

15 May 2011

Dear friends and family,

The last time we were in touch with many of you was in December of 2008, just after our youngest child, Jane, was born. (So, first, apologies for such a long break in communication!) It's been wonderful to see her grow and relate to her siblings. She enjoys playing with Margaret and William, and is happy to join in make-believe sessions with them. Sometimes this takes place in the bathtub (we still manage to fit all three of them at once), where the three of them organize legions of plastic fish, ducks, and other aquatic species in a game of "bathland" (formerly known as "land of sea"). Jane is naturally affectionate and good-natured, but she is also quite willing to voice her disapproval if someone takes a toy away from her or if she can't reach her alphabet blanket. She loves saying that things in her life, such as Echo, our 12-year-old cat, are silly. During times of stress or boredom she remains equable by sucking the middle and ring fingers of her left hand and simultaneously fingering her right ear with her other hand. When I try to imitate her coping behavior, she rightly judges me to be "silly."

William, now four, is a quintessential boy. He relishes squirt guns and the "arm lasers" on his Buzz Lightyear toy (a present for his fourth birthday), and instinctively turns other objects into weapons as well. A kind of bizarre scene from a *Where's Waldo?* book in which sailors and monsters are squirting banana goo at each other has inspired him to build banana squirters out of Crystal Climbers. (Actually, a lot of scenes in *Waldo* books are pretty bizarre; I don't think I'd recommend these books for kids.) For a couple of years he has attacked others (often me, but sometimes his sisters) by snapping his blue-and-white airplane blanket and shouting "ah-WAVE-ah!" (Recently, Jane has been following William's example; the gently waved alphabet blanket and quiet "ah-WAVE-ah" is more cute than painful.) He loves visiting our friends the Deavels, who boast four boys, Gus, Patrick, Vinny, and Oliver, as boisterous as himself. I'm good for "high rides" (carrying William on my shoulders), horsie rides, and "wrestling," which consists of a lot of "ah-WAVE-ah!" action with the blanket, giving each other noogies (defined by the Urban Dictionary as "the act of rubbing one's knuckles on a person's head so as to produce a mildly painful sensation"), and shooting each other with our arm lasers. In calmer moments he likes reading, watching kids' shows on public television and DVDs, and learning some of the words and math facts that Margaret has been studying in kindergarten.

Margaret, now six, remains passionate about drawing, crafts, reading, and creating stories about her dolls, family members, and friends. She loves playing with William and Jane, and is naturally drawn to babies. She has made notable progress in her schooling. In the summer of 2008 she was diagnosed with selective mutism, which is defined as an inability to speak in social situations due to anxiety. The St. Paul School District gave her an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and let her attend Early Childhood Special Education classes from 2008 through last June. Last September she started kindergarten at our parish's school, Nativity of Our Lord in St. Paul, and received some special education services from a speech therapist. While Margaret has had some struggles in communicating in the classroom and keeping up with her classmates, her teacher has been satisfied with her academic and behavioral progress each quarter.

Alexa and I were therefore surprised and disappointed when we learned that Margaret is not being allowed to return to Nativity for first grade. We do feel pretty positive about the

neighborhood public school, Groveland Elementary, which Margaret will transfer to this fall. Margaret has indeed demonstrated speech proficiency and acceptable behavior this past year, and will therefore no longer have an IEP or receive special services come this fall. Based on our conversations with Groveland staff, we are reasonably confident that Margaret will be placed with the teacher and receive the accommodations that will give her the best chance of succeeding in first grade. We hope that Margaret can return to Nativity, but we cannot assume that she will.

We remain deeply committed to Nativity, our parish home since 2003, and we will be sending William to the parish's pre-kindergarten program this fall. We will have to see how best to integrate all of our children's academic and religious development in years to come.

The five of us have visited our families in Los Angeles in May 2009, January 2010, and Christmas 2010, and I've made a number of other trips by myself to see my mom. It is always a treat to see our relatives and old friends. The children betrayed absolutely no disappointment at the lack of a white Christmas last year, although cold rain (the hallmark of L.A. winters) did keep us indoors more than we would have liked. The only drawback of our L.A. trips is the expense and vomiting that invariably happens on one (or more) of our flights. The six of us (this included Echo the cat) spent a week at the Wisconsin Dells (think of a wholesome Las Vegas with water slides instead of casinos) in August 2009. We stayed at a pet-friendly resort on Lake Delton, enjoying the beach, hiking at nearby Mirror Lake State Park, visiting the Children's Museum in Madison, and buying beer at a Walmart (which is forbidden in Minnesota.)

Alexa continues to stay at home with the children most of the time, but still works as a nurse on a casual basis at St. Joseph's Hospital here in St. Paul. She has remained involved with a Catholic moms playgroup, has volunteered some at Nativity School, and works hard at gardening during the seven months of the year that snow is not covering the ground. Alexa inspired a major interior renovation back in 2009 that involved re-partitioning two upstairs bedrooms (the girls, William, and Mom and Dad each have separate bedrooms now) and lots of drywall repair and painting. We would probably lose some money if we tried to sell our house now, but the house cost us only \$159,000 back in 2001. So, it's kind of like being underwater in a wading pool. Still, my conservative instincts tell me to make our current house work for now.

My work as a chemistry professor has been going better in the past few years. I had a wonderful group of first-year students (we don't have "freshmen" at Macalester) in Accelerated General Chemistry in the fall of 2008 and in Analytical Chemistry in the spring of 2009. I also enjoyed returning to regular, "non-accelerated" general chemistry last fall. Offering first-years and sophomores their first experiences of college-level chemistry is always a treat. It is particularly rewarding to convince students who hated chemistry in high school that the subject can make sense and that it can even be interesting. Having 91 students required me to do lots of grading, but on the whole I was energized by interacting with large numbers of students.

I am finishing a demanding but worthwhile term of service on Macalester's Faculty Personnel Committee (FPC). In the past two years I read and helped deliberate on more than 30 files from tenure-track faculty applying either for reappointment or tenure. I think FPC does a great job of pulling out what is valid and helpful from these files, and comes to fair decisions. My committee work has been filled with discussion, writing and editing—all activities that would seem common at a liberal arts college, but is rather rare for me as a chemistry professor.

This summer, Alexa and I look forward to more time together as a family and getting more involved with parish and community life. We're grateful to all of you for your friendship and interest in our lives. Best wishes for a good and relaxing summer.

Alexa and Keith Kuwata, 1538 Selby Avenue, Saint Paul, MN 55104



From the Kuwatas

Jane, Margaret, William,
Alexa and Keith