

Hi everyone,

The first quarter ended on the first day of Hanuka. Although I liked my students and we had a lovely ambiance in the lectures - I was glad that it was over. The final exam took place one week later and it was a disaster! Although I gave them already two midterms and thought I was aware of their disabilities and wrote an easy exam - they died there. An average grade of 50! I and my assistant (who was involved in the test writing and checking) couldn't understand that fiasco. I worked for 4 hours on "curving" the grades; that means - cheating and trying to make the grades look better, as though they fit a normal distribution curve (bell-shaped). I even wrote a computer program to help me with that. Anyway - the grades now revolve around C+. One funny thing about the test: when the students gave me the test (I was in charge of them during the test; there are no old ladies here) - some of them gave me a stamped postcard to write their final grade on it and send to them. Apparently, it's a common thing here. Something tells me that I ruined the holiday for most of them.

It's January 2nd, Sunday, and tomorrow ends the long long vacation. The campus looked depressingly empty since almost everyone was gone. I thought about my Christmas-escape too late. When I went to ask about tour-packages to Cancun, Hawaii or Tahiti, I got bursts of laughter from the agent ("Now you come?? We have 2 last available places for January 10th, sir"). That makes it my 30th year in a row that I haven't been in Tahiti!

I suffered a bad week here. My 4 friends here vanished to all parts of the world: Hong Kong, Brasil, Israel and (the fourth one) was disappeared in the neuro-biology labs of USC. For a whole week I was by myself and therefore I just had to work! I worked quite hard on preparing my course for the coming quarter and now I have a fully planed 1/2 course (including very long and hard homework which it took me quite a while to solve and write down the solutions). During that week I saw a wonderful movie that moved me deeply ("What's eating Gilbert Grape" - the movie is sometimes as strange as its name) and went alone to a stand-up comedy. At the beginning it looked like a mistake since the comedians laugh on the audience and they could say "Here's a jerk who couldn't find a date for tonight". But - I tried to look the most self-confident I could, ordered a large beer to emphasize that look, sat with my feet on the empty chair in front of me and chewed a toothpick in a way that said: "You wouldn't like to mess up with me, would you?". And that worked. Although I sat near the stage and most of the people around me were humiliated - I was saved. The show was extremely funny: The funniest guys where one who made impressions of dogs (stupid, but funny), a Jewish blond-gay who just recently broke up with his black boy-friend and "outed" himself on the Heraldo show (you can imagine that he had lots of funny material) and - after I thought that one cannot be funnier than that - came a little lady and for 25 minutes she had no mercy for us: We were all crawling on the floor and holding our stomachs with pain, while she just stood there, talking calmly to herself and never even mentioned the F-word. The comedians who came after her were pathetic: I couldn't see them dying so badly there on stage, so I left.

That long week of solitude ended on Thursday (23/Dec) after midnight, when 3 Israelis whom I don't know knocked on my door and asked for a place to sleep. OK - one of them I met just once in Israel last year and he brought the other two (a married couple). They work in the Silicon Valley, which is about 7 hours drive, North of LA. The next morning we drove to San Diego where we spent the 3 days of Christmas weekend. That's a beautiful city, and with the blue sky and warm weather - you can't ask for more. The city was full of US flags, perhaps to remind the visitor that he's still in the US and not in Mexico, since everything there is so Mexican (food, architecture, people, language, names of places, art in the museums etc).

Tomorrow I go on my third and longest visit to the Bay area (San Francisco's vicinity), where most people I know in the US work (Silicon Valley, Stanford and Berkely universities).

Have a happy new tax-year,
Tamir