

Letters from The House Between

Formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*

Issue 1 **Still Winter 2016**



A Little Way

In 1873 a twenty-three-year-old French woman died of tuberculosis. It was a common disease back then and many died from this incurable pulmonary wasting disease. Thérèse was a devout Christian with an uncommon hunger to serve God without reservation; she was only fourteen when she joined a religious order. It was years after her death when she was named St. Thérèse of Lisieu and became known for a little treatise she wrote called *The Story of a Soul*. In it she writes about coming to terms with both her smallness and God's love for her. That God should love her despite her insignificance and failures (like regularly falling asleep in chapel) was a mystery to her. She was never a big presence and

wherever she went it made her feel sad not to be able to do great things for God (and for others) so that she could be worthy of his love. One day she was especially touched by Proverbs 9:16 “He that is a little one, let him turn to me.” (from the Douay-Rheims translation) That verse changed her life and from then on she learned to accept herself as she was. Small. Unknown. Of little account. Broken and in need of God’s love and mercy. Eventually her life became known as “The Little Way of St. Thérèse” and it has spoken truth to many of us.

Most of us, well, me, anyway, spend time examining our interests whatever they are, turning them round and round on the lathe of our brains. When I scrutinize my life, I would like it to lead to self-knowledge and not self-absorption which stinks of conceit.

Lately, out of my soul’s worm holes an appalling attitude has wriggled to the surface and I should have confessed it long ago. Have you noticed it’s easy to admit to things we think are insignificant or common? Safe because, hey, haven’t we all cursed the old lady, of which I am now one, in line ahead of us who empties her purse and for twenty minutes counts out sixty-two pennies? I mean, C’mon! Sure our impatience is bad, but we think it’s not too big a deal.

My secret sin is this: I envy everyone’s writing. Yes. I am

jealous of pretty much everyone. You are no exception, unless I think I’m better than you. Pride. Envy. Jealousy. Arrogance. “Love does not *envy*” (I Corinthians 13:4). Blah, blah, blah. It’s easy to trivialize that familiar verse. But Jesus words are sharp and painful: “For from within, out of men’s hearts come evil thoughts,



I want what you got

sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, *envy*, slander, arrogance and folly.” (Mark 7: 21, 22) Did he miss ANYthing? There doesn’t seem to be a sliding scale of badness. Just ALL BAD and envy right in with all the rest. Yes. According to the dictionary, envy and jealousy are nearly the same. It is “a feeling of discontented or resentful longing aroused by someone else’s possessions, abilities, gifts, qualities or luck. Wanting a desirable attribute that belongs to someone else.” This is contemptible, but I’m determined to own it.

I am jealous of:

... my dear friend Steve Garber, also a member of Ransom’s Board of Directors. To say

nothing of the fine books he has written – he somehow manages to get on Facebook and post frequent, insightful reflections on the connection between knowing and doing – filled with compassion for people and played out in many places in the world accompanied by photos of great beauty. New York City skyline. Colorado mountains. Sunsets over the Pacific. How does he do it? I want to write with the same passion and be as prolific. I want the beautiful places and all the “likes.”

... of the acclaim my friend, Nancy Nordenson, has received for her good work in writing *Finding Livelihood* with Kalos Press. I envy that *Luci Shaw* has endorsed her book.

... for the absolute brilliance of Maria Popova’s “Brain Pickings” – of her incredible ability to pull from the work of others and distill it into beautiful, wise words. She feeds the human spirit by pointing to great writers, thinkers and philosophers. She’s only 30, for pity sake!

I envy Anne Lamott for her funny, creative memoirs – her phrases and sentences capture everything I wish I could have said myself.

I’m jealous of my soul-mate, Andi, who I’m sure, despite her busyness is writing another wonderful book on loving others in the everydayness of where we are called to be.

... of the tightly reasoned, compelling logic of N.T. Wright. However hard I try I could never write with his elegance.

... J.K. Rowling, who is a billionaire, (a billionaire!!) and has now begun *another* best-selling series.



Ridding my heart of this poison and being content with what God has given me to do means acknowledging that all these writers are doing what God has called *them* to do (not *me*). So between myself and God and because of Sister Thérèse's humble ways, I've been thinking of my life as "Margie's Little Way." You shouldn't be laughing. I don't mean in the least that others should follow me. It's more about accepting who I am without owning a long list of accomplishments of where I've been and what I've done. A loaf of bread fresh from the oven. Silent prayers for people I love. Preparing a room for a guest. Spreading seeds for the cardinals. Adjusting commas in a sentence. Watching *Futurama* with my granddaughter. These things are barely discernable on our culture's meter of What-is-Important. Traveling in this Little Way is a journey filled with ordinary acts and small kindnesses that any Old Joe with a stick could do. The difference between me and the rest of the Old Joes is that [this] not [that] is what God has called me to do, and when I do it, I am blessed and so are others.

In the end, you could rightly ask, why on earth do you need to make this public at all? Just repent and shut up about it. Well, I confess for

a couple reasons. First, it's a good spiritual discipline, we're urged to confess as in "confess your sins to one another." It's the will of God. Second, although sinful weaknesses can

threaten to break us apart, they can also become a conduit for a mystery of God. Strangely, he is pleased to work through our weaknesses. So beneath my layers of bluff and smoke-blowing, my repentance and confession becomes a path for God's strength to enter with forgiveness and love. So, as a "little one" I turn to him with confidence that he will sort me out. I remind you of this in case you, too, need to be sorted out.

A Shady Crevice

Christina Rossetti was another 19th century woman with a deep Christian faith. Overshadowed by her famous Pre-Raphaelite brothers, she remained single all her life, lived with chronic illness and cared for her aging parents until their death.

She also wrote some of the finest poetry of that century with topics that spanned across creation and human relationships. She seemed keenly aware of her sacrifice and calling in life and once in

a poignant letter to her brother wrote: "Beautiful, delightful, noble, memorable, as is the world you and yours frequent, I yet am well content in my shady crevice—which crevice enjoys the unique advantage of being to my certain knowledge the place assigned me." Most often her poems reflected her passion for and love of Christ.



The Little Way

She had no way of knowing that one of her poems would be set to music and become a beloved Christmas carol we sing to this day. She was another example of a person who walked a Little Way – one who knew that to be content required knowing that she was called to [this] and not [that].

In the bleak mid-winter

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.

Ransom Notes

A year ago this past January Denis and I spent a morning reviewing the previous months and being pretty amazed at all that happened.

WE LOOKED BACK AND GAVE THANKS

Toad Hall sold in three days for more than we asked.

Finding a church we love.

For this house. When God allowed us to move to this place it was like a honey badger finding a bee hive. Joy!

Ransom made it to the end of the financial year, turning the corner into 2015 and we were able to continue our work. It felt like a miracle.

restored to abhorrence.) The Great Aunt passed away. I dropped my phone in the toilet. Ed's cancer defeated his body (not him, though) and he left us. Our youngest daughter was diagnosed with POTS disease after being bed-ridden for five months. Being unable to parent 5 children full-time, our oldest granddaughter came to live with us. Adding her to our household has meant reestablishing a myriad of details that parents instantly forget once their teenagers leave home: Shopping at Hot Topics. Driver's education. School. Is she eating healthy? Who is she hanging with? Is she sleeping enough or too much? Last year we didn't Instagram pics from beautiful vacation spots because we didn't take one, although our back yard and garden is a cool place to visit. Denis hoped for reconciliation with his aging father, but things only grew worse. (Note: I just realized this letter could be the perfect model for an anti-Christmas-letter, just opposite of ones where the children go to Harvard on full scholarship, Dad wins the marathon and Mom gets a new Accolade.)

We know God promises to be with us through trying times and unexpected events as much as when everything is cool and bright. Though difficult, it's right to offer praise to God because we were exactly where he planned for us to be – in a bit of trouble and sorrow. In the midst, we found holy comfort in small ways, ways that reminded us of his love and provision. Encouragement and laughter often came through conversations and words from others. Invitations to share a meal came at just the right times. While harvesting vegetables from our little garden day after summer day, I could scarcely believe we got to enjoy such ripe goodness from God's creation. It was fun finding edible mushrooms in the woods. There was the joy of seeing *The Christmas Carol* at the Guthrie. Of weeping during "The Messiah" because the story of our redemption is so piercing and powerful and beautiful. And Bonus! Every week our granddaughter fills our house with the enticing aroma of bread baking. I have loved passing this skill on to her. She is a pleasure to have despite her own plate of challenges.

God, our only hope

We began 2015 full of happy plans, of course, not knowing what was in store. Fundamental to our lives as Christians is knowing we *must* trust God for a future we can't see or control. If he had allowed us to see what was coming ... I would have wanted to skip much of it. I'll spare you from *every* detail that sent us scurrying to prayer, but some of the printable things were:

On January 10th I broke my ankle and it required surgery with plates and screws. Recovery took awhile. I remember the first day I got out of the house again, and it felt so *gorgeous!* "Look!" I said with irrational awe, "there are the housing developments I normally despise!" (I was quickly



Vegetables from our garden

Continuing on

We continued to put out our publications – *Critique* and *Letters from The House Between*, although this year I'll be shortening *Letters* in order to give more brain space for other writing projects. We became more involved in our church, met our neighbors, had some speaking gigs, my book *God in the Sink* was published and Anita continues with Ransom as part-time assistant. She is looking into a master's degree in horticulture and has also bought her first home – a 100 year-old house in St. Paul with sturdy bones and the warmth of old oak and plenty of projects. Very exciting.



Anita's house

At the end of 2015 we realized, too, that once again, God had provided and there was enough money in the budget for Ransom Fellowship to move forward into 2016.

This year we need to redo Ransom Fellowship's website. It's a big project and a big expense, but we can't put it off any longer. The site has grown clunky and old and requires hiring a company to redesign it and hours and hours of time from us as we learn to work it and transfer data.

I've begun another memoir that will focus on Denis' and my years together from college into the next stage of our life which included "dropping out," discovering a theologian who wore knickers (Francis Schaeffer), becoming parents and other questionable activities. Meh. I'm enthused about this, but it will take several years to complete and I wonder... will I actually live long enough? Will I retain enough clarity to plant my memories? Just wondering. But for now, this is what God calls me to do – keep on writing. The same is true for Denis – writing.



A screen shot of my blog

My blog, *Toads Drink Coffee*, also needs to be up-dated and renamed. I'm hopelessly unskilled and terrified. If there are any blog-disasters within a hundred miles, I will find them and crash everything in sight. So, if there's anyone who'd like to volunteer to lend a hand? It needs to be local. I'd be so grateful.

Many of you have been with us for years faithfully, prayerfully

supporting our ministry, not caring that we aren't big and famous but that we've been standing in the margins offering cold water to people who want to live in and understand our culture and also share Christ's love at the same time. Thank you for being the hands and feet of Jesus to us. Others of you have found your way to us more recently. Thank you for joining and for sharing with us. We pray that God will in turn bless you because grace has found us all!

PRAY

Rochester L'Abri Conference
Feb. 12-13. We each give a workshop.

Redoing the website.

Keeping up with our publication schedule.

Finding good and true words for writing.

And Finally...

I wanted to include a short quote from each of the writers I mentioned earlier, writers I admire, but have, yes, sometimes envied for one reason or another. And there are so many more....

Steven Garber

"We know in our deepest places how hard it is to keep our eyes open to the complexity of the broken world around us, to keep feeling the pains of a world that is not the way it is supposed to be and, knowing the difficulty, choosing to engage it rather than being numbed by it."

N.T. Wright

"The whole point of the kingdom of God is Jesus has come to bear witness to the true truth, which is nonviolent. When God wants to take charge of the world, he doesn't send in the tanks. He sends in the poor and the meek."

Andi Ashworth

"In small and large ways, when we create beauty—in our environment, relationships, music, cooking, poetry, and celebrations—we push back the effects of the Fall and express our hope for the new heaven and the new earth that God promises."

Nancy Nordenson

"Your eyes may not see beyond where you are now, and that must sometimes be enough."

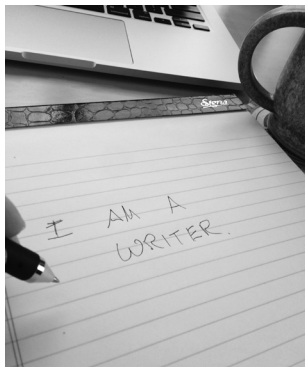
Maria Popova

"Boredom is not only an adaptive emotion but a vital one with its related faculties of contemplation, solitude, and stillness. It is essential for the life of the mind and the life of the spirit."

Anne Lamott

"Jesus would have even loved horrible, mealy-mouth self-obsessed you, as if you were the only person on earth. But he would hope that you would perhaps pull yourself together just the tiniest, tiniest bit – maybe have a little something to eat, and a nap."

My prayer is that you will choose to live despite the pain of knowing both yourself and the world. Although it is still winter, we know spring is coming.



Warmly,

Margie Haack

About *Letters From the House Between*

If you drive through western Kentucky where two great southern rivers – the Cumberland and the Tennessee – 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.

Letters from the House Between is not available by subscription. Rather, interested readers can request to be added to Ransom's mailing list, which is updated frequently. Donors to Ransom Fellowship, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-deductible ministry, are added automatically unless requesting otherwise. Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receives *Critique* magazine. To receive them send your mailing address to:

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