

# Letters from The House Between

Formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*

Issue 3 **Summer Into Fall 2016**



## Dear Friends,

If it were up to me I'd be blasting judgment from my throne. I would wipe out – the Zika virus, the ex-president of FIFA and the Japanese beetles attacking my garden. This summer we wonder how bad can it get? We are horrified by violence. Helpless in the face of corruption and crime, death and politics. Why does God allow it? With murderous thoughts for all the evil in this world, little of which touches my life I admit, I shake beetles from the vines and drown them in soapy water. On the frontline of this battle where dozens congregate in a frenzy of mating – I am losing. My grapevine is ravaged. My pole beans are dying. My dear William Baffin climbing rose is reduced to brown ragged leaves by little green worms and

beetles are eating what's left. They seem to prefer elevation because the low-growing Dragon Tongue beans have escaped their notice. The beans are wide and flat with rosy splotches on a creamy yellow background. They are pretty, tender, tasty, and this year they are prolific. I throw them into a cast iron skillet with garlic salt and a little butter, cover and saute them slowly until they are slightly caramelized. I try to be positive, but I'm mad. I hate Japanese beetles. Granted a righteous anger exists, but I doubt I've mastered it: "Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret – it only leads to evil." (Ps. 37:8) Aargh.

By now I planned to be a much better person than one who can't stand up to attack or is capsized by every trouble great or small. It's disappointing to find I still don't have *Hinds Feet on High Places*. Tsk. (I didn't like that book anyway.) What I seem to need over and over are reminders of who's in control here.

Lately, in a much needed remedy, I placed myself under the mentorship of the Psalms – to practice better listening to God and praying them back to him. Eugene Peterson exhorts us to do thus in his little book *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*.

The Psalms apparently weren't invented for my whimsical heart and pinched brain. What? But I thought they were! For years



*Japanese Beetle drowning pool*

I've cherry-picked verses that speak to my circumstances and leave others out. Peterson calls this Psalmectomy. Whether I am happy as a dog rolling in a manure pile (trust me, our childhood dogs loved it) or sad as a mother who has lost her baby, the Psalms have existed for thousands of years as a means by which God's people learn to respond to life by taking them, *all of them*, before God not according to our emotions or current circumstances, but methodically one by one, line by line.

This recent effort exhumed a comforting new idea from Peterson that expressed something so true I almost laughed. Oh, wait. I did.

Peterson writes: "There is a pseudo-prayer that promises its practitioners entrance into the subliminal harmonies of the way-things-are, putting them in tune with the general hum of the universe. This so-called prayer reduces tension, lowers stress, and

extends longevity. The people who get good at it are calm, their voices soothing, and their actions poised. They meditate beautiful thoughts and sleep well. They cultivate the way of peace ... Psalm-prayer also enters into the-way-things-are, but finds that the way-things-are is pretty bad." (p. 95)

Yes. Yes. I agree "the way-things-are is pretty bad." I've often felt guilty for not being able to get a grip on emotions and CALM the heck down. I've always strove (striven?) to find a zen-like place of calm and peace in the midst of bad news and everyday trouble. I have taken slow deep breaths twenty at a time. I've listened to an app that softly chimes and gently fades into ocean waves. Yeah. I've repeated memorized scripture. I pray. I've taken supplements designed to .... I mean, what have you done? Surely you've tried remedies? There must be a thousand cures for calming your thoughts and sleeping at night. I'm *not saying* you shouldn't try them or that these things don't work to some degree. But for me? Not so much. I turn a corner and boom I'm at the mercy of some problem and can't find the power to keep humming along. "The way-things-are is pretty bad." What a relief. Peterson gets this.

An overview of the Psalms reveals they are incredibly cyclical. Thousands of years ago the Psalms were divided into five separate books similar in cadence. They all belong in God's word because they are the means by which the church



has *always and ever* been expected to live in prayer before God. So rather than beating myself up because c'mon, Margie, don't you think that by now IF you were a serious Christian, you would be spiritually above it all? The Psalms cry out a resounding NO! The Psalm writers repeatedly move from anger and depression and questioning life and God to erupting in praise. Often the change in the text is so abrupt it is like an airbag detonated in your face. The amazing thing is how this pattern repeats itself over and over again.

Why is this so? Well, it takes more space than I have to set down a convincing argument, I suppose. But start with this? If David, the shepherd, guerilla fighter, court musician and king loved God so utterly that God said of him "I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart." Acts 13:22) – if David wrote round after round of Psalms-cycles throughout his whole life, shouldn't we accept that we might experience the same pattern? Because God knows we need to keep punching the repeat button? I think of the Lord's Supper instituted by Christ and repeated regularly: Why didn't Jesus tell us once was enough? Because we easily forget what was done for us and why. So the Psalms cry out with tears and doubts again and again but

they also lead us toward trusting and believing in God's love for us despite circumstances.

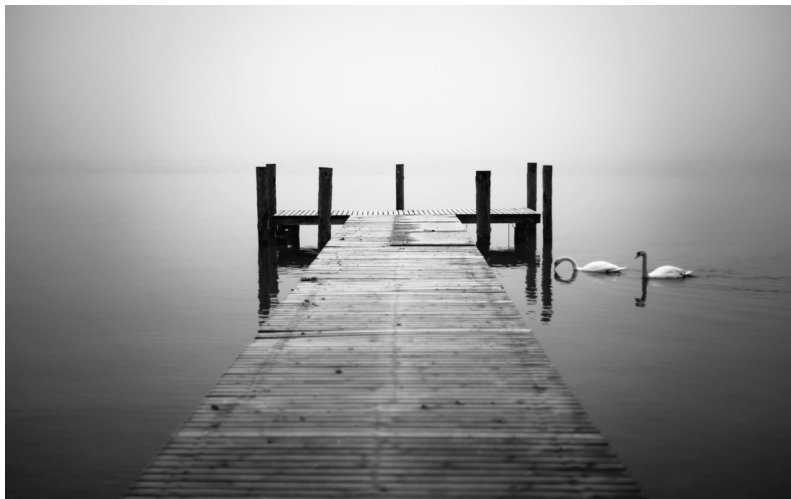
If we look at Psalm 10, for example, it begins with something we may feel to some degree every day – complaints because it looks like God doesn't care a whit about what's going on. "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (vs 1). We watch the world and can't understand why the wicked are allowed to *exist*. The Psalmist points this out to God: "His ways are always prosperous; he is haughty and your laws are far from him; he sneers at all his enemies. He says to himself, 'Nothing will shake me; I'll always be happy and never have trouble.' His mouth is full of curses and lies and threats; trouble and evil are under his tongue." (vs 5-7). There is more. But suddenly the writer switches from accusations and doubts and asserts: "But you O God, *do* see trouble and grief; you consider it and take it in hand. The victim commits himself to you; you are

the helper of the fatherless." (vs 14). And soon the Psalmist will say to God: "I trust in your unfailing love, my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord for he has been good to me." (13:5-6)

Another thing I've missed is that the Psalms were not written for my private devotions. Peterson asserts "Prayer begins in community." So as I pray, whether alone or not, I step into a great stream of people using the same words as those who have worshiped together for centuries, originally led by the Levites and the choirmasters praying and singing with the Israelites. Together with the body of Christ I can honestly complain and cry. I can be fully human and yet somehow be led to praise whether I feel like it or not and to the knowledge that I've been made righteous by God's tender mercies.

And finally there is this: "...be silent." (Ps. 4:4) "Nothing more need be said. No explanations, no boasts, no apologies. This is who you are. There is something more important

than liking or not liking yourself, more significant than the day's accomplishments and failures; there is *you*. In the silence, simply be the person that God is gathering into salvation." (p. 64) God is in control of all things including the renovation of your soul.



*Calm*

# Ransom *Notes*

## Taking a deep breath

In the next few days we will write what to us is a large check (around \$10,000) to redesign Ransom's website. The last design was done in 2002! If you've been on it lately you will see it is old, clunky, and frustrating. The email function doesn't work well and it's not mobile-friendly. Although this project is much needed – the cost comes at a time of year when we are tempted to turn off the electricity and eat cold oatmeal to spare RF's account. (just kidding, sort of.) If it interests you to contribute toward this expense we would be ecstatic. We can't dedicate a brick in the wall to you, but we will definitely note your wishes and shout out a huge thank-you.

I never thought I'd be excited about getting a new website. But the work of this design company is so bang-on I can't wait to see what they do. When completed we anticipate hours of work – we have so much data, so many files to migrate – just kill me now – however with improvements and a cool new look maybe, just maybe, we'll be able to do the migration and be *happy* while doing it.

## Recent quotes about Ransom's website

"I looked at your site for the first time the other day. I spent hours combing it. Had no idea your work was so broad and deep. What a great help to have the reviews and movie discussions!"

"I loved the interviews Margie did for the two of you. Explains so much about who you are."

"A friend directed me to your site because I have questions about Christianity and hate bullshit. Am glad to see you plan an overhaul. It was difficult to get around on it."



## Thank God with us

One of the constants in the life and ministry of Ransom has been the generosity of people who chose to pray and give toward our work. Some of you have contributed month after month, year after year. Some of you can't afford to give, but you pray for us. Your faithfulness is humbling and nearly overwhelming. Although we've often been down to the wire, sometimes waiting with quaking hearts, there has always been enough to meet Ransom's needs. This fills us with gratitude. We know we continue only according to God's will and there may come a year when we are obviously done. Until then: In this last half of 2016 we watch and pray hoping to continue serving the body of Christ on into the future partly through a new website because we believe the Lordship of Christ touches all parts of life even technology. Our particular calling is helping others see how popular culture gives us windows of insight into where this generation is headed and how we might speak the Gospel in a way that is winsome and understood.

### PRAY

In November we head east to Boston to do a weekend retreat for Christ the King Church – pray God might use us to love and bless those who attend.

# Family Notes

This summer has ushered in changes for us. Our granddaughter who lived with us this past year moved back to Tennessee. She completed her senior year in high school in March and found a job she loved. She was becoming a good driver. We were proud of her. But as days passed she began to miss her mother more; at the end of June she left for Chattanooga. Our prayers are with her – that she would find a way ahead and that God watch over her path. There was a tiny moment when I wondered if perhaps we had failed in some way. I banished the thought believing that sowing seeds of love is a messy arduous business and there aren't guarantees that the sower will see the harvest. In fact knowing shouldn't be our motivation. Obedience to God is.



*Cold press coffee at House Between.*

Now with Manessah gone we are living alone for the first time in eight years! We relish no-schedule evenings and morning coffees minus a commute to school and back. And the quiet between visitors. There hasn't been much chance to be lonely as family and friends from as far away as New Zealand and L.A. have popped in for overnights.



*The Couchin stares me down.*

Sadly, my young hens needed to go. As the Spice Girls grew, I moved them from their cardboard box to Honeysuckle's hutch in the basement. Unfortunately, building the outside coop slowed when costs for making it predator-proof mounted. Meantime, the chicks grew and like most young teens they began to fly the coop. Sneaking downstairs I'd find them perched on top of the fence murmuring and pooping down the outside. I began finding piles of excrement on the carpets. Each day there was more evidence they had been out partying. They watched me from their pen as I cleaned up, cocking their heads – like, Margie, where did that come from? Not us! Then an inflammation hit my heel and friends advised it took a year to get over plantar faciitis. That they needed to wear a boot to bed for months. That they needed surgery. Going down to the basement was hard enough without

chasing them around on a crutch. Finally, I sold them. All my grand ideas for controlling Japanese beetles in the garden and brown eggs by the end of summer, gone. So is my opinionated advice about how you should go ahead and do what you love. Don't wait until you are half dead and can't. Start now. Begin that hobby. Buy those chickens. Take that class on canoe-making. Remodel the bathroom by yourself. Become a mycologist. Raise bees. Etc. Etc. Etc. Not giving up yet. There may be another year.



# And Finally...

In reading Eugene Peterson's little book *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* there were many quotes that stood out to me. Perhaps the following was one that seemed both reflective of my own life and at the same time hopeful that what we experience is a human condition common to most of us. I think Peterson might correct me by saying not "most" but "all" of us.

"Prayer is the language of the people who are in trouble and know it, and who believe or hope that God can get them out. As prayer is practiced, it moves into other levels and develops other forms, but trouble – being in the wrong, being in danger, realizing that the foes are too many for us to handle – is the basic provocation for prayer. Isaac Bashevis Singer once said, 'I only pray when I am in trouble. But I am in trouble all the time, and so I pray all the time.'

The recipe for obeying St. Paul's 'Pray without ceasing' is not a strict ascetical regimen but a watchful recognition of the trouble we are in." (P. 36.)

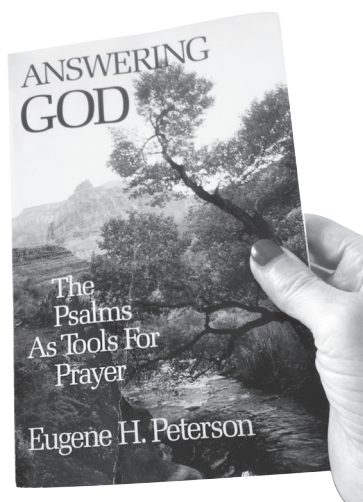
I used to think it *was* and, of course, failed continually with the effort. But this I think I can do.

So keep reading, keep praying and stop thinking you will one day be so spiritual you'll be above it all. You won't. We won't.



Warmly,

Margie



## 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.

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