

December 19, 2021

Dear friends and family,

Since indoor gatherings were largely forbidden in 2021, Suzanne and I recommitted to hiking. We started with relatively short, local hikes at Stone Mountain, Lake James, Grandfather Mountain, and parts of the Appalachian Trail in NC. Feeling emboldened after our mid-fifties frames managed those climbs, we set our sites on Yosemite National Park.

While we really hoped to “free solo” El Capitan with Alex Honnold, he had other plans that week, so we substituted in the Half Dome hike with our sons Luke (25), Thomas (25), and Zac (20), along with Luke’s girlfriend Ana and Thomas’ friend A.J. Of course, we wouldn’t have dared the trek if our kids hadn’t lied to us. “Mom and Dad, it’s not that bad. The first couple of miles are a little steep, but it’s relatively flat for the next five miles until you get to the sub-dome, and then adrenaline carries you right up the cables to the top!” Righto—if by “a little steep” you mean “straight up” and by “relatively flat” you mean “steady, relentless incline.”

But Suzanne and I traipsed along as the young folks scampered ahead and regaled us with stories about the “much tougher” hikes they’d managed in the Pacific Northwest. It all went smoothly until we hit the final stretch where you’re forced to pull yourself up the steep side of the dome using metal cables. I went on ahead with the younger crowd while Thomas stayed with Suzanne. “Why didn’t you stay and help your wife?” you might ask. Well, we’ve learned from 29 years of marriage that, (1) I tend to give a fair amount of unsolicited advice during stressful situations, and (2) Suzanne does not fully appreciate my pearls of wisdom at such times.

So while I reach the top and start strutting around like Edmund Hillary, planting the flag and posing for pictures, Suzanne’s legs seize up with massive cramps about half-way up the 45° slope. And that’s kind of scary. You’re hanging on the side of a mountain, grasping cables, with a line of folks waiting for you to summit, and your legs give out. But that’s where our faith in humanity was restored. Fellow climbers handed over electrolytes and “goo” and waited patiently as the cramps subsided and Suzanne’s willpower (and Thomas’ calm guidance) overcame her physical impairment. By the time I hear that Suzanne is in crisis and start down the dome towards her, she strides up the last 100 feet of the cables with the “Chariots of Fire” theme resounding across the mountain top (or so it seemed). It was a great day, a bucket list item, and, most importantly, something that we never have to do again (although we may bring it up every so often: “Remember the time that Suzanne and I passed Tenzing Norgay on the side of Half Dome? Oh you don’t? Well, let us tell you about that!”)



Suzanne climbing the cables; Thomas, Luke, Zac (back row), Matt and Suzanne on the summit of Half Dome.

Aside from our mountaineering expeditions, we largely celebrated our vaccinated status and (temporary) reprieve from the pandemic with family gatherings. We explored Miami and visited my brother Bruce and his husband Scott at their new place in Ft. Lauderdale. We traveled to Virginia to see Suzanne's brother Jonathan and his partner Kathy. And we topped it all off with September family reunions in Connecticut and Massachusetts. The Wintsch family reunion included a baby shower for our nephew Ben and his wife Sage, who delivered our first great nephew this November. The Churchill family reunion featured a battle-of-the-bands 60<sup>th</sup> birthday party for my brother Ian and a nautical-themed family photo shoot with some prize-winning costumes that we subject you to here. Yes, that's Luke in the mermaid costume.



The boys (or should I say, young men) are all doing great. When not employed as an understudy for “The Little Mermaid,” Luke is in his second year of law school at Stanford where he’s studying a lot harder than his father ever did. He worked for the California Attorney General’s office this summer and will intern at a DC firm next summer. We’re looking forward to having him back on the East Coast for a bit. Thomas continues to work for the website wikiHow, most recently heading up their international efforts and adding some operational roles. He’s taken full advantage of the remote work environment, logging in from locales across the country, including San Francisco (where he lived with Luke last summer), New York, Austin, Tucson, Taos, Boulder, and even Davidson, NC! He’s currently living in South Lake Tahoe, entertaining lots of visitors for skiing and hiking adventures. Zac is halfway through his junior year at Tufts, studying sociology and environmental studies. He’s active in the Tufts Mountain Club, an interest I’m sure he developed from his parents. He lives with a great group of friends off campus and spends some of his free time making music and short films with them.

Suzanne is on sabbatical this year, working on a new digital humanities project and sharpening her oil painting skills. I continue to enjoy my work at Robinson Bradshaw as a health care, transactional lawyer, although work demands have been intense this fall, requiring lots of nights and weekends. Fortunately, Suzanne has been entertained in my absence by an anime series, “The Great Passage,” about the creation of a Japanese dictionary. The show includes exciting and stressful episodes like one where the cast discovers that a word has been left out and must confirm that no other words are missing (I kid you not). This gives me hope that my work life may soon be turned into the next Miyazaki classic!

Our dog Josie is as peppy as ever, but our seemingly invincible cat Fergus finally succumbed to various ailments this year, and we miss his occasionally affectionate and always determined personality (although our counters are a lot cleaner). Overall, we’ve been very fortunate this year, and our thoughts are with those for whom 2021 has been difficult.

We hope that you are happy and well and that we’ll be able to see you in 2022. We promise that the words “Half Dome” and “Yosemite” will only slip from our tongues on the rarest of occasions.

Lots of love,