

2nd April 2005

Dear everyone,

It is getting on for two years since I last wrote so there is quite a bit to report.

10-year anniversary special!

It is hard to believe but yesterday marked 10 years since we arrived in Denver. When we came to America, we expected to stay for only 9 to 12 months. Somehow we got stuck here. It is also a surprise that we are still in Denver but more about that later.

Work

After being unemployed for 7 months in 2003, I finally landed a job with *Wall St On Demand* which does web sites for finance companies. Towards the end, I was practicing “*Do you want fries with that?*” as I feared it was going to be a requirement at my next job. Anyway, I’ve learned many things that I didn’t know that I needed to know. It is the first job I’ve had where there are a lot of people (~20) doing similar things to me and it is great to see what everyone else is doing and hear ideas bounced around the office. Another good thing is that I don’t have to worry about what the site looks like; other people with graphic design backgrounds work that out and my job is to make it function. At 40, I think I’m the oldest in the Design & Development group. One big drawback of the job is that it 60km/37 miles from home. It is against my environmental principles to drive that far every day but being without work is against my principles too, only more so.

Lan was at American Express but they had incredibly lax data security and management resisted doing anything about it so Lan was constantly undoing what others had altered. Indeed we wondered if there was fraud with senior managers getting kickbacks but we had no proof. Lan’s complaints put her offside with her boss and so she was sent away to the Phoenix, Arizona office. For 3 months we got up at 3:45am on Monday so we could get her to the 6am flight and she returned at 10pm on Friday.

I can’t imagine any reason for the city’s existence except that it might have been founded by missionaries to teach unbelievers what the fires of Hell will be like. I visited Lan in May (spring) and it was already unreasonably hot.



Often seen in the background of Western films, saguaro (say *sawaro*) cacti cope with the desert climate by growing slowly. The first 4cm/1½” takes a decade and the first branch appears at about 75 years. They have a wide, shallow root system to snatch any rain before it runs away.¹

Lan was there through to the end of June 2004. Her life was made more miserable by being without a car and real cooking facilities in her hotel room, so she was limited to restaurants that she could walk to from her hotel in the late afternoon heat. However, she made friends among the drivers of the hotel shuttle bus, almost all Mexican, who took her to and from work. I think they appreciated Lan’s kind words and shared immigrant experience.



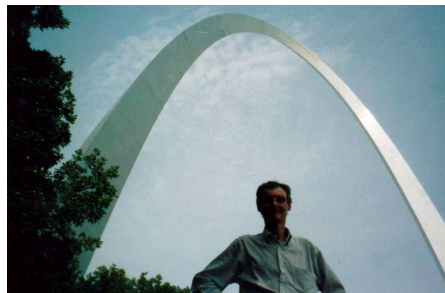
At the Phoenix Botanical Gardens. Note Lan at the lower-left. Unfortunately the photo can’t capture how hot it was. A rented umbrella to helped but not enough.

Washington D.C.

It became clear that Lan had no future at AmEx so she quit without having another job to go to. Six weeks later, she was offered a job in Virginia, just outside Washington D.C. so she started at the end of August. She would need a car once she was there so this gave us the opportunity for a cross-country road trip!

Prior to this expedition, we had not driven much further east than Denver’s airport. Now we needed to cover 2675km/1665 miles in 3 days. I was pleasantly surprised to see gentle rolling hills as we passed through eastern Colorado, Kansas and western Missouri on the first day as I thought the land was as flat as a pancake from Denver all the way to the Mississippi River. That night, we stopped at the aptly named Boonville. Our hotel was next to a service station offering overnight parking and shower facilities for truckers. I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many big rigs in one place at one time. We walked by on the way to get our dinner at Wendy’s (a hamburger joint) which surprised Lan by having a delicious salad. I remarked to one of the staff how impressed I was by the trucks and was told it was a quiet night.

We had not planned to see anything along the way but figured we would never make a trip to St. Louis, so if we wanted to visit “the arch”, we had to do it on the way through.



St. Louis, Missouri—the only city in the world with its own carry handle. The shape suggests corporate sponsorship by McDonalds.

Built at the junction of the Missouri & Mississippi Rivers, St. Louis was the jumping off point for the Lewis & Clark expedition of 1803 and then settlers heading west in the middle 1800s. The Gateway Arch² is stainless steel, 192m/630ft tall and we rode to the top!

Heading east out of St. Louis, the traffic was much heavier and dominated by trucks. Through Illinois, Indiana and well into Ohio, I was struck by the ease with which one could build an international airport. Even several side-by-side.



Headed east across the mid-West on I-70. What better way to represent this exciting piece of America than a combine harvester on the back of a flatbed overtaking an Air Force semi-trailer?

Finding a place for Lan to stay turned out to be more difficult than expected. The rental market in Denver is weak so there are signs on apartment complexes everywhere offering move-in specials. There was none of that around DC. I had contacted perhaps a dozen places before we left but only one had a unit available for immediate occupancy and it was gone by the time we arrived. We had also arranged to meet two single women offering share accommodation but neither of them worked out. As a temporary measure, Lan moved into a converted garage owned by the sister of a friend of Lan’s sister. It was dismal.

I flew back to Denver that afternoon, arriving at 2am instead of midnight as scheduled with the result that I was too late for a bus of any kind. After turning down an offer of \$55 to get home by taxi, I elected to find a quiet, carpeted section of the terminal and sleep on the floor till 4:10am when the first bus left. It turns the airport is quiet for only 10 minutes at a time as the security announcements run all night.

You are probably wondering what my plans were. I intended to move over but later rather than sooner as I wanted to stay at my job for 2 years but had been there only 10 months. You might recall that I was in Australia during most of 1998 while Lan remained in the US. Lan is an independent woman having faced much greater challenges in life and I gained the impression that it didn’t matter much to Lan whether I was with her or not. It turns out that we’ve grown older and more attached since then. In retrospect, in 1998, Lan kept the same job and lived in the same place with neighbors and friends. This time she was completely on her own. Indeed, she said later that she felt the same terrible uncertainty she felt when she arrived in Australia in 1981.

Lan moved to a real apartment after 10 days though even with the minimal furniture she had

¹ Learn more about the saguaro:
<http://helios.bto.ed.ac.uk/bto/desbiome/saguaro.htm>

² Learn more about the Gateway Arch and museum:
<http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/lewisandclark/jef.htm>

with her, getting in was a physical struggle. I planned to visit every second weekend but she moved the weekend when I wasn't there.

She did find some wonderful neighbors though, particularly two older gentlemen Bob, and Roy who served in both WW2 and in Korea. Both were a valuable source of local knowledge, kind words and good humor. Lan later discovered she was living next door to another woman originally from Vietnam.

Lan has two sisters living in Charlotte, North Carolina. Since it is "just" 650km/400 miles from Lan's apartment and baby Andrew was getting baptized, we drove down for the event. About a dozen babies were processed in quick succession, though not all seemed to enjoy the experience if the screaming was anything to go by.



With Lan's sister Loan and family after the baptism. I find it hard to blend in among any group of Vietnamese. The older son Duy (pronounced Yee) is lovely.

A wealthy Englishman, James Smithson, died in 1829 leaving his considerable fortune to form "an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men". Although he had never visited the country, he specified that it was to be in Washington. He didn't indicate why. After years of debate about what to with the money and even whether to accept it, Congress created the Smithsonian Institution³ in 1846 to conduct research, administer national collections and to educate the public. As a result, we now have a series of first-rate museums ranging in subject from the American Indian to Air & Space. On our first assault, Lan and I spent a full day at the Museum of American History and only conquered three-quarters of it. So much to see but sore feet are a limiting factor.



On the Mall looking towards the Washington Monument. Various national institutions are scattered around this strip including the Capitol (where Congress meets), the Smithsonian museums, and memorials for President Lincoln, WW2 and the wars in Vietnam and Korea.

I actually lived in Washington DC in 1969 and 1970. As many of you know, my father was in the Navy and Australia was buying something

from the US Navy at the time. Somehow dad was involved. I had a reasonable recollection of the house we lived in but none at all of the school I went to even though it was only two blocks away.



The rather grand house at 4610 Reno Rd. I once tried digging a tunnel from the front garden to a friend's house. I didn't make it.

Lan called me after starting work describing it as a "dream job". Unfortunately it didn't last. The man that hired her left two weeks after she arrived and his replacement was incompetent and arrogant. And loud! If Lan called me from the office, I could often hear him in the background shouting at someone. The stress made Lan sick which made life even more difficult so I urged her to give up and come back to Denver.

On my final visit, we made a trip to Annapolis, a beautiful small town an hour or two north. After inspecting the State Capitol and some other historic buildings, we walked down the waterfront and admired the yachts. We struck up a conversation with a man making repairs to his craft and he told us that *"Only one thing works on an old boat and that's the owner!"*.

Although Annapolis bills itself as the "sailing capital of the world", its real claim to fame is being the home of the US Naval Academy where officers are trained. The visitor center was a waste of time catering mainly to prospective students but the museum's collection of model ships was stunning. Especially intriguing were the ships made of bone. To relieve the boredom of their captivity, French prisoners saved the bones from stew, dried them and cut them into strips to make the planks and rigging for their models. The English arranged for the models to be sold to the public so the prisoners could make a little money. A few of the model makers were so successful that they elected to stay in England after peace was established.



Model ship made by French prisoners captured by the English during the Napoleonic wars (early 1800s). The hull is perhaps 50cm/20" long. Targeting their market, the models were generally based on English ships rather than French.

The ships were difficult to photograph in their glass cases so I was hoping to buy some

postcards. The gift shop didn't have any of the ships but I purchased a few others that were interesting. Figuring that Lan had a spare car key, to liven things up a bit, I left my keys on the counter after getting some coins out of my pocket. We walked back to the car and then I announced that I had lost the keys that included the keys to Lan's apartment. I ran around the places we visited during the day but they weren't there and the gift shop closed shortly after we left. Lan did have a spare car key so we drove back to Virginia wondering what to do next. Lan's apartment was on the 3rd floor and she left the balcony door slightly open for ventilation. To entertain Lan's neighbors, I climbed up from the balcony below. It doesn't look very high up when you are on the ground looking up but it certainly looked high when looking down! Anyway, the following day we returned to Annapolis and I must admit to considerable relief at recovering the keys.

A few days later we were packed up and drove to Charlotte to visit Lan's sisters for Thanksgiving. On the way back to Denver, we made good progress on our first day and drove into the evening hoping to make it to St Louis. While on the freeway at around 7pm, a deer mounted a *kamikaze* attack on us and I surprised myself by swerving instinctively to miss him. It would have spoilt my day (and the deer's) to have hit him or her. 150 people and 1.5 million deer die in such crashes each year⁴. The next day we set ourselves a new record driving 1337km/831 miles, getting home at 11pm. It was lucky we did as it snowed heavily the next day.



99 Ford Escort. Loaded. There was still room for several toothpicks if carefully placed.

Despite trying without luck for 3 years before leaving for Washington, Lan got another job in Denver within a week of returning. It is with TriZetto which serves health insurance firms.

Election and American politics

Although not able to vote, I've never been as emotionally involved in an election as I was for last year's US election. Same for Lan. Along with almost half of America, it seemed utterly obvious that the President was incompetent and his Administration wrong on almost every issue. However, the other half of America held the opposite view just as passionately.

While I believe it is probably true that Mr. Bush got more votes where it counted, I am still angry at some of the tactics employed, or attempted, by the Republicans. Some of the highlights:

³ See the Smithsonian on the web: <http://www.si.edu/>

⁴ From the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety <http://www.defenders.org/habitat/highways/new/reports/deercollisions.pdf>

- In the lead up to the war in Iraq and then during the election campaign, the President and members of the Administration constantly used “Iraq” and “terrorist attacks” in the same sentence and spoke of Iraq as part of the “war on terror”. Without ever actually saying it, they created an impression that Iraq was directly involved in the attacks on New York and Washington. In 2003, nearly 70% believed it⁵. As we know and as the President has admitted, there was no such link.
- *The Plain Dealer*, a newspaper in Cleveland, a city that is heavily Democratic, printed voter registration forms in the paper as a service to its readers. However, Ken Blackwell, the Ohio Secretary of State and a Republican rejected the many thousands that arrived because the paper was “too thin”! This was later overturned but it is likely that some applicants didn’t hear about the reversal and didn’t vote.
- Two weeks before the election, Republicans attempted to have 63 polling stations in Philadelphia moved in an apparent attempt to confuse voters. 53 were in areas with largely African-American or Hispanic (Spanish-speaking) populations that traditionally vote Democrat. The city rejected the application.
- In Nevada, the civic-sounding but Republican funded *Voters Outreach of America* discarded the voter registration forms of those indicating that they wanted to be noted as Democrats (allowing them to vote in the pre-election elections that select the candidates). They got away with it.
- In Florida, where the President’s brother just happens to be Governor, the state sent a list of 47,000 felons to the counties to ensure that they were removed from voter rolls. However, as an investigation by the *Miami Herald* soon discovered, 2100 of those had won back their right to vote. Remember that the 2000 election was decided by just 537 Florida votes. Even worse, the *Sarasota Herald Tribune* reported that there were just 61 Hispanic names on the list in a state where 17% identify themselves this way. (Florida Hispanics are largely Cuban and vote Republican overwhelmingly.) The state’s defense of the list became untenable and they eventually relented allowing the counties to make their own judgements.
- “Those who vote decide nothing, those who COUNT the votes decide everything.” Although attributed to Stalin, there is scant evidence that he actually said it but it sounds plausible. Anyway, the CEO of Diebold, the largest maker of electronic voting machines, wrote that his company was “helping Ohio deliver its electoral votes to the President.” Some 40 million voters used electronic voting machines in this election and only a minority of machines left a physical paper trail available for independent audit. Was their fraud? We don’t know and we can’t know. However, even assuming Diebold was

completely honest, it has been demonstrated that the tabulators can be hacked to change the “results”.⁶

I must also report that there were irregularities on the Democrat side. Probably the most famous was someone being paid in illegal drugs to get Democrats to register. However, from what I’ve read, these problems are utterly insignificant compared with actions by the other side.

Having said all this, what really gave Mr. Bush the edge was his political advisor Karl Rove. His strategy was not to unite by winning over undecided voters in the middle but to “energize the base” and it is widely believed, to use third parties to ruthlessly smear the opponent.

Dealing with the second one first, in this last election, I’m referring to the so-called *Swift Boat Veterans for Truth* that ran TV ads casting doubt on John Kerry’s record in Vietnam. Although some of the claims were contradicted by what they themselves had written at the time and John’s crew mates who saw what happened stood by him, some of the mud stuck. I find it incredible a large segment of the American public was so willing to believe this and yet be completely unconcerned that Mr. Bush avoided going to Vietnam because his father used his influence to secure a position in the Texas Air National Guard. Even then, he failed to show up for duty for several months.

Similar tactics were used against John McCain in the Republican primaries in 2000. As you probably know, John was a prisoner of war in Vietnam for 5½ years. The communists offered to release him when they discovered that his father was an Admiral but he refused unless all the POWs were released. That’s character.



“Hey Karl, what’s the frequency?”

Was Bush wired? There is something under the jacket. The President’s halting delivery and far off gaze at times during the first debate suggested it was a radio transmitter and the President was being fed answers. See report⁷ and many more photos⁸.

Unlike Australia where voter turnout is near universal because it is required by law, in America, not only do you have to convince voters that your positions are right but you have to convince them *enough* to get them to vote. Karl Rove reckoned that 4 million “evangelical Christians” didn’t vote in 2000 so he aimed to engage them with “Christian values”—and change the subject from Iraq, loss of jobs, exploding government deficits and so on. I

thought what they were promoting was a perversion of Christian values, or at least a self-serving subset.

I heard an interesting analysis that argued that in the last generation or so, Christian values have been turned from *external* issues (fighting against poverty, racism, violence against women, environmental degradation, torture and war combined with fighting for peace, jobs, access to healthcare, education) to *internal* issues focused particularly on abortion and same-sex marriage.

I’m uneasy about abortion but see the real solution is preventing unwanted pregnancies. The “pro-lifers” would do well to ask why the US has such high rates of teen pregnancies—more than double that of Canada for instance and 16 times higher than Japan⁹. Their opposition to sex education and contraception might be part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

The hypocrisy on the same-sex marriage issue jarring. The President has given his support to a Constitutional amendment that would define marriage in terms of one man and one woman and 38 states have passed “defense of marriage acts” that define it this way. The Republicans talk about marriage and family as being the foundation of society and say that same-sex marriage is a threat. Somehow divorce is never mentioned even though 40-50% of US marriages now end that way. While condemning homosexuals, the President was strangely silent when Britney Spears was married and then divorced 55 hours later. If lack of children is the problem, it is odd that Republicans don’t criticize couples like Lan and I.

I am forced to conclude that these issues are merely politics, a way to get popularly elected while doing what they really want—massive tax cuts, government contracts and rollback of regulations for their wealthy donors. I urge you to read this article¹⁰ about the growing wealth inequality: “...between 1973 and 2000 the average real income of the bottom 90 percent of American taxpayers actually fell by 7 percent. Meanwhile, the income of the top 1 percent rose by 148 percent, the income of the top 0.1 percent rose by 343 percent and the income of the top 0.01 percent rose 599 percent.” It gets worse after that.

To my mind, a government that truly reflected Christian values would look like a combination of *GreenPeace*¹¹, *Amnesty International*¹², *CARE*¹³ and *Doctors without Borders*¹⁴.

Although there were some cheap shots at the President, the film *Fahrenheit 9/11* moved me when looking at who makes the decisions about the war and who fights it. Only a few members of Congress have close relatives serving in the

⁵ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&contentId=A32862-2003Sep5>

⁶ <http://www.blackboxvoting.org/>

⁷ From the Washington Post <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A18734-2004Oct8.html>

⁸ Note especially the unconvincing photo with the tailor and the NASA photo analysis: <http://homepage.mac.com/c.shaw/BushBulges/PhotoAlbum15.html>

⁹ From the Population Resource Center

<http://www.prccdc.org/summaries/teenpreg/teenpreg.html>

¹⁰ Quoting from *Business Week*

<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=10&ItemID=4728>

¹¹ GreenPeace: <http://www.greenpeace.org>

¹² Amnesty International: <http://www.amnesty.org/>

¹³ CARE: <http://www.care.org/>

¹⁴ Also known as *Medecins Sans Frontieres*, its original French name: www.doctorswithoutborders.org/

military¹⁵. The film followed a pair of Marine recruiters who focused on the poorest areas knowing that the residents there had few opportunities for education and employment.

"We don't do body counts"—General Franks. The Administration does not discuss the human cost of the war for the Iraqi population. Strange given that the President considers the sanctity of life so important that he flew back from Texas to sign legislation at I AM to save the "life" of Terri Shiavo who, as you probably know, had been severely brain-damaged for 15 years. Since there were no WMD or links to *al Qaeda*, the overthrow of a dictator allowing "freedom" and "democracy" is about all they have left to justify the war but that would sound hollow if the death toll was widely appreciated. Sadly, there are no plans to overthrow other brutal dictators such as Robert Mugabe but then Zimbabwe has no oil. For the record, as of today, there are *at least* 17,316 reported civilian casualties¹⁶—more than five times the number killed on 11th September 2001. A report in the *Lancet*¹⁷ estimated the toll to be 98,000 within a wide range. It included Iraqi army personnel (mainly unwilling conscripts) killed during the invasion as well as civilians and extrapolated from samples.



Although created as a joke, this map reflects the painful reality that states that voted Democrat are perhaps culturally closer to Canada than to the states that voted Republican. The map of election results¹⁸ has an interesting correlation with the map of "free states" and "slave states" before the Civil War¹⁹. Make your own judgement of what this means, if anything.

Miscellaneous

OK, enough serious discussion. We had an enjoyable visit to Australia in April last year though there was not enough time to see everyone and everything. This was our first visit home since my sister returned from living in the UK so I finally got to meet her daughters. Actually, I had met Eleanor before but she was only 1 at the time. She has grown since then. Lan was a big hit with the girls. My mother and I went to visit one day while Lan went to see her

sister but Eleanor was very upset that Lan didn't arrive crying *"I want Auntie Lan!"*. She had to make do with Uncle Peter which I admit is a poor 2nd prize.



Charlotte and Eleanor. I can't recall if Charlotte was pretending to be a monster or if she was just desperate to get away from us.

Lan has a wonderful niece and three nephews in Sydney and we took them bowling which was a lot of fun. I hadn't done it for perhaps 20 years and Lan had never done it at all. We enjoyed it so much we did it again in Adelaide when we visited the rest of Lan's family.



Still trying to find the correct way to position my tongue when releasing the ball. Nice shoes! Photo credit to Nam.

My mother's sister Pat and husband Des came to visit in June last year staying with us on the weekend and making some expeditions into the countryside during the week. We bought a tent in 1996 but had never used it so it was great that they took it and a sense of adventure with them.

I am very worried about what we as a species are doing to the global ecosystem but it was wonderful to read about the large increase in the number of whales passing Sydney each season²⁰.

We don't own any Ray Charles CDs but his life and finally death touched us. We saw the film *Ray* and came away with a much greater appreciation of his musical impact. I heard somewhere that Ray had said that being black held him back more than being blind—a sad indictment of the racism he and other African-Americans endured. My favorite magazine has a moving obituary with a beautiful photograph²¹. It mentions that even at the school for the *blind* he attended, black and white students were kept apart!

Speaking of films, I also urge you to see *Hotel Rwanda* if you haven't already.

If you use the internet and still use Microsoft's *Internet Explorer*, I'm guessing that's because you are unaware of a new and better alternative. *Firefox* offers much better security, tabbed browsing, popup blockers and more. It is one of a new breed of "standards-compliant" browsers including Opera, Safari and Konqueror that are built around open standards rather than locking you into one company's (i.e. Microsoft's) vision of how the internet should operate. Download it now: <http://www.mozilla.org/>

Bumper stickers:

A divisive election is good for bumper stickers:

- *Well behaved women rarely make history.*
- *Screw Tibet. Free Scotland!*
- *Enjoy life. This is not a dress rehearsal.*
- *I still have the body of an 18 year old. It's in the trunk and it's starting to smell.*
- *Stop inbreeding. Ban country music.*
- *I am straight but not narrow.*
- *Support OPEC. Buy an SUV.*
- *Bush. A global disaster. A national disgrace.* (There was a United States Air Force sticker on the same vehicle.)
- *It's time to trim the Bushes.*
- *Save the environment. Plant a Bush back in Texas.*
- *Iraq is Arabic for Vietnam*
- *Oh well. I wasn't using my civil liberties anyway.*
- *Regime change starts at home.*
- *Vote or die.*
- *Bush lied. People died.*
- *If you aren't totally appalled, you haven't been paying attention.*
- *</bush>* (A bumper sticker for computer programmers!)

The future

Any plans we make keep coming undone so I've given up making predictions. We'd still like to move to the east coast sometime since being a tourist was one of the reasons we came here and after 10 years, we have done most of what we want to on this side of the US. I'd like to try living in the UK one day and eventually be back to Australia. We'll see.

In the mean time, we've been looking at real estate in Denver, possibly to live in but something that can be rented if we move out of town. The real estate market surged in recent years and we could have a huge capital gain if we bought a house when we arrived but I resisted to avoid getting too entrenched. We made an offer on one last Thursday but I was relieved we didn't get it since it required a lot of work.

Please write and tell us your news if you get a chance.

—Peter and Lan

¹⁵ <http://www.newsabc.com/f911chap7-8.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.iraqbodycount.net/>

¹⁷ To save you creating an account with the Lancet: <http://www.sweetandsour.org/letters/files/Lancet.pdf>

¹⁸ From NY Times:

http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/politics/2004_ELECTIONRESULTS_GRAPHIC/

¹⁹ From a group that appears affiliated with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.:

<http://www.learner.org/biographyofamerica/prog10/maps/>

²⁰ From the newspaper I read online almost daily:

<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/07/16/1089694565535.html>

²¹ As Larry Ellison once said,

"I used to think. Now I just read *The Economist*":

http://economist.com/printedition/PrinterFriendly.cfm?Story_ID=2765918