

December, 1992

Dear Friends,

Mel and I want to begin this letter by wishing you all a very Merry Christmas and a HEALTHY and happy New Year. The emphasis on healthy is not accidental. The year 1992 is one we will always remember--perhaps a bit like Queen Elizabeth! On January 2, Mel was diagnosed with a heart problem--atrial fibrillation, an electrical problem in the heart. Mel had not been feeling "right" since the preceding August, and atypically he had been in to see a doctor three times that fall and nothing was found. However, on the 2nd his heart was fibrillating when he was at the doctor's office and it was readily diagnosed. Ultimately his heart was at times beating erratically, or too fast or too slowly--165 beats a minute to 34 beats a minute--all without his doing anything. The biggest danger is of stroke--clots develop in the heart when it doesn't empty properly. The doctors first tried drugs on him which made him very sick and very depressed (we found out later that depression is a common side effect of many heart medications). He was hospitalized several times trying to get the drugs regulated, with no success, and finally after two months of increasing terror, a pacemaker (that does everything but tap dance) was installed the first week in March, the same week my mother had double by-pass surgery and Mel's dear friend from Vicksburg, Earl Martin, had lung cancer surgery. To say that it was a stressful time is the understatement of the year. The Physics Department was wonderful and hired a full-time postdoctoral student as a substitute for Mel, a young man very interested in teaching. When Mel was feeling well enough, Mike came to class and observed. When Mel was not well, they discussed the lecture thoroughly and Mike gave the lecture. The times when Mel was in the hospital were an adventure. The hospital is just 2 blocks from where I teach, so I would teach and run (literally) to the hospital and then run back and teach. Everyone was so supportive--at UT, St. Andrew's, church, our friends and neighbors. Prayers kept us afloat.

By the end of March medications were finally adjusted and the pacemaker programmed so that Mel's heart was finally behaving. Anxiety, and depression that were left over from the terror of earlier months were handled by our wonderful internist. Mel is so much better, he hasn't been to a doctor in 2 months. He looks great, is back working full-time, is playing better tennis than he has in years, is working on all kinds of projects around the house--we are so blessed.

In the middle of all of this there was some good news. I have had a serious back problem for the past 2 1/2 years--and no one could find out why I was in so much pain--especially when I was sitting. I'd had a CAT scan, lots of physical therapy, and no relief. Finally in late January, when things were getting really grim with Mel and he really needed me to sit and hold his hand, I had an MRI and it showed the problem clear as a bell. I have a tear in the L4-5 disk in my lower back. When I sit, the "jelly" in the disk tries to leak out, presses on my sciatic nerve, and pain results down my left leg. I was sent to another physical therapist who prescribed 250 partial pushups a day--in sets of 50. My first reaction was to laugh hysterically, but at that point I figured I had nothing to lose. I am still doing at least 100-150 a day. It works by arching my back as much as possible, thus squashing the stuff that is leaking out back in--great technical language here! Anyway, it is a constant struggle, but I am in much less pain than I was a year ago--and my doctor has told me that while disks heal very slowly, they do heal-- and that I should feel much better in 5-10 years! Whoopee! I am walking/running 4 miles three times a week.

In February and March I would be on the floor at night, crying and doing my exercises and Mel would be sound asleep. I would wonder what the Christmas letter would say and I just couldn't imagine how things would turn out. In the end, it has been a true growing experience. We are so grateful for every good day, for each other, for our wonderful children, our friends and family. I call this the year I grew up. In May the three girls came home for a short visit to see that their dad really was getting better.. It was really difficult for them not to be at home. My brother Robert also made it here twice during the spring.

A trip East was wonderful even though Mel still wasn't feeling up to par. We flew to Hartford, Conn., rented a car and went to Norfolk where Beth was at the Yale Summer School of Music with the MAIA QUARTET. From there we had a wonderful visit with my sister Nancy (who was a true Rock of Gibraltar through all of this--she called every night for nearly 2 months) and her family in Cortland with a side trip to Rochester. We then went on to Vermont to see Aunt Peg and then down to Wrentham for church one Sunday and on to Boston and cousins Lois and Ellie and then to Newport to Aunt Florence's--and then back to Norfolk again. From there we flew to Asheville where we met Mardie and visited with my folks--and Mel and Mom swapped heart stories!

Mardie continues in architecture at Rice. It is hard to believe she is a junior already. She had a wonderful spring break trip to Paris last year with her architecture class. She is not looking forward to having her tonsils out right after Christmas. She was a wonderful help this summer around the house. She and Mel were happy as clams working on different kinds of projects including a wonderful greenhouse and relandscaping.

