

Advent Letter 2012

Dear friend,

I hope this message finds you well. Please accept my best wishes for a blessed Nativity and New Year.

Be encouraged, this is a happy letter so I hope you'll stick with it. We'll work through a little discouraging news in the beginning, then move on to the good stuff.

I seem to be writing these things once every four years lately, the last two being written in 2004 and 2008. The last one was a 52 page tome. I promise this one won't be nearly as long. The last one was a once-in-a-lifetime deal, an exhaustive midlife review and preview.

For me, the last four years have flown by like a blur. Looking back, I realize I've been in a state of convalescence the whole time. But I'm still kicking!

When I wrote the last one, though I did not understand it at the time, I was near the end of a painful period of limbo in my marriage. My wife and I had been separated the entire year and when I composed the last letter, I wasn't sure what was going to happen. I was holding out for reconciliation, while she had given up.

After I sent the last letter, in January 2009, she petitioned for legal separation. On a sticky note affixed to the legal paperwork she scribbled "This is as far as it goes" - meaning, she would separate legally but, out of respect for the sacrament of marriage, she would not divorce. So I began 2009 in an even more perplexing state of limbo than I had experienced in 2008.

Then in August 2009, on my father's birthday, I received notice that she had converted our legal separation to a dissolution (divorce) precisely 180 days after she had filed the legal separation – the legal waiting period in our state. So on August 13 2009, I found myself again involuntarily divorced. After a year and a half of painful suspense, I felt dazed and disoriented because, silly me, I keep supposing that marriage is a life-long commitment and when it ends, I am surprised . . . yet at the same time, I felt relieved of the painful suspense . . . sad, and relieved.

“Smelling the Roses” - Dance. You may remember how in the 2008 letter I mentioned Scandinavian folk dance. While she had abandoned counseling in the summer of 2008, I continued to work with our counselor on my own issues. After flatly advising me to divorce her, he also advised me to “smell the roses of life.” He said I had been trying to carry the weight of the world on my shoulders, in a sense playing God. He told me to stop it and learn to enjoy life a little. He left it up to me to decide what “smelling roses” means. While I did not act on his divorce advice, I thought the rose-smelling idea might have some merit, and decided to dance more.

Having always believed in the benefits of dance, I decided to broaden my dance horizons beyond Scandinavian folk. I spent the latter half of 2009 and all of 2010 surveying other kinds of dance that can be learned around here; and, having gained a fairly thorough overview by the end of 2010, I decided to call 2011 “the year of the dance” and spent it in a self-guided program of total immersion. During that year I incidentally shaved six inches off my waist line because I was spending my evenings dancing instead of eating. Over that time I became acquainted with Contra, Square, Salsa, Rumba, Cha Cha, Merengue, Bachata, Samba, Rueda, East Coast Swing, West Coast Swing, Lindy Hop, Charleston, Balboa, Shag, Night Club Two-Step, Country Two-Step, Hustle, Waltz, Tango, Blues, and folk dances of the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

In late 2011 I discovered that certain more strenuous dance forms require considerable strength and agility of the lead, so I bought an annual membership at the local university's new state of the art gym and have been working out four times a week since. Now, thank God, having just observed my 49th birthday, I'm in the best physical shape ever.

The dance floor is a peculiar place. For one thing it's a coward-free zone. Only the brave dance. I really like hanging out with brave people.

For another thing, there aren't many people my age. They're either older or younger, making me either a "cub" or a "creep." Regularly, I must both politely and kindly deflect the unwanted attention of older women or "cougars" while at the same time checking my own impulses to appreciate younger women.

Now at age 49, I am grieved to recognize that, regardless how physically fit or young at heart I may be, I have crossed an age line that makes dancing with attractive women in their 20s hazardous. I have to be very careful. It's a strange thing for me, to have spent my whole adult life admiring beautiful women in their 20s and 30s . . . then all of a sudden, I wake up one morning to discover that I'm old enough to be their dad.

Meanwhile I still feel 23 and I wonder where that thing is, that switch or something that I am supposed to flip, that makes my feelings for younger beautiful women strictly avuncular. And while many things that used to be taboo aren't any more, I find it is still quite taboo in the minds of many for an older man to engage in a relationship with a younger woman, despite the fact that in the holiest of families, Joseph was old enough to be Mary's grandfather.

So I dance on eggshells or, as it were, thin ice . . . and as I continue to age, having decided to dance until I die, I find it necessary to fine-tune what, where, how, with whom, and around whom I dance. As of this writing I find that Argentine Tango is particularly suitable for a man my age.

Fatherhood. For Johann's eighteenth birthday I gave him this trilogy of hard bound books containing all the letters I have ever written to him since before he was born as well as much of my other best prose and poetry, totaling 1,183 pages.



He is a young man now, brimming with confidence and ability. I am the bow and he is the arrow. I pulled as hard, and aimed as straight and true, as I could. Now it is time to let fly, and I do so gladly with the fervent prayer that he will excel, prosper, and succeed in all that he tries, and that we will remain best of friends forever.

I find that his most important goal is to have an intact family. We discuss that a lot. What does it take to create an intact family? Is money enough? No, for if that were the case families with ample income and wealth would

not divorce; but we know they do, often citing “irreconcilable differences.”

You may wonder, what business do I, who have been thrice divorced, have advising my son about keeping his own future family intact? Perhaps I have none. But as his father I feel a duty to try.

And here is where I am on that question, having learned many things the hard way, gaining an entire head of gray hair:

- You must adore each other, and adoration is a **feeling** that can not be faked, forced, or “worked on.” Either it is, or it isn't. I did not understand how adoration feels until I had been dancing for several years; I did not adore any of my wives because I yielded the initiative before I ever understood what it was or that it belongs to me. In all three cases, they approached me. In retrospect I do not blame them for their feelings or their decisions. I understand why they were discontented.
- Women need and deserve adoration like they need oxygen or food. When deprived of it, they become justifiably discontented and resentful. When given it, they flourish like healthy plants. They can easily tell the difference between real and faked adoration; when they detect fakery, they become irredeemably incensed, and rightly so.
- In the same way, men need respect.
- The man's task, therefore, is to become attuned to his own feelings of adoration and to keep the initiative because if he yields it (as I did all three times), he deprives both himself and her of their respective opportunities to adore and be adored.
- While Economics matter, the key to holding a family together is doctrinal: are they on the same page? Do they agree with each other about basic things like whether there's a God, the nature of love (is it a feeling, a choice, or both?) the definition of family, gender natures and roles, the purposes of work and of money (are they means or ends?), and so on. That's why I gave him the books. They contain the best doctrinal work I could muster, developed in personal terms, from real life experience, in the context of his own childhood.

Having attended a private prep school for the last four years, of course he is all about applying to colleges at the moment; and I say, go ahead and apply. See who accepts you. Meanwhile, consider also taking a break from academe for a year or so. Let's work together. Get some real world experience. Get to know yourself and hear yourself think. As father and son, let's make up for lost time. Come abide with me.

He appreciates the sense in my appeal and is considering it. But to me, the pressure he's under at the moment to go straight to college out of high school is incredibly intense. The anxiety is palpable.

When I discussed it with his art teacher during my visit in late November (more about that below), I watched the young woman's eyes well up with tears as she described the pressure imposed on the entire senior class and how, before she got her teaching job and well after she had finished her own degree, she tended bar for four years; and I could see how, as an academic, an artist, and a caring person in her own right, she felt incredible anxiety and helplessness for her students that they not suffer the same disappointment, frustration, and desperation that she experienced before she finally landed her teaching job.

For myself, I am clear about the limits of a college education. I am convinced we expect too much from formal education and not enough from individuals because as a culture we are ignorant about Economics and mistakenly suppose that More Schooling will make it all better somehow, while in schools economic education has been criminally neglected. We have too many credentials and not enough gumption. I object to the pressure that is being placed on my son by well-meaning but mistaken adults, and am determined to do what I can to offer him liberty.

Spirituality & Sabbatical. Because of the Romney candidacy and a few other things, in 2011-2012 I studied Mormonism. I read The Book of Mormon, the Pearl of Great Price, and a good deal of Doctrine and Covenants. I found them unbelievable and discovered that Mormons suffer from an excruciating kind of Cognitive Dissonance that is uniquely theirs.

While unable to accept their beliefs, I gained understanding, compassion, empathy, and appreciation for them and their situation. I read several books about Mormonism including Fawn Brodie's No Man Knows My History, studied the experiences of ex-Mormons, and reviewed Youtube video and TV programs about Mormonism, including HBO's 2006-2011 series "Big Love" which I recommend highly because, although it is dramatized, it's well-researched and thoroughly grounded in the every day realities of Mormon life.

During this time, I took a seven month sabbatical from my duties in the Orthodox Church, attending only on alternate Sundays as a regular parishioner, and visiting other churches in the community on the off Sundays.

Since my 2008 letter, the local Greek Orthodox Church, which is about 10 minutes away, got a new young priest named Father Michael. Around the same time, as a total surprise to me, my ex-wife began attending the other Orthodox church in our county that I had helped build and had always attended, which is some 35 minutes away.

When she appeared, determined as ever to be estranged, my own emotions caught me by surprise. That church had been my haven; I had helped build it with my own hands. I could not bring myself to receive the Eucharist in a state of chronic estrangement from someone present in the same room. It was a cruel Catch-22. We are not supposed to approach the chalice in a state of estrangement, yet the one from whom I was estranged refused reconciliation. I sobbed like a baby.

At that time I had been serving as a chanter, assisting Father Michael with his sparsely attended mid-week services at the Greek church. You see, in the Orthodox Church every day is a holiday. Church is more than a Sunday affair. Yet because of American "Sunday Culture" as well as work obligations, most Orthodox come only on Sunday. So Father Michael needed mid-week help, which I provided.

So when she appeared, my heart broke a little because I knew that for the foreseeable future, I would lose the haven I so loved and had helped build. But I decided to yield it to her for her sake, and move entirely to the Greek church in town to help Father Michael build it up to its full potential, helping with both mid-week and weekend services.

And that is what I have been doing ever since, with redoubled effort since July of this year, when I concluded my sabbatical. When I turned in my pledge card I let them know that not only am I willing to chant the services; I am also willing to help in other areas like organizing year-round feasts and festivals, teaching Patristics, Hagiography, Liturgics, Hymnody, folk dance, and Bible study. In 2013, just as I did years before for the Russian monastery on Vashon Island, I will be donating The Great Synaxaristes (the complete lives of the saints), as well as the complete Menaion in English (containing variable texts for services for every day of the year).

Why? Because I am convinced that as it is for a family, so is it for a community. The key is to straighten out our doctrine, to get clear about what we believe. The Orthodox Church has worked so hard, and done so much, to help us do that. In my experience and observation, we do not need to re-invent the wheel; we just need to pay attention. So that is what I am doing; and by serving as a chanter and teacher, I am helping anyone else who wants to pay attention, too.

During my sabbatical, when I was visiting other churches on alternate Sundays, I discovered a bewildering state of doctrinal chaos that may be best summarized by comparing and contrasting these five: Mormon, Presbyterian, Methodist, Roman Catholic, and modern "nondenominational."

Doctrinal chaos was the soil of Mormonism. Joseph Smith was reacting to the doctrinal chaos of his day. Since nobody agreed with anybody else, he concluded they were all wrong and decided to develop his own religion claiming, of course, that it was divinely inspired. Mormons suffer today from acute, agonizing cognitive

dissonance because of the doctrinal chaos that provoked their religion. They have always been in a state of doctrinal chaos, and will probably always be.

In my town, on Garden Street, there are within a few blocks both Presbyterian and Methodist churches. When I was a child, my family attended both: first the Methodist church, then the Presbyterian church. Why the switch? Partiality, not doctrine. An elder at the Presbyterian church was my mom's college history teacher.

So I visited both earlier this year, and here is what I discovered. The local Presbyterian church was at odds with its national parent organization, the PCUSA, over the issue of homosexuality. The PCUSA favored acceptance and ordination of homosexuals while the local church opposed it.

A few blocks down the road, even though BOTH churches are from the Protestant Reformed tradition and have historically been left-leaning, PRECISELY THE OPPOSITE situation prevailed: again, the local church was at odds with its national parent organization over the same issue, but this time the parent organization was against it and the local church was for it.

So I'm thinking, maybe the local Methodists should become Presbyterians and the local Presbyterians should become Methodists. Then at least some of this conflict might be relieved, and they could battle out the rest at the national level.

Meanwhile I visited the Roman Catholics and the modern non-denominationals. Both houses were PACKED. But an interesting thing was happening: in the modern non-denominational churches, they were concerned about handling growth. They were growing so quickly that they felt out of touch with their members, and they didn't feel that they had the administrative or organizational spine to handle it. They felt concerned they might collapse under their own weight.

They also felt concerned about maturity and spiritual growth. They found that most of their members were not growing; they were dissatisfied, poised to leave for greener spiritual pastures. And through extensive national research, they found that real spiritual growth happens in solitude, not in group participation that a church can organize. It's an individual thing. So the best they could do is share their findings and encourage members to do their homework . . . the irony being, of course, that by emphasizing group activity and organization, individual homework was the last thing members were inclined to do. By affiliating with a group, they expected to be relieved of such drudgery. Economies of scale, and all that.

Meanwhile at the Roman Catholic church, I discovered that they had been modernizing, and that worship was an incongruous, disjointed, and just downright weird admixture of Gregorian chant, electronic keyboards, drums, and guitars. And in commiserating with my Roman Catholic friends, I discovered that they didn't always go to the Catholic church. On the contrary, they circulated freely between it and the modern nondenominational churches. I discovered that they went to the Roman Catholic church to scratch their itch for permanence, structure, and tradition that the modern churches lacked, and they went to the modern churches to scratch their itch for relevancy and edginess that their understanding of "traditional" churches lacked. So they played both sides.

All of this left me feeling both grateful for the riches of Orthodoxy, and sad that so few really know about it, including people who have grown up their whole lives in the Orthodox Church because to them it's an ethnic thing into which they were born and, by only coming on Sundays, they miss out on the richness that rests invisibly in the palms of their hands. So by July I was ready to run back and commit myself wholly to making doctrinal clarity openly available to any and all who want it.

And gradually, little by little, we are seeing progress. I find that since faith comes by hearing, it begins with good music, so I have labored diligently to learn to chant Byzantine hymnody well in English. Fortunately, around the same time I was waking up to the need for clear doctrine, monks and nuns around the country were busy translating text and music into English and arranging the music into Western notation that I can understand. Now I have a thick binder of sheet music I rely on to help Father Michael do the services, arranged meticulously by holy monks who bless and minister to me through their work and enable me, in turn, to minister and bless.

So you see we are all working together like strings on a harp strummed by the Holy Spirit to do this thing. For me, it's a mystical privilege, and I smile on the future.

Work. My Economics practice Making End\$ Meet (<http://www.makinendsmeet.com>) is finishing its 16th year. Reviewing my own financial statements, I see how in 2011 I got happy from all the dancing I had been doing and became a lot more effective, attractive, and focused in my work. Consequently the money I spent on dancing more than paid for itself in new and better business.

Then in 2012 I decided to work toward duplicating myself, sharing the joy of my work. Why should I keep it all to myself when there's so much good to be done? After all I am only one man; I can only do so much, and nobody else seems to be doing this work in the way that I do it.

In essence, I have figured out how to make a living helping broke people improve. That's something, isn't it?

So I researched franchising and decided to build a franchise. I learned that one of the first steps is to write an Operations Manual for your business, so in July, I did just that. Prospective franchisees can get it by going to [this web page](#), and downloading, signing, and returning the Non-Disclosure Agreement. Although it contains many hyperlinks that lead to other documents and forms, the manual itself is only eleven pages long. I feel pretty good about that.

In 2013 and beyond, I plan to keep building my own practice and build a franchise organization as well. (If you know anyone who would like to do what I do, please introduce us.)

Meanwhile in August of 2011, I wrote a 50-page Benefits Manual that thoroughly describes the kind of value I deliver, which can be downloaded from [this web page](#).

I see how in the 2008 letter I mentioned Customer Relationship Management (CRM) which I had just begun using. Now it is four years later and I am still happy with the same application, but I have also discovered other, newer applications that are in some cases more appropriate for my clients' needs. For example servicemonster.com is a CRM app especially designed for cleaning businesses, while 37 Signals' Highrise and Basecamp applications work really well for businesses that work with discrete (as in separate or not continuous, not secret) projects like construction or web design.

So CRM continues to be an ongoing part of what I do but, just as with accounting software, I'm not married to one tool. I'll research the state of the art and recommend & deploy whatever makes the most sense for the client & situation. As with investments or anything else, I'm impartial. I'm just interested in what is true and best.

The Latest. I visited my son Johann and his mom in Kailua, Hawai'i for ten days in late November.

People say, "Ooooh, Hawaii, how was your vacation?" I answer that Hawaii is incidental to me. I don't even like the place, really. I went there to visit my family, and if my family were in the Mojave desert, then that is where I would go. Hawaii is irrelevant to me, even annoying because I see it as a sort of shallow, hedonistic playground for immature adults who are their own spoiled children. Its popularity inflates the cost of everything beginning with real estate, making life very difficult for the most weak and vulnerable. I try not to think about the whole situation very much because I get very angry when I do. The juxtaposition of rich and poor is very stark there and I feel incensed when I see homeless old men dying on hard stone benches in parking garages beneath opulent hotels and restaurants.

I went there then because she is dealing with a kind of blood cancer that was diagnosed in August. Johann asked me to come because he felt concerned that this might be our last Thanksgiving as a family and he wanted us to spend it together.

He is finishing high school, applying to colleges, and being her primary caregiver. I am so proud of how he has stepped up with zero discussion and taken care of business, and of her for being such a tough and optimistic fighter. After sixteen chemotherapy sessions I am so impressed by how well she is doing. Honestly I can't tell that she is sick so she must be doing a lot of things right.

I tell her she must kick this thing so she can live to bicker with me over access to our grandchildren. She laughs.

When my son received a stellar college recommendation letter from one of his teachers while I was there, she and I high-fived each other for doing a pretty damn good parenting job despite our many differences and difficulties, almost in spite of ourselves, with God's grace.

The Sunday I was there, Johann and I went to the [Holy Theotokos of Iveron Russian Orthodox Church](#), where the Iveron icon streams myrrh with miraculous healing properties, including the ability to heal cancer and AIDS. Click on the above link to learn more about it. Both he and I were given small quantities of this myrrh by Reader Nectarios, a sweet young man. We saw, smelled, and felt this icon and the myrrh that streams from it with our own senses.

Johann and his mother will be spending Christmas in the hospital at City of Hope in California. Although she is not Orthodox and has never taken kindly to the Orthodox Church, I have directed Johann to offer this myrrh to her when he feels that she might appreciate it, in times of fear or pain.

I trust God to work it all out for the best but I do covet your prayers for them and for her.

That's about all that I have to share for now, except that I'd like to hear from you some time. How are you? What has been happening in your life?

Blessed Nativity to you & yours,

Kris Freeberg

PS – Since through hymnody doctrine goes straight to the heart, I've spent a lot of time during the Nativity Fast (Advent) working on a hymn web site called <http://www.frommyprayercornertoyours.org>. Next year I hope to finish it.

The bulk of the site consists of the daily hymns. To see how it's taking shape, you can visit the site and hover your cursor over "Daily Hymns." Be patient with it, and you'll see a sub-menu of months appear. You may need to wiggle your mouse around a little to get the sub-menus to appear, it's kind of like my car that way, you have to hold your tongue just right or something. Click on any month and you'll see how it's arranged. As of this writing there is content on the September page. You may notice some months are missing; that is because I've taken them off line until I have permission from the translators to use their material. I hope you like it!

Until I get that permission, I'm keeping the recordings off the site. But if you want to hear the over 200 hymns I've prepared so far you can [click here and download them](#). It's a 132 MB zip folder.

PPS – After I finished this letter, on 12/14 the tragedy in Connecticut happened. On 12/18 I was so touched by the pictures of the kids we lost and their grieving parents, friends, and family and dismayed by how surprised everyone was acting about such tragedies when there have been so many – something like nineteen in five years – I was reminded of Herod and recorded [Coventry Carol](#).

Since I understand how it feels to lose a child, it's from the heart. It helped me get through the grief; maybe it'll help you, too.