

Dear Family,

I had every intention of beginning this letter by lamenting my life as an owner of two Toyotas. Not so much because of the 2004 Sienna (which Crystal drives and hasn't had any trouble with) as because of the 2005 Avalon, which I've driven without incident for over three years, but which I'm just now learning is apt—without any warning or provocation—to send me hurling through the glass front of a Dunkin Donuts. Supposedly if I sense this is beginning to happen, I can avert disaster by calmly shifting into neutral and firmly applying the brakes. Sounds simple enough, but of this much I am certain: whatever my reflexive reaction might be to my car suddenly lurching forward, it won't be right.

But instead of writing about my deathtrap of a car (which, I reiterate, has yet to give me a moment's trouble) I feel inclined to write a few brief words about humanitarian aid. This inclination is prompted by an unusual sequence of events that has resulted in my needing to process the ward's tithing and other offerings each of the past two weeks. This task is almost always carried out by one of my counselors and a clerk—I've probably done it less than a half-dozen times in my life. But two of those times have been last week and today. (Unlike the wimpy Olney Ward, the wards in our stake met today despite the 5-6 inches of snow that fell yesterday and last night.)

My two consecutive weeks of opening the envelopes and watching the financial clerk log the amounts into the computer just happened to coincide with the first two Sundays following the First Presidency's impassioned plea for Church members to support the relief effort in Haiti by donating "as their means allow" to Church Humanitarian Services.

I am aware of two ways of doing this: [online](#), or via the standard donation envelope and slip that bishoprics collect, count, and deposit every Sunday. I, of course, have no way of knowing which of my ward's members may have contributed online, but what I do know is that it was unusual for me to open a tithing envelope (this week or last week) that didn't have something on the "Humanitarian aid" line. And after the clerk had closed out the batch, I logged back into the computer and confirmed what I'd already suspected: that the humanitarian aid collected in the past two weeks alone was more than 20 percent of what we'd collected in humanitarian aid during all of 2009.

And the 2009 take was not insignificant. And as far as I can tell, these donations did not come at the expense of other "discretionary" donations (such as fast offerings). In other words, these are people who already pay full tithes and, in many cases, extraordinarily generous fast offerings, who are now digging even deeper to help people they'll never know. I spent a good chunk of yesterday reading the book I got for my birthday: *SuperFreakonomics: Global Cooling, Patriotic Prostitutes, and Why Suicide Bombers Should Buy Life Insurance*. It's a fascinating follow up to a similar book I fell in love with four years ago. Both books take

dispassionate looks at obscure social questions (including several that probably shouldn't be discussed in mixed company) strictly from the perspective of available data. Both books are smart, funny, and built around the thesis that people are little more than incentive-driven animals, and that even apparently altruistic acts are fundamentally self-interest-driven. By Saturday night, I was just about sold on the thesis. But then I went to Church this morning. I arrived a little before 7:00 to find the Young Men president out by himself clearing the snow from the walks. (If you're familiar with our building, you know that it's enormous and the walks go forever.) He was joined at 7:30 by the rest of the PEC (who I suppose were incentivized to help by the prospect of not having to sit through a boring PEC meeting—even though I think my PEC meetings are less boring than most). But even if I discount the altruism of the rest of the PEC, which arrived on time (which I think I would be wrong to do) I can't for the life of me think of what self-interested motivation could have prompted the YM president to arrive 45 minutes before he was asked to and start working by himself in the 10-degree darkness. And then there were all those tithing envelopes, the specific contents of which will never be known to anyone (other than the donors) except me and a clerk (and possibly an auditor), and which we'll soon forget amid the wash of generosity we're so accustomed to seeing. I imagine the *Freakonomics* guys would be smart enough to find data suggesting some self-interested motivation for this generosity, but I wouldn't buy it. Even though I thoroughly enjoyed reading both books, and even though both books make me laugh out loud, I ultimately could only accept the thesis with one enormous caveat: that it only applies to the "natural man," which is pretty much everybody at least some of the time. But when people apply the principles of [Mosiah 3:19](#), the thesis doesn't seem to hold anymore. I love it when people do that. (And I'd like to be more like those people.)

The second semester is now a week old for the girls. The distinction is really only significant for Hannah, who begins the new semester with a new geometry teacher. This is because her old geometry teacher stunk. I wasn't allowed to express this view publicly while he actually was her geometry teacher, but I'd known he was a lousy geometry teacher ever since back-to-school night in September when his response to a question I asked about his requirement that all students have expensive graphing calculators (like the one Hannah used in her 7th grade algebra class, which was stolen near the end of the year) suggested to me that he didn't really know squat about geometry. This apparently became clear to school administrators as well when 70 percent of the class failed the standardized midterm exam. (Hannah wasn't among those who failed, but she didn't do particularly well, either.) So now the school has swapped in a different teacher, and we'll see how that goes.

For Grace, this begins her last semester of Pre-K, which she attends with a large cadre of special-needs kids and which I keep meaning to write about, and keep forgetting to (or keep forgetting not to fill the page with non-informational personal reflections). Maybe next month.

Enjoy this one. Love, Tim *et al.*



No Pictures.

Sorry.