

Letters from The House Between

Formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*

Issue 3 **Summer Into Fall 2015**



Dear Friends,

You do not want to begin your day finding a note on the counter that reads “Emergency in garage. Freezer door left open. Everything melted. Blood dripping on floor. Love, Anita” She had to leave for an early appointment, otherwise I know she would have helped clean up. When I looked into the garage, I saw a river of water mixed with blood running across the floor and puddling under our car. I’d heard somewhere that thawed meat can be refrozen without a problem. In that moment I choose to believe that whether true or not. I don’t care if it is an urban legend. If you don’t want to eat grilled pork chops with us any time soon that’s fine. My daughter-in-law told me about a poster that declares: “Many have eaten here

but few have died.” I should probably get a copy of that for our kitchen.

I didn’t have time to wonder who the guilty party was (er, probably me) and shame them to death – I simply had to tackle the beast. It gave me a chance to pitch some very dated items, like Swiss chard from 2012 and a two year old container labeled “pork broth for soup.” I looked at the pig’s head that was cut in half and waiting for us to make scrapple. Keep? Throw? Oh, well, keep. You have to boil the bloody thing to death anyway to pick off the good parts. That should kill the bacteria. As fast as I could, I sopped up water, dried off packages of meat and jars of strawberry jam and put them back on the shelf as the freezer motor roared. It ran for three days and then finally settled down.

I’m not sure if the timing was significant but the freezer meltdown happened on the day we were being interviewed for a little promo for a church retreat in California this fall. I wanted to be in a good mood and on my best behavior, so the freezer thing was stretching me. We don’t often sit in front of a lens, Skype, smile and answer questions about our ministry so we can be jumbo-tronned in a church sanctuary. Like never. I’ve never done that



redeems this interview because we’d like people to come, not be frightened away.

One of the places in life where I *claim* we need to be faithful is right in the middle of our mundane, messy lives, but sometimes I’d like to be *anywhere* else or *anyone* else. How about Jane Goodall? Amelia Earhart? Understand that I never actually would want to be them because I’m afraid of chimpanzees’ teeth and I don’t like looking out the window when I fly.



Amelia Earhart

Life falls apart

In the same month that our lives changed quite massively (we have a new member in our family – our teenage granddaughter has come

before. Seeing myself on the ceiling in a ten by twelve foot frame is not on my bucket list, so I’m hoping God

to live with us) it appears that we are also in a vortex of appliance break-downs. We begin to take notice, and wonder is this a pattern? Is there a message in it for us?

Our car’s air conditioner is not working. It cools the air a bit if we are moving at freeway speed, but a lot of city driving leaves you baking like a lizard, yes, even in Minnesota. We replaced that unit only two years ago but when we took it in to be repaired, the warranty had expired the week before.

Our microwave has quit. It refused to work even when we held the door tightly shut and finessed the handle. Then when it decided to work *with the door open* – the danger of cooking my arm was too keen. We’ve stopped using it.

Recently our television began to get the flickers. You can Google all you want and do every single thing YouTube tells you to do until finally they, too, give up and admit – “It needs to be replaced.” We can watch as long as we don’t mind getting a migraine from the strobe effect.

All these conveniences, the car’s air conditioner, the microwave, the television, aren’t they inventions we take for granted in modern life? Well, I guess. My grandparents, hey, even my parents, had none of them but I’ve come to think of them as necessities.

This past Sunday our church's youth group reported on their trip to Mexico. About half of them cried recalling the poverty they witnessed: Families living in tiny homes of cardboard, walls held together by sharpened bottle caps, very little clothing, no medical service, no churches, no water. Even so, some tended little gardens of vegetables, neatly bordered by rocks. The rocks. They sat there, proof of the human desire to make beauty, however small, even in the most barren places. This is good for our American souls. We who mourn broken microwaves.

Shh-shh, I see you

Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips writes in his book *On Balance*: (I am cherry-picking a quote from him because, in general, I'm not into his perspective, but when he describes feeling overwhelmed, he says it well.)

It is not unusual for us to feel that life is too much for us. And it is not unusual to feel that we really should be up to it; that there may be too much to cope with — too many demands — but that we should have the wherewithal to deal with it. Faced with the stresses and strains of everyday life it is easy now for people to feel that they are failing; and what they are failing at, one way or another, is managing the ordinary excesses that we are all beset by:

too much frustration, too much bad feeling, too little love, too little success, and so on.

These feelings are often linked to the idea that unless we are doing something that *really* counts,



Slum garden

something really visible, like finding a cure for Ebola or digging a well in Chad, it is not worth so much. We are tired. We are easily crushed as we keep trying to do the large things. We are thwarted by our mistakes and the inevitable breakdown of things including our bodies.

To shake some sense into my easily mislead heart, I often return to what Zach Eswine writes about in *Sensing Jesus*, and what I heard him say in a lecture at L'Abri. God says to us, "Shhh- shhh. I see you. I see you. Follow me and you will learn to do small things slowly, over a long period of time." This is a hard sell to a culture where so much value is placed on the opposite – getting large things done quickly. Work, art, life,

relationships, learning to play the violin – all these things take a long time to learn to do well. There are moments when this assertion reaches the center of all that I am and I see wisdom. I smell it – I settle into the contentment of those small things.

Right now I am teaching my granddaughter to bake bread. She is a wonderful learner and her efforts fill our home with the scent of real purpose and quiet beauty. Peace.

Jesus, I forgot the bread

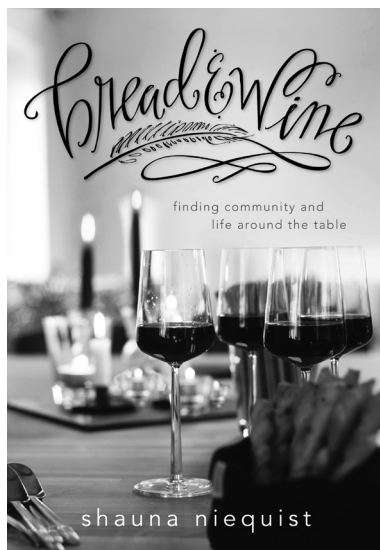
My memory is distressingly short, but that's the good of keeping a journal. It can remind you of what you easily forget. I'm afraid that 90 percent of my entries are prayers of complaint and worries about this or that problem in life. Will there be enough for us to make it to the end? Recently I recalled an incident from Jesus' life and I actually said, "Jesus, remember the time you were in the boat with the disciples and they said, 'Jesus, we forgot the bread?' You reprimanded them for forgetting what you can do with just a little bread and there be what? seven baskets of leftovers?" (Matt. 16:7) That's me. I'm often saying, Oh no, I forgot the bread! Now what are we going to do, beings how we have so little (time, energy, money, etc) and must see to EVERYthing in life all by ourselves!? Totally forgetting the faith we so *obviously*

ought to have because we've seen the miracle of Jesus leading us through day after day after ordinary day.

So in the midst of my non-sensational days there remains small surprises that remind me of God's presence in the pleasure of small things like supper with good friends. Unasked for. Unexpected. So for my own benefit, I looked back into the month of June and see what I

recorded. I had been reading *Bread and Wine* by Shauna Niequist when, as it happened, for two nights in a row we were invited to share an evening meal – one was spontaneous, unplanned, the other we waited for in anticipation for several weeks.

Niequist writes: *What happens around the table doesn't matter to a lot of people. But it matters more and more to me. Life at the table is life at its best to me, and the spiritual significance of what and how we eat, and with whom and where, is new and profound to me everyday. I believe God is here among us present and working. I believe all of life is shot through with God's presence, and that part of the gift of walking with him is seeing his finger prints in all sorts of unexpected ways.*



In the first – a friend called on a Monday afternoon and asked us to come for supper that very day. We

arrived at their home on a quiet street and were ushered through the house to the deck that over-looked a shady ravine. She had made a nourishing chicken soup loaded with vegetables. The table was set with china dishes and wine glasses. In the

center there were three cheeses on a board, a dish of freshly mashed avocado, ripened apricots and purple grapes in a green and gold bowl. The contrasts in color and texture were perfect. He brought out a basket of warm French bread. We drank wine and ended the meal with pressed coffee, a plate of chocolates and home-made raisin/fig bread. As the sun's rays sifted through the trees, glinting off our faces, we talked and ate, slowly savoring the evening until it was too chilly to stay outside.

The next night we had the pleasure of being with my niece

and her family. Before we even knocked on their door we smelled a wonderful aroma of spices in the neighborhood and we hoped it was coming from her kitchen. It was! Their three-year-old son greeted us at the door with a drum around his neck and marched us down the hall to the kitchen shouting, BOOM, BOOM, BOOM as he pounded on his drum. Stephanie, a small, lovely woman, was working in the chaos of her warm kitchen – toasting pine nuts for a shaved asparagus salad while holding her youngest on her hip. The popovers were just done and she asked me to pull them from the oven. Her husband was taking chairs to the backyard where the table was all set on a crocheted white cloth that made the table glow in the

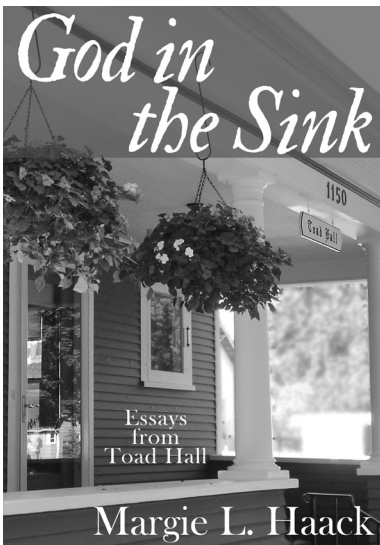


setting sun. Wine glasses were being filled as we brought out the colorful, spicy dishes – one, a platter of crusted salmon on a lentil-dhal dish. Marinated plums and nectarines in a black pepper

vinaigrette on a bed of arugula. Almost too beautiful to eat. Dessert was a creamy homemade gouda/raspberry ice cream with crispy little pecan cookies. All of it a feast! It felt like a European movie set. But this was real- with real people, real food and love with warm conversation and little children spilling drinks and finger-picking. Real life.

Both of these dinners – now that I think of them, were mini-celebrations, reminders to have faith that Jesus will come again to make all things new again. All things. I am thankful that wiping bloody water off the garage floor, holes in our budget and aches in our hearts makes small graces more meaningful when they come. I am thankful to be in a place, at a

time in life when the homeliness of eating together reminds me of Jesus eating with friends, sinners, disciples and of his provision for his people. Even when I have no idea where or when help will arrive, I should know better than to doubt his goodness or ability to guide our small lives and then leave us with baskets full of leftovers.



God in the Sink: Essays From Toad Hall

I've done very little PR (guilty!) but would love to see this in the hands of more readers. I continue to receive encouraging notes from those who have read it. One young woman wrote:

"Thank you for your books. They have buoyed me through a difficult chapter in my life... I am a pastor's wife and mother to [two children]and I've been caring for my mother who has been battling Alzheimer's for 12 years... Your books comforted me to much-needed sleep."

To order a book, contact me directly or order through my blog "Toads Drink Coffee." I will be happy to send a signed copy.

Ransom*Notes*

Just over a year ago we moved into House Between. We're grateful that it now feels very much like home. We are meant to be here. Books are sorted and shelved, pictures hung and some rooms have new paint. There is a small vegetable garden out front thanks to Anita. There are flowers in pots on the deck even though last night raccoon raiders seriously dug them up. Petunias and dirt everywhere!

As we reported this past year, we hoped the quietness of House Between would be a natural place for the slowing of life as we grow older. The location would enable us to concentrate more on writing. We wouldn't abandon speaking and hosting, but there would be a bit less. However, things almost never unfold as we expect. There are always interruptions and surprises, for blessing or for curse, to remind us that our control and foresight is always partial and fragmentary at best. That's when gratitude and trust are supposed to really shine. Hmmm?

The big change for us this summer is that our daughter Sember, has been diagnosed with POTS disease which severely limits her physical abilities. To help their family, our oldest granddaughter has come to live with us, permanently. This requires a reassigning of energy and time that is easy to do because we love her. But pray that we will all thrive in the changes that are upon us. Please ask that God will give us grace and wisdom to parent once again as we enter this new and unexpected story of life.



*Amish Paste Tomatoes ripening
just after a shower*

Summer is always a lean time when we must exercise that faith muscle. I wish it weren't so atrophied in my life, but this year is no different. More out-flow than in. We covet your prayers for Ransom as we continue to trust God for the needs of Ransom's ministry. And we pray for you, too, that in the interruptions and surprises that come your way you will shine with trust and gratitude.

Coming Up

September 24-28 Santa Rosa, CA. First Presbyterian Church. Denis & I are doing a weekend retreat. Pray that we can connect with and encourage them as they desire to better understand the culture around them and relate to people with confidence.

Family Notes

Perhaps your list would be different, but in Minnesota summer tends to mean sweet corn, fresh tomatoes, mowing the lawn and the state fair. It also means time with family. We've visited the ones in Chattanooga, the ones in northern Minnesota will be coming here and Anita will visit Seattle. We're excited to hear that our son and his wife have a new family member on the way – grandchild #9!

As I have already mentioned, the changes in our daughter's life have deeply affected her and her family. In May, Sember was diagnosed with Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS) and Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (also known as CFS). POTS has no cure and its seriousness is compared to that of having congestive heart failure. What she is able to do has been greatly reduced. With five children, this has created stress and sadness for her whole family. Their community support has been inspiring as they've come along side to help. (for eg, a friend has hired a young woman by the week to cook meals that can be frozen – she can do four meals in four hours for a very reasonable fee. A PayPal account has been set up and family and friends have contributed to it. We're so thankful!) Sember's attitude is: "I know that I will find quality in life, it will just have to be elsewhere and I know that I am on the biggest learning curve of my life right now."

Unexpectedly for us, this has meant we've become parents to a teenager. Sember's daughter, Manessah, has come to live with us. It was her choice, but we also wanted her, not only for necessity, but for love and joy in one another. It has meant big changes for us. Like Driver's Education and part-time job searching and the satisfaction of teaching someone to bake bread.



First place pie

When she entered life here, it was the middle of strawberry season and Anita taught her to make freezer jam. She had this grand idea that Manessah would enter her jam into the Scott County fair, that I would (reluctantly) make a strawberry-rhubarb pie, and she would enter a miniature flower arrangement. We did it. Amazingly, we smoked the competition and have made Manessah an authentic Minnesotan. She's a fair winner! I'm so proud of her!

Maybe you should plan to go to your state or county fair? "If you ever start feeling," Jeff Foxworthy says, "like you have the goofiest, craziest, most dysfunctional family in the world, all you have to do is go to a state fair. Because five minutes at the fair, you'll be going, 'you know, we're alright. We are dang near royalty.'"

We need to pray for one another—we for you and you for us—that this summer we'll be able, by God's grace, to provide sweet memories within the fabric of our families. Reminders that in this broken world love covers and even lends a touch of healing to the brokenness that infects us.

And Finally...

There is nothing like living with a teenager to remind you that you are ripening into old age. Some would choose another word for ripe. (If you're under 50 you might need to go away for a minute. Trust me.) We joke, our granddaughter and us, but her presence reminds me of some forgotten past when I listened to Jimi Hendrix without earplugs. Now slightly elevated lullabies wound my ears.

I think I could have written the following witty prayer by a 17th century nun. (Sorry, I forgot to record the source. Another age-related fail.) She prays:

Lord, Thou knowest better than I know myself that I am growing old.

Keep me from the fatal habit of thinking I must say something on every subject and on every occasion. Release me from craving to straighten out everybody's affairs. Make me thoughtful but not moody, helpful but not bossy. With my vast store of wisdom it seems a pity not to use it all, but Thou knowest, Lord, that I want a few friends at the end.

Keep my mind free from the recital of endless details; give me wings to get to the point.

Seal my lips on my aches and pains. They are increasing, and love of rehearsing them is becoming sweeter as the years go by. I dare not ask for grace enough to enjoy the tales of others' pains, but help me to endure them with patience.

I dare not ask for improved memory, but for a growing humility and a lessening cocksureness when my memory seems to clash with the memories of others. Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally I may be mistaken.

Keep me reasonably sweet. I do not want to be a saint – some of them are so hard to live with – but a sour old person is one of the crowning works of the devil.

Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places and talents in unexpected people. Give me the grace to tell them so. Amen

Counting on a few friends at the end.

From *House Between*...



Warmly,

Margie



About *Letters From the House Between*

If you drive through western Kentucky where two great southern rivers – the Cumberland and the Ohio – come together, you pass over the dams that bind them and a land emerges bordered on all sides by water, simply called The Land Between the Lakes. As we drove, we thought about the changes coming as we aged and needed to move from Toad Hall, our home of thirty-three years. We needed a place where certain features were on the main floor so as body parts fail one doesn't need to climb stairs to reach them. We thought of that place as "The House Between," a place bound on one side by years past where we raised children, continued our ministry and grew older, and on the other side, a place in heaven where God holds a perfect place of restoration yet to come. Our new home is a reminder that this is only a "place between" what is now and what will one day be true Home forever. Thus: The House Between.

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