

## Excerpts from the 2010 Williams Family Christmas Letter

We hope this letter finds you and your loved ones doing well this holiday season and provides you with a few laughs on us. It should be easier than getting you to scowl or frown; at least that's what we learned when we did our best to take the family picture we've included (with the original letters that were sent out). It was torturous coordinating everyone's attempts at grimacing like fearsome pirates. I guess my kids aren't exactly sword clanking material. But notice Daniel and Joseph—how intently they're glowering at the world. I bet you'd be concerned if they joined you in a dark alley, wouldn't you? In reality, if the automatic camera, which was perched on top of a pillow, on top of a cooler, on top of a phonebook, on top of a wobbling stool, hadn't shot the one you're looking at, I'd say the thorn bush at Daniel's back and the kicking kid in Joseph's arms would have driven them to pirate-like actions.

Anyway, despite our rough exteriors, please know that we care. Our lack of proximity to you is not a fair indicator of feelings, for, in so many cases, our absence is actually the best Hallmark Card we could send—especially when you consider the zoo of germs we routinely have, claiming room-and-board in our home, often as long-term guests, hopping gleefully from one unwilling host to the next; and it goes without saying that superglue and duct tape are limited commodities which necessitate us missing some events, particularly those involving glass objects and small spaces. I'm serious! Superglue is always on the shopping list—below binkis....

And then there's the embarrassing 'locust effect' that we have upon dining engagements. Like the time we went to a Scout Banquet without Chrissy, while she was on bed rest with Jacob, and Anna prodded the kids to really pile their plates high. She told them, "Mom said this is all you get to eat this week, so you better eat a lot!" Regrettably, I didn't hear her or I would have corrected the misunderstanding. Nevertheless, I had a chorus of kids quoting her when I inquired of them why my wee ones were hidden behind piggish mountains of food. Fortunately, Joseph did some of his best work and cleaned up what they couldn't finish. He's talented that way....

To prove my point, Angel routinely prays earnestly over the food, "And please bless no one will say 'Eew, I hate this! It's the worst ever, Mom!' and nobody will say 'Yuck, it makes me sick!' and we'll just eat it anyway."

By the time Angel gets done praying, you'd think she and Anna would find it hard to complain. But I guess we're all human. At one point on a naughty day, Anna said she'd starve rather than eat the food Chrissy had prepared (she's nearly a teenager). I personally thought it was a logical solution to my wife's constant battle with Anna over mealtime conduct. However, Chrissy is loving and patient, though as unbending as a steel pole, so she tried to persuade Anna by showing her that one-year-old Isaac was devouring his dinner eagerly. "That doesn't mean anything," responded Anna jadedly. "He eats gross things!"

What can I say? Some kids are picky eaters and others are definitely not! Either way, Chrissy always wins in our house. Once, Angel sat at the table until bedtime, crying about not wanting to touch the food on her plate. Chrissy insisted Angel could expect to eat it for

breakfast or find it in her lunch from home the next day if she left her chair without finishing it. Finally, totally exhausted and probably dehydrated from hours of tears, Angel gave in and ate the food. When Chrissy asked if she liked it, Angel responded flatly, “I don’t know. My nose was too stuffed to taste it.”

It’s all pretty silly if you ask me. Food is food. With the tight economy, we eat a lot of “winner-wheats,” Sarah’s name for Frosted Mini-Wheats, and if we’re lucky, we add “erasers,” Stephen’s name for dried pieces of fruit; he actually thinks they are made out of erasers—and he would know better than most, for he recently went through a phase of systematically biting them off the back of all the pencils in the house (though I certainly preferred that phase over plucking the keys off the computers, which he did repeatedly last year).

Anyway, with and without erasers, we eat enough cold cereal around here to fill a swimming pool....

I think some of my kids are getting old enough to feel a little bit self-conscious about what the public is thinking while we’re buying in bulk....In fact, while I was dragging Andrew—kicking and screaming—to choose ice cream for a birthday celebration, he sheepishly confessed that he knew the store had hung a picture of our family behind the service desk and that they had instructed their employees to boot us out if they caught us trying to buy stuff from them. I suspect Anna had a hand in that misconception. She’s quite a prankster.

On one occasion, Anna actually did something nearly impossible: She teased herself! She came galloping down the stairs in the morning, exploding with excitement, insisting that she had a chicky in her bedroom (typical of Anna, hoping for more pets). I followed her and the gang up to find it. After searching and searching, she instructed us to listen quietly for the bird. And to everyone’s surprise, we heard it. Anna had awoken to the sound of her own peeping nose! It was disappointing, but very funny.

In truth, though, I think we’ve had plenty of pet time. Even Anna must know this. She recently said to her friend, “My bunny Blossom has had tons and tons and tons of babies. She’s even had more than my mom!” And Chrissy’s been a great sport about them all—critters of every shape and size—including the time the kids were hollering and scampering because their foot-long lizard was gone. From the bathroom, fresh out of the shower, a wet Chrissy responded drearily through the door, “I think someone’s missing something.” Lizzy had crept in, searching for the same thing my wife had been craving: A few moments of solitude.

Perhaps it was Chrissy’s mistake to expect any alone time while in the restroom. The kids usually bang on the door, trying to break in, particularly the young ones. They come begging for whatever’s on their mind at the moment. And the older ones occasionally come pounding and whining with questions they hope won’t be heard in their entirety, so as to increase the likelihood of a mistaken ‘yes’ verdict. I’ve even heard them purposely muffle their voices, as though the barrier didn’t already do it enough. You’ve been there, I’m sure.

Lately, Sarah’s the worst bathroom stalker....She’s such a chatter-box, and a strong-minded one at that, that she has an unusual propensity to say revealing things—the kind of things that she enjoys describing vividly from her angle of observation—the kind of things that she’s likely to repeat later at Grandma’s house or church. Like she’s noticed how “humongous” Chrissy’s backside is (compared to a toddler, I suppose it is, but compared to the rest of us, it’s tiny). And she told me, “Dad, your face is all scratchy—you have woodchips on it, but they’re

black zits, huh.” And she said to one man, while patting his stomach curiously, “You look like you have a baby in your tummy; but you’re a boy, so you don’t...What is in your big tummy?” You get the picture....

Recently, when Sarah asked through the closet door, “Are you getting your clothes on, Mommy?” Chrissy responded, “Yes, honey. I need some privacy.” But the attempt didn’t end there. Sarah quickly added her most convincing argument, “Just let me in—I won’t say yuck or eww this time, I promise...”

The line sounds awfully similar to Angel’s dinner prayers, doesn’t it? The kids pull phrases from each other all the time. I personally like it when they’re close, and you know what they’re saying, but it’s evolved a bit. Like Daniel’s plea, “You should help me with my homework, Dad, because you’re the *‘math magician’* in the house.” And later he told Andrew that they both needed to rub their derby cars down thoroughly with *‘silver wolf’* if they wanted the paint to shine. And in the backyard, he touted his knowledge of birds by declaring excitedly, “Look at that black-and-white *‘Potpie’* on the fence.”

Grab-and-gabs are awesome. Angel told Chrissy, “Can’t we please watch *The Last Airoffender,*” to which Chrissy responded, while changing Jacob’s diaper, “If they include our family in the counting, there’s certainly more than one left!” And Daniel, freshly home from school, explained that *‘skinned milk’* doesn’t taste very good and that he had fallen down while *‘hand fiving’* one of his friends. Perhaps my favorite of his slipups came when he said confidently, “I know what it is, but I just can’t quite put my *‘tongue’* on it.”

Daniel, we’re glad you can’t! Your germ-o-phobic siblings might go into anaphylactic shock if you did! They hate illness with a passion. For example, back in January, they all became enraged when they discovered that a stomach-flu virus had infiltrated our family. Most of them bathed in sanitizer repeatedly, hoping in vain that it would save them from the wicked visitor. Joseph did, too, before growling angrily, “If I could see germs, I would yell at them...and...I’d file a complaint!” To whom, I wondered. Regardless, at least his hypothetical recourse makes it obvious he hasn’t been indulging in violent video games with his teenager friends.

We try hard to keep worldly vices like that out of our home. So when Angel heard Anna groaning about the end of off-track time, specifically that Anna didn’t like one of her subjects, she misunderstood and quickly responded in horror, “What? *Geography* at school! Oh no! Look away from it, Anna! Don’t follow Satan!”

Later, Andrew suspiciously asked, “What’s a bar?” We responded with a short discussion about the destructive influences of alcohol and bad atmospheres, assuming his peers had introduced him to yet another worldly evil. He smiled all the way through the explanation and then added at the end, like a gavel concluding the bidding, “That’s what I thought! Sunshine’s working in a bar...and it’s bad. You should make her stop playing the computer, Dad.” He, of course, wanted to take control of the machine, so he had resorted to tattling. When we inspected Sunshine’s game, it was nothing more than a harmless ice-cream bar.

But you can count on Andrew to be conservative, even when he’s not trying to steal computer time from one of his little sisters. At church, he refused to read the “D” word in his scriptures—*‘dumb idol’*—and no amount of convincing would get him to do otherwise. However, if you ask Anna, her dad swears all the time. On Father’s Day, she indignantly

confessed that she had heard me use the “D” word and “S” word, while filing tax forms. What she neglected to tell her fellow churchgoers is that, in my moment of weakness, I had only said that the procedures appeared ‘*stupid*’ to me and that whoever created them was ‘*dumb*.’

Yup. I’m quite deplorable, aren’t I? Hopefully Anna’s crowd of listeners will recognize that with a dozen little recorders circling my feet at all times, I’d be in big trouble if I so much as coughed in the direction of a curse word. I was nearly in the doghouse for weeks after telling Chrissy, “Tommy studied Uranus and saw 27 moons.” I suppose it’s good she’s so vigilant. With little kids around, life seems to dump plenty of situations in my lap where the vice of swearing would be amply manifest if I were prone to that sort of thing; and it wouldn’t take long before I’d have eleven salty-lipped sailors, each engendering mutiny aboard my ship, and one steel-pole stern woman rowing away from us as fast as possible.

The last thing I’d ever want is to raise the crew by myself. As it is, I don’t know how Chrissy juggles them all. A few episodes per year of manning the post alone are plenty for me. Like when I took the gang, baby included, to the super-deluxe party at Heritage Park/This is the Place Monument, where everyone got in for free because of the 24<sup>th</sup> of July celebrations. We pushed the four little ones (three and under) in strollers and made our best attempts to have fun, despite the crowds. I personally was exhausted and ready to go home before leaving the dusty parking lot. Just lathering my fair-skinned kids down with sun block, while keeping them corralled enough to avoid being run over, all the while listening to their cries about how hot and shadeless it was, was sufficient to sap most of my natural strength.

Regardless, we pressed on and soon found an oasis. Popsicle bearers greeted us the moment we entered the first patch of cover under a big tree. The kind helpers made sure we all matched—equally splotted with bright-red drippings—which inadvertently turned us into a show for passing spectators. I actually thought for a few minutes, ‘*Let’s see—free, two-sticked popsicles, a 98 degree temperature, lots of dust, and a massive crowd of gawkers. Hmmm. Where’s the camera? It’s a set-up, kids. We’re gonna be mocked on TV.*’

But when others began to receive popsicles too, as they sat around watching us make a mess of ourselves, and the only people who approached me asked the usual questions about our situation, and nobody asked me to sign a media waver, I sighed heavily and knew we had dodged a bullet. With the bigger worry gone, it wasn’t bad answering the regulars, such as, “Which ones are twins and triplets?” and “How many of them are yours?” and my favorite inquiry of the day, posed by an old lady who had stared at us vigilantly for at least twenty minutes, “Where in the world is their mother?!” Anything was better than a guy coming to tell me we were on some sort of candid-camera show. Of course, we did have plenty of people snapping photos, so I don’t doubt, somewhere out there, on someone’s blog about nut cases or polygamous families (No! I’m not!), there’s a pathetic image of me, probably bending unflatteringly while helping the babies get their shoes back on.

After that, it only took an hour to rotate everyone through the bathrooms, washing the goo off their hands, face, and clothes, before we could “start having some fun,” as Andrew put it. His fun always involves waiting in long lines to attempt games that have the possibility of producing trinkets he can bring home in his pockets and leave on the kitchen floor for our resident floorsharks to eat. Fortunately for him, the booths were all complimentary, as part of the festivities, so I naively consented. However, we ended up paying plenty—the price was getting the younger ones to stay happy while waiting and waiting and waiting! Apparently, free

stuff tends to draw huge lines. And infants, one-year-olds, and two-year-olds don't see the big picture, the importance of obtaining spider rings, tiny rubber balls, and bendable, thumb-sized aliens; they're too focused on the blaring sun, blowing dust, and screaming crowd of strangers. How juvenile....

Anna and Sunshine enjoyed the activities and prizes. Nevertheless, their eyes had a tendency of drifting toward two other events that were distractingly close by: The petting zoo and pony-ride station. I knew for sure that no one would survive the drive home if we didn't "giddy-up," so we made time to wait for our chance to enjoy the wheel of tethered Shetlands. The line was bad enough that some intelligent people were avoiding it. But not us—we waited for our turns, despite discovering that the procession in front of us often grew faster than the one behind us. It was terribly frustrating to my fairness-minded crew, especially since so much of the line-hopping was unabashedly blatant. I even had a boy, about eleven, defiantly slip into the middle of my kids and claim he had been there from the beginning. When I told him he was mistaken, he made the blunder of assuming I only had girls and a couple of babies, the ones clustered around me, and foolishly added, "I'm with them," pointing confidently at five of my boys who were in front of him.

Needless to say, the intruder was shocked when he discovered that we were all one family. Not that it did any good. Once we finally made it to the finish line, even with six horses trotting, it still took me four rounds to work my kids through, with others squishing in, stealing half of the ponies each time the helpers stopped to reload. '*Where in the world are their mothers!*' is what I was thinking, as we patiently persevered against the wave of brutish rudeness. But I didn't make a fuss to management—I let Stephen do it for me. He had watched various siblings ride three rounds without him, and had even been led to the horses without getting a saddle, so by the fourth round, when he finally got his turn, he couldn't enjoy it—not after someone had craftily stolen his spot in the previous cycle. As soon as the trotting began, Stephen's crying elevated to a blood-curdling screech. It was loud enough to stop the ponies abruptly in their tracks and cause everyone to grab at their ears in pain. The head director of the horse rides pointed and scowled until we exited.

If only Stephen had ceased screaming once I dutifully fetched him, the petting zoo incident might have been better. Instead, with Jacob and Isaac beginning to join him in howling, we shuffled around in the neighboring, gated enclosure and did our best to dirty our hands on as many animals as we could—as quickly as we could—or at least as quickly as I could get Anna and Sunshine to do. Finally, feeling desperate, I begged my gang to move on to a shadier, more secluded place where the three grouchy boys could be watered and bottled and diapered and whatever else they needed to stop their crying, but Sarah wasn't about to budge until she could nab a bunny—the one critter that had somehow eluded her fingers. "You have bunnies at home," I pled, "even baby ones!"

"Not like this cute one, Daddy," she responded, continuing her pursuit. "It's white with spots!"

Perhaps Cruella Devil would have agreed with her that that particular fur was better to pet somehow, but I didn't. So with four crying kids, we made our grand exit.

Fortunately, within ten minutes of frantically searching, we located an obscure drinking fountain. It was heaven sent. Everyone had a mini-cup, and as the water splashed around, the

crying ceased. Isaac and Stephen took turns filling and dumping until a knothole in the boarded walkway was bubbling over. It kept them preoccupied enough that they didn't even protest when I bathed them in antibacterial wash to compensate for having allowed them to parade haphazardly through the barnyard experience.

I'm certain, at least for the little ones, that frolicking in the waterhole was easily better than the pioneer games they had played for prizes, and we didn't even have to wait in line, since the location was hidden well enough to fool thousands of people into staying away. Not to mention, drenching their shirts was a good thing with the heat relentlessly continuing. Though I did feel a little red-necked when I took Isaac's dripping one off and rung it out in front of a better-groomed family of three, who pretended to be enjoying the bathroom smells that were blowing in their direction as they lingered to watch us, the parents shuttering disapprovingly and their only child amusing himself with a gaggle of nice toys he'd acquired from the gift shops.

Needless to say, my kids do have eyes and are smarter than rocks, so as we walked away, they made casual comments about how they had observed that 'some' parents were doling out cash to provide better souvenirs. 'Sure' I thought, *'the ones with one kid;'* however, not wanting the day to end without me being dubbed "The Best Dad Ever," I suggested that they could have one last memento, a balloon. It was daring to think it, much less say it, for, as Chrissy has often commented, "A balloon is nothing more than disappointment in a ball!" Nevertheless, they were free to the brave who dared wait. Besides, hunger was necessitating us to stop anyway, since I couldn't fetch the two gallon-sized bags of sliced apples and can of peanuts from the bottom of our double stroller while walking.

Amazingly, ice cream cones and hotdogs, which the neighboring parents had bought for their kids, weren't enough to keep them happy. No sooner had I raised the rations from beneath Jacob, than three boys impatiently joined my crowd, pushing their way to the front and insisting boisterously that they hadn't received their fair share yet. And it didn't help that I knew where *their* mothers were, because they placidly looked on and did nothing. It seems like the next generation will have plenty of people seeking handouts from our children's tax dollars, assuming any money escapes being used as interest payments on our indebtedness to China.

Regardless, after more than half an hour of waiting, and long after the fruit had been shared away, it took some serious persuading to get Joseph and Tommy to approach the booth where the balloons were being tied to wrists. The teenagers who aided the little ones had fun mercilessly teasing Joseph. But they didn't realize what he was doing: He was boldly taking one for the team! I had instructed him to go along with it in order to cleverly reserve an extra balloon for the unlucky person who would somehow lose theirs, hoping by taking such measures I would defy Chrissy's laws concerning the inevitable.

Unfortunately, I was foolish to think I could outsmart natural processes which have their predetermined, unalterable consequences. Within minutes, Angel's balloon blew into a rosebush and dramatically popped. To hear her cry, you'd think she had a dead puppy on the end of the limp leash she drug behind her on the ground, as she moped her way in my direction. *'I'm Super Dad,'* I thought, having foreseen the future and having fortuitously planned accordingly—that is, until I noticed her wails continued after I had already employed my recovery move: Apparently, despite stripping Joseph of his floating companion, it was the wrong color and it wasn't hers! And to make matters worse, the more Angel complained while

recklessly bopping the balloon around, the more irritated Joseph became, seeing her lack of appreciation and thinking about how he had embarrassed himself horribly in order to obtain it—not to mention, he had already named the balloon, and his was best friends with Tommy's.

Does any of this sound familiar? I'm sure it does. The scenario's been replayed over and over across the world since the beginning. I can nearly hear father Adam saying, "It's a plum, the same as the one you sloppily dropped into that ravine back there," and his daughter moaning pathetically, "But it's not as squishy as the one I had before!" and his good son, grimacing, his stomach growling, thinking, "Then give it back! I still want it."

In our situation, Angel complained and complained until dust caked her tearstained cheeks as we blearily searched for our van in the parking field. Angel was driving us all crazy. Finally, Anna looked at her and grinned. "Don't worry about it being the wrong color," she said smugly. "You won't have it long, anyway." The gang gasped as they noticed Angel's shrinking balloon, which she suddenly wanted to keep safe but had destroyed by her careless treatment during the minutes of sorrow over ending her last one. I guess we're not as grateful for stuff when we have it as we are when it's taken from us.

Throughout the drive, shrieks and whimpers filled the air as Angel notified us, blow-by-blow, about the status of Joseph's dying friend, much to his chagrin; and Tommy wasn't very happy, either, since he assumed his was next; and the rest of my crew begged earnestly for Angel's noises to end until their discontent prattle overpowered hers substantially. So much for the coveted Best Dad Award! I was just lucky at home when one person was still delusional enough to jump up and down with glee while telling Chrissy how wonderful the day had been. "I rode a horsey," Stephen said. "It was FUN!"

That's right! The one story that surfaced to Chrissy, as proof of my good fathering, was a sham—the poor boy had been robbed of his rightful turn and then ejected for complaining to management. But I took credit and moved on. I was too tired to explain. Besides, I felt the way Joseph once expressed after having had his blood drawn: "It's like I was abducted by aliens and they tortured the wind right out of me!" Blood draws tend to make my kids feel that way, and for weeks afterward, they think we're taking them back for more. Like when Andrew, on Memorial Day, refused to get into our van, which was filled with buckets of flowers and a picnic lunch, because he was certain we were tricking him into round two. I'm offended. Just because we checked them out of school on Anna's birthday last year to get the job done and had given them an 'extra special' Halloween surprise the year before in order to do it, doesn't mean we'd stoop so low as to ruin Memorial Day, too. Besides, after the hospital visit in October, we still let them go trick-or-treating. We wouldn't miss it. You can't take candy from a baby that doesn't have any, right?

On another occasion, Chrissy rushed Sarah to the restroom at church, because she claimed she needed to "do a little-bit lot of a twisty-toot." Unfortunately, while Chrissy waited in the stall, the smell in the air made her hungry, which consequently grossed her pregnant self out enough to nearly lose it all over Sarah's head. Just the thought of a public facility inducing feelings of desire for food was beyond thinkable. Nevertheless, shortly thereafter, she discovered that someone had brought barbequed ribs for their Sunday-School class down the hall, and that that was the smell she had detected, not anything anyone had done in the ladies room.

Though, we're used to having strange restroom experiences. Kids need to go the moment you're driving down the road, despite the number of times you begged them to take care of things before leaving the privacy of your house. On one lucky occasion, Chrissy had Sarah dancing at her side as they waited in line for a stall at McDonald's. Eventually, Sarah stopped jabbering about the "dirty, gross floor" and "messy, messy mirror," and asked why they didn't get on with things.

"The door's closed," said Chrissy. "We have to wait."

"No we don't," responded Sarah, chuckling loudly. She ducked close to the ground and disappeared before Chrissy could grab her, while declaring proudly, "I can go under. See!"

I guess privacy is something we need to work on with her. Though, we have begun. She likes to yell, "Naked bum! Naked bum!" in a distressed voice, as if the sky were falling down, whenever Isaac strips—which he's done plenty of this year. Apparently, he likes the suit his momma gave him, but doesn't prefer the one she puts over his clothes when he's feeling mischievous. Regardless, for a while, he daily wore a frilly, pink-and-yellow girl's swimsuit on top of his regular attire to keep him dressed. And, as many people recently witnessed, he's relapsed to the point that he may need that sort of treatment again. Last week Joseph, Tommy, and Anna couldn't seem to be able to get him to put his pants back on when he stripped them off during Sacrament Meeting at church, while we sat on the second row. I was just glad that the diaper stayed on until I got him out into the hall. After all, it was Sunday, not Moonday!

Most of our kids are the opposite—they like to put extra stuff on, not take the minimums off. Like when Sarah approached me, decked to the hilt in layers of costumery, including a fancy hat and flowing cape, and said excitedly, "Guess who I am, Daddy? You only have fourteen guesses!"

On another occasion, Isaac came up to me, half clothed, and looked big-eyed with concern. "What happened?" I asked.

"Monster eat pants," he mumbled, saying it twice for emphasis.

"Show me where they are," I continued, hoping he'd lead me to them and, quite frankly, feeling surprised that his siblings had already taught him how to tell a yarn.

Around the corner, Stephen popped out wearing big sunglasses and swinging a handful of vacuum parts. "I'm the sca-ry monster that eats pi-ants!" he boomed ominously, doing his best to terrify us; all the while, Isaac was cowering behind my leg, pointing a condemning finger.

The younger boys seem to enjoy playfully tormenting each other. Like when Stephen told Isaac he was in trouble because the ground was littered with green peaches—Isaac spent twenty minutes trying futilely to put them back. And for ages, we had to protect "Gukob" whenever his brother drank a mush bottle, because, unsupervised, Isaac would rush to him and dump the contents over the top of his bald head. Sportingly, Jacob never cried about it; rather, he smiled contagiously while trying to wipe the mess into his mouth. And it's quite revealing about our family that "pillow fight" and "Gukob do it" were among the first words uttered by Isaac.

But our boys aren't the only ones involved in the business of torturing. After a string of difficult swimming lessons, Anna and Andrew scowled in the direction of their Hulk-like instructor and claimed bitterly, "He doesn't care about anyone else, but his muscles!" I suppose Tommy should have been the one complaining, since he had had the misfortune of being driven by the same man until his exhaustion brought on the highly unfortunate experience of feeding the fish. Interestingly, after Tommy was ill, the instructor had asked him to be done for the day,

but pole-stiff Chrissy had insisted he go back and finish. So who's tougher? Hands down, anyone who's given birth to twelve kids, and has chronically been sicker than a crowd of kindergarteners on a broken, relentless Tilt-A-Whirl in order to do it, and yet has still managed to command the troops with the kind of classy grace that the rest of us don't possess, even while she's been on bed rest, is clearly the winner.

However, that doesn't mean everyone recognizes it. Sarah observed on one occasion, "Mommy, you're not very smart because you don't know anything." She had asked, for the hundredth time that morning, whether she could use play-dough and had been told by Chrissy, "I just don't know, honey! We'll have to see." If only she were older, she would recognize that phrases like 'I don't know' and 'We'll see' and 'Maybe later' usually mean the same thing: No! But it's just as well that she's still young. We love all the craziness that she brings into our home, and it's awfully convenient that she finds it fun to follow her three little brothers around, constantly reporting back to us on their mischief. Like the time she rushed in from the yard, breathless and distressed, claiming, "I think Isaac touched something eewy gross, like maybe a dead mouse."

Chrissy reached for the quart of sanitizer, her stomach lurching while asking, "Are you sure?"

Sarah nodded emphatically, her hand on her hip, insisting, "My brain just knows it, Mother!"

We're all glad Sarah still has one: It was nearly taken by force when Sunshine chased her down with a stethoscope in hand and growled hauntingly, "I'm going to suck your brains out this time, girl!" Fortunately for "all of the baby elephants" that Sarah plans on "hatching," so they can "sleep in her bed with her," Sunshine's efforts were thwarted. You may also be interested to know that "Elephants can go to the bathroom in the Potty," or at least Sarah says so. Of course, when I protested she laughed and laughed at my stupidity, because "Their potty is the bush, Dad, not the same potty we use." Either way, if any of Sarah's elephants really do hatch, Tommy's words will ring in my ears, that "Doo-doo's should be called don't-don'ts," at least in my bushes.

It's actually surprising that Sarah would think anything else could possibly fit in her bed with the menagerie she's already got, the very critters she adamantly defends against Jacob and Isaac, saying nervously, "They can't hold my stuffed animals, Mom, because I don't want anymore boogie-woogies on them!"

But in all fairness, many things don't make complete sense. Like Anna heard the boys playing football and said that it was an illogical game because, after all, "Why do they say 'hike' when the field is always flat?"

Or as Daniel once noted, "Why would the Tooth Fairy want old teeth anyway? They're gross." I suppose at least one time he was right. Sunshine thumped down the stairs, disturbed, and complained that her tooth hadn't produced a reward yet. Sarah shook her head caringly and told her, "I guess the Tooth Fairy runned out of money, Sunshine!"

Perhaps she did. When Chrissy took the four youngest with her to the store, she didn't even buy them the twenty-six puppy purses they had looped on their arms. "Don't we have any money, Mom?" they begged pathetically for all to hear. However, if Sarah had bolted without paying, she would have probably been all right, since she had her two "side kids" with her to

protect her and carry the loot, which included the heaping pile of yappy purses and also a “Rudolph the other reindeer” she had found that was “so, so, so cute!”

It’s a good thing she has her helpers. Though, she does need to be specific with them about what she expects or things don’t always go the way she plans. Like the time Sarah whined and whined that her slush was stuck to the bottom of her cup and that she couldn’t get it out. Her plan was to annoy her parents into giving her a spoon, which hardly seemed worth it for the last sip. Nevertheless, Isaac, who was sitting next to her, saw the problem and dug in. By the time she turned back around, he was handing her the slush (it was oozing between his sticky fingers) and saying proudly while tasting some of it with his other hand, “Here do go, Sarah. Got it!”

We all feel better when we share, don’t we? It’s something that is true for the giver and the receiver. That’s why, when some friends in the neighborhood offered to hand over a toad they had caught, we gladly said yes. I went and got it with an ice cream bucket. Upon returning, I informed Chrissy that it was the cutest little thing she’d every see and that we’d be crazy not to keep it.

“Then show me,” said Chrissy, a little skeptical. I popped the lid and, before the top was even wide enough for my unsuspecting wife to get a peek, the monstrous bullfrog smashed his way out and flopped across her chest, then to the floor, and then around the kitchen, leaving muddy skid marks as he went. It was so big that it actually filled the majority of the gallon container and resembled the Goliath Frog the kids had seen at the pet store. Needless to say, we all wanted to keep it and couldn’t help making a list of the people we intended on ‘surprising.’ Angel, in particular, wanted to “store it” in her bedroom and finally consented to do rock-paper-scissors for the privilege. Of course, she cleverly tried to insist that she hide her hand behind her back, suggesting it would work better that way. I bet it would—for her!

In retrospect, I should have left my mom’s name off the frog list. She didn’t take it as well as my wife had. A matter of fact, she said that she seriously thought she’d stroke out if she ever saw it again. Sorry, Mom. Sometimes our best ideas are not that great. And sorry to everyone else who happens upon our path and is somehow left the worse off. We know it’s not an uncommon occurrence, especially given our tendencies to tease, and our sheer numbers alone cause problems, too. So it constantly amazes us to see how nice many people are to us; the unexpected dinners while Chrissy’s down with pregnancy; the gifts and surprises that come at the right times; the help that’s unselfishly given to our kids; and the list goes on and on. We thank you all!

**Have a Merry Christmas!**

**Make it a Great New Year!**

*Tom, Chrissy, Joseph, Tommy, Annamarie, Andrew, Daniel, Sunshine, Angel, Michael, Sarah, Stephen, Isaac, Jacob.*