



**November 29, 2009
First Sunday in Advent
Belgrade, Serbia**

Dear Friends,

In July 1989 we took the family to Berlin. We wanted the kids to see “the wall” which had been a defining image for nearly three decades. It looked permanent; but 14 weeks later it had been breached. Seven months after that we were back and saw bulldozers reunite neighborhoods that had been divided for 28 years. The collapse of Communism was our generation’s moment in history and we needed to be part of it. Being “part of it” launched us on new careers in a new field, “democracy development.” We’ve been out of the U.S. for 120 of the 240 months since the “wall fall,” mostly working in the former “evil empire” with some Middle Eastern stops along the way. Twenty years on we find ourselves back in Serbia with two Alaskan cats. The highlight of the year was our pilgrimage to Berlin for the 20th anniversary. We didn’t expect our midlife crisis to last so long or to be so rewarding.

During the past year Rich has directed the Serbia Media Assistance Program and Suzi’s been consulting with the Great Library at Alexandria, Egypt, hoping to build Egypt’s first Community Radio Station. She spends most of her time in Belgrade and at this very moment is sitting at the kitchen table designing studio space. This year we’ve gotten a chance to visit friends throughout Europe and Georgia; and spend some summer weekends by (in?) the sea in Montenegro.



A personal highlight for Rich was working with the Exiled Media Forum, brave journalists using “new media” (like Skype and Twitter) to get news out of and into places like Zimbabwe, Burma and Iran.

The global economic crisis has caused setbacks for Serbia, and when the Russians cut natural gas to Europe last winter we had some chilly nights. The flu epidemic has folks wearing masks. All of this leads to a feeling of uncertainty and a certain nostalgia for the communist past. But moving back after several years we see a positive difference. Serbia’s transition started only 9 years ago, delayed by war. And while Serbia lags behind most of the rest of Eastern Europe, we think it positively compares with Slovakia in 1997 when it was 8 years into its own transition. Today Slovakia is fully a part of Europe. We live in hope.



Last Christmas all six of us were together in Sitka. Since then both couples have bought homes, Brian and Liz in St. Paul, Minnesota (left) and Kevin and Shannon in Eagle River, Alaska (right). Both sons are still somehow involved in theater, Liz works at Hennepin County Medical Center and Shannon at the University of Alaska. This year we lost Suzi's foster sister, Sandy Larson,

in August and her step mother Kay Randall in February. Kay was 90. This year Rich's mom turned 96. She's still living in her own home in Ridgewood, New Jersey. We feel the loss that our expat life causes us when we cannot be with family at cornerstone events. But we did get back to the States this year, to both Minnesota and New Jersey. And Suzi, Rich, Brian and Liz got together for a joyous weekend at the Winnipeg Folk Festival in July.



In some years past it's been hard to get into the spirit of "anticipation" that Advent is supposed to bring because we've been in either the Moslem world where Christmas is just another day, or the Orthodox world where Advent is still two weeks off. But this year we got in the mood by heading up the Danube for the Budapest Christmas Fair (the banner on the top is from that fair) that opened Nov 20. We got a jump on our Christmas shopping, listened to some Christmas music and got a head start on our annual holiday weight gain grazing the food stalls; washed down, of course, with mulled wine.

This Christmas, insha'Allah, we will fly home to Sitka, by way of the Frankfurt Christmas Market, (we love European Christmas fairs) to spend the holiday with our Sitka friends, along with Kevin and Shannon. Brian and Liz will spend Christmas with her parents.

We enjoy good health, strong family ties and rewarding work. We both work with energetic young people who are immersed in the "new media" of social networking, iPhones, twitter, blogs and "citizen journalism." After 20 years, despite setbacks, walls keep on falling (like the dominos in front of the Brandenburg Gate, right) and we keep looking forward.

We wish you good health, good hope, good holidays, good friends, and a peaceful world.

Take Care,

Suzi and Rich McClear suzi@mcclear.net rich@mcclear.net

