

Letters from The House Between

Formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*

Issue 3 **Still Winter** 2015



Dear Friends,

It seems like I fall a lot. This is disturbing. If you spend that kind of unexpected contact with the ground, simply looking down can make you anxious. Maybe you fall down, too, but you don't mention it? In January of 2014, I wrote in my journal that I had fallen while taking the garbage to the trash. I tripped on a brick step out by the alley, tore my pants and bruised my knees. In May of 2014 on my way out of the bank I fell because I was in a hurry to do my good deed for the day and make everyone love me and think I am indispensable. For awhile I lay on the sidewalk contemplating this do-good philosophy that was not doing me or God any good.

In November of 2014, here in our new neighborhood when I was out walking one afternoon, I rounded the corner, walking in clogs. In the first place, why are you walking in clogs? Because you're too lazy to put on tennis shoes that require bending and tying? As a kid, I hated it when Dad would say "and let that be a lesson to you." My foot landed on a pebble, I twisted my ankle and went down face-first on the sidewalk. As I lay there assessing my injuries, no longer than ten seconds, I'm sure, a van pulled over and two ladies who didn't speak English very well jumped out and insisted I get in. They took me home. One of them held my arm as I limped to our front door. She rang our doorbell like she was delivering a package and when it opened I tried to quickly explain to Denis before he freaked out, why I was being returned by a stranger, but when I turned to thank this angel, she was gone.

I've often thought that one day in my 70s or 80s I would take a *serious* fall – not merely tear up my blue jeans and bloody a knee, but I'd probably break my hip and end up inconveniencing myself no end and causing everyone to hate me because they would need to take me to the bathroom or pay to have someone else do it. I have tried to crush those notions with scathing ego threats like if you don't stop googling "old women with osteopenia" I'm going to put you in a body cast and fill it with cracker crumbs. But I don't listen.



God rewrites the plan

In a saner part of my brain, I have been thinking about goals and plans (I don't love either word because, sorry, I prefer impulsive and spontaneous) for the next month, the next year, for life. Plans are like egg whites, they can slip through your fingers and onto the floor so easily and unexpectedly. And there's no getting them back in the bowl when that happens. So why not live and simply be surprised by what happens? I know. I know. I acquiesce to make them and join others who do. So we write our plans down, my Denis, who loves lists and plans, and I; we write them down. We pray about them. We offer them to God – and hope he will see that some of them come on home.

This year one of my generalized plans has been to grow more in knowing and loving God. That is fairly generic. Sounds pretty

pious, too, huh? I'd like to see some of my character warts whittled down. And maybe this is the way to learn. Say them out loud. I'd like to love others better. I'd like to take care of myself in a way that frees me to do what He wants me to do – which is now more about writing – not what I THINK others want me to do. I'd like to love inner beauty more as I let outer beauty go to the dogs. Before God, honest, I acknowledge that such desires are not especially safe and that he might answer in a way that involves suffering in one way or another. It seems to be one of his favorite ways for growing kinder, stronger, more loving people.



I thought a lot about this way of growing through suffering the past few months because last September, my brother, Randy, was in a chemical explosion at his work and 65% of his body was burned. He was in the Seattle Burn Unit for weeks. You can only imagine the pain of recovery he has faced. He said the accident has made him want to be a

kinder more generous man. And someone who prays more for others who suffer.

I also thought about one of the women in the documentary *The Lady in Number Six: Music Saved my Life* who explained, against all odds, why she could say *anything* positive *at all* about her suffering in a German concentration camp where she survived as part of the Nazi propaganda music program. She said, when you live in such conditions, eventually everything gets stripped away and it is then that you realize the most important things in life are found in relationships. In love for others.

That's what I thought about. How can I love more purely without manipulating people into becoming what I want them to be? How can I love anything without making myself the central reference point and the motivation for acts of generosity? Well, I can't really. I told a friend the other day that I like to live *pretending* that I don't think I'm the center of the universe.

Falling Down Score

So back to falling. This time I really killed it. Like the South American soccer commentator who yells GOOOOOOOAL!! I should have shouted FAAAAAALL! as I went down because I scored. A Facebook friend, upon finding hints of something catastrophic asked, "Margie, what did you do to

yourself THIS time?" And she is a psychiatrist who, and I'm telling you this, Kosmo, - you need to work on bedside manner. Another friend commented, "For Pete's Sake, Margie, what did you do?" I swear it's not as if I wasn't getting enough attention. This was not something I *planned* to do. But apparently I have a reputation.



I was coming down the stairs. One. At. A. Time. True, the lights weren't on, and we've only lived here for six months, so the neural brain paths that had been developed over 33 years in our old house that told me precisely "Eight steps. Landing. Turn. Five steps. First floor arrival" had not been burned into my cortex yet. So my brain did not remember there were two more steps to go and my body fell for it. That's how a person sprains one ankle and breaks the other and ends up with six pins, a plate and oxycodone for dessert.

It has caused us to be even more grateful for our new home – the House Between with a bedroom

on the main floor. A shower I can step into. Windows that look out on the bare bones of the ravine. We imagined that as we age there would be more need for such things, but I didn't think it would happen this soon!

Receiving so many good wishes and prayers for recovery and the wondrous soups Stephie has sent over, and the warm blankets and many trips to other parts of the house by Denis and Anita; have at least, given me time to think. To think about the fact that I am loved and haven't appreciated it as much as I should. To reckon that I don't need to be devastated because someone *has* to help me. Sure it is humbling, but it's not humiliating. And all my plans and goals that were snatched from me in one second's misstep? I do believe God is in this. I'm not saying he made me fall. But in falling, apparently the lesson is learning more about receiving love not giving it. And down here where I'm safe in a chair with feet elevated, it's been a comfort to have the strangest clarity for recalling Bible verses I memorized as a child; they flow across the screen of my heart when I can't sleep at night.

Two I especially enjoy are full of phrases that bear deep and repeated reflection on both love and suffering:

Hebrews 12:1-2: (I like the New King James Version)

...since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

It's comforting to think of all the people who've gone ahead, who cheer for us. They know I'm running even though it looks like I'm standing still. The plan isn't to beat anyone in the race, but to make it to the end. I also like that this tells us Jesus is "the author and finisher of our faith," so it is his initiative, not mine, that not only begins our faith, but also puts on the finishing touches. Some translations call Jesus the "architect" of our faith. I like that – he has designed a blueprint and is seeing that it gets built properly.

And then Romans 12:1 has always intrigued me:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

I'm certainly not a perfect specimen and yet God wants my body? The Old Testament sacrifices had to be flawless animals. He wants my body knowing its condition? I'm inspired. Sometimes I feel like such a perfect lump that I'm

grouchy about it and even avoid clothes shopping. At other times, like now, I am deeply touched that God should want all of me with my falling-down ways and yet somehow my body is exactly suited to "true and proper worship." Why? I don't know. It's hard to believe.

God is a big Mystery

I've thought of all these things in a big mish-mash of ideas and swirling images of the world we live in – of the people we know and don't know who suffer all sorts of tragedies. Catastrophes worse than you or I have



experienced or imagined that make us groan. It doesn't seem right that some of the most evil powers who create human suffering escape punishment. Recently, I was reading Jeremiah and thinking about his prophecies. Through him God made it clear that the evils of this world do

not escape his notice – it's only a matter of time and those who practice greed, oppression and abuse will be ... well, look at this:

I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and strong arm, in anger and in fury and in great wrath. (Jeremiah 21:5 ESV)

It is pretty terrifying that his response is so sweeping. Anger. Fury. Great wrath. At the same time God has a plan to completely restore his people with justice and mercy and love. How he is going to make all that work together, I have no idea. (Another reason why Denis says you're not God. Duh.) But I'd say some people should probably start planning an exit party now. Only once I saw someone so furious he started breaking things and it was so frightening I wanted out of there fast. So if it isn't a mere man breaking chairs, but *God* who is coming after you with fury, well...

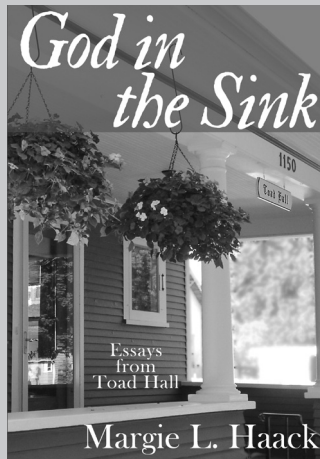
I am utterly grateful to be seen and known by Jesus. To be assured that he who carries all our griefs and sorrows is the same one who cares for us like a shepherd.

Although it is fun zipping around on a knee scooter, (as long as I don't take corners too fast,) this is not what I planned for the next 8 weeks, or ever, thank you. Immobile most of the day, employing a personal mule to bring coffee, computer, a phone charger, and a sweater and, oh, that book – I forget where I left it and can't remember the title, but



please find it. No, I don't think so. On the second week into healing, I am learning another thing about the good of a broken ankle. It has caused me to slow down in places where I wasn't even aware of being speeded up. That may sound too obvious since even moving from the chair to the couch requires the pace of a snail. But I mean inside. I've slept more than I knew I could. It has been peaceful on some days to simply be. To read without hurry. To pick up my crochet without guilt. I can't achieve my goals and plans for this quarter of the year. Perhaps never. To be perfectly honest there are days when I feel quite discouraged. But perhaps through these days God, with his own plans and purposes, is making me a kinder, more compassionate less egotistical person. I pray so.

Mother's Day Special Offer



I know! If you're like me you don't plan ahead all that much. But here's your chance to take a new path. People who've read "God in the Sink" have said it's honest, raw and joyful. Many have passed it on to their mothers who find it speaks to the surprising ways God works in life. It's not a "girly" book so men like it, too. I'd love to share it as an encouragement to love what God does in ordinary lives. I'm offering signed copies:

"God in the Sink: Essays from Toad Hall"

at \$10.00 plus shipping

"God in the Sink" together with "The Exact Place: A Memoir"

at \$20.00 plus shipping

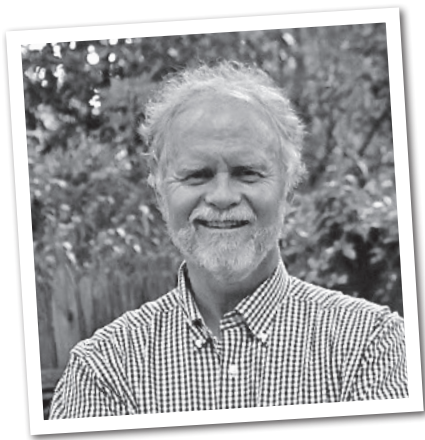
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Coming Up

- February 13-14** **Rochester, MN** L'Abri Conference. Denis will teach a plenary (on film, of course!) and a workshop. If my recovery allows I will have a workshop, too.
- February 22** **Savage, MN** House Between, Book release party for *God in the Sink: Essays from Toad Hall*. Everyone welcome.
- March 4-8** **St. Louis, MO** Covenant Seminary, Denis teaches a course on small group formation and dynamics.
- March 6-10** **Missoula, MT** I am excited to accompany my mother to visit my brother, Randy.
- March 19-25** **Scottsdale, AZ** I will be visiting my good friend Peggy Tazelaar and meeting with some book groups there.
- June 8-12** **Chattanooga, TN** PCA General Assembly, Ransom will host a booth and schmooze with old and new friends.

Ransom*Notes*

Occasionally I introduce our Board of Directors to our readers because each one brings a unique energy and perspective to Ransom Fellowship. As a non-profit ministry we need people to oversee our work, people we respect but who keep us accountable and honest. For example, as a safeguard we are careful about how donations are handled; when they arrive at our address, we don't open them unless our bookkeeper is present. Our Board also helps us remain orthodox and true in doctrine and practice. With five Directors and one honorary (Ed Hague, as he fights his terrible battle with cancer but still wields power) who serve as advisors, budget setters and decision makers, we are deeply blessed by these friends who have walked with us, loved us and, at times for our own profit, held our feet to the fire. Now how good is that?



Steve Garber, who we've known practically since we were in diapers, is our longest standing Board member. From the beginning we shared the same vision of learning to understand the times we live in – and how to winsomely and truthfully speak the gospel into a world that is broken and alienated. Steve is a scholar and a genuine lover of people. The books he has written on calling and vocation and his skill in sharing that vision have taken him many places on the globe, and still, he makes it back to our annual meetings and for that we are glad.



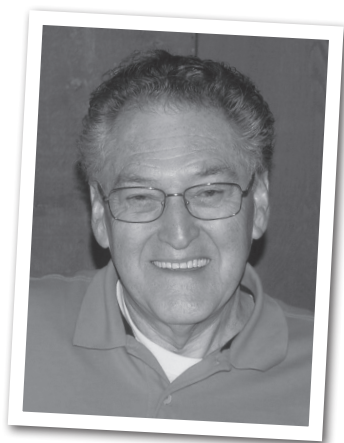
Donald Guthrie has also been on our Board of Directors for many years. Currently, he is Professor of Educational Ministries at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Chicago. His love for international students, their particular cultural challenges, his masterful dialogical teaching (which I've always admired) make his gifts beneficial in leading Ransom as our president. Although he can be charmingly impudent, the fact that he constantly hums under his breath and is addicted to college basketball makes him, well, someone I see as wonderfully human.



Bonnie Liefer is a talented graphic artist and Vice President of Marketing and Communications for the CCO in Pittsburgh. While she is probably the most right-brained person on our board and able to give an artistic eye to such things as our website and publications, she is also very skilled at giving honest and practical feedback for a bunch of dreamers when it comes to real life decision-making. She's acquired wisdom that comes from loving God and from personal suffering that adds weight and authenticity to what she says. We listen up when she talks.



Henry Tazelaar lives in Scottsdale, AZ and is chair of Mayo's Pathology Department, but we know him best as a friend we've walked with for many years as we have shared both the joys and the afflictions of our lives. At our board meetings he often uses his gifts in management, trying valiantly to keep us on task – like herding cats. We value his keen eye for details, his flagrant generosity and his love for the arts which have been such an important way for us to understand and connect with our culture. We hope to walk with him for many more years.



Paul Woodard is the most recent addition to our board, but has the honor of being our oldest member. He recently retired from years of "formal" ministry, the last one being chaplain at a large St. Louis retirement center. We've known and been friends with Paul since our Intervarsity days in New Mexico. He is the kind of guy who says retirement to the golf course is not my calling – rather, he asks how may I use my gifts to further the Kingdom of God at this stage of life? We are so delighted one of those ways was to join our Board. We need his guidance as we look at what it means to be fruitful even as you age. He is like ballast to us. Safety. Wisdom.



Anita Gorder is not a Board member but she has served wonderfully as Ransom's full-time assistant for the past two years. Her willing help and creative energy has allowed Denis and I to spend more time on writing projects. This has been a great bonus to us as frankly, we have less energy than we did when we were younger. This year she has returned to half-time and will be exploring opportunities for expanding her art works. She continues to share our home and our walk-out basement has become home for Honeysuckle and a beautiful studio space, complete with a bohemian guest bedroom.

Give praise to God with us

We approached the end of the 2014 with deep concern and some heaviness because we weren't certain we could continue with finances as they were. However, Ransom ended 2014 well financially because of the generosity of God's people making up the budget deficit and providing enough that we can continue on into a new year by God's grace. We are back to the basics that are the essence of Christian faithfulness: gratitude and trust. Whatever our circumstances we want thankfulness to fill our hearts everyday. And that this be true for you, too.

And Finally...

“...I would like people to know that I tried to praise the mutilated world and that I found a little piece of unpaved earth and paid attention.”

—Linford Detweiler, *Over the Rhine*

Although we live in a deeply wounded world that has waited for healing so long we are tempted to lose sight of the promise that one day Jesus *will* renew all things, there remains much to be grateful for.

At House Between we try to pay attention. We’ve been watching the coyotes play in the snow in the ravine below our house. They crouch and leap one another like frogs. They toss snow on their noses and then sit in the shelter of the old trees sniffing the air and scratching their bellies.



Run-off from our yard flows straight down the ravine into a tiny unnamed creek into the Credit River (a brook, really) to the Minnesota River to the Mississippi just a few miles downstream. We’re thinking about alternatives to the Standard American Lawns of our suburb fueled by TruGreen chemicals that poison the waters. Organic fertilizer? Goats? More gardens?

At this time of year it is the gardener’s folly to pay *too much* attention to seed catalogs. But we dream of heirloom, vine-ripened

tomatoes and climbing cucumbers and hot peppers. In the frozen days of winter it’s easy to forget the thorns and thistles of life, the Japanese beetles that ate the leaves off our tender little Honey Crisp – the poor apple tree that nearly died two winters ago from hungry bunnies eating its bark. Last summer it almost passed away from the shock of getting dug up and moved from Rochester to Savage. In spite of these assassination attempts, it bravely put out a few new leaves at House Between.

We are grateful for this small plot of land. We’re paying attention. We’re feeding the birds and thinking about spring. It’s time to start seedlings and push out a few new leaves.



Warmly,

Margie Haack

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.

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:

Ransom Fellowship

5245 132nd Court
Savage, MN 55378

Or contact us

www.ransomfellowship.org

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