

One's sixth decade may be different. For example, this week was a first—managed to schedule two different appointments to see two different doctors for two different reasons. I seem to remember not bothering with a yearly check up not so long ago. More recently, my health needs were met with a “Nice visit, see you next year.” sort of thing. Apparently, that's for folks in their forties and fifties. The latest sojourn has turned into a Herculean task of slaying a white-robed hydra. I can't seem to open one cavity or another for a health practitioner without that exploration growing into additional rendezvous for future medical procedures. Our once-dormant answering machine has been positively chirping with updates about imminent assignments and the necessary preparatory purifying rituals.

Please don't shop for wreaths or lilies, though. Ambulances and hearses aren't yet stalking me in any overt way. Remove a few odd bits, manage some pressures, and my social life may resume its less antiseptic mores. I still row regularly—hope to make it to fifteen-million meters in 2014—which will put me well over the North Pole and somewhere in the middle of Oregon, heading back to the equator.

Have also been teaching quite a bit. Otherwise boring commutes are much more palatable when listening to an iPod. A few years ago, podcasts replaced music for the bulk of my trips. The material frequently worms its way into the courses I teach on child development, counseling, and what-not. Stumbled upon the iPod books-on-tape genre in 2012, a delightful way to keep up on reading, even when one's eyes are failing.

This year, I rediscovered the wonders of learning a foreign language through audio lessons. Is it possible to dabble in a total immersion course? On the morning commute, I would learn Japanese and then attempt to master Hindi for the ride home. A small downside to learning languages in public is the necessity to practice one's pronunciation. Most of the time it's pretty easy to repeat the phrases in Tagalog, Urdu, or Greek softly to *sarili*. Problems arise when attempting the mouth-popping enunciations of Xhosa, the South African click language. Passengers showed much less distress when I supplemented the Xhosa lessons by actively chewing gum while practicing. Loud smacks and bubbles disguised my attempts to utter, “Excuse me, is this your bar of soap?” and other introductory phrases. Finally gave up as Chris became annoyed when I would conflate Xhosa with English in a type of pidgin popcorn-in-a-microwave meets Gaelic, “Tch-Hello, tch-Sweetie.”

Along with a polyglot's passel of language lessons, I've also rediscovered a series of audio lessons instructing actors on how to speak English with various foreign accents. *Nô fretʃ, thōgh. I cœŋ kæp ït undèr çontrôl.* This phonetic acumen may turn into a new career as a deep-cover spy. If you don't see me around, that's probably what's happened.

In the spring, Chris and I accompanied two friends to visit The Chimpanzee and Human Communication Institute at Washington State University, Ellensburg. This sanctuary used to house Washoe, the famous signing chimp, and her extended family. Not sure if our visit was that influential, and the two remaining chimps have since moved to Canada. While maybe not transformational, the experience made an impact. I spent the rest of the trip using random gestures to try to communicate with all of the other animals we encountered. Admittedly, it may have been over the top to use Ameslan when asking for directions out of town. Also, every time we passed a supermarket or convenience store on the drive back to Vancouver, Chris would frantically make the sign for *frozen banana*.

Most exciting moment of the year was during the weekend Chris and I booked a cabin at Copalis Beach in southwest Washington, part of the Olympic Peninsula and not far from “Vampire Diaries” country. Kept asking everyone we met if we should be more concerned about werewolves or vampires in that particular neighborhood. Would surreptitiously check to see if the shop was low on garlic or silver crosses. The game turned serious when a clerk in a local store responded to the question of what was the larger threat with, “Are you kidding? Both vampires and werewolves are scarce in these parts because of all the feral Sasquatch.”

Copalis Beach boasts the only low-tide landing strip in the state. During a morning walk along the beach, we passed a twin-engine something or other parked on the dunes. Being on a posted airstrip, we didn't think much of it. Then the fog came whispering in. Chris and I both realized that the pilot was probably not going to spend the night stranded on the beach, so we began walking (briskly) back to the path that would take us up to the house and off the soon-to-become runway. Then the fog left its little cat's feet behind and began billowing in on whiteout elephant hooves. That's about when we heard both engines fire up.

*Panicked* is a fair word to describe our run to surf's edge to get out of the path of the invisible plane that was bearing down on us at takeoff speed. It felt like momentarily being stuck in a combination of the final scene in *Casablanca* and the climactic chase in *North by Northwest*.

Wishing you and yours less panic and more joy for 2014.