

Dear Family,

It's occurred to me that the four greatest words in English may very well be: "No lifeguard on duty."

Unfortunately, at our local YMCA, where Crystal goes most days either for her spin class, or for her pilates class, or to lift weights, or to swim, or I don't know what else, the lifeguard is always on duty. Which means they might as well hang a different sign at the pool: "No Fun Allowed."

I was reminded of this on the Friday after Thanksgiving when the six of us wandered over there for a little wholesome family playtime. We hadn't been there ten minutes before the lifeguard was whistling, waving, and yelling at me. Between her accent and the din of the room I had a hard time picking out precisely why she was yelling at me. I wasn't sure if I was getting it for chucking golf balls to Hannah at the far end of the pool or for the more general "horseplay" that I typically get whistled for. (Turns out it was for allowing Grace to get more than an arm's length away from me in the deep end of the pool—where I was retrieving the golf balls Hannah had thrown back to me. I tried explaining that I have very long arms, but the lifeguard wasn't having any of that, the Nazi.)

On the way home from the pool, we purchased a fresh turkey breast (they were practically giving them away on the day after Thanksgiving) so we could cook it and have some Thanksgiving "leftovers." The lack of actual leftovers is perhaps the only drawback to the now-standard 36-person gathering at grandma's house every year. This year's group looked a lot like last year's group (which, in turn, looked a lot like the previous year's group) — so feel free to dig through the archives if you'd like to know who was there. The little cousins committee (i.e., all the girls 8 and older) organized a program with singing and little skits and it was all very cute.

We picked up the turkey breast at Safeway, my favorite California-based grocery store. I've decided I like California again. I no longer think of it as the home of the company that laid me off last year; instead, I now view it as the place where a narrow majority of the electorate still has at least some vague notion of what marriage means (and what it doesn't). I also now view it as home to thousands of remarkable people who were willing to sacrifice personal means and reputation in defense of what is right. I don't know if I'd have the guts to subject myself to that amount of religious bigotry (masquerading as "tolerance" — a glorious virtue whose true meaning has been absolutely obliterated by the well-meaning, misguided, permissive masses).

If this were a blog (and it isn't, even if it's starting to sound like one) I would spend the next several paragraphs offering my reaction to this month's election. Instead, I'll give Sophie's: She's ecstatic about the outcome. In the campaign's closing days, when the simple act of turning on the TV gave you a roughly one in three chance of tuning into the middle of an Obama ad, she really started to take a liking to him—to the point where she now cheers: "Hooray Barack Obama!" whenever she sees his charming mug on TV. I'm not sure where

my other children fall along the political spectrum, but I know a little about some of their classmates. My favorite Halloween costume in Lucy's class was the little boy with devil horns, tail, and pitchfork...wearing a John McCain mask. I don't know if this is the same boy who refused to trick-or-treat at any houses with Bush-Cheney yard signs four years ago. (This shouldn't have posed too great a hardship, as I don't recall seeing more than one of those in the whole neighborhood.) I only bring up Sophie's crush on our next president as evidence that a) I don't brainwash my kids (at least I try not to), and b) not everything they say is necessarily something they've heard me say.

Keep (b) in mind as you read this paragraph. We were all in the van yesterday with the radio tuned to 97.1 WASH-FM (a local easy listening station that switches to a holiday format this time of year). We got to an especially syrupy song (even by WASH-FM standards) that prompted Sophie to violently request a station change because she didn't want to listen to "sucky" music. I shared Sophie's assessment, so I changed the station to something different, only to have Grace start crying at me, "No I want to listen to the sucky music." Somehow I don't envision these conflicts getting any easier in the years to come. I'm starting to understand why their mother just flips on the DVD player for even the shortest trips.

As the Christmas season gets underway, my attention is drawn to a small blue poster we hung on the wall last Christmas (and is still there). It's a list of gifts each of us would give Christ. Most of the items listed are relatively simple: I will not lose my temper (Hannah); I will not lie (Lucy); I will not fight with my sisters (Sophie); I will not yell (Dad). Mom's gift, on the other hand, is somewhat more philosophical: "I will remember that Christmas traditions are only important insofar as they help me enjoy being with my family. Traditions that can't be observed without causing me to lose patience with my children should be discarded." The only problem I see with this otherwise very nice sentiment is that to perfectly comply with it would compel us to forego a Christmas tree or really any Christmas decorations of any kind. The tree is already up (amidst much contention). We would ask, however, that you please refrain from sending us any kitschy Christmas-themed crap (sorry, I learned that word from Sophie) that you have no further use of or think our children might enjoy. They will, if "enjoy" can be understood to mean "break, squabble over, and irritate parents with." But their parents won't.

Finally, I had the privilege of joining my father and three Melchizedek-Priesthood-holding brothers in conferring that priesthood upon our youngest brother, Peter (who, in case you've forgotten, is 25 and has Down Syndrome). This enables Pete to participate in the blessing, confirming and ordaining of his 15 beloved nephews and nieces, and the whole thing was all very touching. The only downside is that the ordination was also attended by my mother's cousin, Bill Mathews, who lives in McLean, and advised my mother that my 18.5-mile bike commute to work (particularly the 7-mile stretch along VA-123 after I cross Chain Bridge into Virginia) is tantamount to playing Russian Roulette. So apparently I'm going to have to figure out another route or my mother's not going to let me ride my bike anymore.

We wish you a joyous Christmas season. Love, Tim et al.





An early-November stroll through Brookside Gardens

