

## Francia

I completely forgot it was Father's Day.

Flying out of Santa Fe, I had braced myself for enduring more whims of the travel gods. Fortunately, I arrived in Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport on Sunday morning without any mishaps. The gods were either feeling kindly or else they partied too hard Saturday night and were sleeping it off. Olivia and Sterling were not so lucky, however. Olivia made it to Dublin but then had to kill



***Selfie with children***

half a day when the airline cancelled her connecting flight without explanation. Sterling made it to the luggage carousel at Schiphol but then had to wait over an hour for his bags. Apparently, the luggage of every passenger on his flight was missing. That was a new one! He texted me cheery updates as I waited a hundred yards away. Finally, Olivia arrived, looking happy but weary. We gave ourselves a big three-way hug. It was so good to be traveling again with my children! Stepping outside to catch a bus downtown were greeted by sunshine, which was a surprise. It had been rainy all day and the forecast called for more during our stay. We took the opportunity for a family selfie. As we lined up, Olivia said “Happy Father's Day!”

The bus deposited us near our hotel, located on a canal in a pretty area west of Amsterdam's Centrum district not far from the famous Anne Frank House. After dropping off our bags in the cozy room, we stepped outside. We were in Amsterdam! How cool was that? Very cool, I thought. We walked onto a bridge and immediately started taking photos. Olivia had made a lightning visit to the city during her semester in Berlin in 2019, but this was a first visit for Sterling and myself. We chose a direction randomly and began a slow ramble. I liked the city immediately. You hear so much about Amsterdam, about its beauty, its museums, its canals, its annual flood of tourists, its Red Light District, that I didn't know what to expect in real life. Would it be like Venice? The Italian city gets twenty million visitors a year and has struggled mightily to maintain its integrity. Amsterdam gets the same amount of people and has many of the same issues, though its “red light” reputation adds a burden of rowdiness and seediness that Venice happily lacks. One difference was clear right away. Amsterdam is a busy modern city with one million residents leading regular lives. Its vitality was easy to see – especially all the people going places on their bicycles!

On cue, we ran into a street party. Three, actually. Crossing a canal, we suddenly heard pop music. Following the sound, we entered a pedestrian-only street where we saw a crowd, a stage, and a band. The music was happy, the advertisements were in Dutch, the flags overhead were orange, and there was a beer in nearly everyone's hand. Locals, it had to be! Working our way around the crowd, we discovered another band a short distance down the street. Then another, though this band played what sounded like metal rock. It was really great. Everyone was having a good time, us included. Not wanting to leave, I asked Sterling and Olivia to wait. I wanted to soak up the music and the good feelings. I had designed this trip with fun in mind – as well as sailing to a new part of the Sagalands – and this was a great way to start.



***Street party in Amsterdam***

I needed it. Four weeks earlier, I had upended my life. Prepping for its sale, I emptied my house of its contents, hired a mover, and transferred myself to a rental house in town. For the first time in more than twenty years, I lived someplace new. On April 30<sup>th</sup>, I quit my day job. I filed for Gen's Social Security check the following day. There was more. In order to sell my house properly, it needed a substantial upgrade, including a new roof, a new walk-in shower, a new patio door, new windows, a complete stucco job on the outside, and a paint job inside. I found a wonderful contractor who engaged his whole family in the work. When he was done, I told him "I want to move into this house!" – which he appreciated. The house went on the market June 8<sup>th</sup>. My stress levels were high and unrelenting through the entire process, including countless trips back-and-forth trips between the houses, and runs to Home Depot. Then there was the cost. The repairs and upgrades set me back \$75,000 – the bulk of my savings (and I didn't have a job now). I was reassured by my real estate agent that I would get it back, but I crossed my fingers anyway. Then there were the memories. Sterling and Olivia came out before the move to pack up their things and make decisions about what they wanted to keep. It was also an opportunity to sleep in their rooms once more. One evening, we sat in the living room and had a long nostalgia session, recalling birthday parties, sleepovers, Halloweens, dogs, chickens, good times with mom, reciting lines from Shakespeare, holidays, and more. There were tears – but they were good tears. Everybody was ready for next stages of life, myself especially. The house move was hard and completely draining on every level. I was ready for street music in Amsterdam – and fun.

The next morning, we started with Van Gogh, whose paintings I've admired for decades. I know he wasn't the cheeriest person in the world, but his work has a zest for life that has always been inspiring. I love his colors and his brush-strokes, which I got to see up close! The museum had a special showing of self-portraits, of which Van Gogh painted thirty-six during his lifetime. In them, the artist comes across as intense and serious. I did a quick Internet search. As I suspected, Van Gogh never smiled in any of his portraits. That conformed to his personality, I guess, but it makes somewhat dour viewing. Fortunately, his outdoor paintings, especially the ones done in the lovely countryside near Arles, France, are full of life. They make you smile. When Gen and I visited Arles during our trip to Provence in 2014, we walked to places where Van Gogh had made some of his famous works, including the Night Café and Starry Night Over the Rhone. Unfortunately, when we stood on the spot by the river where he set up his easel, our view was obstructed by a cruise ship.



Next on the fun list was a street food walking tour Amsterdam's Jordaan district. Our guide, Aileen, who worked for the national train company, was cheery and personable. As we set out, she warned us that we would be sampling spicy food as part of Amsterdam's multicultural heritage. Aileen was East Asian Dutch. Her parents arrived from Indonesia when she was a child, she said. They represented the legacy of Dutch colonialism that began in 1602 with the founding of the Dutch East India Company, the world's first multinational corporation. Its chief business, Aileen told us, was importing exotic spices, including nutmeg, mace, cloves, cinnamon, and peppercorn. Each were highly coveted and highly profitable. The Company's huge success helped kick-off the Dutch Golden Age, a century-long period when commerce, science, and the arts famously blossomed. Later, as we walked, I asked her if the Dutch were owning up at all to the 'other side'



*The cheese stop*

of their colonial legacy – the slavery, exploitation, racism, and oppression. “No,” she replied with a noticeable sigh, “not really.” Formerly a working-class district for Amsterdam's port, the Jordaan has become a trendy and expensive neighborhood for professionals. We made six tasty stops for food, including curried chicken and pickled herring. I loved the cheese stop – I could eat Dutch cheese all day!

In the evening we made cocktails. I've never made one before, unless gin-and-tonics count, and I'm not a mixed drink connoisseur, preferring to stick with margaritas. However, I stumbled across a cocktail-making workshop at the House of Bols during my planning and thought it would be fun. Sterling and Olivia agreed. After checking in at the front desk, we headed downstairs for a required walk-through of the museum, an interactive, multi-sensory experience that we loved. The House of Bols is famous for its flavored liqueurs and *genever*, a type of upscale gin made only in the Low Countries (and protected by law). Founded in Amsterdam in 1575 by Pieter Bols, it is the oldest distillery in the world. Pieter's son, Lucas, put it on the map when he came a major shareholder in the Dutch East India Company with first rights to the spices as they arrived in port. He invented hundreds of tasty liqueurs – called 'elixirs' at the time – becoming rich and famous. In the museum, we tasted, sniffed, and touched our way through the distillery's many confections. Then we went upstairs for free drinks.



***Elixirs at the House of Bols***

Next up: the workshop. This was right up the kids' alley. Among other duties, Olivia is a barista at her bakery-café and is eager to learn how to make cocktails. Sterling was ready to drink



***The happy workshopers***

them. His (rich) friends in Portland were mixed drink buffs, which meant he knew his way around the cocktail world. Fifteen of us arranged ourselves around a U-shaped bar, ready to go. Under the upbeat guidance of a youthful instructor, we made two drinks: caipirinha, the national drink of Brazil (as Sterling knew); and a delicious passion-fruit martini with a regrettable name that has become popular (Olivia concurred that it needed a new name). The mixing process was a bit more complicated than I expected. In addition to measuring carefully, you had to get the ice element just right, and not get things out-of-order. It was a blast. Best of all, when we were done, we got to consume the fruit of labors.

The next day was intentionally unscheduled. The weather was good, so we decided to visit Utrecht, a lovely town close to Amsterdam, also full of canals. After arriving at Utrecht's train station, we headed for the Dom Tower, built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and later attached to a big church dedicated to St. Martin. We decided to skip the guided tour to the top of the Dom, choosing instead

to wander through and around the church – where I was suddenly reminded of the main purpose of my trip. Unlike Amsterdam, Utrecht was built atop the remains of a Roman fort. In 50 AD, after a series of disastrous campaigns in Germania, the Roman Emperor Claudius decided the empire would make no further attempts to expand north. He ordered that a series of forts be constructed along the Rhine River to hold the imperial line (the river flowed through Utrecht back then). As we walked around the outside of the church, I noticed a metal map lodged in the stone pavement. It depicted the location of various Roman forts on the Rhine, including the one beneath our feet. Claudius' line held fast for two centuries, but repeated invasions by Germanic tribes, including a formidable foe called *the Franks*, forced the Romans to retreat in 275. Utrecht disappears from the historical record until 650, when Dagobert I, king of the Franks, orders a church to be built within the old Roman fort. Apparently, the city had become part of the growing Frankish empire. Nobody remembers king Dagobert today, but everyone knows his great-great-great-great-great grandson. That's why I was here.



**Map of the Roman forts**

To see an emperor.



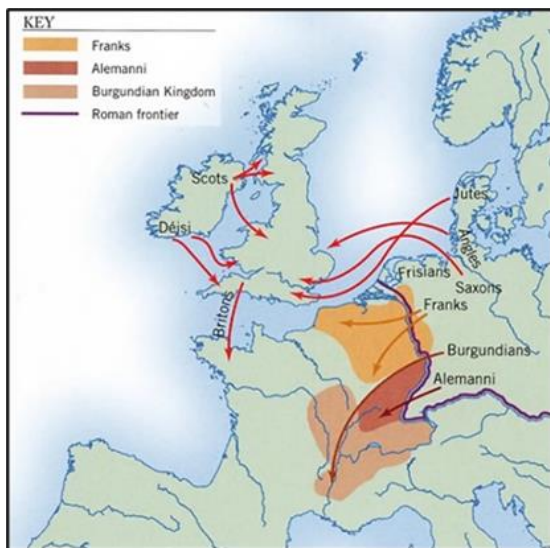
Emerging from Cologne's main train station, we were greeted with a sight I'll remember for a long time: the city's famous gothic cathedral. Huge and impossibly tall, its twin towers looked appeared to touch the sky. We stopped walking, and stared. It recalled a similar jaw-dropping moment in Rome when Sterling and Olivia were eleven. Emerging from a dark subway station, we were greeted by the Roman Colosseum – right there in front of us! Just across the street. It was the same in Cologne, except here a plaza separated us from the historical wonder, not a street. It was full of people too, mostly men, I noticed. As we stood gaping at the cathedral, I heard singing. Then I saw kilts. Kilts? Glancing over at the kids, I saw that Sterling was already on his phone making an inquiry. "It's the Euros. European Football Championship," he said. "Soccer," he added unnecessarily for Olivia. "Scotland is playing Switzerland tonight in Cologne stadium." Ah. That explained the kilts as well as the boisterous singing, though the numerous beer bottles in evidence were likely contributing. Curious about the kilts, which all had the same tartan colors, I made my

own inquiry, discovering they represented the Scottish National Team. Introduced in 2017, my source said, the tartan became such a hit with fans they refer to themselves as the Tartan Army and wear the kilt to show their pride. Good for them! Traveling from Scotland to Cologne to drink, sing, and watch football sounded like great fun, and their happy energy filled the plaza. Although the Scottish team was apparently a long-shot in the tournament, it mattered not to their fans, of course. I played soccer in high school and love the sport, which is the most popular in the world with *four billion* fans. We got hooked on the World Cup when Sterling and Olivia were young, but I had no idea what went on behind the scenes at a game. Now I had a hint.



**Tartan Army invades Cologne**

After depositing our bags at a nearby hotel, we worked our way through the kilted crowd to the front of the cathedral to meet a tour guide for a two-hour walk. For my Sagalands purposes, we were in Germany to tackle the 1% French and German contribution to my ancestry identified by a DNA spit test I took during winter. The analysis pegged an additional 6% of my ancestry as “undefined Northwest Europe” which means my DNA matches several populations in the region. “This shared heritage,” said the report, “may be the result of extensive migration, including the Germanic invasions of the early Middle Ages.” The Franks, in other words. They were a Germanic tribe living along the lower Rhine. They had a love/hate relationship with the Romans for centuries. On the one hand, the fiercely independent Franks fought the Roman empire to a standstill. At the

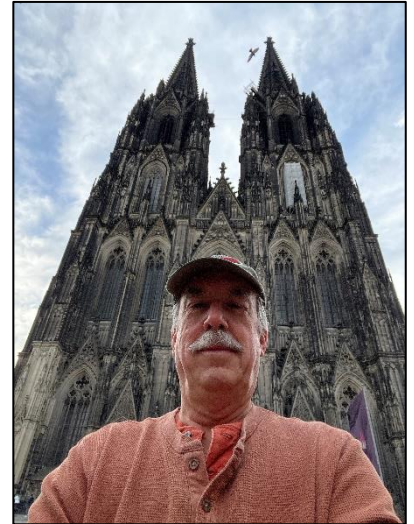


**Franks on the move in the 6<sup>th</sup> century**

same time, many Franks signed up for the Roman army. The result of all this contact was a “romanization” of Frankish society that would have profound impacts on European history. The center of action was Cologne, the largest city, fort, and port – and prize – on the Rhine. As the Roman empire disintegrated, Cologne held out until 460 when it was captured by, you guessed it, the Franks. They were just getting started. Employing military tactics they learned from the Romans, the Franks kept conquering. Soon, a new empire emerged in a place called...

*Francia* – the land of the Franks.

We met our guide, Servet, a retired schoolteacher, in front of the cathedral. After a spin through the giant church, we hit the trail. I wanted to hear about Cologne, Romans, the Franks, and what it all meant for German history. We were only here for one night, so I hoped to soak up as much as possible. However, we ran into three obstacles. First, the Romano-Germanic museum was closed. That was a disappointment. Second, it was hot. The cool weather in Amsterdam had given way to a burst of heat. It made a mid-afternoon walking tour a thirsty affair, especially since Servet kept up a brisk pace. Then there were the Scots. They were everywhere we went, singing, drinking, and mingling before huge TV screens set up for the big game that evening. The Scottish fans were wonderful, but I couldn't hear Servet very well over their happy noise. In compensation, she walked faster, which means I heard even less. Sterling and Olivia didn't have any trouble keeping up, but I did (I get distracted easily by the sights). I caught the part about Cologne being pounded



***Selfie with cathedral***



***Scottish fans singing***

to smithereens by Allied bombs during WWII and having to rebuild from scratch. That explained the 1950s-60s style to the buildings we saw, which is not attractive. Thankfully, the bombs didn't hit the cathedral. After bidding adieux to Servet, we headed back to the hotel for naps. Later, we scouted for supper amidst the kilted hubbub, finding, to our surprise, an empty table outside at an eatery with three TV screens set up for the game. Every other table was filled with Scots. This looked like fun, so we settled in to eat, drink beer, and root for Scotland. It was wonderful. The food, the beer, the warm evening air, the game, and the convivial vibe of humans being social combined to create a mellowness in me that I had been craving for months.

The next morning, the train was late. We had been warned by Aileen, the food tour guide in Amsterdam, that "German trains are always late." At the time, I wasn't sure I believed her – this was Germany, after all! But there we were in Cologne, waiting. An hour later, we boarded and headed north. Our destination was St. Goar, a small town on the Rhine River, halfway between Koblenz and Mainz. My trusty guidebook said this stretch of the Rhine, packed with medieval castles and pretty towns, was worth a visit. I booked an apartment for three nights and designed an

itinerary that would keep us busy, including an evening cruise on a party boat. After settling into our seats for the two-hour ride, Olivia put on her headphones and slipped into a world of music. Sterling put in ear buds and watched a video on his phone. I stared out the window. This trip to Europe had interrupted their busy, young lives – not that they were complaining. Sterling is a member of an improvisational comedy troupe in Portland, which he loves, and was missing a critical group audition to be here. Additionally, the unexpected visit to Santa Fe in May to deal with the house move meant he was nearly out of PTO (paid time off) at work and would be leaving us after our stay in St. Goar to get back. The trip was poorly timed for Olivia as well. A recent promotion meant she’s part of the management team at the bakery/café in Northampton, piling new responsibilities onto an already hectic social life. Neither one had a partner yet, though it was just a matter of time. They’re good people and their friends are like-minded souls. For our relationship, this trip felt like extra innings and I was grateful to be able to travel again with them.

We arrived in St. Goar at noon. The apartment was perfect. Not only did it have separate rooms, it had a coffee-maker in the kitchen and a table in the living room for dad to work on in the wee morning hours. It also had a view of the Rhine River and a medieval castle! How cool is that? After lunch, we walked a steep path under a hot sun to St. Goar’s main attraction: Rhinefels Castle. Founded in the 13<sup>th</sup>-century, Rhinefels quickly became the largest fortress on the middle Rhine. Its strategic location allowed it to control barge traffic on the river (by demanding tolls) and its mighty walls meant it played a huge role in the family feuds, political fights, religious persecutions, and military campaigns that wracked the Rhineland for centuries.

I leaned on a castle rampart and studied the lovely view of the Rhine River. The emperor I sought on this trip traveled often on the river, shuttling between palaces – or to war with his army. His name was Charlemagne. My 40<sup>th</sup> great-grandfather. Born in 748, Charlemagne became King of the Franks at age twenty, King of the Lombards in northern Italy in 774, and Emperor of what today is called the Carolingian Empire in 800. He was the first reigning emperor since Romulus Augustulus was deposed in 476, concluding the western Roman Empire. Charlemagne inherited an already substantial empire from his father Pepin the Short, who had overthrown Childeric III, the last of the Merovingian dynasty



**Charlemagne's empire in 800 AD**



of Frankish kings. The Merovingians were founded by King Clovis (466-511) who succeeded in bringing all the various Frankish tribes along the Rhine under his control and then conquering most of the old Roman province of Gaul. He is considered to be the first ‘King of France.’ Clovis also converted to Christianity, leading to religious unification across Europe. Pepin the Short was the son of Charles “The Hammer” Martel, a local prince who pulled an army together and stopped the Muslim expansion into western Europe with a decisive victory at the Battle of Tours in 732. The triumph cemented Frankish control of the region and set the stage for Charlemagne’s wars of conquest. Campaigning relentlessly for decades, Charlemagne expanded the Frankish kingdom to include what is today Germany, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, and the northern half of Italy – *Francia*. Charlemagne’s heirs remained in control of the continent until a certain enterprising viking named Rollo was granted a track of land around Rouen, France, in 911 by King Charles the Simple.

We know what happened next.

In the evening, we took a walk along the Rhine. We followed a well-worn footpath north from a ferry dock toward the famous Lorelei rapids, a perilous sequence of submerged rocks and sand bars that were the bane of sailors for centuries. Looming over the rapids is a 400-ft rock that was the home, according to German mythology, of a beautiful maiden who seduced sailors onto the rocks – and their deaths – with her singing. It was hard to imagine hearing anyone singing



today. In addition to steady flow of trucks on the river road, trains would blast past every five minutes or so. Then there was the barge traffic. For centuries, the Rhine has been a major highway for transporting goods from the North Sea through the heart of Germany all the way to the border of Switzerland. Nothing has changed except the goods. A steady parade of heavily-laden barges made their way up and down the river during our stroll. Many had a ‘sealed-up’ appearance suggesting they carried oil, natural gas, or industrial chemicals. The only treacherous spot on the whole journey was here at Lorelei. In 2011, a barge carrying sulphuric acid capsized below the rock, blocking the river for days.

***The Rhine with castle***

I kept pinching myself. I was walking along the Rhine River! Until this trip, I had never seen the world-famous river, much less strolled along its banks. At one point, we stopped walking so I could put my hand into the water briefly. I wanted to say I’ve touched the Rhine. I couldn’t

help myself. There's something about rivers. They're both timeless and utterly of the moment. They can be serene, but also an exciting portal to new adventures. As we walked, my thoughts drifted. Who were the Franks? I knew a few things. They were a people who spoke *Frankish*, a Germanic language similar to Old Dutch that eventually went extinct. Church and government officials spoke Latin and in the western part of the empire French prevailed as the language of the people. So it went with the Franks generally. In 508, they ditched their pagan beliefs when King Clovis was baptized. They adopted foreign styles of architecture, art, dress, and customs though they continued to wear their hair long and straight. They were highly militaristic and well-organized along Roman models. They were experienced in battle, utilizing every type of weapon, including naval forces. And they were accustomed to winning. Charlemagne put all of this to work on his behalf. Building on centuries of success, he led the Franks to an empire not seen since Rome.

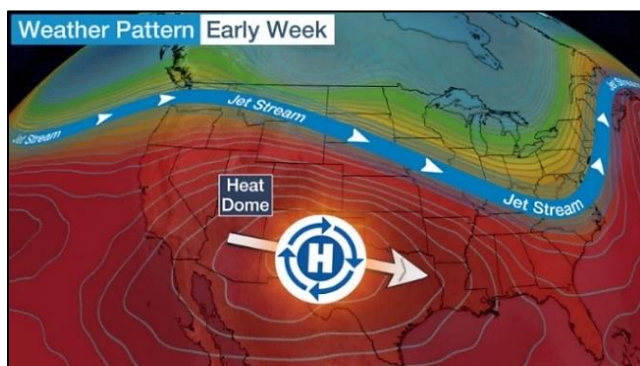
It wouldn't last a generation.



The next morning, I rose before dawn, made coffee, sat down at the dining room table, and fired up my laptop. Rising early to write is a habit I began when Sterling and Olivia were young. This morning, however, I didn't write. I checked the news instead. As usual, I had put an embargo on the daily news at the start of the trip, not wanting the relentlessly grim headlines and deliberately anxiety-inducing stories to ruin my fun. However, news had slipped through about a stubborn heat dome baking the western half of the U.S. A heat dome happens when a high-pressure system stalls



***Feet and Rhine***



**June 2024 (weatherundreground.com)**

over an area, trapping hot air like the lid on a cooking pot. Heat and humidity can quickly build under a dome making life miserable, especially if the stalling goes on for an extended period of time – as this one was doing. Heat records had fallen in northern California, Las Vegas, and Phoenix. Death Valley set a record at 128 degrees. No relief was in sight. I knew about heat domes. In 2011, I invited Bill deBuys, a

fellow conservationist and writer, to speak at the annual Quivira Coalition conference about his new book *A Great Aridness: Climate Change and the Future of the American Southwest*. Heat domes have a big role in Bill's book. The climate scientists he interviewed said without reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, heat domes will become larger and last longer. Apparently, their predictions were correct.

There was more. Extreme heat was broiling other parts of the world as well, some with fatal consequences. In Saudi Arabia, three hundred people died in searing heat in Mecca while attending the annual Hajj, the world's largest religious pilgrimage. The Saudi Arabian government is aware of climate change and has spent vast sums of money to protect the pilgrims by erecting 100,000 air-conditioned tents, handing out water bottles, and building medical facilities to treat heat-related sickness. It wasn't enough for those who died – and it won't be for many others in the future as temperatures keep rising. According to the story I read, a [recent analysis](#) predicts by 2050 Mecca will endure 182 days of dangerous heat a year, including fifty-four days when it will even be dangerous to take refuge in the shade. “By those measures,” wrote the story's authors, “Mecca will be one of the least hospitable places on Earth.”

None of this was news to me. I've been reading climate science since 2007 after watching Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. While I accepted the premise of the documentary, I wanted to read the fine print. I love research – to do it, read it, and write it – so I jumped into climate science with both feet, reading articles, books, and reports, including ones published by the IPCC. I tracked the work of climate scientists and activists, including Dr. James Hanson and journalist Bill McKibben (who spoke at a Quivira Conference at my invitation). I attended climate conferences in Phoenix, Denver, Hamburg, and Montpellier, France. I followed the COP climate meetings, read responses by scientists to climate deniers, and digested the news as climate impacts became increasingly severe. I kept an eye on carbon dioxide levels at the Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii, home of the Keeling Curve, as they kept rising. In December 2015, I went to Paris for the COP 21 summit and celebrated at the Eiffel Tower when the landmark Agreement was signed. Finally, it looked like the world would act on this existential crisis. Nearly ten years later, however, nothing had changed. Everything that followed Paris was just empty talk, empty pledges, and empty promises – what climate activist Greta Thunberg derisively calls more “blah, blah, blah.” The evidence was right there in the heat domes. I closed the laptop.

It was time to have fun again.

After breakfast, the kids and I spent the day touring quaint German towns along the river and waiting for late trains. Sterling estimated that we waited for two-and-a-half hours all together, which is a lot of wasted time in train stations, even if it is Europe. We visited Oberwesel first, in a light drizzle, then moved up the river to Bacharach, a popular destination. They were as pretty as promised by my guidebook, but there wasn't much going on. Even tourists were sparse, I thought. We walked the length of the attractive main streets, surveyed historic city walls, drank coffee, and took photos. I didn't mind the low energy of the towns. Actually, they were a relief after our people-packed stay in Amsterdam and raucous, crowd-filled Cologne. The quiet gave the three of us time to enjoy each other's company without the stresses of a big city – eat, chat, laugh. The kids practiced their college German. We talked about mom a little bit, but it seemed pretty clear to me they had moved on from their grief, as young people will do. Their lives are busy and full.



**Oberwesel**

In the evening, we did a major fun thing. We took a (delayed) train to Bingen, a busy town not far from Mainz, and found a table near the river at a crowded restaurant. As we ate, the sun came out, which we took as a great sign. At 7pm we headed to a nearby dock – it was time to board the party boat! Searching for river cruises online this spring, I stumbled across a once-a-month,

dance-and-drink cruise aimed at locals who wanted to blow off some steam after a long work week. Sounded good to me, and I was sure the kids would enjoy it. *The Rhenus* arrived right on time and we joined a sizeable crowd. Some people headed to the dance floor on the top deck, others spread out among the tables on the second level of the large vessel. We headed to the bow, which, to our surprise, we had mostly to ourselves. I stepped inside to order our first round of drinks. As the boat glided downstream, we bathed in evening sunlight, the warm air, and views of castles. There was one around every bend, it seemed. We drank, laughed, talked, and drank some more. We were cruising on the Rhine! How cool was that? Pretty damn cool.



**Selfie with tequila sunrise**

The next day we went for a hike. Our destination was Burg Eltz, which the author of my guidebook declared to be his favorite castle in all of Europe. We caught a train to Koblenz, delayed

as usual, and transferred to one that took us up the Mosel River to tiny Moselkern. We followed our phones through town, then walked a long stretch of road in a residential area. There weren't many opportunities for photos, so the kids chatted as we walked, catching up on various Dungeons & Dragons games they been watching and playing, what their mutual friends were doing, concerts, improv shows (Sterling) and Comicon conventions (Olivia) that they attended recently. I was impressed by their busyness, with full-time jobs too, but then their dad specialized in keeping busy. And I love how well they get along with each other despite the distances that separate them. We've been through a lot as a family, and it shows in their special bond.

The road ended at a pretty hotel. Crossing a bridge over Eltz creek, we followed a gentle trail into the woods, commencing a lovely hour-long hike to the castle. The lush forest reminded Sterling and I of Oregon, and he identified as many trees for us as he could as we walked. My leisurely pace meant the kids would zoom ahead and start chatting. It was wonderful to hike on a trail once again. For a while, trails filled my life. As President of the Backpacking Club in high school, I organized trips to national parks, wilderness areas, and others, culminating in a three-week backpacking adventure along the two-hundred mile length of the spectacular John Muir Trail, located atop California's Sierra Nevada mountains (a highlight of my life). I was so hungry at the end of the hike that I got sick on pizza our first night back in civilization. Gen loved trails as well and was always game for a hike. Some of my favorite memories are camping trips we took in the early years of relationship.



***Approaching Castle Eltz***

At the castle, we joined a long line of people at the entrance booth. Eltz is a 'living' castle, meaning its owners still occupy the parts of the structure. Once inside, we promptly bought food. We sat outdoors in the small patio, which reminded us of our trips to Carcassonne, a large, restored castle in southern France with lovely outdoor places to eat. That led to a round of reminiscing about our various trips to Europe over the years. I had to smile. I was forty-seven years old when I visited Europe for the first time (not counting a high school trip to the UK in 1976, which was a blur). At age 25, they've been to Italy, France, Germany, Scotland, Spain, London, Paris, Pompeii, now the Netherlands, the Rhine Valley, and shortly Belgium (for Olivia). They're aware of their privilege and are thankful for the opportunities. Sterling gave me a squeeze on the arm as a 'thank you.' It caused a small pang in my heart. He'll be leaving us in the morning to go home and I don't

know when the three of us will travel together again. In early September, I'll be going to Normandy solo. After that, I haven't made specific plans yet, though I have ideas about which Sagalands need to be visited next. Upending my life this spring has also upended my plans for travel. I'll figure it out once the dust settles.



***Flowers at Eltz***

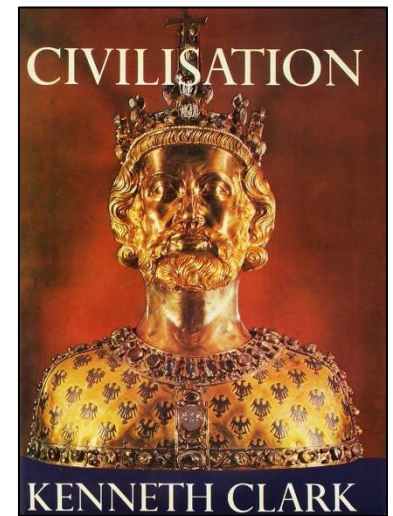
After lunch, we wandered through the castle's treasury rooms, filled with more rich people stuff, before deciding to skip the guided tour of the castle itself. I was happy to hang out in the courtyard and wander around the flower-filled grounds. I've described turn-around points in trips, when momentum shifts from 'going there' to 'going back.' This was our pivot, I realized with a sigh. On cue, it started drizzling on our walk back to the train station, the prelude to an afternoon of steady rain. My mood was lifted unexpectedly at the station when we are accosted in a friendly way by a group of drunk young women who were singing and having a good time. One young woman spied Sterling sitting on the bench and came over with questions about his camera, cup of alcohol in her hand. He was nervous. It was cute. It was a bachelorette party of local girls, it turns out. They asked us questions about where we were from and about our day, still interested in Sterling, though Olivia got questions too. It was great fun.

The train was late, of course, but this time we didn't mind at all.



We said good-bye to Sterling the next morning. We waited together at the St. Goar train station, preparing to head in opposite directions – north for him to the Frankfurt airport and home, south for us to Cologne and then on to Aachen. Fortunately, the travel gods smiled on us and both trains arrived on time. Sterling left first, but not without big hugs from his sister and me. He gave us a smile and a wave, then he was gone. Our train arrived a few minutes later, and as we settled into our seats, I gave a small wave to St. Goar out the window. I liked the apartment, with its coffee-maker, Rhine river view, and easy access to points beyond by train, however tardy. Maybe I'll come back to write and explore. Or maybe I'll find another apartment someplace else in Europe and do the same thing. I liked that idea. Selling my house and pocketing its equity as cash means I can be as footloose as I want. That opened a world of possibilities. The house wasn't sold yet,

however, and I didn't want to count any equity chickens before they hatched, so I decided to think about Charlemagne instead, whose tomb we would be visiting later today in Aachen. I first heard about the illustrious monarch from a groundbreaking BBC series in 1969 called "Civilization" which I watched in the lunch hall at school. Penned and narrated by Sir Kenneth Clark, an art historian and broadcaster, the series gave my adolescent imagination a profound jolt with its focus on art and architecture, as well as its exotic European locations (it was one of the first BBC documentaries to be shot in color). I pestered my father until he agreed to buy a copy of the book – which I still possess. Its cover features a gold bust of Charlemagne. According to Clark, the emperor was "the first great man of action to emerge from the darkness since the collapse of the Roman world." By 'darkness' he meant the cruelty, ignorance, and disorder that supposedly ran rampant during the 'Dark Ages' of early medieval Europe. Charlemagne was the "light" that restored order (with his conquering armies) and "saved" western society, at least according to Clark, by reconnecting mainland Europe with the "civilizing" cultures of the Mediterranean.

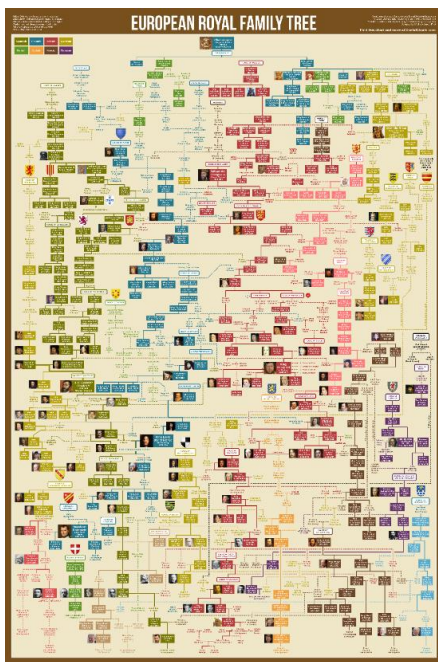


What was Charlemagne like as a person? According to a contemporary biographer, he was tall (six foot-four), had piercing blue eyes, a walrus moustache, and a small, squeaky voice. He was sturdy, had a round head on a short, fat neck and often had a bright and cheerful expression. He wore his hair short deliberately, setting a trend. Even as emperor, he continued to wear a plain, blue Frankish cloak. In addition to be an effective military leader and tireless campaigner, he was a skillful administrator to his empire. He was pious and worked strenuously to convert the 'pagans' on the borders to Christianity, usually at the point of a sword (side note: some historians theorize that Charlemagne's brutal wars against the Saxons and Danes provoked the vikings to retaliate by sacking monasteries and other holy sites, ushering in the Viking Age). Unusually for a monarch of the time, Charlemagne supported higher education, including for women. He ordered classical texts to be copied and in the process his scribes invented a beautiful style of Latin lettering now called 'Carolingian' which dominated for centuries.

Another sign of his forceful personality: his empire fell apart within a generation after his death in 814. His only surviving legitimate son, Louis the Pious, inherited the crown but not his father's gift for ruling. In his defense, Louis was confronted by repeated rebellions by his own

three sons, Lothair, Pepin, and Louis (Jr.), who fought each other and their father for a larger share of the kingdom. Louis made the situation worse by attempting to include his son Charles the Bald by his second wife in his succession plans, enraging the others (I'll return to Charles shortly). After Louis' death in 840, the empire was carved into thirds and then broken into smaller parts by more fighting and treaty-making. Despite the dissolution of his empire – or perhaps because of it – Charlemagne's reputation grew. His reign became the ideal of medieval kingship and the political structures and administrative reforms he implemented lasted for centuries. He would be eventually hailed as the "father of Europe" and his life would enter the realm of myth – continuing right down to a certain BBC documentary series in 1969.

For my purposes, it was the other meaning of Charlemagne as the "father of Europe" that mattered most. The amorous monarch had at least eighteen children with three wives and numerous



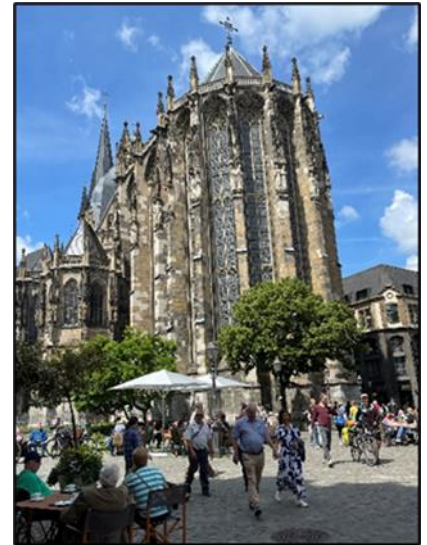
***That's Charlemagne at the top***

concubines. The descendants of his legitimate children flowed directly into the European Royal Family Tree, which includes kings and queens of France, Germany, England, and Italy. William the Conqueror is on the list via his paternal grandmother Judith of Brittany who was descended from Charlemagne's son Carloman. She married Richard II, Duke of Normandy – great-grandson of Rollo. However, the connection to the emperor I'm pursuing isn't through William the Conqueror, but his wife Matilda of Flanders. Charlemagne had at least twenty-two grandchildren, forty-nine great-grandchildren, hundreds of great-great-grandchildren, and so on for the next 1000 years. That's why nearly all white Europeans can trace a family line back to the emperor, and by extension so can anyone else with ancestral roots on the continent – like me. And possibly you!

Olivia and I arrived in Aachen at noon feeling famished. We deposited our bags at the hotel and then headed straight to an attractive plaza lined with trees and restaurants. We liked the city right away. It had a welcoming vibe that seemed authentic, possibly because the Aachen doesn't cater to the tourist industry. My 900-page guidebook to Germany devoted only a single paragraph to Aachen, a mighty come-down for what once was the capital of the sprawling Frankish Empire. We were here for the same reason others came to Aachen – to see Charlemagne's tomb. Actually,



many people apparently come to the city to soak in its famously stinky hot springs, which date back to Roman times. Charlemagne enjoyed the waters so much he decided to build a royal palace nearby. Under his guidance, Aachen grew into a capital city and a center of learning. In 793, Charlemagne began the construction of a private chapel that eventually became a cathedral. Olivia and I headed inside for a look. Its Byzantine style was a surprise. Turns out, the emperor chose a ‘East-meets-West’ theme for the holy edifice and his final resting place. It was exotic and lovely. It was also crowded with visitors. Charlemagne’s tomb was cordoned off and it was hard to get a good view through the forest of heads and cameras. I decided I would come back after a nap.



***Charlemagne's cathedral***

A bell woke me. I had left the hotel room window open and in the distance I could hear a solitary bell ringing. It had to be the cathedral. Not wanting to wake Olivia, I left the room quietly. Stepping inside the cathedral, I was surprised to find it nearly deserted. I walked to the cordon and gazed at Charlemagne’s golden sarcophagus in the soft light. My 40<sup>th</sup> great-grandfather. Matilda

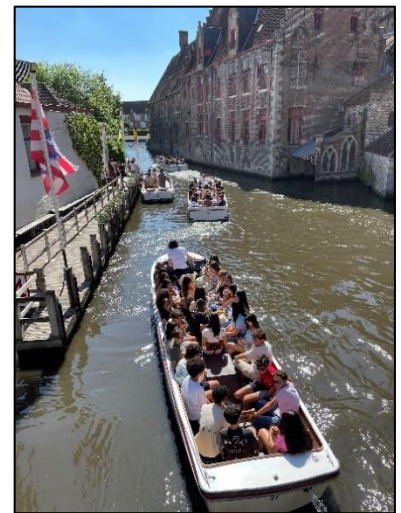


***Charlemagne's sarcophagus***

of Flanders was the daughter of Baldwin V, Count of Flanders, who was a direct descendent of Charlemagne via all the earlier Counts of Flanders. The first Count married Judith, the daughter of Charles the Bald, Charlemagne’s great grandson. I’ll call this family tributary *Charlemagne Creek*. It flows through Flanders and merges with *Rollo Creek* (which originates with the viking Rollo and flows through the Dukes of Normandy) when Matilda marries William the Conqueror and they produce nine children, including Henry I – my ancestor. From there, *Rollo Creek* rolls on through the *de Lacy* watershed. The key stories on *Charlemagne Creek* belong to Matilda and Judith, who lived in Bruges, Belgium – our next stop.



The trains were on time in Belgium, so Olivia and I were able to make a tight connection in Brussels, transferring to a sweltering commuter train. The weather had turned hot again and by the time we stepped out of the Bruges station into the blazing afternoon sunlight we were soaked with sweat. We joined a stream of fellow tourists flowing toward the medieval quarter of Bruges, hidden behind a long row of trees and barricaded by a busy road and a canal. It immediately reminded me of Disneyland. Crossing over the canal, we entered a very tidy, clean, frozen-in-time city, complete with attractive cobblestone streets and brick buildings. And visitors – *lots* of visitors. After dropping off our bags at our rather nice hotel (I had splurged for air conditioning), we walked to a main street where we were engulfed by a sea of people. The Disneyland feel was reenforced by the Belgian chocolate and waffle shops, souvenir stops, and designer clothing stores that lined both sides of the thoroughfare. Crossing a bridge, we could see boats filled with people chugging down a narrow canal. The only thing missing was Mickey Mouse. I knew Bruges had recently become an extremely popular destination, especially for cruise ships, which parked at the nearby port of Zeebrugge, but this was kinda nuts. To escape the crowds, Olivia and I ducked into a café, ordered coffee, and settled in at a quiet table. A sympathetic waiter explained that we had arrived at ‘peak’ cruise ship unloading. The flood of people would shrink to a trickle by suppertime, he said reassuringly, and Bruges would return to a normal city again.



***Boat rides in Bruges***

Later, I took a long walk to the market square in the heart of the historic city while Olivia rested. Bruges is popular for a good reason – it’s very pretty. Originally a coastal city, its strategic location was valuable first to the Romans and then to the Franks, who made it the administrative center of *Pagus Flandrensis* – the County of Flanders. The region’s prosperity attracted the attention of marauding vikings, prompting the first Count, Baldwin I, to fortify the city. Over time, Bruges became the center of a vibrant wool and textile industry. It grew fat and happy. However, the unstoppable silting of the river basin meant Bruges eventually lost direct access to the sea. City leaders responded with an elaborate system of interconnected canals, but these efforts proved futile as maritime activity and wool markets shifted to Antwerp. Bruges fell into steep economic decline. By the 1600s, the city was a shell of its former self. Construction of new buildings essentially ceased as people moved away. It froze in time. Spared the bombs of both World War I and II,

Buges' intact medieval quarter – one of the best in Europe – was discovered first by British tourists. In 2000, UNESCO designated the entire city center as a World Heritage Site, and the floodgates opened. I wasn't complaining. The city's architecture is a marvel to behold and its market square one of the best pedestrian-friendly open spaces I've ever visited.

It's not just for tourists either. As I wandered around, a group of young schoolchildren suddenly filed into the square behind their teachers. Each student carried an accordion. They split into small groups and spread out around the large square before positioning themselves on chairs behind music stands. Then they began to play music on their accordions. It was wonderful. People gathered to listen to the impromptu performances and applaud the young musicians. A sign announced them to be part of the *Conservatorium Brugge*. A little later, the young musicians coalesced into a small orchestra of accordions and embarked on a lively concert of pop tunes in front of a large, happy crowd. I had snagged a prime listening spot at the foot of a monument. Across from me was the flat-topped belfry, built in the 13<sup>th</sup>-century and home to forty-seven bells, quiet for the moment. I closed my eyes as the concert began, letting the warm sunlight and the music lead me into a blissful state.

Olivia and I spent the next day touring Bruges and nearby Ghent with a guide, Flavia, who hailed from Argentina. It gave me a chance to think about *Charlemagne Creek* and the stories of two of the most remarkable women in the entire *de Lacy Saga*. The first was Judith, the royal great-granddaughter of Charlemagne, who led a brief but extraordinarily eventful life, including defying her father, King Charles the Bald, to marry for love. Born in 843, she caught the eye of Æthelwulf, the King of Wessex, England, who was making a pilgrimage to Rome with his youngest son Alfred (later known as Alfred the Great). Stopping at the Frankish court, the widowed, sixty year-old Æthelwulf asked for the hand of twelve year-old Judith despite having five children who were older than his bride-to-be, including three sons. Shockingly, King Charles agreed – shocking because Carolingian kings traditionally prevented their daughters from marrying (thus preventing ambitious sons-in-law from becoming a threat), and never to a foreigner. Nonetheless, the marriage took place in 856, provoking a dramatic sequence of events. First, Charles insisted that his daughter be crowned Queen of Wessex, an unprecedented honor for a woman. Next, the prospect of Judith producing a younger, high-born son caused Æthelwulf's son, Æthelbald, to rebel against his father.



***Little accordionists***

The conflict was resolved two years later when Æthelwulf died without a producing a new heir. Æthelbald then proceeded to marry Judith – his stepmother – himself! Æthelbald died less than a year later (by poison, it was rumored), leaving Judith a twice-over widow at the tender age of sixteen. Her second marriage was also childless, so Judith returned to her father, who promptly sent her to a monastery, apparently against her will. End of story? Not at all.

A year later, a young count named Baldwin visited the monastery and fell in love with Judith. She returned his affection and with the assistance of her brother, eloped with the handsome young man. Her father, the king, was outraged. He demanded their capture and imprisonment, but Judith and her new husband eluded their pursuers with the help of her Carolingian cousins. Furious, King Charles ordered the Church to condemn their souls. In response, Judith and Baldwin fled to Rome where they were granted an audience with Pope Nicholas I. Hearing their pleas, Nicholas officially sanctioned their marriage. Grumbling, King Charles allowed the happy couple to come home. He put Baldwin in charge of the County of Flanders, where Baldwin built a residence for himself and Judith near where the Bruges Town Hall sits today. The region suffered from constant viking raids, leading to contemporary speculation that Charles hoped Baldwin would be killed by viking marauders. However, Count Baldwin proved to be highly skilled at defeating vikings, earning the nickname ‘Iron Arm.’ His success set Flanders on the path of power and wealth. He and Judith had three sons, including Baldwin II who married the youngest daughter of Alfred the Great. Judith died at the age of twenty-six, but not before living a life that she chose for herself, and with a man that she loved – fortunately for all of us who are her descendants!

The second remarkable woman is Judith and Baldwin’s great-great-great-great-great-granddaughter Matilda of Flanders, eldest daughter of Baldwin V. Her story is no less riveting, though apparently it didn’t involve true love, at least not at first. In fact, when her father accepted a proposal of marriage in 1048 for the beautiful and highly cultivated Matilda from the lowly and crude William (the future Conqueror), Duke of Normandy, she was mortified and refused to be betrothed. For William, her pedigree as a direct descendent of both Charlemagne and Alfred the Great meant their marriage would legitimize his place among the noble families of Europe. For the proposed bride, however, the exact opposite was true. William’s bastardy made him unsuitable to the high-born and haughty Matilda. Enraged at her rejection, the insulted William rode to Bruges, dragged Matilda from her horse by her braids, pushed her into the mud, and beat her. Then he jumped on his horse and rode home. Unsurprisingly, Count Baldwin promptly declared war on

Normandy. Conflict was averted when his daughter suddenly changed her mind. She would marry the bastard after all. No reason is given for Matilda's change of heart, though there were rumors that she was in love with a wealthy Anglo-Saxon lord named Brictric who had refused her romantic advances (years later, Queen Matilda ordered Brictric's extensive lands in Britain to be confiscated and the lord imprisoned, where he died). Perhaps she had settled on William as her second choice. The betrothal between William and Matilda hit a major snag, however, when the Pope declared them to be too closely related – called consanguinity – and prohibited their marriage. It's not clear what the Pope meant since nearly all elites in 11<sup>th</sup> century Europe were related to each other in some way (think: Charlemagne). In fact, both William and Matilda could claim the famous viking Rollo as their ancestor, he through Rollo's son Willam Longsword, and Matilda through Rollo's daughter Gerloc. It's unlikely the Pope had Rollo in mind. He was probably playing politics. In any case, the prohibition had no practical effect – the wedding took place anyway.

The marriage lasted thirty years and produced ten children. Perhaps in a sign of his feelings for his wife, William sired no known bastards, which was highly unusual for the era. Their son Henry I, for example, would have two legitimate and at least twenty-three illegitimate offspring. Matilda also earned her husband's respect. When he embarked with his army in 1066 to conquer England, sailing on a ship that Matilda had given him, William appointed her regent of Normandy to rule in his absence, a role she would repeat five more times over the next decade. Although she was crowned Queen of England at a ceremony in Westminster in 1068, Matilda spent most of her life in Normandy. In addition to her official duties, she was deeply involved in the education of their children. She seemed particularly fond of her eldest, Robert, a testy lad who took umbrage when his younger brothers, William Jr. and Henry, dumped the contents of a chamber pot over his head one evening as a prank. Enraged that his father didn't punish them, Robert rose in rebellion, only to be defeated and exiled by his dad. Behind her husband's back, Matilda had supported Robert's rebellion with gold, causing a serious rift when her betrayal was uncovered. Matilda made amends by negotiating a family truce, though William never again allowed her to rule Normandy in his absence. The emotional bond between them remained strong, however, and when she died in 1083, William was grief-stricken for the remaining four years of his life.

I asked Flavia the tour guide if there were any remains of the palace that Matilda or Judith would have occupied during their years in Bruges, but she shook her head. All of the old buildings had been replaced by new ones during the city's heyday in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, she said.

There was a history museum that might have artifacts, she suggested. I declined. I didn't feel like spending time inside staring into glass cases on such a lovely day, even if the temperatures outside were climbing again. We decided to move on to Ghent for lunch, followed by an afternoon walk around its medieval quarter. The contrast between the cities was obvious right away. Ghent is home to a large university and its downtown was packed with serious-looking young people – except for the ones sunbathing by the river. That looked like fun! In the medieval era, Ghent also became a major textile center, but it didn't suffer the economic collapse that Bruges did, partly because it was buffered by the university. As a result, its medieval area today is small and not as attractive, to be honest. It felt plunked down in the middle of a busy, modern city. After a few hours of wandering, we headed back to Bruges. I was ready for Disneyland again.

For supper, Olivia and I walked to the market square, picked a restaurant for its views, and ordered martinis – the same one we made back in Amsterdam. It was our last night in Belgium. Tomorrow we would travel to Amsterdam and then prep for early departures from the airport the next day. We weren't ready to go home, so we lingered over supper for quite a while. The evening air was perfect, warm and soft. The mellowness I had felt earlier on the trip returned. I was sitting with my daughter in the heart of a beautiful European city watching the last rays of the day ignite the buildings surrounding us. It had been almost a year since my trip to Scandinavia and the launch of my Sagalands adventure. I had started that journey with a heavy heart, searching for a new way of being under unwanted circumstances. I found purpose on the excursion – a writing project that would take me to new places and teach me about ancestors, tributaries, and family watersheds. All good – except this winter I realized it wasn't enough. I was adrift in the Doldrums emotionally. My head had purpose, but my heart did not. My heart felt like a jammed rudder, circling around and around. Rather than try to repair what was wrong, I quit my day job and abandoned the home ship this spring for another boat, tossing most of my life's cargo overboard as I made the transfer. I have no idea where this new ship is going, other than the Sagalands, or how long I will remain on board before transferring to a different boat, but my heart felt better immediately. It was open now to being mellow – and having fun. However, there was still a rough stretch ahead possibly. I had kept in contact with my real estate agent during the trip, and she reported that there had been very little interest in the house so far, which surprised her. We'd talk when I got back, she texted. Should I be worried, I asked? Not yet, she replied. She meant that to be reassuring, but it didn't work very well. I decided to have a second martini.

I studied the fading light on the lovely buildings. Had I found a new way of being yet? Was it even possible at my age? Adapting to unhappy circumstances, embarking on a new adventure, and forcing myself out of the Doldrums had been good, healthful decisions, despite their stress. Quitting my day job and leaving save-the-world work after four hard decades was definitely new. It had also been good for my health, lifting my spirits, and helping heal my heart. Did it all combine into a new way of being though? Did it even matter? I took a long sip of my drink, still watching the light. It did matter, I thought to myself. I had been unhappy and unwell for some time. I needed to admit that. Gen's declining health, our substantial debt, the empty nest, and other forlorn things had hurt my heart. Ironically, my save-the-world work, which involved advocating for positive and regenerative solutions to food, climate, and other pressing problems had not been regenerative to me personally. I was worn out and blue. I was reminded of something a speaker said at a Quivira conference years ago. She was the Sustainability Office at a large, progressive beverage company and she told the audience that she had learned "If it isn't fun, it's not sustainable." She was right, but I didn't take her words to heart at the time. I was having fun at work. It felt sustainable despite the long hours. Over the years, however, fun and joy drained away, especially as news headlines became increasingly grim. I finished my drink. A new way of being meant rediscovering joy.

It's never too late for that.



***A toast to family and fun***