

Holiday Season, 2002

Dear Friends,

I reached a numeric milestone last September. 6309 days elapsed between Thursday 14 March 1968 and Saturday 22 June 1985. Another 6309 days elapsed between Saturday 22 June 1985 and Monday 30 September 2002. In other words, on that date, the portion of my life post-high school graduation exceeded the portion pre-high school graduation. Or, if high school graduation is considered the mark of maturity in present-day society, I now have been an adult longer than I have been a child. (If we use other marks of maturity, such as 18th. or 21st. birthdays, I still have time left. If we use the obtaining of a driver's license, I have gobs of time left!)

In previous holiday letters, I have attempted to be light-hearted and cheery despite the world situation. Why shouldn't I have been? I had more childhood experiences than adult experiences upon which to draw and could thus still afford to observe the world through a child's rose-colored glasses (or, in my case, a child's dirty scratched lenses held to the frame with masking tape. Ah, those were the days!) However, I now have all this pent-up cynicism concerning recent events that I would finally like to vent. Sorry this one isn't as funny as the others, but, well, I'm jaded now.

An earlier draft of this letter had me commenting on many of the hilarious things that have happened in recent years such as the 2000 election (really, is Gore really worth the trouble of disputing this election? Or of even remembering it?) or the present situation in Iraq (we're mad at them because they have nuclear weapons. Any further comment on this ironic situation would certainly be redundant). So, my entire emphasis this year will be on the biggest American tragedy of the 21st. century:

Browsing through Borders Books in Ann Arbor several years ago, I noticed this very interesting game, the name of which fails me at the moment. Anyway, the premise of this game is that some space alien or deity or other all-powerful creature offers you the opportunity to make some pretty amazing deals. This being has the ability to alter the space-time continuum but for some reason decides to seek advice from you as to how the space-time continuum ought to be altered. You don't actually play this game with other people; you just answer the questions to yourself, and the answers you give frequently give you pause, or at least they gave me pause. So, let's play the game.

The space alien offers you this choice: If ten innocent civilians in Afghanistan were to have died before their time, history will somehow take a different path that results in the World Trade Center Disaster not transpiring. The choice is yours. If they die, the World Trade Center will survive, but if the Disaster occurs, these ten individuals—who have committed no crime—will live long, productive lives. What do you choose, the lives of two thousand or the lives of ten?

The space alien then offers you this alternative: you can save the lives of the two thousand and the lives of the ten. He can alter the course of history so that both groups survive, but in this new history, events unfold in such a manner that you lose your driver's license for life.

One of the premises of this game is that no one knows about this space alien but you. No one will ever know that you made the choice; if you try to tell people about it, they will just think you are crazy. You will never be blamed for a bad choice; you will never be credited for a good choice. So choose: Two thousand Americans, ten Afghanis, or your driving privileges for life. What do you sacrifice? (By the way, it's not fair to take the chicken way out and say that you refuse to participate in the alteration of events that have already transpired. If you prefer, imagine that the alien approaches you before the Disaster and tells you to write history rather than to rewrite it.)

Pretty scary, isn't it? I think we all know what the moral choice is, and I think we all know what choice we would actually make. But here's the thing: this is not hypothetical! The USA, as a whole, has already made its choice. We as a nation were outraged when two thousand Americans died senseless deaths on 11 September. General American opinion was that we should teach the Taliban a lesson, even if that lesson were to result in "collateral damage," which is, of course, the killing of innocent Afghanis (and more than ten, I should guess).

And, while the murder of two thousand people is a crime and must be addressed in an appropriate venue, it is still only two thousand. What, you say!? Only two thousand!? How can two thousand senseless deaths ever be prefixed by the word "only!" The answer is when it is compared to the forty thousand senseless deaths that occur each and every year on America's highways. Yes, that's right! In 2001, 42,116 people died in traffic accidents. Cars killed more Americans than terrorism did by a ratio of twenty to one! Where is the outrage? Where are the protests? Where is the concern that we do everything we can to prevent this sort of thing from happening again! (I remember shortly after the Columbine tragedy, a friend mentioned to me that gun violence is now the number one cause of teenage death and suggested that we police our schools more strictly. This individual was, of course, mistaken. The number one cause of teenage death is traffic accidents; this has been true for many years.)

So I've read, the most popular New Year's resolution in the United States is to lose weight. After enjoying holiday cheer (and just about everyone I know celebrates at least one of the December holidays. I personally try to celebrate as many as I can reasonably get away with), Americans (including myself) become concerned that their own waistlines are following historical tradition and endorsing Manifest Destiny. I propose an alternative: drive less. I know it sounds stupid, but if traffic fatalities decrease by only 5%, we've just saved a World Trade Center worth of people! It may not be as emotionally satisfying as blowing up a Middle Eastern city, but look at the benefits. Fewer cars on the road mean safer driving for the cars still on the road. Safer driving means fewer accidents. Less driving means less gasoline, which means less dependence on foreign oil. (Aren't you tired of the debates between the people who think we should do business with nations whose policies we despise and the people who think we should destroy our national parklands? Does either of these really sound like a good idea?) And if you're driving less and walking more (and maintaining a healthy diet), you'll lose that weight anyway! I'm certainly not suggesting that we give up driving completely, but my own resolution will be to ask myself every time I head to the car if I really need to drive this time.

Sorry it was more preachy and less funny this year. Have a great holiday season and drive safely!

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