

31 December 2007

Hey there... wow, it's been way too long since I tried to bring friends up-to-date on my life. It's not clear whether anybody actually has actually noticed this lack information, but just in case, here's my attempt to wrap up my recent life...

Probably the biggest news of the year is that I am now living in a place I call *Perched*. As you can see from the photograph, it is aptly named. It's in Bear Canyon in a little village called Mt. Baldy and is on the slopes of... you guessed it... Mt. Baldy (aka Mt. San Antonio, which at



10,000' is the highest point in LA County.) It's a tiny, 830 sq foot, 1923 cabin that's been remodeled an unknown number of times since then. It's smack in the middle of the Angeles National Forest (which means I never have to worry about the land around me being developed or otherwise mucked around with). There's another cabin about 50' down the canyon from me, but that's the only immediate neighbor I have. Perched is at 4500' (1400m)—so, nicely above the LA smog*—nestled in a wooded canyon with a stream down below. There's plenty of wildlife around...birds & squirrels galore, raccoons, foxes, deer, rattlesnakes and, yes, of course, a bear. Unfortunately, said "wooded canyon" also happens to be a largely,

thinly disguised pile of firewood, so I get to bite my nails every time Southern California gets those infamous wildfires. But on the upside, this little slice of heaven is only 25 minutes door-to-door from my office at Pitzer down on the flats below. The place needs a LOT of work, including engineering work to keep it from sliding into the stream below, but the location is definitely pretty sweet. Let's just say this new place is a bit of challenge.

* Another odd factoid: I believe I own the second highest property in LA county.



Just to give you a better sense of the place, I'll also include two shots from the same level. The first is the shot of the "back yard" (most of which is rather vertical)... but there is enough room that hot tub you can see between that oak tree and the cabin, natch! (It's the tiny, roofed building.

The second shot here is of the front door, which gives you an idea of how many windows this small place has (plus 13 skylights).

You really feel like you're living in the trees when you're sitting inside! "*The Treehouse*" was my runner-up name.

Finally, the shot on the next page will show that it has one feature not often associated with Southern California....





Snow!!

So, deciding to indulge my “inner misanthrope” and retreat to Perched has been a rather large development in my life to date. Much of my spare time is taken up with architects, contractors and with puttering around the place fixing this or improving that. The folks at the local Lowes seem to know me pretty well now.

And, I’ve definitely needed a retreat this year from work. I’m now in my 7th year at Pitzer College. I’ve got tenure now and as punishment for my good deeds, I was elected to a two-year stint on the committee that basically runs our little “faculty-run” institution. Last year on the committee was bad enough, but this year they made me chair which has kind of turned me into an air-traffic controller* that oversees all faculty hiring, firing, tenuring, promotions, reviews, grievances, etc. I hate to complain to people who have “real jobs”, but on a whim I thought I would count how many emails I’ve written since the Fall semester started at the beginning of September and the number is somewhere north of 2000. I have to say that when I went to graduate school, they never said that my life as a deep-thinking philosopher would mainly involve my writing emails and memos!

However, I still teach, too, and that’s definitely the high point of my job when it comes to the day-to-day value of things. In addition to courses related to my research (on the relationship between the mind and brain), I’ve been teaching courses on Darwin & Evolution (with a colleague of mine in psychology), and Medieval Thought (with a colleague of mine in history). I even taught a “First-year Seminar” this fall, to 18 of our bright-and-bushy-tailed first-years. It was basically a version of my “Introduction to Philosophy” course that I called “The Examined

* You know the joke about “herding cats”? Well, organizing my colleagues is like herding *wet* cats... in a blizzard... with your shoelaces tied together. OK, perhaps I exaggerate.

Life”... a little bit of the trial and death of Socrates, Thoreau’s *Walden*, *Zen & the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, some Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums* thrown in just for fun. What was most striking this time around was the quality of the students. When I taught a First-year Seminar in my very first year at Pitzer, we had a 51% acceptance rate. Since then, we’ve managed to lower our acceptance rate to 24%... and, boy, could I tell the difference! The smartest kids now are no smarter than those back then, but the bottom end of the class... the <cough cough> “not so smart ones” are clearly much better than some of those kids I was trying to teach how to write back in 2000!

I also have been very struck lately by how different these kids are from the kids with whom I went to college way back when at the University of South Alabama. OK, these kids are somewhat better prepared than I and my friends were, but their expectations and outlook are just so much different. A lot of these kids are poorer than I was (many of them coming from first-generation immigrant families or inner-city neighborhoods from all over the country), but being at Pitzer means they just naturally think more about the world outside. 60% of my students go overseas for at least a semester. Also, it just strikes me how being at Pitzer (as compared to South) seems to broaden their horizons after graduation. I currently have students in law school at Georgetown, UCLA, and UC-Hastings; in grad schools all over the country; working for NGOs in South America; in Americorps; doing Fulbrights in the Republic of Georgia and Timbuktu; or traveling the world on Watson Fellowships. I always felt like an oddball at South for wanting to go to Grad school and see the world. These kids are no smarter than my classmates and I in Mobile, but being surrounded with other kids with high expectations seems to have a significant impact. (I wish I could take more credit for their success, I know that!) The moral here seems to be if your kid(s) are good at school a private, encouraging them to apply to some residential liberal arts colleges might not be such a bad idea, they might get a scholarship. Then again, I am biased here...

With the new mortgage, my own worldly travels have been cut down considerably in the past year. No trips to Beijing or Copenhagen for me this year. However, I do get up to San Francisco fairly regularly, to see my friends up there...

...and I did manage to visit a number of National Parks this year: Sequoia NP, Death Valley NP, the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, Monument Valley and...





A quick camping trip to Kings Canyon NP (which seems to be the Poor Man's Yosemite... it's located just to the south... and has far fewer people in it. Nonetheless, it's quite spectacular, so I highly recommend it.)



And, just because I like the photo at left, I'll mention that I went to Burning Man again this year. I had to give it a miss last year (2006) because its Labor Day date conflicted with the start of the Fall Semester. But I was able to get back there again this year, albeit a few days late. As usual, there was a lot of great, crazy art in the Black Rock Desert 3 hours northeast of Reno, NV. This year's theme was "The Green Man", so a lot of the art revolved around "Green" themes, such as this fun oil-tanker sculpture (and you could climb through the inside of the whole thing, too! There were nice views from the top.) My Burning Man "tribe", called "Sporosite" (yes, we are the Spores) had a pretty low-key year this time. No pirate art cars. No body painting. We did have a couple of tricycles that we rode around the playa giving away free cups of chai, but that was about it. After 12 years of attending (I've only been 6 years myself), we

decided to have a year-off to enjoy ourselves a bit. We'll see whether we come up with the energy to put on a big show again next year.

Let's see, other than work, and the new home, and the curtailed travel schedule, I should also be sure to mention the fun that I have with my Nephew, Roy. He just turned 5, although I like the photo of him here that I took just after he turned 4. You'll note his air of having the world as his oyster, no doubt encouraged by his fêted status as the only child. I refrain from claiming that he is spoiled by his parents, Steve and Sally, but I do know that I take his other Uncle Eddie (Sally's brother) as my arch-nemesis. I do my darndest to be the "Cool Uncle" (and not the "Creepy Uncle"), although Eddie gives me a run for my money, I have to admit.

In any case, it's great having Roy and his parental minders in LA (they now live in The Valley... so I'll have to work extra hard to make sure Roy doesn't grow up to be a "Valley Boy"... see Nick Cage's young performance in *Valley Girl* to see what I fear!). I lieu of children of my own (and there's no danger of me acquiring any soon, given the apparent complete lack of interest of the females of our species), it's good to have at least a ¼ of my genes in somebody that I can spoil.

So, in a 6-page nutshell, that's *La Vida Brian*. Life is pretty good in my mountain retreat and I continue to enjoy my time at Pitzer (and I will enjoy it more as soon as this year is done and my committee duty is done). I hope your 2008 is a good one.

Cheers,



Brian Keelley