

# On Wisconsin's Winter (Sometimes Called Spring) or Why I Decided Not to Move to California!

by Denis Collins

**I**n December 1989, I accepted a fantastic job offer to integrate business ethics throughout the University of Wisconsin–Madison's School of Business and to teach every MBA student in its prestigious program. It all sounded wonderful, except for the location. As a boy growing up in a working-class New Jersey town, Chicago was a place you saw on TV news every January when a blizzard hit, with temperatures below minus fifty degrees. Why would anyone want to live under those conditions?

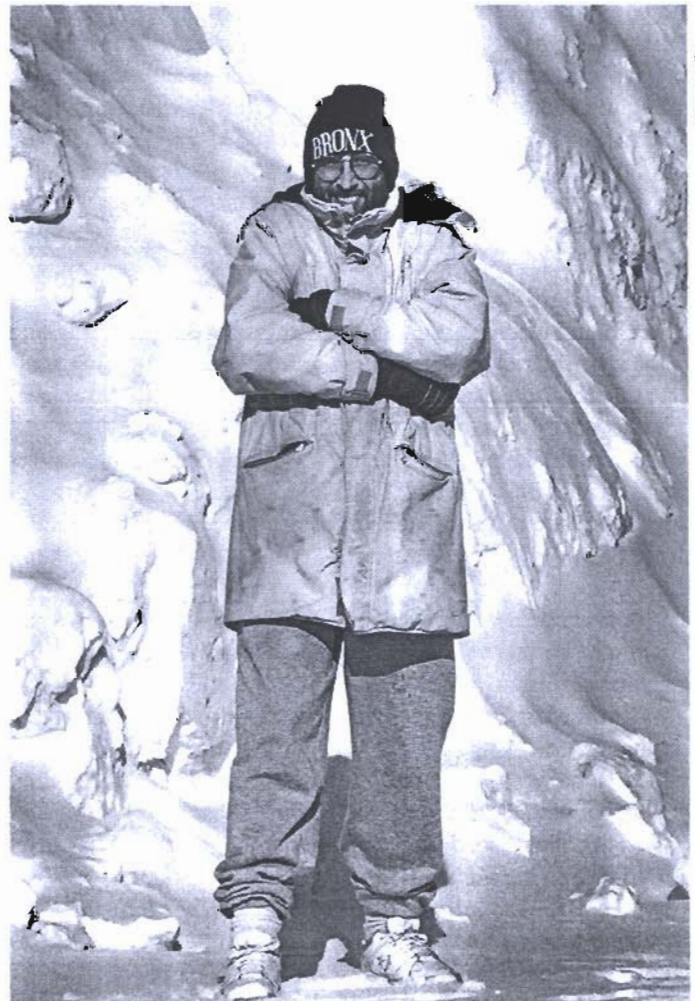
Madison, Wisconsin, meanwhile, was located northwest of Chicago! That north directional scared me. Why would I want to move to Canada?

During my adult life I've lived in Hawaii and California. They have constant sunshine and warmth. Sun is freedom. Fewer clothes, greater exposure to the surrounding environment. People who live in sunny climates seem to be very friendly, unlike many of the people I knew growing up in the New York City metropolitan area. Cold weather is like prison, as it limits freedom. You have to protect your body from the natural environment. Barriers are created. People are in too much of a hurry to stop and chat, because they are trying to escape the cold. There aren't as many people walking the streets during the winter months. On a cold day I just can't step outside, sit on my lawn, and enjoy what the world around me has to offer.

But I accepted the job anyway. There were too many great things about Madison and Wisconsin. The university, top-rated departments, a progressive political tradition, hills, lakes, and so much more. Indeed, as the newspapers and magazines were reporting, it seemed like one of the most livable cities in the country—particularly if you had kids and loved having fun. There were great parks, safe neighborhoods, intellectual bravado, sports, and entertainment. There was just this little downside: a long, bitter winter.

I was told that there was a fall semester and a spring semester at the university. As a business ethicist, I became slightly upset with this false advertising. That first semester it was quite cold by October, so three of the four months could be classified as winter. The spring semester was even more unsettling. Spring? How could I put the words "Spring Term" on my syllabus when students came to class wrapped up like Eskimos during January, February, and March?

I loved walking to school. We had never owned a house, so my wife, six-week-old son, and I settled for very small living quarters at the Lincoln School apartments. On a lake no less. When we lived in Pittsburgh, our apartment overlooked an alley



Denis Collins having fun in the snow.

Chris Anderson

garage where some guy collected and stored broken bottles. Our new rooms in Madison were small, but what a view of the lake! Stunning sunsets every evening, even during the winter! I would stand up and stare at the majesty of nature's colors. What a show!



My first true dose of winter happiness occurred during December 1990. One Monday morning I got dressed in my new down coat and Sorel boots and at 8:30 headed for school. To my surprise, there were about ten-to-twelve inches of snow on the ground. Hardly any cars were on the road, and it was very windy. What cars and buses there were, were stuck. I muttered to myself that I was going to tease Jack, the faculty member who was primarily responsible for recruiting me here. He told me, an ethicist, that winters in Wisconsin were nothing to worry about, because the city knew how to manage the problem well. But then why were those city buses stuck in a snowbank near James Madison Park, I wondered? When I finally made my way into the office, I thought, I'm going to call him a liar to his face!

I trudged up Bascom Hill, unlocked my office door, turned on the lights, and then the computer. As the computer warmed up, I took off my coat, boots, hat, gloves, and sweater. I found my Birkenstocks, put them on, and got ready for a good day of writing about making society more humane and teaching my business ethics course. I was making some tremendous progress on an article about improving society, thinking, typing, editing, and listening to classical music. All was well with my world, despite the snow.

At 10:00 the telephone rang. It was my first human contact since arriving in my office.

"Professor Collins, do we have class today?" a student asked. "You bet, see you at 1:00," I quickly responded and hung up.

A few minutes later the phone rang again. I began to think this might be one of those mornings when I let my answering machine screen my calls.

"Professor Collins, do we have class today?" a different student asked.

"I'm here, so of course. See you at . . . hey, wait a minute, you're the second person to ask me this. What's going on?"

"They announced on the radio that the university has been closed. We're having a blizzard."

"Really, they closed the school down?" I responded. Someone told me that this school had never been closed due to winter weather. "How can that be?"

"It's a blizzard, Professor Collins. We're setting some sort of record for the most amount of snow in a day or something."

"No kidding. Well, if school is closed I guess we don't have class today. See you on Wednesday." I walked over to Commerce and sure enough, there was a note on the door stating that the university was closed today.

I got back to my office and called my wife to tell her about the situation. We were relieved that the snowfall was out of the ordinary. It was a great day for writing. Hardly anyone was around. No disturbances. Just me, my computer, and classical music. I played with images of Dostoevski, Tolstoy, and Solzhenitsyn writing away during those harsh Russian winters. If they could do it, so could I. In my biography, this chapter would be called My Winter Years. Plus, unlike those Russian writers, I could have more fun because I was living in a democratic society.

At 5:00 p.m. I turned off the radio, computer, lights, and headed home. The sunset over James Madison Park was beautiful.



The next few winters I merely aimed to survive the cold. I stopped watching the weather channel every morning. I just had to accept the fact that it would be cold for many months. Did it really matter if the temperature was ten degrees above or below zero? We moved into a house on the near-west side, within walking distance of

my office, and for the first time we experienced winter as part of a neighborhood community, rather than as just isolated individuals. I bought a warmer coat and bigger boots so that I could comfortably walk to my office along the railroad tracks, away from the traffic. We went sledding a few times with the kids, and did some cross-country skiing with rented skis.

Since I assumed that I would obtain tenure here, and then move to Berkeley, Stanford, Santa Clara University, or San Francisco State University, it seemed the best winter strategy was to turn my office into a tropical climate. So, with some guilt on behalf of the taxpayers of Wisconsin, I turned my thermostat up to 75 degrees. It was great. My own paradise within Bascom and then Grainger Hall.

But winter still wasn't easy. I was setting world-record times running from my front door to my car door, and then from the car to whatever indoor activity we were heading for. Every weekend I took the kids downtown, and we ran from the parking garage to a series of wonderful, indoor activities: downtown toy store, the "Kids at the Crossroads" performances at the Civic Center, the public library, the Children's Museum, Rozino's for pizza, the donut shop across the street, and, the grand finale, the chocolate milk store (it's really a convenience store on the corner of Johnson and State streets, but the only product that really mattered to my kids was those small cartons of chocolate milk!). I was watching more football on television

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than I ever wanted to in my entire life. I tried again to watch basketball on television, but it didn't grasp my interest.



Finally, after five years of Wisconsin winters, a few major changes occurred. In July of 1995, I was told I had an advanced case of Hodgkin's disease. It was pretty bad. Turned out that all those stomach problems and leg cramps I had been ignoring or denying for the past two years, and which the doctors kept attributing to the chronic active hepatitis B virus first detected when my offer to donate blood was refused by the Red Cross over twenty years ago, was cancer.

I told my wife that the one thing I wanted after surviving the cancer battle was to move to California. Anyplace there, from San Francisco to San Diego, as long as it was tropical and had social problems for me to work on. I had lived in Hawaii for two years as a missionary, but Hawaii got to be too small. Very hesitantly, my wife said that this request was the one thing she couldn't promise me; she loved Wisconsin and our Madison neighborhood!

With the chemotherapy my body became even more sensitive to cold weather. So my wife bought me wool socks. They were wonderful. She also bought me my first pair of flannel-lined jeans. I got new insulated boots. For Christmas we bought each other cross-country skis, and we used them right away. We went ice skating at Vilas Park. Now the kids, ages two and five, are old enough to enjoy some very basic forms of sledding, ice skating, skiing, and even some make-believe hockey. One day when the snow melted early, I missed it. I wanted the air to be brisk and fresh. It felt nice to walk in cold weather. I am so happy to be alive, to see joggers and friendly people.

Then the day prior to my fortieth birthday, the doctors informed me that the chemotherapy was not eradicating as

much of the cancer as they had hoped for and anticipated. We increased the dosage. There are all sorts of drugs going through my body, and it actually feels good. I'm living on borrowed time. If it weren't for the skill of the doctors and the miracles of modern medicine I'd be dead by now. These doctors want to keep me alive. Bless them. If the new chemotherapy treatment doesn't work during the next few months, then beginning June 1 (they will) try even more toxic drugs, followed by a bone marrow transplant using bone marrow from my own body. I hope to be in a sound sleep when they do this. There goes my summer off from teaching, but beginning September 1, I hope to be back to normal, the cancer gone.

In the meantime, every day is a blessing—particularly the cold ones. They are so fresh and have such great potential for expressing love and kindness. I want to live in this winter weather forever. My already good Madison friendships have deepened, and some new friendships have miraculously evolved. The neighborhood has rallied in the best sense of the word *community*. In addition, it takes me less time to get to my office, as my walking pace is a little quicker and focused during the most frigid days. That means three more minutes of writing time, talking with people, and trying to solve community problems! So many more books and articles to write, students to teach, people to serve.

I think I'm having a good time. Some people think I'm manic.

On Wisconsin winters!

*This essay is dedicated to the employees in the oncology/hematology department at Meriter Hospital in Madison. In particular, I want to mention Thomas McFarland, M.D., Peter Beaty, M.D., the nursing staff on the sixth floor of the east tower, and the hospital support staff I also dedicate it, of course, to my loving wife.*