

Notes from Toad Hall

Issue #2 ~ 2011
Spring



Needy for Spring

We have friends who live in Hawaii and I wonder what they do to welcome spring since they're always draped in leis and eating ten pound avocados from their tree. They must have other ways of marking time and seasons, but, as if she senses my bitterness, my dear friend is sending furikake (what *is* that?) to spread on grilled fish because, here, we are still cleaning out the miseries of winter. The least of which is that the door to the balcony, a useless exit from my office, came unlatched (was *left* unlatched?), and the wind whipped it against the house breaking a pane. I amend "useless." It *does* have a use: cooling down. My hot flashes aren't related

to what makes everyone nod and smile at a woman my age as if they know. They don't. My thermostat is broke: fever above 72 degrees, hypothermic below 67, and the margins are narrowing. Stop looking at me.

Sometimes if we're quiet long enough, the guts of life calm down. Almost every day, because this stage of life allows it, I'm in my favorite morning spot reading Scripture and praying, not that I witness many miracles for being so holy. The ritual does help, though, because I'm forgetful, a little crazy, and need God reminding me over and over: you can do this, you can face an ordinary day where you wake up to a bathtub drain that was fine yesterday, but plugged solid today. Sometimes we're simply meant to behold what is and do nothing. Wait. Not that someone else shouldn't locate the Drano. But, I do believe in God who graciously dwells with us in all these spaces.

For just a minute we'd like stories that have nothing to do with war or earthquakes. Not that we don't care. We do, greatly. I'm even ashamed that who ate my Trader Joe's Chocolate Almond Bar trumped the war in Libya. I know who, actually – our trusty

assistant, who never shows damage from a diet of pure cocoa butter. Otherwise I love her. She is a marvel of energy and skill – she just built a very nifty compost bin for recycling Honeysuckle's SLS (scientific term learned from author John McPhee in *The Founding Fish* – referring to the decomposition of rockweed, meaning Shit-like Substance) which then transmogrifies into enchanting soil for the flower beds. This could be used for more than rabbit litter.

So, if you were looking for the earnest dialogue and political analysis I'm famous for, you'll need to go elsewhere today. Sorry.



Anita's compost bin

The apple cure

Some days I have, well, interesting pain. Probably a combination of things, but it means moving slow. Thinking is more difficult than normal; I avoid it as much as possible, anyway. Writing requires clarity, creativity, and sitting upright, so that's my excuse for

why this issue may seem pretty random. When I came downstairs this morning, looking disheveled and hung-over, Anita was already at work. It seems wise to let others know why you can't lift your eyes to look at them so they don't wonder if you have a festering grudge against them. I mentioned it and she offered to make anything I wanted for breakfast. When someone responds kindly I'm mush.

In a while it came to me how nice to have an apple puff pancake. Perhaps you'd like it, too.

Apple Puff Pancake in Cast Iron

(Serves 2-3)

Heat oven to 450 degrees.

Melt 3 T. butter in cast iron skillet (I use a 9 inch Dutch oven). Make sure the sides are oiled, too.

3 apples, peeled, sliced

¼ c. brown sugar

½ t. cinnamon

Stir together and cook on medium to low heat for 10-12 minutes or until the apples begin to soften and caramelize.

2 eggs

¾ c. milk

½ t. salt

1 T. sugar

¾ c. flour

Whisk eggs and milk. Add flour, sugar and salt and whisk just until smooth. Pour over apples and bake for 15-20 minutes or until top is puffy and edges are browned. If it doesn't puff, it's still yummy. Drizzle with a little maple syrup.

Boyfriend, woolblock & etc

We captured a wild bunny. Honeysuckle's Boyfriend. He'd become so accustomed to us he'd

sit by the hedge or the garage and not flash out of the yard. Just watch us, frozen, ears alert in case he had to flee. From the back door I saw him cross the flower bed beside the steps and methodically bite off tiny sprouts invisible to me. I don't

blame him. This time of year we all crave green. I'm impatiently waiting for Joe and Becca's spinach and other greeny, B-vitamins things.

The winter before he ate the bark off half our hedge and a lot of it died. Last week Anita culled it and now there is a huge pile of brush behind the garage. We are out sprinkling cayenne pepper on the crocus, not wanting to share this bright evidence of spring, even though in the last twenty-four hours it has thundered, hailed, rained and snowed four inches of white cement. Most of our crocus buds have been clipped off at the base again this year, and I hope the cayenne sets *someone's* mouth on fire long enough for him to think twice.

We call him Boyfriend, but we don't know. Could be a girl. He comes to the edge of the porch and looks at Honeysuckle and she



Honeysuckle damage

brought him onto the porch and Honeysuckle hopped over to sniff him in the cage. "Say, good-bye," he said. Then he drove to the edge of town at dusk and released him. God's little creature. He came out, paused to get bearings, then arced across the field to the woods. He'll be okay.

Honeysuckle went on a rampage and gnawed the living daylights out of our porch and the old Persian wool rug I rashly left at the back door. I cut the damaged part off and now it's in her hutch giving it a French boudoir look. Is it possible this activity contributed to woolblock

stares back like a poster girl. We think of him fondly, but decided we better live trap him and relocate if there's going to be a hedge or flowers. The trap was baited with carrots and grapes, and the next day we found him in the trap calmly eating. Denis

– a condition that can kill a rabbit? She was also behaving oddly, digging at the floor and carrying grass in her mouth like she had the urge to nest with babies or was protesting Boyfriend's exile. The breeder suggested a cat hairball remedy and the next day she was popping pellets like normal. If it was a need to mother, she has an appointment with a buck, and next month there might be a pack of sickeningly precious white nibblers on the porch. Denis and I admit Honeysuckle is most of the amusement we need for spring, whereas her real owner, Anita, has to worry about her future and follow her with broom and dust pan.

The brush pile was a chance to call Brady from Junk-it, again. I mentioned him last summer as one of the many we appreciate for their honest labor. He had come on the day he'd been fired by a nasty employer. He was depressed and trying to make it on his own. I mostly just said uh-huh. When he came to haul away this year's



Honeysuckle waits

accumulation (WHERE does this stuff come from?! our lot is only 50x150), he showed up pulling a new trailer, along with his fiancé and his mom, who helped him load up. It was so endearing. He remembered me and said it had taken six months to get another day job. Now, in addition to hauling junk during off-hours, he has a position with benefits and loves it. His mom added with obvious pride and happiness, "They're AWESOME people to work for."

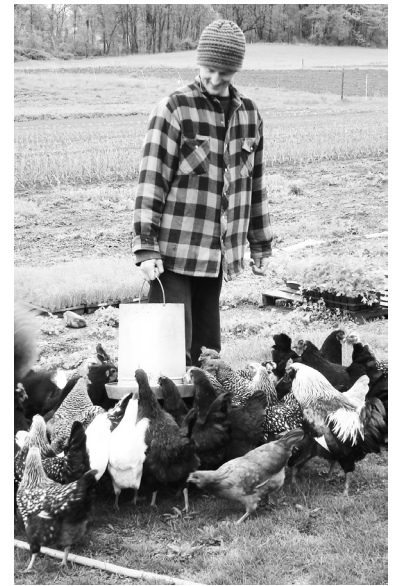
In March my husband complained that I frown on eating donuts. Well. He knows he is guilty for even thinking about what he himself describes as the minimum amount of flour required to hold sugar and fat together. He craves them and has been quite foxy about getting them so now I can't trust him to be alone. When we traveled to Chicago at the end of March and stopped at a gas emporium, I was coming out of the restroom, wending my way past aisles of manufactured cheese bits when I bumped into DENIS, who was stuffing a raised glazed into his mouth. He saw me coming and knew he had three seconds to swallow the thing whole before I caught him. That's when he choked and I had to help him to the car. It's true I have a shelf full of Pearson's Salted Nut Rolls, but that's different. Nuts = protein. Plus it's Eating

Local – they're made in St. Paul, MN. Also, in the case of chocolate, you should know, it has antioxidants, lowers blood pressure and benefits the heart. I learned this on About.com.

Rising from spills

Last week we brought our first supper of the season out to *Heartbeet Farm*, Joe and Becca's vegetable farm. We had homemade hummus with fresh baked pita chips, Greek chicken and potatoes, and a large salad of baby greens gathered from their greenhouse dressed with lemon vinaigrette. We ate the last of our frozen strawberries and rhubarb in a pie. It's a gift that goes both ways. They get a meal. We get stories of what spring has brought them.

Daniel and Hannah now own the land next to them so the enterprise is growing and diversifying. Their interns begin arriving mid-May, so next time we do this there will be ten of us at the table,



Joe & chickens

not counting Silas who's already a year old.

Besides a new workhorse, the farm has a new puppy, Pippin, whose ridiculously short legs don't stop him from being boss dog over the way larger Franky and Tato. Mookie, the steer is affectionate as ever, but a little alarming when you stop scratching his throat and he tosses his stubby horns around. The Three Stooges, young Holsteins, watched us stepping around fresh piles as they chewed their cuds. Gertie has given birth to a gorgeous calf, Buster, who looks all Jersey. Freida, the little Guernsey, is cross because she didn't get one, too, and has tried to adopt Buster.

Daniel and Hannah purchased Peggy from the same Amish farmer who sold Karla and Kayla to Joe. Her horse power will



Greenhouse



Freida

help distribute the heavy work. The other two do not welcome this newcomer and last week cornered her in the pasture so they could kick her up. Hannah and Daniel heard the ruckus and as they ran to break up the fight, they saw that the chimney above the greenhouse was on fire with burning creosote flying through the air and landing on the plastic covering (the greenhouse is heated by a woodstove). It took a while to get things sorted out. The cows and steer had protectively surrounded their one calf just in case the terror spread. Peggy now stays to herself and there are a few holes in the roof that will need to be patched. Later Becca discovered Silas eating chunks of creosote as he played on the ground while she planted tomato seeds. A day later she was still brushing it out of his little teeth.

Daniel spilled two gallons of maple syrup on the ground as he was transferring from the large pot to a smaller one. Each gallon of syrup represents forty to fifty gallons of sap. Hannah was watching. Nothing she could do as Daniel sat on the ground for awhile with his head in his hands. It is deeply

moving how people rise from all kinds of spills.

It's easy to romanticize the peace and beauty of this little farm even though I know the stories and how hard they work for their calling. When we leave at ten, when



Sisters Becca and Hannah

the stars glisten bright and the silence is only broken now and then by an animal sound, I have longings that are difficult to articulate. Although I'm content to return

to our urban life where we serve others in very different ways, we all carry a collective memory of a place where no one ever spills a drop of syrup or accidentally deletes the golden paragraph that took all morning to write. The beauty of this place has its origins in a living God.

Especially in spring it's nice to have pure, raw air along with delirious songbirds perched in blossoms of outrageous color. You hardly ever get all you want, but this morning when I woke at 2:53 a.m. and heard a robin outside our window, I got half. As I looked at the clock, I thought if it weren't for Daylight Savings Time he would have risen to sing by 1:53 a.m. It

was no dream because each time I surfaced for the next four hours he was still at it.

I thought of what I read later that morning. "Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!'" (Rev. 5:13) It was the word "singing" that got me. It was the idea of everyone singing, including wild rabbits. I like that.

Ransom Notes

When we scan the calendar year, it always looks manageable. Like life is under control, but by the time we turn over a new month it has filled. Always a surprise. You'd think we'd catch on? It seems typical of life everywhere. The good thing is it keeps us off-balance enough to pray for wisdom to say "yes, this" and "no, not that." Still, no guarantee for getting it right.

When we review where the weeks have gone we see, no Pulitzer Prizes, no crowns of glory, just clusters of writing time, overnight visits from family, friends passing through, dinners here and there, studies led, emails answered, pre-marital sessions with several couples, the front door answered, and a crocheted hat or two. I have a new layout editor and *Critique* has a cool new design (we're hugely pleased with Anne Melnyk for *Notes From Toad Hall* and Karen Perkins for *Critique*). These are all places where we try to acknowledge God's design, not our own, for what the day brings.

We've been brainstorming with Ethan, our web person, to build a new subsite for Ransom.org, one that makes it easier to get to what Margie contributes to Ransom's ministry. Hard to contain – that. I jest. After all, I'm not rebuilding Japan. But I do ask for prayer. I'd like to get the design right (make it attractive, not cute). Don't like cute, except in rabbits. This is strangely stressful, not energizing. I also need to stop avoiding the organizing, editing and recording of old pieces, so they can be posted. That would be good. Am thankful Anita helps with some of this. Denis continues slogging away at his book, making good progress.

This can be a testy time of year for Ransom's finances. More so than normal because of unusual expenses coming in the first quarter. There are so many "what-ifs." I can think of a ton of pitiful scenes – some of which involve Denis and I shivering in a platform tent, drinking pond water, and speaking to one another in shaky old-people voices. Please don't remind me some would be grateful for a tent. So, as ever, it is a relief to turn from poorly imagined scripts of abandonment to God's promises to be with us always. Surely your love and prayers help sustain us in ways we don't even recognize. Thank you for being a part of "God with us."

Coming up

April 25, vacation week. Cos Cob, CT.

May 7, Kosmicke/Powell wedding. Denis participates. Rochester.

May 20 – 30, Chattanooga and places between. Visiting several churches. Seeing family. Yes!

June 25, Meador/Lovette wedding. Denis gives homily. Lincoln, NE.



Family Notes

A year ago we helped our daughter, Marsena, move from her home into a small, dark apartment. As if the day reflected our hearts, there was a cold, cold rain falling and the wind blew away anything not tied down. I know she told herself to be thankful, that her church was supporting her, that she'd found a job, that everything had been done to pursue her husband's heart but he refused to turn back, and that friends stood with her. But still, don't you keep asking yourself questions for years when things like this happen? There's no quick fix for such times. Sometimes none at all.

We were back in March to help her with another move. This one better: more her own choice.

From my journal:

Saturday. Everything went well yesterday. All got moved. Her best friend, Candace, scrubbed and shined every single surface in the bathroom – exquisite generosity. Every part requests the pleasure of your company. Today she got her damage deposit back from the old apartment, yea! we got kitchen unpacked, living room, boxes hauled out. Denis has been vacuuming, running to the hardware store and doing minor repairs, even hanging art. It's time to knock off and think about where we're going to eat. Marsena sighed and said; "I feel lifted. Like I've taken a step out of darkness." I can tell, and that makes me happy, too!



Marsena's guest room

Sunday. The sun is shining this morning and warm light is spilling from Marsena's bedroom. It's pouring through her doorway as I try to quietly make a pot of coffee in the kitchen. Nearly everything is in place, only her bedroom/office area remain. This place feels airy and spacious, with the warmth of bookshelves, rugs, comfortable couches in an "L" facing a large window. Her style pulls you in with peaceful colors and interesting details that make you wonder. The hope of home. Makes you want to sit down for awhile and read or play with the cat.

I know many who've experienced their own ruptures in life. Some worse than others. Some never to be resolved in this life. I guess that's why I tell a little of ours. None of us are immune. Sometimes all we can do is repeat a daily prayer we've been using from the book *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*:

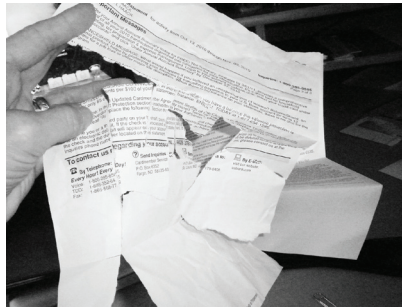
May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you: wherever he may send you;
may he guide you through the wilderness: protect you through the storm;
may he bring you home rejoicing: at the wonders he has shown you;
may he bring you home rejoicing: once again into our doors.

Final Notes

When I was too lazy to walk downstairs to the shredder and tore a paper to bits, scrunched it up and threw it away, the next minute, I was, WAIT! that was my credit card statement that I haven't paid or even looked at. I sorted through the trash under my desk, retrieved the bits and was taping them back together when Denis walked in. He seems to sense when I do not want him witnessing the shoals I'm navigating or the boat load of chocolate I snuck out of hiding. But there he is, eyebrows waggling, brown eyes glowing. Only in retrospect: can you not read, for heaven's sake? Just call the 800 number to get your balance. I was neither drunk nor stoned, not that you'd assume it. No, it's just habitual: the obvious way is not for me, I prefer panic-stricken narrow paths.

So if you locked yourself out of your house and car – with the motor running and your 18 month old strapped in the car seat, well, you're young and harassed and I really understand. I'm a few years older but haven't forgotten what it's like to throw a brick through the back window to get in the house.

Dude! We'll need to keep on forgiving one another, including those annoying folks who put up a massive billboard on Hwy 63 proclaiming JESUS LOVES YOU. As if six foot letters in red will convince us. No. We need incarnation, touch, resurrection. Really.



Warmly yours,



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 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.