Time, like year-end commentaries, are convenient constructions to help us make sense of our lives. In the great scheme of things -- or, in The Great Scheme of Things, as you prefer -- both make little difference. It's not that they don't matter; they do. Both require great patience to endure, and both direct our wooly thoughts here and there, willy-nilly.

Distractions explode, pop, and stutter in the mind. This is especially true if, like me, your concentration and mental discipline are not what they once were. Digesting a few recent tidbits in the news has proven tougher on my stomach than freeze-dried ostrich or owl jerky.

For example: In the last week, via media reports, I've bumped into various aspects of God, Santa Claus, Fox News, Albert Einstein, and Pope Francis. In a move displaying little to no apparent evolutionary advantage, my mind insists on turning these random exposures into patterns -- in this case, jokes of the sort which always begin with a long, convoluted list of people and animals all walking into a bar...

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To demonstrate how far afield I shamble these days: It makes me wonder what humor's role or purpose may be in our lives. Like some primates twisting and scrunching up the face, and baring the teeth, these are all perfectly acceptable activities, providing a certain set of unthreatening, intention-signaling noises accompany the facial display. These signs can indicate playtime. In humans, these same displays can indicate stress relief, an imbalance of personal chemistries and/or medications, or just be a sign of the annual rounding-up of documentation in preparation of filing one's taxes. Humans complicate everything they touch, I suspect. Sometimes we even remember to add laughter.

Our thoughts are populated by commuting wisps of memory, hope, and wishes. They are punctuated with neon-lighted highlights, and by *lowlights* that we try to scuttle and abandon in dim alleyways. We're not so evolved that this wouldn't happen if we were still cave-painters staring dimly at charcoal-marked rock walls. The process today is just faster, far more varied, and in much greater detail, as we gape at big-screen teevees, flip through news magazines, and otherwise consume our world visually.

Maybe humor acts as a shock-absorber for the mind or spirit, keeping us flexible to handle whatever erupts in our path, be it volcanoes, saber tooth tigers, a football pool, bridal showers, or the boss saying, "We need to talk," right after the post-Christmas axe has fallen on half the office.

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Our lives are fully capable of handing us overheated drama or plunging us into icy slapstick. The trick to navigating it all, I suppose, is like running on ice: It's helpful to know when to slow down, seek better traction, and establish balance.

In the case of actual ice, I can tell you from hard-wrought experience that it's really helpful if the lower half of your body is going at about the same speed as your upper half. Usually, this time of year, the lower half of me can hit speeds in excess of 200 mph while the upper half cruises along at a pokey 1 or 2 mph -- providing both my arms are flapping like a lunatic turkey attempting lift-off. (Should I fail, I am very happy about whatever all-natural seat padding I can bring to bear to any sudden landings.)

But, enough of that. Like an eager, first-time parent, I wanted to take out some news photos and share them with you. And, just like as in slide shows, home movies, and the post-Thanksgiving dinner trance, feel free to nod off anytime in the dimly-lit space that follows.)

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You really have to hand it to Albert Einstein. The man was more full of interesting ideas than a practical holiday handbook called *1001 Things to Do with Bacon and/or Accidentally Crumpled Gingerbread Houses and/or Good Brandy.* For example, even though he believed time was an illusion, he gave us poor, hapless *schlumps* this humorous slant on life and living: "The only reason for time is so that everything doesn't happen at once."

This may seem silly at first, but it makes perfect sense. Without the subject of time fairly well nailed down, every conversation we have would sound like tryouts for the Abbott and Costello "Who's on first?" routine.

(I seem to remember hearing about a language or two that was perpetually stuck in first gear, in present tense only. There may be some advantages to that -- maybe when sneaking back in at home after a late night -- but, I imagine it's more a case of simplified verb use, where all the verbs are present-tense, but meaning is gathered from context. Or body language. Or being made to sleep on the couch for a few nights.)

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There are ways to slow time to an uphill crawl. Late-running public transit commuters are familiar with these methods, as are cross-country airline users when into the first few minutes of a cross-country, crying-babies marathon flight.

Some people like to slow things down on purpose, for fun. You might remember the "slow food" and "slow living" movements -- a reaction to the time poverty many feel in modern life. Add to this a teevee revolution in Norway, Land of Slow Television: There has been a burst of interest for televised, 8-hour knitting epics, six-day ferry journeys, and train trips galore.

Having *no time* is not a recent development, even if it does feel that way -- especially when your hair's on fire. As Mahatma Gandhi once observed, "There is more to life than increasing its speed."

Meanwhile, time is certainly relative, to bounce back to Einstein again. I had time whiplash the day after Christmas, in a drug store, getting a prescription refilled. One employee was moving Christmas candy to the clearance shelf while another worker layered sandbags of Valentine's Day candy on the shelves, in preparation for the next consumer blitz.

This is right up there with the previous time whiplash, in which the Halloween candy got bumped and rubbed bags with Christmas treats, as one group was demoted and the other promoted.

This is also in the neighborhood of my own personal calendar sense, in which there are only two pages: July Fourth and January First.

There are times I know I'm not the fastest knife in the drawer, but it's not often I feel slow -- in the sense of being a special-needs learner. Computers, however, are certainly more than up to the task. Time is more than relative here: It can be fluid as roofing tar one moment and hard as frozen taffy the next.

The iMac at home has become a cornucopia of speed-aging for its operator, all while providing painfully slow cures and no results: A bit ago, it sprung a bounty of permanent, brightly-illuminated vertical lines on its display screen. I do not feel well illuminated in dealing with this issue, nor with the discovery that the unit can no longer be upgraded. It's reached its apex, its zenith, its tippy-top.

No more add-ons, new versions, improvements. Technology has marched on, and time has edged and bumped the machine closer to the cliff edge. Browsers no longer feel supported by the operating system. Some websites refuse to speak to it any longer. There are more frequent, and longer, periods of crashes. There are fewer clean recoveries. And, more hard reboots. We are both in shock. It's anyone's guess who will be in mourning first.

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The Blu-ray player, however, has stepped in to take the top spot in generating highly agitated venom on my behalf, such as the iMac used to trigger at times. Having only recently taken the plunge on yet another technology upgrade for watching films and documentaries at home, I am loathe to discovery that the unit, and the items I purchase for its feeding, are no longer my own.

(By *loathe*, I mean to say that there are times when my partner tells me she can see veins sticking out on my temples, and that I've picked up an irregularly-firing twitch just under my left eye.)

I was just starting to settle down, in medium simmer, about selecting "play movie" on the menu

and remote, then being instantly warned and harangued about the non-victimless crime of film bootlegging, lit into by the FBI and Interpol, and then the film's contents bring disowned and disclaimed by its makers.

Worse, some films refuse to budge or cue up, even though we have the latest hotnew gear -- and have no new firmware to become soft-hearted, soft-headed, or generically *firm* about. No, in previous incarnations, you bought the player, you bought the media, and the business relationship was concluded.

This, of course, was no good enough for the GreedMeisters among us. No, a new umbilical had to be invented -- a string on which we might continue to be made to dance, even after our pockets had been turned inside out. After all, the writing was on the wall: It didn't look like there was going to be another revolutionary tech upgrade for a while yet, so the studios couldn't count on selling us the same movie another 3 or 4 times -- which meant another avenue of revenue had to be pioneered.

Like keeping their hands in our pockets long after we've left the store. From looking around online a bit, after I regained the ability of seeing straight following the initial red-hued vision I'd developed , it appears Universal is the worst. I've had problems with them all, though. Their need for *eyeballs to advertise to* is strong -- every bit as strong as their need for *butts in seats* at the theaters.

My father had me late in life. He saw immense change: He went from horse-drawn trolleys in the streets, through the Apollo moon shots, Mars rovers, and beyond. The changes I've seen -- that we've seen -- in our time here run from vinyl to 8-track to cassette to Beta or VHS, and on to DVD and now, we all sing the *Blus*.

There's a great cartoon that I remember. It showed Edison in his workshop, tinkering on the next great invention. On the shelves, behind him, were all manner of inventions already perfected, but not yet ready for planned, timed release: from Victrola to big-screen TV.

This makes me think we might have Kube (TM) technology, or some such, just ahead, ready to be jammed down our anxious-and-willing gullets, as soon as Blu-ray sales slump. Whatever happens, I'm digging in, staying at this level. The next upgrade will bring new intrusions: No

longer content with jamming advertising into our nerve-endings, the next upgrade will feature the actual teleportation of a sales representative, right into your very own home, for the eye-rolling, forehead-slapping, stomach-churning sales pitch.

They call this progress. This is how I am so certain that I must be slow.

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Thinking about languages without tense, and about time relativity, I think it's about time the English language came up with a far less awkward nomenclature for one's life partner. The *boy friend-girlfriend*
route seems silly after the middle teens.
Fiancee
and
fiance
are clunky, and seem from another era, especially if marriage is not a red-hot priority.
Friend
seems tepid and weak.
My special person
sounds bizarrely spotlighted.
Life partner
seems unnecessarily cold, contractual, obscure, or oblique.
Husband
and
wife
both seem a poor fit for the unmarried, especially as the terms are reserved for those who walk that path.

And, the one I heard about via the Census seems stripped of all romance: *POSSLQ* -- pronounced POSS-ull-cue, meaning Person of Opposite Sex Sharing Living Quarters. Somehow, I'm having trouble fitting this conversation into my head: "Mom, Dad -- I'd like you to meet my POSSLQ...." Ernie or Debbie or Ralph or Janet or whatever.

I suppose if one is gay, one just adds another *S*, to become a *POSSSLQ* -- Person of Same Sex Sharing Living Quarters. In that case, I suppose you just pronounce it about the same way, with the option to hold the

S
sound a little longer, maybe.

As I say, I think this needs some work. But, then, I'm old-fashioned: I have a kerosene-fired iMac and strongly object to puppet strings being attached to the goods I purchase outright.

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Speaking of distractions, I meant to mention Santa, God, and Fox News earlier on, but slipped a few gears -- or stripped some -- in my concentration. Maybe it was on purpose -- like suppression of traumatic memory via hysterical amnesia or something. Anyway, friends alerted me to a shifting of tectonic plates this season: It turns out that a talking hairdo on Fox made the royal pronouncement that Santa, like Jesus, was a white man.

There's hardly room to know where to start in on this one -- but, I suspect I could make talking hairdos on Fox explode, or at least vocally even more hysterical sounding, by suggesting that the historical Jesus was a Middle Eastern. You know, those same people Fox folks and friends undoubtedly love to think of as *towel-heads*, but who have been trained, over time, and by intensely hostile reaction, threat of lawsuit, and docked pay, to no longer just blurt right out loud.

The followup conversation of some twits on Twitter on this whole line of inquiry -- of dialogued psychosis diagrammed -- pretty much breaks the sound barrier on the primal-scream front, too.

I try to scrub Edvard Munch's The Scream from my mind's eye, but it won't budge. Not even for seasonal, handmade bourbon fudge.

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When it comes to authorities on the vagaries of deity, I'm willing to go with the Pope, especially now, now that Pope Francis -- or, Pope Frank, as some would have it -- holds that position. I've

spent a lifetime eschewing the Catholicism I was raised in, and reconfirming my status as an agnostic -- a status I should think would apply to all clear-thinking, non-superstitious, completely honest people. I mean, humans are not in a position to know, you know? This is the entire message of agnosticism: *Beats me.*

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My *POSSLQ* and I were discussing our general amazement about, and relief generated by, Pope Frank, even before he became, like Albert Einstein, *Time* magazine's Man of the Year. In one swift and swell stroke, gone was the sense of distant, aloof, unknowing elitism previously framed in Prada shoes, Serengeti sunglasses, and one's own special cologne. In its stead, a host of stunning, sea-changing, common-sense pronouncements as comfy as your best pair of old jeans. Here was a people's Pope, a man of-and-by the people -- more humble fisherman than glam rock star.

Even for a stubborn agnostic, the urge to reconsider has tickled the outer edges of old upbringing. The harshest critics of religion will say all religions are mostly in-flight entertainment, population control, manners-minding, and/or busses to nowhere definite -- I think they would all uniformly agree that they now really like this pilot, this controller, this Mr. Manners, this bus driver.

Hey: Anyone who makes Sarah Palin squirm has my vote, as does anyone who would suspend a bishop for spending almost $43 million dollars on a House renovation -- and then sending him off to a monastery, while thinking about turning the luxurious residence into a soup kitchen for the poor. Or speaking out against unbridled capitalism. Or picking his name after St. Francis of Assisi. Or donning a red clown nose at an occasion. Or comforting a disfigured man, or washing the feet of a woman, who is a Muslim, and is in prison. Or choosing a 20-year-old Renault as his main wheels. Or...

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During a 4th-grade Christmas pageant at Sacred Heart Catholic School, where I once felt detained under long-term house arrest for unnamed offenses, and during a break in confirmation and catechism classes, I once played God.

After waiting what seemed like 19 days in back, at center-stage, behind a slit in the backdrop curtain, hunkered down among the rows of stored folding chairs, where I was supposed to wait, and then eventually spring out and spout my one line: "Let there be light."

My one and only thespian experience spoiled me for the movies and for the stage. I never acted again. I mean, after playing God, where do you go?

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And so it goes. Time, Santa, Faux News, Technology, Einstein, Gandhi, human nature, Pope, God -- all of it. Let there be light, indeed. I still have no idea what to make of any of it, this life.

And, my lack of understanding is not from a lack of trying: I've been pondering such things since I was seven years old, in the hospital with rheumatic fever, pondering my own possible death. The wonder of it all, and the endless questions about it all, never cease. I've dwelled on it my whole life, and on it again this year, watching my fingernails ripple and my hair fall away, fighting cancer.

This year has been a time of Great Unknowing, perhaps more than in any other year. But, I do agree with Einstein, when he remarked, "If you can't explain it to a six-year-old, you don't understand it yourself."

I am mostly glad in my life that I don't have much of anything to explain to any six-year-olds. Not when I don't understand a lick of it myself.

Let there be light.

A Menu of Einsteinisms: http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/a/albert_einstein.html

A Taste of Who's What and Where? http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQXwt83hYkE

Slowly, please: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slow_Movement

and: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slow_living

and: http://www.create-the-good-life.com/slow_movement.html

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Slowww TeeVee: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-25524704

Gandhi quotes: http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/m/mahatma_gandhi.html

Fox, Santa, and Jesus:
http://freethoughtblogs.com/pharyngula/2013/12/12/santa-is-a-white-man-just-like-jesus/

Twits Twittering: ht tp://thedailybanter.com/2013/12/i-just-had-one-of-the-weirdest-conversations-in-the-history-of-twitter/#.UqoFrp6NQAc.twitter

Edvard & The Scream: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edvard_Munch

Break out the good stuff: http://www.food.com/recipe/kentucky-bourbon-fudge-209042

"Aggie" Someone:
http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/american/agnostic?showCookiePolicy=true

A link on Pope Frank from my POSSLQ -- why we both love this Pope: http://theboeskool.com/2013/11/24/10-things-pope-francis-has-done-that-make-me-consider-being-catholic/