

Holiday Greetings, 1998 from Laurel and Brian Hines

They say it's good to share your feelings. Here's some of what 1998 brought us (starting with the dark side first; we'll end on a positive note).

Depression. This year Brian turned 50, and Laurel entered the on-deck circle for becoming a half-centenarian. This cast a dark shadow over most of the year, especially for Brian, who still harbors a fantasy that he will stay youthful forever. Well-meaning friends didn't help all that much. Brian would be told, "You should look on the bright side of growing old." He'd reply, "What, pray tell, could that be?" Almost always, the person would be dumbstruck as they frantically tried to think of some way to flesh out the substance of their platitude. A long awkward moment would pass as Brian waited for reassurance. Then, he'd be told something like: "Well, the older you get, the less concerned you are about sex." "Oh, thank you. I feel so much better now." Or: "Um, with age comes the realization that you will never accomplish all that you set out to do in life." Great. *Passionless unproductivity*—the priceless gift of geezerhood. Fortunately, the local natural foods store refused to give Brian a senior citizen discount when he demanded one right after his birthday, being told "you don't act old!" (which was just what he wanted to hear). And, blessedly, the AARP hasn't sent a membership card yet.

Indignation. The problems Laurel encounters in her counseling practice seem to flow with the times. A few years ago bulimia was the disorder of the day. Now it is domestic violence. Damn women! Always abusing the men in their lives! Forcing the man to rub their feet every night! Making the man play second-fiddle to a favored ~~child~~ dog! No, wait...that's not right...we're not typical. It's the *man* who usually is abusive. A fact Brian is reminded of almost nightly when Laurel comes home with the day's client-stories (names omitted, of course) about male dominance and patriarchy. For the rest of the evening he is careful to reply "yes, dear...of course, dear" to whatever she says. Laurel's indignation at the seeming epidemic of domestic violence led her to become a board member of Solutions, a non-profit family violence institute in Salem that teaches men how to treat women right. Such as by taking swing dancing lessons, which we did. Four lessons, in fact. It was way cool. And our instructor kept telling us, "guys, this is the last place on earth where you always get to lead." Yes! But that means the man has to know what he wants to do, which is part of the reason we haven't actually gone and danced in public yet. Soon, though—when the double dose of Prozac takes hold.

Terror. In February Brian went to India. There he had the most terrifying experience of his life, a fearful event which almost all overseas travelers have heard about, but few survive: *the New Delhi cab ride*. This would, by the way, be an excellent addition to Disneyland—an exciting thrill attraction that would put the Indiana Jones ride to shame. Imagine yourself getting into the back seat of a rickety car in the middle of the night, no seat belts, nothing to hang on to. The driver speaks little English, so you hand him a slip of paper with an address on it and he rockets off into the mysterious New Delhi night, the air pungent with the exotic odor of diesel fumes. The car shakes and rattles as it speeds along, its horn beeping constantly as the driver pulls to within inches of the back bumper of huge trucks filling both lanes of the road, then darting around and past them whenever a space more-or-less (usually, it seems, less) large enough for the cab to fit through appears. As the trucks begin to move together again, the cab not yet past, your driver increases the speed of his honking and yells inexplicable Hindi words out the window.

He seems to be saying, “I believe in reincarnation. Kill me now if you must. I will enjoy a better next life, free of this damned cab and my American passenger.” To top it off, after half an hour or so the driver stops and admits, in halting English, that he has no idea how to get to where he’s supposed to go. Ah...the mysterious East. But undoubtedly this happens in New York too.

Joy. But after Brian’s cab ride, and an only slightly-more-enjoyable six hour train trip, it was all worth it to spend two weeks finishing up work on his new book, *Life is Fair*. The book will be printed in India in a few months by his spiritual group, Radha Soami Satsang Beas. Twenty-five thousand copies are planned for the first printing, which is great. Writing a book is akin to giving birth, except a pregnancy is over in just nine months, while a book can gestate for years, and even then a delivery isn’t assured. Brian is happy to be having the book published non-commercially for now, but is seeking an agent—so far unsuccessfully. He suspects that the agents he has contacted respond to his query with a special glee, given the title of his book: “Hee, hee. You think life is fair. Well, here’s something fair for you—a *rejection letter!*” He’s happy to be able to include 25 cartoons in the book. Almost certainly this is the first time Calvin & Hobbes and Dilbert have been used to help explain the workings of karma.

Renewal. With the aid of a backhoe, we sent over an acre of blackberries on to a new and better life, replacing the briars with meadow grass and dozens of maple and fir trees. Laurel, our Janie Appleseed, lavishes the seedlings with lots of love and attention, carrying water to them when they are thirsty, staking them when they can’t stand straight. The local deer also adore her plantings, considering them to be high-priced deer food. But it truly is satisfying to plant a tree which will mature only after you die, since the benefit of your labors will go mainly to others. It’s a cliché, but the more we give, the more we get—which, incidentally, is a line in Brian’s book.

Relief. Tasha, the family UPS scourge, gave us a scare a few months back when she suddenly could barely walk the day after a hike at our cabin in Camp Sherman. For a while it was looking like the end was near for the beast we have fondly called in previous Christmas letters, “our psychotic pet.”* With the aid of a series of expensive, but effective, shots, Tasha now is back to normal—though that word somehow seems strange when used in connection with her. She loves a new indoor game Brian developed in honor of the recent soccer World Cup, where Tasha is the goalie guarding the stairs, and Brian is the world’s greatest soccer player with one “free kick” that will either win or lose the world championship. If Tasha misses the ball, the house reverberates with a triumphant cry of “Gooooooooooooooooooooo!!!” For a while, Tasha had a new friend, Blackie, a cat who decided to spend nights on our deck and serve as a surrogate pet for purr-deprived Brian. Unfortunately, though, Blackie seems to have disappeared of late. Perhaps the daily morning ritual of being awakened with the sight of a large German Shepherd snout, and a chasing into the brush, wore thin.

Well, life is meant to be lived, so as long as we’re feeling *something*, it must mean that we’re on the right track. Like everyone else, we’d prefer to have life always go just as we think it should—but it doesn’t...thank heavens. Who wants to be in charge of the cosmos? We’re happy playing our parts in this earthly production. Someone else can be the playwright.

Happy Holidays and best wishes for the New Year,

* Note: after researching this matter in the International Manual of Psychological Dog Disorders, we wish to correct our earlier diagnosis to “pathologically-neurotic pet.” Tasha has not lost touch with reality; she just considers reality to be best managed through constant whining—not unlike many humans.