil had a week of work-related training in Colorado in April, followed by:

* Estes Park and the Alpine Trail Ridge Road - awesome. As we were leaving the park, we saw EIGHT MOOSE! All those trips to northern Ontario and I've only seen one female moose, despite all the "night hazard" moose crossing signs!

* We had a great time in Big Sky Country Montana with Kellie & Aaron Sironi and Kellie's mom and dad. We avoided hitting anything, even as we drove through Yellowstone Park at night (lowlight), then hit a skunk at an intersection in Bozeman, mere miles from our destination.

* Our Dryden visit (northern Ontario) coincided with the tail end of a visit by Phil's parents which was pleasantly extended due to weather-related flight cancellations and delays from the small Dryden airport. We enjoyed watching birds at Dona and Rob's, seeing a beaver swimming down their river, plus we saw two bears and golden eagles and bald eagles!

* Through a *serendipitous* tip from a fellow passenger on the plane to Denver to meet Phil, we stopped at Widmer's Cheese Cellar in Theresa WI to see Joe the Cheese Guy and wound up with two blocks of spectacular 10-year-old cheddar, which made it well worth the trip.

[*Serendipity: the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way.*]

* We didn't see any American Girl performances in Chicago, nor musicals starring half the Hays' family, but we did get to watch video of some of Amanda's acting gigs and we met Chloe, their bichon frise (pictured here as The Bodyless Dog).

* We made a brief Sunday afternoon stop in Harrod, Ohio, to see my Aunt Opal and my parents, who were visiting to attend a high school reunion. We give thanks to God (and thanks to my brother Kevin for driving them over) that my mom was able to see her brother, my Uncle Weldon LaRue, for what turned out to be the last time, as he passed away a week later at the age of 91 years.

* Phil started a new job, still at OMB, that he describes as the hardest and the most fun job he's ever had. He's responsible for the finance and planning team for OMB's budget systems, and helps to lead a cross-agency "line of business" to find ways to improve the federal budgeting community. He's learning a lot but he doesn't think he'll stay long - too much stress. Some days he loves it, other days he's looking for a new job, preferably not in budget. (I've read his resumes and job applications over a dozen times this past year, I'm not kidding.)

In July, my cousin Scott Lillie from Colorado - who I hadn't seen in over 30 years - and his family managed to include Washington DC on the return leg of their family vacation trip. I had only seen pictures of his girls, who are now teenagers, and had never met his wife Donna, so it was a special treat to meet them for some DC sight-seeing via the DC Duck tour. I would include a picture here of Scott and me, but my camera wasn't working that day so I have no proof that they were ever here. ☹ [An FYI for our out-of-town friends and family: We are a 10-minute WALK from Union Station, where most tourists to the city wind up at some point. So give me a call if you find yourself there and I will walk over to say hello. Unless the weather is really crappy.]

A week later we were in Ashtabula, Ohio, for my family's Lillie Round-up and my 30th high school class reunion. I really enjoyed seeing many of my old classmates (and I mean "old" only in the sense of former!). I have great respect for reunion planners - in this case Cookie Daniels Frampton - who work so hard to give us these special opportunities to re-connect.

In September Raffi had his first trip to Ohio and his first hotel stay, as we went to attend the 100th LaRue Family Reunion in Lafayette, Ohio. All of my siblings were able to come, and I was



thrilled that my nieces and nephews and sister-in-law Gayle could meet Raffi and see how sweet and friendly he was. With the help of many relatives, I have been working on updating a LaRue Family History that was published by one of my mom's cousins in 1967, focusing on descendants of William Albert LaRue, my great-grandfather. It's a switch for me and my introvert self, communicating with LIVING relatives rather than researching dead ones, but I'm enjoying it.

Returning from Ohio, we discovered we had RATS in our basement. (That would be a lowlight, unless you talk to Angela Johnson who thought it was pretty cool.) They apparently moved in the weekend no one was home, not even the dogs, and feasted on birdseed. Final body count: two dead in the neighbor's back yard, three dead in our basement. Raffi helped sniff out the last one when it expired out of sight. (Now we know what dead rat smells like.) We're pretty sure they're gone now but I still smell rat pee after I run the dryer (not sure why). For whatever climate-related reasons, this is a city-wide problem that happens every decade or so here, and not just specific to our house and the construction work going on in the vacant rowhouse next door. The upside is, after over 15 years in this house, we will finally start work on fixing up our basement. ☺

We enjoyed another September reunion followed by a Dec. 1 banquet celebrating our Neighborhood Learning Center alumni, who Phil and I have worked with in various capacities for the past 25 years. Now they're all grown up, many raising children of their own. Our involvement with these young people continues to be one of the sweetest blessings of our lives and work in DC.

This fall Phil started meeting with a small group of men on Saturday mornings at Cole's Café in Anacostia, known for "the best soul food in town." When the guys asked Mama Cole if it was okay to meet there for Bible study, she considered it a sign from God that she should keep the place open. She's been having financial difficulties and was considering shutting down; friends were advising her to be less generous giving out free meals to those who needed them. One of our major news stations recently featured Mama Cole and her restaurant, followed by an article in The Washington Post, in an effort to help her raise the money she needs to pay the bills and stay open. Please pray with us that God will let Mama Cole keep doing her good works and that Phil's group will get to enjoy the great food when they start a new study on Hebrews.

When he's not working on job applications, setting rat traps, vacuuming or napping (I just threw in vacuuming to see if you were still paying attention), Phil's been reading a lot of juvenile fiction, which I swore off two years ago because it was too depressing. (Our young friends don't seem to mind this.) For those of you who are Parents of Juveniles or avid readers, Phil offers this First Lesson of Juvenile Fiction: If it's a Newberry Award winner, everybody will probably die, including your favorite character. Lesson #2: If it doesn't have a Newberry Award, it's probably not worth reading if you're over 12.

We're rather excited to mention that this summer we are looking forward to a record THREE weddings: friend Wanda Zehr and Charles Anderson in late June, my sister Ann Lillie and Doug Briggs on July 12, and our niece Kelsey Wenger and Zach Fox on August 2. [*loud rejoicing*]

*We hope this new year brings you new and exciting things, and we pray that you will feel the Lord's presence through both the joys and sorrows that make up our lives.
God bless you and give you peace in 2008!*