

2009 started with Mark recovering from knee replacement surgery, the exciting part of which was pushing a walker up an incline in the snow. He soon graduated to a cane, which is equally exciting in the snow. Now, I thought having a sharp spike on the end of the cane would be handy, but Mark chose a cane with a light on it, which is handy for, uh, getting a good look at the Boogie Man, and for being one up on "the other poor slob" at physical therapy who have "ordinary canes."

By May, Mark was cane-free and able to walk up and down hills without moaning or mumbling to himself. Becky—a.k.a. kid #2—decided that we should spend time in California with Mark's brother, Herald, and friend, Jim. It was 109 degrees in the shade, which was perfect for hiking in the desert that is Joshua Tree National Monument. It was also great for playing pickleball. Jim introduced us to the sport, which, for those of you that haven't hung out at a southern retirement community recently, is played on what is essentially a small tennis court, using a flat paddle and whiffle ball. Mark and I took up the sport in Michigan and played well into November. Sadly, the series is tied.



Kids trying to look like Joshua trees.

Since the first family event went so well, I hooked up with my dad and sister, Aby, and we drove together to Birmingham, Alabama to visit my Uncle Thomas, Aunt Rosie and Cousin Janet, and drive down memory lane. Unlike the oven in California, Alabama in the summer is more like a sauna, and I'm certain I sweated from parts of my body that hadn't sweated before. As we drove around my father's boyhood homes, I learned my *father's grandfather* had a mansion across from the Birmingham Country Club, and because he sold it, we could only drive by and wave. And cry. Later, we played the fast-paced card game called Scrunch with Rosie and Janet and some kid who claims to be Janet's sister's son. They all turned out to be polite, wickedly fast players, which, if you ask me, are the worst kind. My only "win" this trip was getting Aby and Dad to imitate pigs outside the local Piggly Wiggly grocery store.

A month or so later, Mark and I returned to Nunavet, Canada in pursuit of big fish. The bugs were very friendly, the ice on the lake a bit of a surprise, the birding quite spectacular, and the fish rude. We took along our pal, Jack, who caught the biggest pike of his life, and would rather you not know that he tumbled head-first into the bottom of the boat.

In August, my sister and her family came from Illinois to spend time with us Michiganders and have bad hair days on our dunes. Later, for Mark's birthday, Mark got to fly a WWII Boeing Stearman biplane while Holly and I flew in a New Standard D-25 biplane.



My niece and her dad on a dune ride.



Mark flying.

And that's about the end of the fun and good news for the year. The rest is a turn-for-the-worse, coming-together-to-help kind of story.

In early September, my dad and I joined up with family and friends to help my Uncle Roy. He lived in Sturgis under the care of an amazing lady named Ginny, and had fallen into a state of health that required him to move to the Ann Arbor VA hospital. I hadn't seen my Cousin Ryan in 20 years, and he, with our help and that of Ginny's daughter and friend, oversaw the moving of Roy's things with a mix of military precision and a good sense of humor. Ryan got Roy settled at the VA hospital, where I later reconnected with Ryan's brother, Scott, who is also a hard working guy with a good sense of humor. Thomas and Rosie also came to town, as did Scott's wife. Each little get-together was very important because in November, Uncle Roy succumbed to cancer.



Family rallying around Uncle Roy.
Photo by a nice hotel employee.

My father took seven trips from Grand Rapids to Ann Arbor to see Roy, which was impressive not only because of the distance and the difficulty of seeing his brother's decline, but also because of his own condition. See, my father's lung collapsed in January 2008 and the doctors failed to tell him in 2008 that he has lung cancer. We only found this out during a routine exam earlier this year. My dad is an amazing guy, and his wife, pals, and co-workers deserve lots of hugs and thank yous for keeping my dad employed, active, and maintaining a good sense of humor.

In November, Becky continued the lung theme by puncturing a lung and fracturing 17 bones after riding a flying saucer down a hill in Colorado into a tree. As a result, Holly, Arthur and Willi made all the fixins at Becky's house for Thanksgiving. I remain impressed with the way the kids help each other out in times of need, and thought they did a great job proving that a turkey cooked upside down still tastes as good as one cooked right side up. The GM folks, and Becky's neighbors and pals are to be hugged for all their help, too.

Perhaps feeling left out, one of Mark's lungs collapsed in December while he was at work-- sitting there, doing nothing—and he ended up in the hospital ten days. The Alma College folks were terrific, driving Mark to the local hospital, helping him transfer to Lansing, and filling in for him during his last week of lectures and final exams. They rightfully accused him of wanting to start his three-month sabbatical early, though most thought his method of doing so was terrible. My dad visited the "Wimpy Windbag" several times to encourage and harass him. And Becky called Mark occasionally to see who was having the best hallucinations from their pain meds.

I think the real reason Mark's lung collapsed is that I ignored and neglected him while updating my web site and creating a blog called Natural Wonderings. If you haven't been to amylpeterson.com you should, because the blog postings are mostly humorous in nature, and Mark apparently suffered greatly as a result. You may also learn something, about nature, pets or life.

I must also have neglected my mother, because in mid-December, she slipped on the ice, fractured two ribs and banged up her knee. Quite handily, I was able to loan her Mark's walker and knee wraps, which means we've come full circle since the beginning of the year. Or so I thought. My dad called right before Christmas--he fell on the ice and broke a wrist.

Thank your lungs, ribs, knees and wrists for the work they do for you, and give your family and friends extra hugs this holiday season. Happy 2010!



Dad and me. Photo by Uncle Thomas.