

Notes from Toad Hall

Issue #2 ~ 2012
Spring



Fleeting

On a morning late in April I woke and couldn't remember where I was. There had been too many beds that month. When I heard the flock of English sparrows in the hedge outside our bedroom window – I recognized I was home. Normally, I'm bitter about them, but for that one day their tuneless quarreling was sweet.

“What lasts? What lingers? What is snagged by the brambles of time, and what slips through and disappears? What leaves only a little dent in the world, the soft sunken green grave, the scribble on a scrap of paper, the memory that is bleached by time and then vanishes bit by bit each day?” So asks Susan Orlean in *Rin Tin Tin: The Life and*

Legend. (p. 40) These questions sneak into our lives – suddenly, there they are, right at the surface when some unexpected event forces a halt to ordinary life.

It's been several weeks now since I spent six days in a hospital in Connecticut with a nasty pneumonia. Being immunosuppressed (from medications prescribed for rheumatoid arthritis) can make you susceptible to serious infections with abnormal presentation, – so for awhile I was a “case of interest.” You don't want to be interesting to medical people. I managed to scare Denis because, of course, I like inventing new ways of keeping him alert. The nights were long giving plenty of time for thought, what with constant interruptions and a roommate who groaned for hours in a most alarming way. I suppose I'm a little evil if I admit she made me think of P.G. Wodehouse, who described someone as “Aunt calling to aunt, like mastodons bellowing across the primeval swamp.” I'm not saying it's anything unusual – not getting rest in a hospital – and I know what a small slap it was compared to the beating many take. I don't mean to be super-pious either about using the time to think and pray – especially for the lady in the next bed, since I could hardly ignore her or her large Bronx family giving political commentary and more from morning



Denis and me.

'til night. To be honest, there were many hours when all I emitted were garbled hums aimed at the ceiling.

One of the first things I determined to do when I got out was to send our children copies of my usernames and passwords

for every website and account I use, including the bank and Paypal. I do not care if they hack me. If I die, they will thank me for this. (I haven't done it yet, kids, but I will.) I also decided to pick hymns for my funeral and ask the person I have in mind to take charge of comfort, if needed, and give thanks to God whose generous mercies accompanied me all my life. You can't be too diligent about such things.

Listening with Benefits

I also turned over a new leaf. Denis was glad to hear of this, and now I hope it wasn't a mistake to raise expectations. Generally, I resist his warnings when he questions my priorities or sees me tanking. Though he understands people *need* to take risks – how else would we even walk from here to the bathroom? – and that we are never completely safe, he likes to protect me, but I *like* risk. This time my resistance was cause for reflection. I'm not sure how guilty

I should feel for a hospital bill that is going to be thousands of dollars? That stresses me for a minute or two. But it might have happened even if I'd stayed home from our long, interesting, complicated trip to the East Coast, like he suggested. We can't know for sure. Before we left, I was struggling, trying to hide how bad I felt; I kept thinking, any second now I'll feel better. To clarify – I have fibromyalgia, rheumatoid arthritis, and other annoying auto-immune issues which makes some weeks worse, especially if symptoms flair for who-knows-why? I'm always quite sure if we wait one dang minute I'll be able to rebuild that rock wall for you.

This confession is not to gain sympathy, but to be more open about the challenges of chronic illness that affect daily life for many people. I have at least ten friends who face similar struggles but have a hard time talking about it. We often even bore ourselves trying to figure out symptoms, medications and causal links. Most of us are afraid to admit much because we don't know what others will think. That we are having histrionics? That we are babies, who if we quit whining and got off our butts would be just fine? On our trip, staying with friends, in the ER, in the care of a perceptive doctor, I was outed and chided for under-reporting. I honestly want to figure out how to communicate better and rid myself of a machismo attitude that keeps me a little too dishonest about how I feel.

My goal is to be a better listener, to Denis especially, and be wisely, but not insanely cautious. Being married for eons should confirm he



Poppy buds quickly swell and burst into flower.

knows me better than anyone. I want to responsibly take better care of myself. I want to be content where God has placed me. Marva Dawn advises in *Being Well When We're Ill*: "In our limitations, our achievable piece of fidelity might be simply to rest in grace, to refrain from fussing about not accomplishing anything, but to learn to wait." (p. 136)

My one quibble with Denis is his tendency to be a tiny bit too controlling and to miss out on some fun because he's risk averse. So we sigh and try to walk along respectful loving lines, learning from one another even as we live and age together.

Buts are good

Perhaps it's inevitable that the older we get, the more we think about when or how our days will end. None of us knows. When will we become "sunken green graves," our lives uncaught by the brambles of time? We echo the words of Virginia Woolf who wrote, "The beauty of the world which is so soon to perish has two edges, one of laughter, one of anguish, cutting the heart asunder." (*A Room of One's Own*, ch. 1, p. 17) In a similar vein, the words

of David used to fill me with such sadness: "As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more." (Psalm 103:15) In despair, Job repeats the same thought: "He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a fleeting shadow, he does not endure." (14:2)

However, this illustrates the problem of isolating a verse without looking at its context or the big picture. If I merely observe the next phrase, or even the next word "*but*," I gain an entirely different perspective. "*But*," means don't stop here; I have something more to add and it will change the game. It's true, our lives can be easily crushed, our passage through life can make us feel small and pointless compared to eternity, *but* that's exactly why God brings it up so many times in scripture.

David goes on: "*but* from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children..." (Psalm 103:16-17) It's as if God knows we can become depressed when the fragility of our lives hits. He takes time to reassure us again and again, through many Biblical writers, in the *strongest*

possible language, that we are loved and our lives are safeguarded in Christ in the most meaningful way, not just on the days when we're in trouble, but forever. We are *not* like flowers here today and forgotten tomorrow. God's Word to us is: "Your life is eternal and even though your body will die, it will be raised up healed and imperishable." God's words are not like mine – full of b.s. and forgetfulness. Not at all. He is telling us that when he declares something, it is diamond-hard, it will not change, be revoked, depend on the weather or getting distracted by Google.

Isaiah repeats it: "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever." (40:8)

Peter affirms it: "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, *but* the word of the Lord stands forever." (1 Peter 1:24, 25)

Jesus is explicit about what this Word is: "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, *but* raise

them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." (John 6: 39-40)

Like poppies, any bit of weather can blow us away, but we're



Opening with flair.



Brilliant for a day.

not lost in the wind. God calls us, he holds us, he loves us, he has plans for us that go way past this life, and he wants us to know we are not alone, we belong to a great community of people.

I review these truths because I easily forget them and greatly need to hold them fast.

Look at them!

I used to not like poppies because their blossoms only last a day or two then they're gone. In fact, when we first moved into Toad Hall, being young and ignorant, if they dared appear in a flowerbed, I tore them out, but I've changed. Last year Anita planted some poppies and only one survived, but it produced three blooms. This year there are seventeen and now I can't stop loving them, perhaps just because they are

so fleeting. They burst, blazing into color, but quickly, their petals fade and drop, then they die. The last few days I've watched them intently, going out several times a day to check their progress. I've learned to appreciate their sudden glory knowing they will be back again next year and perhaps in even greater numbers.

Back in March when I was beginning work on this issue, I thought of writing to you about how often the little things in life, the small joys and beauties are what sustain us through a day. I will save some of those examples for another time, but Henri Nouwen perfectly expresses what I'm trying to get at in an Advent Meditations pamphlet he wrote. Here's an excerpt from it:

Learn the discipline of being surprised not by suffering but by joy. As we grow old, there is suffering ahead of us, immense suffering, a suffering that will continue to tempt us to think that we have chosen the wrong road. But don't be surprised by pain. Be surprised by joy, be surprised by the little flower that shows its beauty in the midst of a barren desert, and be surprised by the immense healing power

that keeps bursting forth like springs of fresh water from the depth of our pain...

Poppies fall into that category of joy. These moments of clarity tune my heart to God's presence all around – often they appear like unclaimed jewels you get to keep just because you looked.

I found one in the midst of my hospital stay. The trees of Greenwich. After three days in the middle of a high-traffic ward, a nurse came to me at 1:48 a.m. and apologetically told me they were moving me up a floor. I asked her if I could please, please have a bed next to a window. She seemed happy to grant my wish. Several hours later, I watched the morning sky light the tops of oak and maple trees outside my window. From my bed, I could only see the canopy of a forest and not the parking lot surrounded by office buildings directly below. At first they were black silhouettes that gradually became individual gray trees lit with the softest tinge of salmon that soon bled to strands of fuchsia, to mango, to finally reveal a spring of newly-minted green leaves under a brilliant blue sky.

The fluffy white clouds looked as if a child had drawn and placed them. My heart soared with joy for the gift of trees, I thought, yes, if I can only look out this window, I will be well in no time. I recalled Manessah, our first granddaughter, who announced with solemn authority in her newly-minted two-year-old voice whenever she saw anything beautiful or remarkable: "God made that."



The trees of Greenwich

Hospitality Notes

When we share our home, our table, our lives, things happen that play into all dimensions. I am inspired by the connections between the ordinary and the sacred. As we welcome others into a safe place, things we can't necessarily see or touch, lap at the spiritual, connecting hearts and minds in ways that tell of God's love for us.

So welcome to a new page for Notes. I might include anything from gardening to recipes to why raising urban chickens will sweeten your life but not your pocket book. Sometimes it may be about welcoming your own tired self to a place where you rest in the sun with a glass of wine and a book. But mostly, I think it will be about hospitality because it's been so much a part of who we are and what God has called us to do. Denis and I have partnered for many years in this, and now Anita joins our small community and gifts us with her help and creativity. We've always believed that hospitality is not about fancy food presented just right – though I love that – it's about saying that as human beings we share a God-made need to care and be cared for in community.

As I write, later today, we expect a young couple coming to spend the afternoon and evening. We look forward to knowing them better. There are important events coming in their lives and we know, like all of us, they carry burdens and cares. I decided for this occasion our menu should be informal – nothing elaborate so everyone will be more relaxed. We'll be eating in the living room because I've sold our table and chairs and the new ones haven't arrived. People actually like eating in the living room. We should remember this.

We'll be eating a make-ahead, simple, colorful, (and can I add?) *nutritious* salad from *Cooking with Less* that I've tweaked. I used to hate this salad because I knew it as a horrible canned buffet item. But no surprise, the homemade version is great. I've served it enough to watch especially men, take a skeptical bite then go back for more because it won them.

You can add or subtract to the basic list of ingredients. If you buy better quality beans, not the cheapest store-brand, the salad will taste better. If you soak and cook them yourself it will be cheaper and even better tasting still. It's difficult to half this recipe, after all, once you've opened a can of beans, trust me, you'll let the other half rot in the refrigerator before you use it. The cool thing is this salad is better leftover and keeps really well.



Three Bean Salad (serves 10)

1 pkg. frozen green beans, steamed and drained
1 can yellow wax beans, drained
1 can red kidney beans, drained and rinsed
1 can garbanzo beans, drained and rinsed
1 can cannellini beans, drained and rinsed
In a large bowl, toss the beans with:
1 medium onion, finely chopped
1 red or green bell pepper, chopped
2 carrots cut in ridiculously small sticks.
Combine in equal parts and pour over vegetables:
1/3 to 1/2 cup olive oil, apple cider vinegar, and sugar
1 t. salt
1/4 t. pepper
Refrigerate for several hours to blend flavors.

Ransom Notes

In April when we left for a thirteen day work/family/bit of time off, I planned to finish *Notes* while on the trip, not knowing God had other plans that would long delay publishing. Looking back, our route to the East Coast resembled a random fly trail:

- * Flew to Pittsburgh. Visited Board member Bonnie Leifer. Met our layout editors for the first time – lovely women. Karen Perkins works with *Critique*, and Anne Melynk works with me on *Notes*.
- * Rented a car, drove to Lancaster. Attended our niece, Mary's lovely outdoor wedding reception.
- * Planned to drive to Boston the next day with another niece, Hannah, to see her jewelry-making studio and connect with Toddy Burton, who teaches film at Gordon College.
- * Drive to New Hampshire to visit The Great Aunt, who lives in divine happiness in her new care center where people say, "Please pass the buttah." (She's as happy as we've ever seen.)
- * Finally, we'd drive back down to CT to stay with friends, John & Leslie Eddy, and fly home.

However, we decided to drop me off in CT *first* where instead of getting better, I got worse. Denis went on to Boston. When he came back things had to be canceled or shifted. Fyi, there's no refund on plane tickets when you book with Expedia. We felt discouraged and anxious but very blessed by friends and family who prayed and took great care of us.

- * Since I couldn't fly, Anita (Yay!) volunteered to drive our car out, which was cheaper than renting, and gave Denis an extra driver for the trip home. We arrived blitzed but cheered to be back home.

Later in May, Denis had a kidney stone attack. Three weeks later, it's still lodged somewhere in there, enjoying the view. He's no longer in pain while it sits, but we expect some groaning any day now.

Denis is behind, but gamely finishing up the next issue of *Critique* and a chapter for a book on the influence of Jerram Barr's life and work – edited by Mark Ryan. Mark graciously extended deadlines, so we're still hoping he can get it done.

Looking Back

One incident stands out from Denis' March lectures on Bob Dylan at Memphis University. (Many of us relate to memory lockdowns occurring at the worst times.) At dinner the evening before, a Dylan fanatic who knew every song and lyric and every album ever made asked Denis what songs he was going to play during the lecture. Denis suddenly had a complete blackout. The guy suggested, "can't you remember one of the words, or hum part of it? You can't remember anything?!" No, he couldn't. Silence descended over the table and the principal froze with fear that he'd brought in the biggest dud ever. Denis spent most of the night praying, coming to terms with embarrassment and shame. The next day he delivered his talks, held discussions, schmoozed at the reception and as the principal drove him to the airport, he announced almost with glee, "I think that was the best Metcalf Symposium we've EVER had. It was a homerun!!" Whew. All mercy and grace!

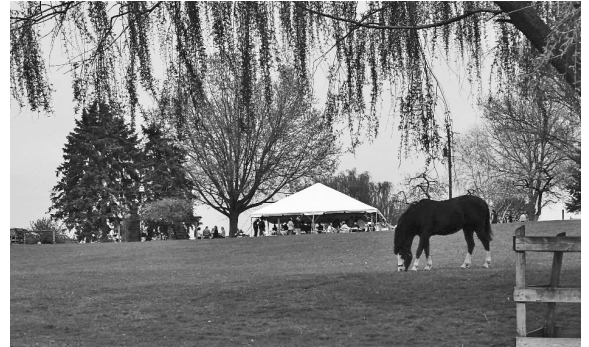
Prayer Requests

We value your continued prayers for us. We need them as we swing farther into summer. To be thankful for fresh words. To keep up with commitments. To be content where God places us. To trust him for strength when ours seems diminished. To laugh at the vagaries of life.

Family Notes

Ordinary Life: changes, grows, regenerates.

In April, in Lancaster, PA, we attended our niece, Mary and her husband Ernie's wedding reception and were delighted to see many from that side of the family. They have their own story of redemption and beauty in the midst of death and loss. It was the happiest thing to see them together and enjoy the outdoor setting on their friend's farm with Guernsey cows watching over the fence like they'd love to join us for gourmet chocolate cupcakes and a gallon of cucumber/mint water. A little herd of black goats bounced over children rolling down the grassy hill and in the distance an Amish farmer spread manure on his fields, but the wind was in the other direction so we could laugh.



Anita has completely remodeled the landscaping on the street-side of our house. People stop to look and smile. I love that gift of beauty she gives to passersby. This spring we ordered a dwarf Honey Crisp apple tree. Anita dug it into the ground and finally after three weeks of looking dead, a tiny green leaf is unfurling. Five years before it fruits.



I loved seeing the Pennsylvania countryside as we traveled through. Cherry orchards were manic with blooms, and mountainsides glowed red with budding maples and the airy whites of flowering wild fruit trees.



We have a new ginkgo tree I check every day. It was loaded with tender leaves when it arrived. All were killed during March's only night of frost. It is now planted on the boulevard with orders to fill the empty spot on the west side where afternoon sun burns into our house. It now has the tiniest lime-green buds poking from the trunk. In years to come we hope it will be that great shade tree of our imagination and provide shelter for the next generation of people who live here.



This month we're painting our living and dining room. First time in twenty-five years! We tried eight wildly different colors before settling on "Curio Gray" – a rich color that changes with the light.

Final Notes

Yarn Bombing

A reporter described yarn bombing as “a maternal gesture of wrapping something cold in a warm blanket.” Crocheted or knitted covers are sewn on to the concrete and steel of the urban streetscape and become an expression of non-destructive graffiti. It has spread throughout the world and has recently sprung to life at Toad Hall. The oddity of this act suits me. It’s an unusual way of conveying a small blessing.

Today, having heard of a friend’s very bad news, yarn bombing could seem unspeakably trivial. A trifling of time and energy. Though it is tempting, we must not think this way. When we are hit with, and everyone does at some point, a side-wind that threatens to knock us down, it is often some small, holy thing that helps us stay alive. Whether in good times or bad we can be blessed to see or listen because by them we are reminded to hope in a Creator who makes a thousand little things that startle us to wonder.

So with remnants of yarn gathered in baskets over the years, in spare time, in a small way, Anita and I have joined the ranks of international yarn-bombers in their practice of surprising passersby with colorful re-defined shapes and humor. (Anita made a warm neck scarf for a local celebrity, Charlie Mayo; sadly, it was torn down the next morning.) I made a wrapping for the stop-sign and parking post beside our house. We’ve seen strangers walk past, pause, as if, wait a minute! turn around look the post up and down and grin at the unlikely-ness of it. Dog-walkers stop at the sign, idly waiting for their pet and suddenly pull him back, startled. Then they smile.



Warmly,

Margie Haack



Dr. Charles Mayo Yarn Bomb



Parking Sign Yarn Bomb

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 rambled along in the hot New Mexico sun. So, to them, 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 automatically unless requesting otherwise. Everyone on Ransom’s mailing list also receives *Critique* magazine. To receive them send your mailing address to:

Ransom Fellowship

1150 West Center Street
Rochester, MN 55902

Or contact us

www.ransomfellowship.org

Follow Margie’s blog at

toadsdrinkcoffee.blogspot.com

Layout Editor: Anne Melnyk

Order Books from:



Distinctive Books and Music

234 East Main Street
Dallastown, PA 17313
(717) 246-3333

www.heartsandmindsbooks.com
read@heartsandmindsbooks.com

All books mentioned in Notes from Toad Hall may be ordered directly from Hearts and Minds. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to Ransom Fellowship.