

18th December 2008

Dear everyone,

It's been two full years since I wrote a proper letter and finally it seems that there is enough news to justify another. So here goes ...

We still have jobs!

Seeing co-workers sleeping at their desks made Lan grow tired of her job at the Securities and Exchange Commission and she landed a job with Wachovia, a major bank. There was one problem: her office was 380 miles (610km) away from home in Charlotte, North Carolina though this was somewhat offset as Lan has two sisters living there. The expectation was that I'd move there after a year if it was a job she wanted to keep long-term but after 3 months of one of us making the trip to the other city, Lan was allowed to work from home. It really is marvelous what a modestly high-speed internet connection makes possible.

However, in a spectacularly bad move, the company paid \$25.5 billion to buy Golden West Financial in May 2006 and with it, a portfolio of mortgages that went bad and greatly contributed to the collapse of the combined company. Another bank, Wells Fargo, is in the process of buying the company but the future is highly uncertain. Indeed, rather than wait for the lay-offs, Lan has already accepted a job with NASA's Space Telescope Institute to start in mid-December. We'll have to move across town though as it is impractical to commute from here.

I'm still a web developer at The Motley Fool and for the time being, my job appears secure. Given that we offer stock market advice to investors and that the stock market is way down, you'd expect our income to have crashed but so far it is down but not drastically.

Yes We Can

You might have heard that there was an election here recently... In fact, the relentless coverage of the campaign a full year before the election was too much even for me and I stopped listening to National Public Radio. Around that time, I got my first mobile phone which, among other things, serves as an mp3 player (occasionally I use it for phone calls!) and I discovered BBC podcasts¹ which give a truly global view.

I've often thought how much better America and the world would have been if John McCain had won the Republican primaries back in 2000 and then the general election. It seems highly unlikely

we would have invaded Iraq and given his years spent as a prisoner of war, it is inconceivable that the abuse of detainees we saw at Abu Ghraib would have been tolerated and the prison at Guantanamo Bay would never have been built. He had and still has sensible positions on most issues and even voted against the Farm Bill which subsidizes agro-business.

Yet in 2008, there was an even better option. For us, the right man won but as the satirical newspaper, *The Onion*, put it, "*Black Man Given Nation's Worst Job*".² President Obama will take office next month with an economy in deep trouble, two wars and a bankrupt treasury. I am greatly encouraged that, with the possible exception of Secretary of State, his appointments to key positions have stellar qualifications but with expectations so high, some disappointment is inevitable.

Lan even got to take part as she became a US citizen earlier this year. Her vote helped tip Virginia to the Democrats for the first time since 1964, the year Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act and remarked to an aide, "We have just lost the South for a generation". I'd include a photo of her accepting her certificate but the ceremony was in a federal courthouse where cameras are banned. Lan can now apply for jobs in defense, leave the US and re-enter whenever she wants, be called for jury duty, run for Governor and join the US Olympic team!

Out and about elsewhere

Lan and her cousin took a cruise from New York to St Johns, Newfoundland (Canada) and back again stopping at Halifax, Boston and Martha's Vineyard along the way. Very pleasant but no pictures to show you.

Late last year I visited Australia but this time, on my own.³ Since I had no need to visit Adelaide where Lan has family, I took a trip to Melbourne, Geelong, Ballarat, Echuca and Canberra to see my extended family and to be a tourist in my



Melbourne's landmark Flinders Street Station

² *The Onion*: theonion.com/content/news_briefs/black_man_given_nations

³ See all the photos at <http://www.sweetandsour.org/photos/index.php?fuseAction=aust2007>

own country. It was wonderful! In particular, visiting my uncle John was long overdue as I had not seen him and his family since my father's death almost 10 years before. There was a drought at the time of my visit and when I visited Nicole in Ballarat (where my mother grew up), I was alarmed to see that Lake Wendouree had virtually no water in it.



What remains of Australia's inland maritime history rests at Echuca on the Murray River. The wharf is very high to cope with varying river level.

Despite widespread belief to the contrary, the hot, humid summer here did not make Washington D.C. a "hardship posting" for foreign diplomats in the days before air conditioning. However, it certainly saps the motivation of tourists wanting see the sights—as my mother discovered when she came to visit in mid-August. Outdoor attractions were largely out of the question, at least initially.

As some of you are aware, we lived in Washington DC in 1969-1971 and my mother has stayed in contact with our neighbor from that time. Having come this far, she took a plane, bus and ferry to visit Diane at her holiday house at Martha's Vineyard, an island not too far from Boston and then spent a weekend heroically trying to see all of Boston.

There are so many things to see around Washington (so long as you like art galleries, monuments, museums and large public buildings) so my mother had plenty to keep her busy while we were at work during the day and on the weekends we went to attractions that required a car.

One of those was University of Virginia at Charlottesville. It is hard to see why it was



The Rotunda at the University of Virginia.

¹ BBC: <http://bbcworldservice.com/podcasts> – note Documentaries and From Our Own Correspondent.

built here given that the nearest port, Richmond, is 70 miles/115 km away and that roads in early 1800s were dreadful—until you realize it was designed by former-President Thomas Jefferson whose estate is just a few miles away.

However the highlight of my mother's time with us was the 3-day expedition we made to Toronto and Niagara Falls!⁴



The American Falls & Rainbow Bridge at Niagara.

Out and about here

Although America is the center of global consumerism, the *National Mall* is actually not a shopping center but a park forming the heart of Washington and is sometimes called "America's Front Lawn". Washington's most-recognized attractions are clustered around it including the Smithsonian museums, monuments for Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, FDR, three wars, the US Capitol and the White House.⁵

The great advantage of living here is that we can see things in manageable doses and since they keep changing it, we've made several visits to the National Gallery of Art where the most amazing exhibition was one on Afghan treasures.⁶ To my own surprise, I've taken a much greater interest in art but only after seeing two brilliant BBC series on art history.⁷



The National Gallery of Art's newer East Wing.

⁴ See my mother's Flickr photoset: <http://flickr.com/photos/30215275@No3/sets/72157607555550650/>

⁵ Learn more about the Mall at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Mall

⁶ www.nga.gov/exhibitions/afghanistaninfo.shtm

⁷ *How Art Changed the World* www.bbc.co.uk/sn/tvradio/programmes/howart/ and *Simon Schama's Power of Art* www.bbc.co.uk/arts/powerofart/ (DVDs thru Netflix)



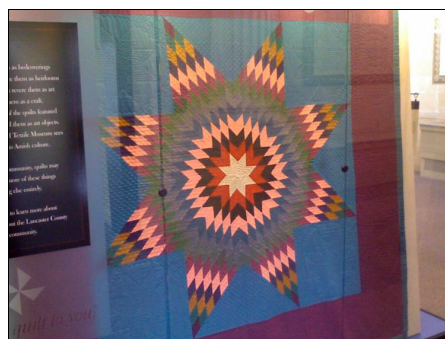
Raphael's *Alba Madonna* was bought by Andrew Mellon from the Soviet Union for the then astonishing price of \$1,116,000. He then donated it to the nation and gave the funds for a building in which to hang it, the gallery's west wing.⁸

America's only national park devoted to aquatic plants is just a few miles from downtown, is amazing—and hardly anyone knows about it. We were thrilled to share this gem with my cousins Neville & Diana and later with my mother.



Lotus flower, about 8"/20cm across, at Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens.

The Amish people live by choice without most modern conveniences but they have a strong tradition of quilting, something in which Lan has an interest. There is a museum a few hours away in Lancaster, Pennsylvania which was well worth a visit. The building housed a bank that collapsed in the Depression and remained vacant for 50 years! The first task for renovators was to clear 2ft/60cm of pigeon droppings!



Quilt and Textile Museum, Lancaster PA

⁸ Read the fascinating story of the *Alba Madonna* www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2008/10/03/ST2008100302263.html

In sickness and in health

Lan has suffered this year from *adhesive capsulitis*, more commonly known as a "frozen shoulder"—as she did before we came to America. We hoped that physiotherapy and time would heal but after a year of discomfort, she went under anesthetic last week to be manipulated. She has regained significant movement but she is still in pain and little strength.

I found out this year that my stomach valve doesn't close properly causing acid to eat away at my esophagus. I share this mainly because, with the benefit of hindsight, this hereditary condition is probably what led to my father being stricken with esophageal cancer and dying so young. I will have to take pills for the rest of my life to calm it down or surgery is possible.

Now that I'm in my mid-40s, there are several options allowing me to deny to myself that I'm getting older. I could have bought a red sports car for instance but being cheap, I elected to run a marathon instead. The mere fact that 26.2 miles or 42km is three times as far as I'd ever run was not going to stop me. I actually attempted training last year but soon had to give up after hurting both feet. I found out that shoes were my problem, not just the particular running shoes but shoes in general. ⁹ I switched to bare feet initially and then to "gloves" for my feet¹⁰ and that corrected my running style.



The 2008 Marine Corp Marathon at about mile 19 with the US Capitol Building in the background. If you look carefully, you can see that I'm not wearing conventional shoes. I was thrilled with my time of 3:51:47.

Seasons greetings

It wouldn't be a letter from me without bumper stickers so I'll share just two:

- Wag more. Bark less.



Happy holidays! Please stay in touch.

Pete V.

⁹ New York Magazine, *You Walk Wrong* <http://nymag.com/health/features/46213/>

¹⁰ Vibram FiveFingers—nearly bare feet vibramfivefingers.com/products/products_sprint.cfm