

I've really struggled to write this thing this year and I've finally figured out why. The kids just aren't that cute anymore. Not with Jefferson saying things like, "Hannah, New York's a very horny town" and Hannah saying things like, "Jefferson, you stink... literally and metaphorically."

So what if Jefferson was referring to NYC's automobiles and Hannah was only half right (which half is subject to debate). They're still not helping. So let's talk about me instead. Not that I'm cute, but I'm entertaining (at least I think so).

Coached basketball this year. Now, the last time I was involved in any sort of organized basketball, Richard Nixon was president. So our offense was a little stale. How stale? Well, in our first game, the opposing team won the opening tip and immediately called out "Motion, Gabriel Two!" All of a sudden there were little 3rd graders running all over like they knew what they were doing and BAM! Layup. It was far more effective than any of our plays, which would best be described as "Chaos," "Confusion" and "Oh, What the Hell." "Prayer" finally got us a basket, cutting the deficit to 19-2. It was a long season.

Learned to wakeboard this summer. Correction, learned I don't want to wakeboard this summer. First run was fine (see photo). Lasted four seconds (photo taken at 3 seconds). Second run lasted long enough for good friend Jim McWilliams, who was driving the boat, to think quietly to himself, "He better straighten out or..." BAM! Face plant! (I'm learning to hate these BAM! moments). "Iff my mouf bweeding" is never a good answer to the question, "You OK?"



Still, we all had a jolly laugh.

So I suggested we all go to the rope swing. Our crew took three jumps. Jump one, Jim wrenched his shoulder. Jump two, Jefferson got the rope tangled in the launching deck, spun around and dropped six feet to the ground before rolling backward into the water. And Jim's son Andy's spread eagle entry? Not a good idea. Back at the boat, Jefferson pointed out the bruise the rope left on his arm. Andy was not impressed. "Dude," he said somberly, "you should see my balls." A "can you top this" moment that need go no further.

Then all had a jolly laugh.

Then it was onto the 4th of July fireworks. One thing about fireworks - no matter how much you pay for them, they're still made by some guy making 60 cents a day in some remote province of China. A good thing to keep in mind. I lit the first and it went something like this: "Oooh. Ahhh. Wowww." PING! "What the ...?" CLANG! "Oh sh..." BOOM!!! Note that BOOM!!! is even worse than BAM!, for I had just torched two children, grazing my nephew Mitchell's leg and setting Sarah McWilliams' sweatshirt on fire. Sarah demonstrated perfect stop, drop and roll technique, being careful not to fall into the lake where she could have gotten dangerously wet. Fortunately, everyone was well and I did what one should always do with defective fireworks. I gave them to the neighbors.

There were no jolly laughs. But then we self-medicated well into the night and all had jolly laughs for no apparent reason.

Jefferson earned the President's Physical Fitness Award, prompting him to ask, "What's that song that goes like this - Dun-dun-da-da Dun-da-dun-da-dun-da-da-da?." What? No. I am not going to sing Hail To the Chief whenever you walk into the room.

Hannah (oh, I'm sorry, Hanna) asked me to buy her an mp3 player, saying she'd repay me when we got home. Her payment included \$37 in coins.

Like I said, they're just not that cute anymore.

Bought a new business with Jim McWilliams that makes lampshade frames. The contract was signed on September 10. On September 13, Lehman Brothers went belly up. AIG, too. Good thing that when it comes to priorities, most consumers rank food, heat and lampshades at the top of their list. The lesson learned is never do anything with someone named McWilliams. Or maybe it's never do anything with someone named Szydlowski. I'm going to have to work on that one.

Anyway, I hope this little letter brought a smile to your face. If it did, remember that there are smiles to be had everywhere, everyday. Lord knows there are plenty of things to worry and cry about these days. But that's why God gave us the ability to laugh. It's His own little version of stop, drop and roll - a surefire way to smother life's setbacks.. Be sure to have plenty of your own jolly laughs all year long (and keep the fireworks at bay).

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, Everyone