



Christmas 2025



Dear Friends and Family,

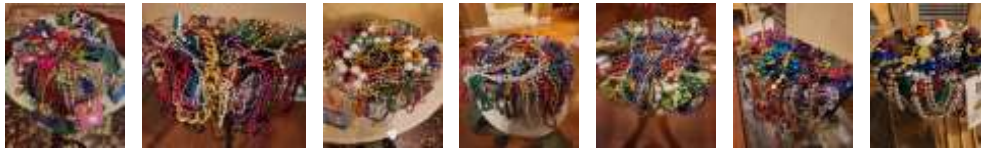
Merry Christmas 2025!

Another year with a lot of things going on, both internationally and domestically. Lots to pray about. But at this time of the year we can still count our blessings, which are many.

Gasparilla. Yep, we again attended Tampa's annual **Gasparilla Pirate Parade**. We seemed to have a need to increase our bead collection which is about ready to completely occupy our spare bedroom. Over the years we've learned a few tips on catching beads throw by the pirates; the best one that does not involve tearing off some of your clothes and exposing yourself, is to stand between two shorter people.

Q: How do you know you caught too many beads at Gasparilla?

A: When your beads around your neck weight more than a large draft horse collar.



Florida State Fair. Last year Joyce won *Best of Show*, meaning her entry was better than any other entry in any other class of Horticulture. Then she decided to retire while clearly the GOAT* of horticulture. However, she recently noted that we have on our porch a beautiful Christmas Cactus (*Schlumbergera x buckleyi*) with blooms . . .

High School Hallway to a College Campus. This year Karen and Cathy's three children graduated from high school and prepared to attend the nearby community college. Uh, well, not exactly. All three did graduate from high school, but all three are attending a *different* college or university and *away from home*. Launching one kid to one college is a challenge. Launching three kids to three different colleges is a full-time job with no benefits, no days off, and definitely few refunds.



Key West. This year also included a trip with Joyce plus Karen and her family down to Key West. It's charming, eccentric, and often sober enough to function. A required visit is to the Hemmingway House with its 57 or so cats, many of whom have the polydactyl trait (i.e., extra toes). I told the kids that if they could grow an extra finger that might help them get a better grip on their upcoming studies. The triplets didn't laugh at my bad humor, but did decide they really related to the cats when they learned that the cats like to sleep about 20 hours a day.



Labor Day Weekend. Calloway Gardens, located in Pine Mountain, Georgia, about 50 miles SSE of Atlanta, is a wonderful resort and a great place to spend a long Labor Day weekend, and that's where Jay went with Robert and his family; At Callaway, one of its many activities is you can zip-lining through the trees. It's thrilling — unless you scream, in which case every chipmunk on the East side of Pine Mountain knows exactly how scared you are.



A Las Vegas Weekend. In mid-September Joyce flew to Las Vegas to be with some long time friends (Della, her daughter Donna, and friend Karen) to see The Eagles at the Sphere. They also saw the special Sphere remake of *The Wizard of Oz*. The Sphere is the only concert where the screen behind the band is so distracting you forget the actual musicians are right there playing their hearts out. It's like going to church but staring at the stained glass the whole time.

(The picture at far right shows *The Eagles* on stage with their images projected onto the Sphere.)



Jay's Activities. Joyce has her horticulture achievements; I have my golf and Pickleball struggles.

PickleBall: At my last checkup, my doctor inquired about my level of activity, so I told him "Pickleball." Note that the doctor did not specify "successful" activity. But I have learned the secret to successful doubles in Pickleball: Try to get a partner who could win all by himself or herself, and stay out of the way.



Golf. I've learned to adapt my golf game to take advantage of situations that come up on the course. For example, I used to get upset when my drives did not end up in the fairway, but in the woods. However, now I am now only two activities away from earning my Forestry Merit Badge.

Tennis for Fun. This is an activity that I joined as a Coach last spring and has now started its 2025-2026 season. TFF is a volunteer-run program that offers free tennis clinics for athletes with special needs — e.g., those with Down syndrome, intellectual disabilities, developmental disabilities. It's fun, and the only negative aspect — for me — is that most of the kids will end up with a better tennis game than mine.



Joyce's Activities. Joyce is still dealing with some pretty agonizing back pain that has defied treatments and some knee problems going back to a skiing accident years ago. Nevertheless, Joyce remains active with a number of groups to include some wonderful ladies who knew her parents before she was even born and are therefore called her surrogates.

Church. Joyce meets monthly with a Ladies Group, and is a member of the choir that comes together for special events to include this coming Christmas Eve. The Choir Director positions choir members who sing like me (badly) next to Joyce so she can hopefully drown them out.

Gatlinburg. Joyce loves Gatlinburg, the only place where you can eat a funnel cake for breakfast and still feel like you made a healthy choice. This fall Joyce and daughter Michelle made the annual trek during federal funding crisis that affected Park Rangers and resulted in more bears on the streets than tourists. And for all you Southerners, that white stuff behind Joyce and Michelle that is also in their hair is called snow.



Service. She also remains current with her nursing credentials and her specialty certifications. To say that many people seek her advice, which is of course, at no charge - remains an understatement. So it's: F. Joyce Braden, RN — where the RN mean Really No-charge



Age. This year Joyce and I both turned 81. I wrote about age in last year's letter. Maybe at some point that's all one is able to report on. As for me, I was always taught to respect my elders, but now it keeps getting harder to find one. Also, I did some research to find the origin of the word "Octogenarian." Turns out it goes back to ancient Rome where it meant "Older than Dirt."

UCF Graduation. Joyce's grandson Conner graduated this month from the University of Central Florida with a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and a major in Accounting. That helped him calculate all the parking tickets he accumulated. Joyce did a magnificent job setting up his Graduation Dinner. To say that the food was quite different than the 37 versions of Raman noodles Conner lived on for the past years is a giant understatement.



Christmas. Joyce and I love Christmas. Especially Joyce. And did I mention, "Especially Joyce?" Think she started putting out decorations mid-November. Among other decorations, we just completed putting lights on a small patch of Croton surrounding two trees in the front yard. Five trips to Walmart for materials, and now a section of our front yard is brighter than the Aurora Borealis.



** Greatest Of All Time – for those who follow Tom Brady.*

Now wishing you the best for this Christmas and the coming years.
May you continue to grow in God's grace, mercy, and love.

Jay and Joyce
The Braden Family: Jay, Joyce, kids, grandkids, great grandkid, and sweet puppy Cinny
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Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV): "For I know the plans I have for you..." declares the Lord
Isaiah 55:8-9 (NIV): "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways ...," declares the Lord