

Christmas 2016



Lily and Co.
wish all our friends a blessed Christmas!

Play The Hand You're Dealt – I gave a public address at Flinders University on Tuesday, 13 December. I shall quote an extract from that talk.

“Let me commence with my health, lest that issue become the “elephant in the room” of this address.

“I have been in poor health for my entire career.

“Not long after I joined Flinders University, I was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease, a serious systemic disease that is best known for attacking the digestive system. This illness became progressively worse over the next few years, and led to three major surgeries. I have taken a number of non-trivial medications ever since the original diagnosis.

“Then, in the late 1990s, I was diagnosed with major depression. A number of treatments have been tried over time, but control of the illness remains stubbornly sub-therapeutic.

“And now the *coup de grâce*: idiopathic peripheral axonal sensorimotor neuropathy, a nerve disease that has been classed as a Total and Permanent Incapacity.

“Many clinicians in my medical team believe that these three conditions are all due to the one underlying cause. I am inclined to agree. However, for me, this hypothesis is alas an academic observation. In the poker game of health, I was dealt the “eights and aces”. But in life it is how you play the hand that you are dealt that matters.”



The talk was my **Valedictory Address**. I had formally resigned from the University on Friday, 25 November, after 33 years, one year as a Temporary Lecturer and 32 years as a full-time academic staff member. My Temporary Incapacity Benefit from UniSuper, my superannuation fund, has been converted to a Totally and Permanently Disabled Benefit. I shall receive this benefit until I am 65 years old, at which point I shall access my superannuation as normal.



The Dean, Professor John Roddick, farewells Alan

A transcript of my address is available at alanbranford.blogspot.com.au/2016/12/my-view-from-ruins-of-ivory-tower.html

and a video may be found on YouTube:
<https://youtu.be/RI8p7ZEfAFs>



Goodbye to the Office Staff

Relevance Deprivation Syndrome – As I had been forced into early retirement due to a medical incapacity, I was looking for something useful to occupy my mind and my time. I decided upon reading, creative writing and essay writing to provide fulfilling activities that I could practise in my retirement. These are all activities that I can do when I am feeling well, and simply put aside when I no longer feel up to the task. I even wrote a poem, “Unwelcome Visitors”, on this point. The poem was entered into the Health Poetry Prize competition 2016 sponsored by the Dean of the Faculty of Health, University of Canberra. The 2016 Theme was “Living Life Well”. In the poem, ‘pain’, ‘despair’, ‘reason’ and ‘fulfilment’ are characterized as Gods and Goddesses influencing the author’s life, with these deities named by their Latin equivalents. The poem is written as heroic couplets of iambic pentameters, chosen to give the poem the feel of a struggle against an adversary. Alas, the poem was not short-listed. (Second prize was awarded to a “prose poem”, a concept that to me seems a contradiction in terms!) I am also writing a blog, with serious yet whimsical posts on a variety of topics! All these gems of creative brilliance may be found on my website www.alanbranford.net.

There's Always Euthanasia – The primary issue with the peripheral neuropathy is the pain, which can be quite debilitating. I get intense burning down my left and right flanks, down my left and right outer upper arms and across my lower breast region. I also have pain in my legs, and as a result I cannot stand or walk for long, I am unstable when I walk, I have considerable pain in the act of sitting down or standing up and stairs are a nightmare. Treatment is only palliative, and is primarily through a drug for nerve pain called Lyrica – ordinary analgesics are ineffective. Of course, Lyrica has all sorts of lovely side effects, including turning my brain to mush. It makes me very fatigued and I can generally only function for a couple of hours before I need a sleep. So, nothing's changed.

In one consultation, I asked my consultant physician whether there were any other options. He replied drily, "There's always euthanasia." (We have an informal relationship and often indulge in such gallows humour.) I asked my psychiatrist the other day if he thought I could realistically travel with Nam, say to Vietnam. I was surprised that he readily said that he did. But then he added, "Do it while you still can." This was said seriously, and it did not make me feel optimistic for the future, given the level of difficulty I already have.

I have found massage helps with the pain, and so for my birthday we invested in a massage chair. We argued that it was a medical aid and not an indulgence – but it is rather an indulgent aid!



For medicinal purposes only, of course!

I have been issued a permanent Australian Disability Parking Permit, which means that everyone wants me to come shopping with them. Going shopping is, of course, the last thing that I want to do!

Better a Carpenter Than a Surgeon – The massage chair takes up rather a lot of room, and so it now somewhat dominates the spare bedroom. So much so, in fact, that there is no longer space for the spare bed! Nam to the rescue. He rather ingeniously suggested that we have a drop-down bed, so that when a visitor came, he could simply manoeuvre the massage chair to one side and drop down the bed. He proceeded to design and then handcraft a drop-down bed (see above, right, behind the quilt hanging; a permanent covering for the bed in its folded up position is yet to be made). While he was at it, he incorporated a new bookcase (see above, left) so as to accommodate my academic books formerly kept in my office at the University.



A bigger bookcase for the study was also added to the project. Now all of our other books are properly stored. Nam did, however, get carried away with his wood-working prowess when he turned the electric planer onto his left hand. He was very lucky not to have done more serious damage!



There's a Cat in the Library – One of the palliative strategies that I tried this year for coping with the nerve pain was hypnotherapy. I had had experience with hypnotherapy years before, and so it was easy to use it again. In the first session, the hypnotherapist asked me while I was under hypnosis to find a place where I was relaxed and comfortable. My mind took me to a large private library such as you would find in a stately home. There were rows and rows of books on fine quality shelves, a mahogany and leather writing desk, comfortable chairs and couches and an outlook over a green lawn and garden. In the second session, she took me back to "my library", but this time something extraordinary happened. There was a cat in the room. She would walk along the shelves as I browsed and

sat next to me while I sat and read. As I had been growing up, the family had had a cat, but I had not possessed one for over thirty years!

After musing on this for a time, and given that I was having to contemplate a future in which I would be spending more and more time at home, I asked Nam if he would like us to get a cat. He jumped at the idea and he raced to the RSPCA website to look at the cats they had for adoption. I stipulated that the cat had to be a female domestic-short-hair with tabby markings, about a year old. I also stipulated that she would be named 'Lily', after my late maternal grandmother. Within a few days, Nam shouted out to me that he had found our 'Lily'. The cat he had on the computer screen met all of my criteria, and so I said that indeed she could be our 'Lily'. Nam shouted, "No, look – she is Lily." The cat up for adoption was named 'Lily'.

Clearly an omen, we were at the RSPCA shelter as soon as we could, and took home our Lily.

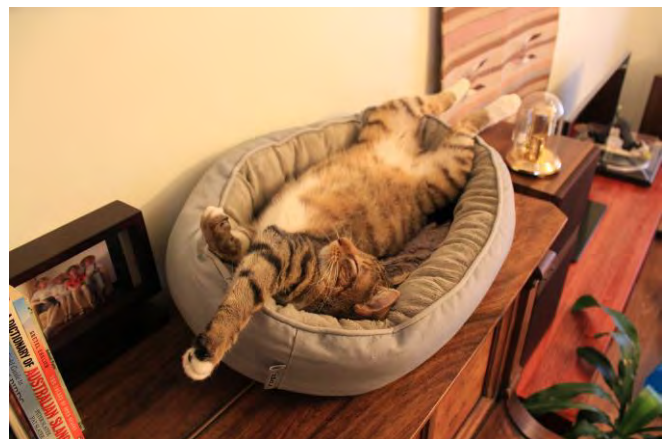


"I loves my Little Daddy"

Lily is incredibly curious, and is quite fascinated by water. Whenever either of us is at the bathroom basin, she must be there too.



Lily will contort her body into the most bizarre positions when sleeping. It is not uncommon to see four legs pointing upwards and a head tucked at a funny angle!



Lily now rules the household.



The lion might sleep tonight, but the leopard doesn't

She is a very sociable animal, quite comfortable with strangers. Whichever room we are in, that is where she will want to be too.



No Escape from the Seraglio – Yet more home improvements were commissioned towards the end of the year, both with a view to making my greater time at home more comfortable and with the Lady Lily in mind. We had a verandah built onto the side of the house outside the sliding dining room doors. With that structure in place, it was then very convenient to completely enclose the rear and side of the house with cat netting. Thus, Lily can play in the garden and sun herself on the patio pavers, but the bird-life and native fauna are safe from her, and she is safe from other cats, cars on the road, etc.



Our builder, Murray Pearce, and Jenny and Peter Coats and the staff from CatPad Enclosures did excellent quality workmanship to make a real aesthetic as well as practical improvement to our garden area.

The Gift that Ran Under the Bed – Recently, while Nam was away (see later), Lily had spent most of the day sleeping. So, when it was time for me to go to bed, I decided to leave her access to the outdoor area open overnight in case she wanted to be more active then. At around 4.30am I was awoken by Lily jumping onto my chest. This, in itself, was not unusual. But she deposited on my neck a rather plump, juicy and very much still alive mouse – a gift from the leopard! I reacted rather ungratefully to the gift, and the mouse scuttled round my pillow, over the edge of the bed and disappeared under the bed ensemble. Neither I nor Lily had a hope of getting to the mouse while it chose to stay under the bed away from the edge, and so I was left with no choice but to go back to sleep with the live mouse under my bed and Lily prowling the perimeter.

At about 8.30am I was again awoken, this time by a scramble and a high pitch squeal – Lily had recaptured her prey. Since I had declined the gift earlier, she took the poor rodent into the hall and began to play with it. I fetched a bucket and a broom, swept mouse into bucket and then threw the mouse out the door – the **front** door, that is!

Little Cornwall – In June, Nam and I went with my mother, Joan, and my sister, Judith, up to the “Copper Triangle”, an area at the top of Yorke Peninsula with three main towns. This area was very important in the early Colony of South Australia, as there were extensive copper reserves found there. And when in those days there was mining, especially wet mines, there would come the Cornish miners. My late maternal grandfather himself and his immediate ancestry came from the area, which is also known as “Little Cornwall”. My father stayed at home and Lily had a little holiday with him.

After a few days staying there, my mother and sister returned to Adelaide, and Nam and I had a few extra days at the bottom of Yorke Peninsula. The coastal scenery is certainly spectacular, and there are numerous well known surfing beaches.



One for the Road – As the year wore on, I found it increasingly difficult to get into and especially out of ordinary cars. Indeed, sometimes Nam would have to come around to the passenger side and haul me out! Since the 3-year warranty on our car expired at the end of November, we bit the bullet and decided to invest in a new car, one that was better suited to my condition. We decided on a new Subaru Forester. The larger doors with multiple opening positions, and a seat that was bum height, make my entry and exit much more elegant and pain-free. And the car itself is a delight. Have a look at my blog post alanbranford.blogspot.com.au/2016/10/the-all-seeing-eye-on-highway-of-life.html



Chúc mừng năm mới – For three weeks just before Christmas, Nam went back to Vietnam for a visit to family and friends, both in Cần Thơ and in Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh (formerly Sài Gòn).



The Cần Thơ Family

So, it is appropriate that we sign off this Christmas epistle with the wish ...

Chúc mừng năm mới