

Notes from Toad Hall

Issue #1 ~ 2011
Still Winter



S kirting the fleece

“Come now, let us reason together, ...though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” (Is 1:18) When I was a kid I must have sung the chorus set to this verse about a million times. Just the prescription to make the words sound like a robot on Zoloft. Not that I’m more holy because they don’t. I love these words because they tell us some interesting things about God. In the first phrase, He invites us to consider a pretty uncomfortable topic. God says, let’s talk about your conduct, Margie, your life and matters. Take any standard of morality – even the low bar you set up yourself, and

let's say nothing about the Ten Commandments, and then tell me how you measure up. Can you have this conversation or are you afraid I can't take care of what you've done and love you at the same time? Give me your best shot.

God's desire to communicate on such a personal level is staggering. The invitation is radiant. It deconstructs my prickly defense and causes me to listen.

"White as snow," I understand. We have a lot of it right now, you probably do, too. All I need to do is look out the window. But to sharpen the analogy, in case we don't get snow, God mentions wool for us to consider. "...though your sins are red as crimson, they shall be like wool." Did you know crimson and scarlet are color-fast dyes? You can't change your mind once they get into a fiber. They are indelible. When wool is first sheared from a sheep it is not a brilliant shade of white or even cream, so I needed help to enrich this analogy.

If we lived in an agrarian culture and raised sheep we might understand it better. We might know what skirting a fleece means. I didn't until two years ago when Anita became our housemate, friend and Ransom's Resident

Assistant. (Some of the delight of having her around is that you never know what next – like right now in Mole's End, her living quarters, there are twenty-seven ugly, creepy worms gorging on mulberry leaf mash. These waxy creatures each have a small dark cord running down the center of their backs and it pulses. More creepy. They are silk worms about to spin cocoons that make one of the earth's most exquisite fibers.) So last spring when she hauled



Anita skirts fleece.

in several giant gunny sacks of sheep fleece purchased from some flock owner and began prepping them for spinning by dumping them onto a large tarp in the back yard, I wondered how she'd ever get wool mittens and sweaters out of that filth. The first thing she had to do was skirt them.

Raw fleece stinks and is dirty with bits of straw and dung stuck to it here and there. The color is often an unpleasant shade of

stained yellow. Skirting, the first step in cleaning, is to remove the organic matter and snip away the worst of the stains. I had no idea this work was part of what makes that sheepskin tossed on the seat of my rocking chair so attractive and comfortable on a cold day.

It was after Anita [youtube.com "Cleaning Wool Fleece"] skirted, then washed, rinsed and put the fleece out to dry in the sun that the transformation

became so apparent. It's beauty shone. It smelled natural and fresh and the color was almost pure white. So right out of the shepherd culture where Isaiah lived, God chose to link the forgiveness of our sins (all our wrong doing even as recent as mine last night when I said aloud to friends – "that woman looks like a ____." I had NO, no

business saying such a vile thing) to a process everyone understood. This transformation is part of what God means when He says your sins "shall be as wool."

Come Away with Me

Being married to one person for forty-three years is a part of my life's story. Wouldn't you think that after so long Denis and I wouldn't have much skirting to do? That we'd pretty much be white as wool?

Here is a little of how it works for us, and how sometimes it doesn't:

Last November. On vacation. The quietness and beauty of the North Shore invites heart repair, renewal and re-creation.

First day. I did nothing, unless absolutely necessary. Like going to the bathroom. Didn't make the bed or wash a single dish. Denis did that. We read. Stared out the window at the rocky shore and the sky. Went for a walk. Saw a big buck lying in the woods just outside the door. His antlers were framed by bracken and tall grass. A bald eagle flew past the window. I didn't cook. Supper menu: Half a smoked whitefish. Rice crackers. Carrot sticks. There was no hurry in anything we did.

Second through fourth day. Although we're on vacation we need to do marriage care. Busyness, distance, offensive tones of voice, thoughtless reactions have built up. Like skirting a fleece, Denis and

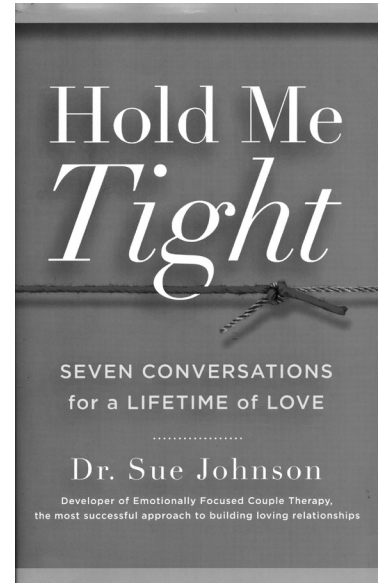
I must pick off the weeds stuck to our skin, the pieces of shit, the yellowed bits of marriage in need of washing. Sorry if you thought

otherwise. Reconnecting in love and attachment isn't like eating vanilla pudding – a twitch of the tongue and wow you've eaten a quart; sometimes it takes all we have to remain attached and in love. It's work we don't really want to do when we'd rather be getting on with the fun stuff of vacation. On the other hand, forty-three years have taught us that it must be part of life and we're grateful that being where we are makes it possible to sit down opposite one another with a glass of wine, pen and paper, the book we're reading, and talk. God is in the midst of us with his invitation and promise, though sometimes I forget that.

A therapist friend recommended a book: *Hold Me Tight* by Sue Johnson. (I like to think the title is the fault of the publisher's marketing department.) Johnson, a clinical psychologist, developed something called Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFCT). It has a simple message: Forget

about learning how to argue better, analyze your early childhood, make grand romantic gestures, or experiment with new sexual

positions. Instead, get to the emotional underpinnings of your relationship by recognizing that



you are emotionally attached to and dependent on your partner in much the same way a child is on a parent for nurturing, soothing, and protection. In this book she teaches EFCT through a series of conversations and practical exercises to help couples create more secure and lasting bonds.

I'm pleased that her ideas helped us find ways to express what was troubling us and move us more safely toward understanding and change. All of us hunger for safe emotional connections; we are hard bit with it like it's in our blood, our DNA; it's part of the inescapable image of God implanted within us. We long for it more even than food or sex. (Don't argue with me



Me doing nothing

about that.) In marriage, Johnson writes, “Distressed partners may use different words but they are always asking the same basic questions, Are you there for me? Do I matter to you? Will you come when I need you, when I call?”

These questions are almost exactly the ones Denis and I have used to describe this generation’s hunger for love and commitment in relationships. We’ve observed that the answer to these questions in so many instances is silence



Rocky shore on vacation

or abandonment by parents, lovers, friends, employers. In other words, no one will be there for you. I instantly recognize myself; it describes what I want from marriage. Denis does, too. We both want the answer to be: “Always.” As Denis and I read the book together, listened (that’s *hard* work) to one another, and examined what the author calls “Demon Dialogues,” we saw our own

ways of going round and round a raw spot, arguing about exactly who said or did what. We want the other person to acknowledge our point and agree, but it ends up looking like the only way out is to admit you’re the rotten spouse every single time. We end up me angry and hostile, him withdrawn and cold. I know what that’s called: fight or flight. We’re not proud of it.

We couldn’t have scripted the spontaneous exchange of one afternoon. Even as it happened, we knew it was a stupid-funny thing to quibble about. But it captured the essence of deeper struggles:

D: What time is it?

M: (I pick up my cell and look at the analog clock on the front.)

5:30. Er, no.

6:30? Hmmm.

(I look again because the hands are close.)

D: (Whips out his cell showing the time in digits.)

5:34. This is better.

(The instant he said that I knew a look of hostility crossed my face. He saw it. In that second we understood where this was going and we chose to keep talking, and laughing at the absurdity of it.)

M: You’ve made a value

judgment: your way is “better.” Therefore, my choice of analog is: *Not* “better.” Mine is *Less* better. It’s not the *right* way. I’m wrong, therefore, I’m stupid – in your mind. But I’M NOT STUPID.

D: No! That’s not what I meant. It has *nothing* to do with value judgment. There may be a ton of reasons why you’d have the other. In fact, one might be that it’s more aesthetically pleasing. So saying “This is better” wasn’t meant to be a personal dismissal or condemnation of what you’ve chosen.

M: But c’mon, when you say something is *better*, what do you mean by using that word? I have lots of trouble getting away from the feeling that I’ve just been, yeah, in a small way, but, still, I’ve been judged. Words *mean* something.

D: It’s not like that at all. In fact...

(I notice how he says “in fact” but talks about emotion. It’s kinda endearing.)

...it hurts me that you immediately assume the worst. It’s fine to have something different, I only meant that when you glance at it, digital is easier to read.

We recognize that Denis likes clarity and preciseness more than I do. Control is important, too, because maybe if one can be very careful about details why then one can stay the heck out of

personal catastrophes. He's hurt because he wants me to trust that he *doesn't* think I'm stupid. I'm hurt because he said "this is better". Being right proves I've made a good choice and that will make him love me more. Being a people-pleaser means if I can just figure out how to keep the laws around here, why then everybody's gonna be really happy and really love me. Oy vey.

Both of us gain insight that can help our relationship. I gotta calm down and not so quickly assume he's purposely being an, an, well, insensitive. He needs to use better word choice. But beneath it all we need to remember what we both want is to be the other's love above all others.

Annoying You

There are times in the midst of a conflict when I feel like running away, but even in this, God isn't surprised by our wanting to escape. On what must have been a bad day the Psalmist writes: "Oh that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest." (Ps. 55:6) Often, the morning after, I read signs of the Holy Spirit's presence. I'm definitely calmer. I know we'll never be perfect, but we're mending, and I see my spouse with refreshed eyes. The habits that annoyed yesterday are strangely tolerable again,

maybe even a little charming. Thankfully, my own sins are "as wool," they've been forgiven. I send Denis a quote from a comedian: "I love being married. It's so great to find that one special person you want to annoy for the rest of your life."



Fleece drying in the sun.

A friend muses how funny (odd) that sometimes seeing your spouse through another's eyes causes renewed appreciation. We watch them kindly pick up a child and offer a drink, or hear them patiently explain how to recover a lost file, or deliver an amazing lecture and we are touched that this person speaking is our friend and lover.

I know a book is not going to be the answer to every problem nor is Johnson's EFCT, though it has been helpful. Through the years Denis and I have reasoned together and with God in search of a place of beauty for our love

and commitment. We long to be bright and beautiful wool ready to be spun into all manner of artful coverings in service to one another and to Christ. Part of this service to one another, and to you, is truth telling. Years of

Christian practice, being in a ministry doesn't guarantee easy bliss. Rather, here in the midst of dust and wounds we meet Christ and find life and hope in his promise to make all things new again.

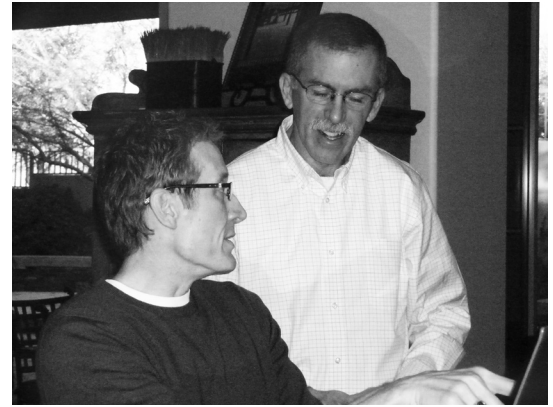
Ransom Notes

Annual Board of Directors Meeting

Our board is a group of able people who oversee our work and review it year after year. They establish our budget and help us set goals. Over the years our bonds have deepened as we share, not just the official business of a ministry, but the broader scope of life which includes our families and vocations.

Every three years as one or two terms expire and members review going or staying, we're happy and relieved that they stay, and stay. This year one of them remarked, we're with you to the end. That might sound weird since we're not officially dying yet, but thinking about limitations as Denis and I age, and our eventual retirement is all good.

We thank God for their patience and generosity to us: Henry and Peggy Tazelaar hosted us in Scottsdale this year. Ed Hague came from Florida to the hostility of December in Minnesota to set up and synch new technology at Toad Hall. (Saved us 100's of \$) Bonnie Leifer is invaluable help with layout and design. Donald Guthrie and Steve Garber – give their love and bonus (!) their brilliant minds. (Learn more about RF's Board members: <http://www.ransomfellowship.org/people.asp>)



Henry (left) and Ed at Board Meeting

Ransom's Resident Assistant

For 2 ½ years Anita Gorder has been a part of our life – wonderful! We are delighted that she feels so at home in Mole's End, the studio apartment attached to our house, and at Toad Hall where she does many things as our assistant. This year Ransom's board offered her a salaried position for help with the website, administration, and hospitality. In addition, she gardens and does some house projects in exchange for rent. All together this makes a full-time position. Everyday we thank God for her.

Website

Matthew Hundley, who's done a great job managing our website, has a new position demanding more of his time, so sadly, we've had to find a new one. Thankfully, the right person to take over lives here in Rochester, Ethan Calvert. Yea. And coming soon is a new sub-site for "Margie's Stuff."

Finances 2011

We thank God that through your gifts, we've been able to continue Ransom Fellowship. Our publications: *Critique & Notes From Toad Hall*, Anita's help, our day to day work and living expenses, wouldn't be possible without the generosity and love of so many. The financial challenge of 2011 will be Ransom's need to evenly spread out expenses. We've often been able to put off larger expenditures until the end of the year when giving gets an up-tick. Are there times when I'm anxious about this? Sure. But do pray for us to be faithful whatever the future holds – believing that our times and all things are in God's hands.

L'Abri Conference

Pray for those who attended the L'Abri Conference in February. Denis was especially honored to give a plenary on film as related to "When Things Fall Apart: Living with Hope and Dignity" and two workshops, one co-led with Anita, on the beauty of fiber arts.

Family Notes



Jerem & Micah's new home.

Thanksgiving was a happy trip to see Jerem and Micah and kids. For seven years they've lived in a tiny trailer home in northern Minnesota, saving and hoping to one day buy a home. When they made a low offer on the listed price of a home on ten acres, no one thought it'd be accepted. But here it is. So many firsts for them: garage, large kitchen, bedrooms, and best of all, (according to Anson, 8) dirt bike trails! Thanks be to God.



Anson "Thank you for Lucky Charms."



Paige and friend.

We kept vacation days for the quiet of November. Some spent at the North Shore and some in Chicago where we stayed with Marsena and visited The Great Aunt – she smiles, but she's angry because we made her take her cane.

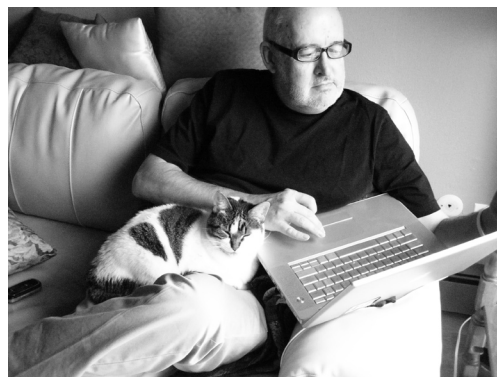


The Great Aunt.

Here at Toad Hall on Feb. 1 it's still snowing outside my kitchen window.



Snowy Winter



Denis and Marsena's cat.

Final Notes

I Will Find You

Honeysuckle, the angora rabbit who lives on our back porch, escaped into the back yard as I was leaving the house the other day. Hemmed in by snowbanks on either side, she disappeared down the walk toward the garage. I hurried after her, scooped her up and returned her to safety. It reminded me of the movie *Wit*, how the professor climbs onto the hospital bed with the dying Vivian Bearing, played by Emma Thompson. Bearing is a John Dunn scholar, but what she needs, is not a poem but a simple story of one who loves you so much they will not let you escape. In the most moving scene, the professor tenderly reads the children's book *The Runaway Bunny*. The mother rabbit says over and over, "...and I will find you."

I was a young married woman when once, I ran away in the night. Later, when I returned because the mosquitos were biting me and he wasn't finding me fast enough, I asked my husband, Do you love me? Before he could answer of course I do, I realized I had forced the response. No human can find and love us perfectly. Ultimately, only God, the consummate lover, is able to consistently catch us in the places we hide.

Still, through out the years there've been definite indications from the husband. Ones I can't ignore. Not long ago while out of town, I received this message:

My love, You need to come home. I am unable to maintain warmth in bed without you, and have had to bring the polar tech blanket from the guest room to make up for your absence. You are worth more to me than one polar tech blanket, but not less. Denis.



Honeysuckle escapes.



Warmly,

Margie Haack

About Notes from Toad Hall

Toad Hall is the name of our home, christened by our children. It is from the book *The Wind in the Willows*, a favorite of ours. In it Mole, a shy yet daring character, and Ratty, who is much nicer and more sensible than his name would imply, have many adventures along the river. One of their friends is Toad of Toad Hall. Toad is something of an aristocrat and lives in a mansion. Otherwise, he has very little to commend him and really doesn't deserve friends since he is a callous liar, lacks common sense and, well, he lives for the pleasure of the moment—which brings him no end of trouble.

When we moved to Minnesota in 1981, our children had rarely seen such tall homes with their imposing three stories. They were used to one-story adobes which ramblled along in the hot New Mexico sun. So, to our children, a midwestern Gothic four-square looked amazingly like a mansion. Possibly even as great a house as Toad Hall.

Notes from Toad Hall 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 to the mailing list 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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