

Notes from Toad Hall

Issue #2 ~ 2014
Spring



Spring, please come

We live in a climate where the seasons are sharp. There is no mistaking them. Winter freezes everything including our senses; but they waken again with the shifting south wind, in slight rises in temps, in clouds changing from steel gray to white muslin. When it is still well below freezing, we sniff the air and say, "I smell spring!" Chickadees add whistles to their dee-dee-deeing. Did you know that in spring woodpeckers tap mating calls on hollow trees? They do. We heard them drumming today. Calling little feathered lovers. Our eaves drip; and long swords of ice hang from the roof. Trickles have turned into brooks running down alleys and sidewalks. Beneath

the street a river rushes through the storm sewer on its way to the Mississippi. Winter has driven frost deep into the ground, so deep that city water lines are freezing. (By regulation they are buried between six and seven feet.) As I began this issue, last night another ten inches of new snow fell.

More than normal, this year I want spring. I want hope to waken me hard and strong. Please come. Please bring sunshine and an easy green path to walk on. Not that I've earned it. I know that. Despite our failures we are invited to bring all prayers to God, even the begging kind. There is one proviso: do it with thanksgiving. (Phil. 4:6) I need a house.



March snowfall

Meantime

Denis and I sat down for a little chat. His reasoning skills are sharper than mine, but my emotional quotient is so above average. As long as we stay on the same side we make a pretty good team. When it comes to selling our home and finding a new one, we must be rational of all things. Realistic. At the same time, we agree to reserve some optimism for a place of

quietness and beauty with space for breathing and looking at the sky and still be in the city. That would be prime.

He says, "It's like this: our present home, with two floors is 2400 square feet minus Mole's End, the little studio where Anita lives. The basement that is finished and houses my library and the laundry room add more square feet. Now. It looks as if the sale of our home, after real estate expenses and what not, will leave us with enough to purchase a home a little less than half that size in the Twin Cities area. So we need to think about how to reduce our belongings so they fit in about 1000 square feet of space." What is he saying?!

With all my heart I want to do this well, but as he speaks I have a mounting sense of panic, I see truckloads of furniture being pitched over a cliff. I have the urge to stop my ears and run away, hugging my oak cabinets and pottery bowls to my chest. Why is it that little ramblers with wall to wall carpet in 80s deco make me want to weep? But this must be faced. We need, for one thing, most rooms on the

main floor. Denis brings a glass of wine and sits beside me on the couch. "We can do this," he asserts. It will be hard. Painful. But it is what people must do at our stage of life. We have always believed that there are ways of living creatively, of being hospitable. Space does not limit these things." True. True. All true. But what about the view I've longed for? Should I be willing to give it up? Perhaps. I go to the public library and find books with

beautiful pictures on how to live in small spaces, it helps a little.

The following week Anita and I get our house "staged" for photos. Carol, the real estate agent's wife, walks through telling us what to put away. That chair, the chopping block,



Pottery collection

everything off the refrigerator; no throw rugs, that footstool, your living room blankies, the list goes on. Luckily, we have an attic with lots of room and Anita is small but strong. Everyday Denis looks a little more shocked. "It's so barren," he moans. But I'm starting to like it. Clean surfaces, no clutter. Even the radiators are dusted. Wow. It's never looked this unlived in. Gradually, he becomes more used to it, and I'm more receptive to the idea that when we move less could be more. Perhaps.

Later

The young man who does real estate pics arrives. He says our house is easy to shoot, and he loves the feel of it. It's inviting. Lots of light. Warm colors. As he leaves, he

spontaneously bursts out that he would buy it if he could. I'm absurdly pleased. A complete stranger likes Toad Hall? Perhaps it will sell.

Later the same day

It's Friday and the listing goes online that night. We pray about things beyond our control. We pray for the right buyer; the timing, perhaps for a family that would love the house as we have. Saturday is quiet all day and feels like waiting for a glacier to calve. The "For Sale" sign on the front lawn looks so wrong. What were we thinking? On Sunday we are gone all day. But that's when calls to show start coming in. For the next three days lookers pour in. We imagine people jumping on our beds and opening the medicine cabinet to examine our prescriptions – normal paranoia.

By Tuesday

We haven't done a lick of work because we must rush about every other second putting away ratty towels, smoothing lumps on beds, grabbing laptops and leaving in a flurry. (This is the downside of having your offices at home when trying to sell your home.) It's only been on the market three days, but that afternoon we receive four offers and must decide on one of them by evening. Our agent is

awesomely efficient and professional – another answer to our prayers for finding an honest, trustworthy person. One offer is from a family who is offering more than our asking

price and a good closing date. They love the house and want their mother to live with them! Anita's apartment will be perfect for her. We accept and the "SOLD" sign goes up.

We can't believe how fast this has happened. We immediately relax our housekeeping and return

to our slovenly ways. Dirty socks on the floor and Honeysuckle hopping through the house dropping little pellets here and there. (Yes. Well. They are hard little things that are barely discernable on the carpets. In fact, Anita accidentally ate one once. She was sitting on the couch eating raisins and watching TV when she dropped one and without looking down, she reached to the floor; felt around, picked it up, popped it in her mouth thinking... But I digress.)

Next, the hard part

Now we *need* to find a new home. There is no turning back.

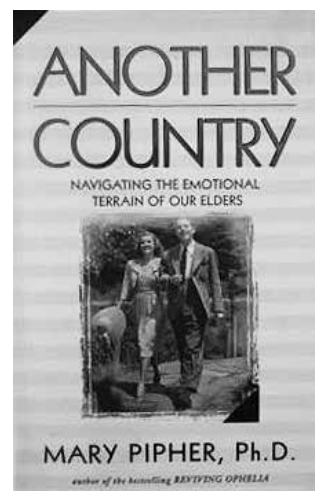


SOLD!

We feel God's nearness to our almost homeless condition. We are in a stage of life that Mary Pipher, in her book, *Another Country*, calls the "young-old." Whether we like it or not, when you are in your 60s you are no longer middle-aged. Sorry, Baby Boomers. We move from "young-old" to "old-old" when we face a crisis that moves us from the kingdom of the well to the kingdom of the sick. A mate dies; a fall breaks a hip; cancer claims a life. What stays the same is our Shepherd who loves us whether young or old, pregnant or barren, swift or slowly limping along. Somewhere in my bones, I know this beyond doubt.

Pipher writes, "My bias is that luxurious surroundings, entertainment options, natural beauty, and good weather are less important than people. As songwriter Greg Brown said, 'You can't have a cup of coffee with the landscape.' At bottom, I think the search for the right place is a search for the right people. It's a search for love and respect. What's important is a community of friends and family." (p. 32) Good advice.

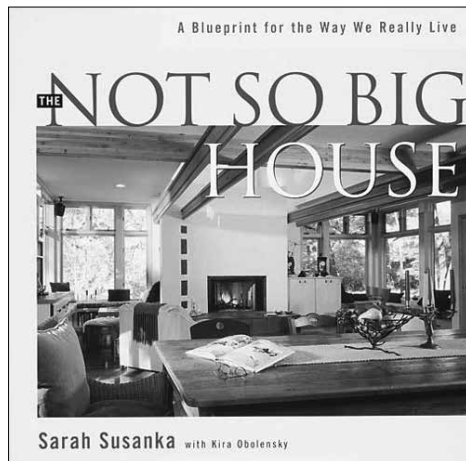
As much as I would like a mountain cabin or cottage by the sea, our friends on Ransom's Board helped us see that we cannot run away to the country – and believe me, that's what last fall's trip to Grand Marais, MN, was about. So, putting the isolated country home aside,



we visited some churches in the Twin Cities exploring community and friends. Could we find a church home, and then locate a place to live? One Sunday we visited a church that was a healthy, joyful experience for both of us. There seemed real potential for community and friends. Another important piece falls into place.

Searching...searching

We have talked endlessly about what Home could look like for us – what kind of hospitality will we offer there? What kind of quiet do we need for more serious writing hours? What constitutes an okay amount of solitude? I confess the outside of a house immediately draws me in or repels. Architect Sarah Susanka says “The house embodies in its exterior form much of what we long for today – a house that says Home before you ever step through the door.” – *The Not So Big House*. Most new-constructed houses – the giant three-car garage in front with house attached don’t say Home to me. I have thought and rethought non-negotiables. I also have a head full of angst and need to review again and again why it is not a crime to be an American and have a home with some degree of comfort when so many in the world suffer homelessness.



There are no possibilities for us right now. There are few homes on the market and good ones get snapped up immediately. Moving to rent while we find the right one? Just kill us now. A friend jokes, buy an RV! Another adds, you can name it “Road Hall!” Denis is adamant. The right one will be there at the right time. We have until June. We are dividing search responsibilities. Mine being approximately nothing – I get too fixated on flower boxes and countertop colors to be of much use. Denis and Anita do the research and I vote up or down. We try not to hit the pits on the same day.

With our house sold and a church in view, we are now more prepared to find a house. I don’t want you to think we believe that if you do things right, speak the right words, pray the right prayers, then

your house will sell, you’ll find a church you like and God will give you waffles for breakfast every morning. No. The Bible does not teach us that.

A reader wrote the following regarding our move and the stress that will be a part of it:

“From reading some other Christian writers, I get the feeling that they experience a crisis in faith for ‘one whole night’ while they throw up in the bathroom with the flu as



Road Hall?

a quadriplegic. But in the morning everything is bright and beautiful. I know that both of us can’t be right, but it seems that these people are not being honest with themselves (or anyone else). They make me feel like a failure, but I do know that David certainly had more ups and downs than they admit.” – Paul S.

This process may take longer than “one whole night” of vomiting on the floor. We may face temporary homelessness a lot longer than I want. I think about the three Old Testament men who were thrown into the furnace, who said if God chooses he can deliver us from death, but if he doesn’t he is still God and our faith is in him. On my end of the scale where mortal danger is embarrassingly low, it is still good to say the same thing. God can choose to give us more of the ideal home I have in my heart. Or not. And if not, God is still God, and I have faith that one day I will go to Home with a capital “H.” God has set us a direction and we’re walking the path.

Ransom Notes

Moving

This has consumed lots of time and energy the past few months, and will continue as we look for another home, pack up our gear and leave this place. I've heard from many readers who have experienced big changes and new stages of life as they face the stress of finding new jobs, new communities and new places to live. As we move through this ourselves, it gives us more compassion for others. We pray for you and are grateful for your prayers for us.

Moving will also bring eventual changes for Anita. She will move with us, see us settled and then look for nearby living space and a new position, as God provides. She is like a daughter and won't be able to move far from our hearts. She promises to always mow our lawn!

Finances

Would you pray with us that there would be enough funding in Ransom's budget to help cover some moving expenses? Our offices, library and many supplies in our home make it a legitimate ministry expense. However, finances are ebbing this spring, and if trends are average, heading into summer means low tide for donations. We don't doubt God will make a way through this time, but your prayers will help us keep steady hearts. (And, bonus! We might not kill one another or be injured by falling boxes of books.) We are constantly aware of God's grace to us through your prayers and support.

Writing

In the midst of this messy move into the next stage of life, I have signed a contract for another book. We have long hoped I would get around to publishing a collection of essays from past issues of Notes. Way past! Going back to the late 80's and 90's. My editor and I have chosen a number and now I have deadlines. Deadlines are a good prescription for procrastination. As I go back to edit, I'm finding lots to change and wonder what ever possessed me to leave modifiers dangling and use so many adverbs. I'm reminded of Mark Twain who said, "Substitute 'damn' every time you are inclined to write 'very;' your editor will delete it and your writing will be just as it should be." I'm very sure he would. We are hoping for a fall release.

Lectures/Readings/Etc

Denis recently taught a film and theology course at Covenant Seminary. The discussions were intense, personal and poignant.

Because of moving, we are trying to keep the calendar free for the next four months. However...



Looking ahead:

- Iowa. I have an unusual invitation to visit Prairie Whole Farm to meet with their interns over a weekend. I would love to do this if I can.
- Boca Raton, Florida. A group would like to host me for a weekend in November. If all goes well details will be worked out.
- Denis will be leading some film discussions in the Minneapolis area.
- He longs for writing days to settle down so he can complete projects.
- In our new home we look forward to both solitude and continued practice of hospitality.



Hospitality Notes

We received a note in the mail the other day from a teenager we used to know in Albuquerque. It was a surprise. Like throwing bread on water and getting it back years later, fresh with a crunchy crust, which, as everyone knows, is not possible since bread on water grows soggy, sinks, and is eaten by vermin. I've watched God's ways for years and still can't predict them. What you do in small gestures, little kindnesses, tolerance toward others and hard truths told in love can seem like nothing. But look thirty-eight years later!

Margie taught me how to make Challah and Five-spice Chinese chicken when I was young & Denis taught me how to understand absolutes. I was sixteen and now am fifty-four and I still know that Jesus is ruler and in charge of all. L. Albuquerque, NM

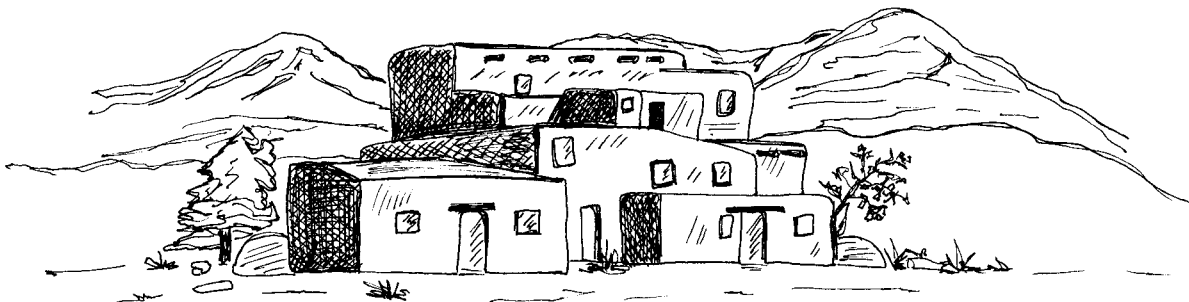
All I did was invite a group of five girls to come to my house once a week after school. I gave each of them a list of basic ingredients to bring. They were to tell their moms they were fixing supper that night. Together, we would put together a simple meal – main dish with a vegetable or salad and often a dessert. In our little kitchen, I would teach them how to prep it and they would finish up at home. I knew they liked doing it; and I loved having them – it was so much fun. Generally everyone left happy, hungry and proud of what they had accomplished. I recall once making them bring a whole chicken because it was cheaper than buying parts, which meant they needed to learn to cut it up. The first thing to do (and this was nothing to me since I grew up on a farm where we regularly butchered chickens) was to reach inside the cavity and pull out the heart, liver and gizzard – usually in a little package. This caused tons of screaming and one girl absolutely refused, she just couldn't put her hand into a dark, cold, slightly bloody cavity because it made her feel faint.

Behind these afternoons was the belief that what we eat, the way we eat, matters as a part of real life that is blessed by God. If we, say, bring a loaf of homemade bread fresh from the oven to a hungry person – or to anyone, for that matter, it might seem like a small thing, but it is as much a part of the gospel as drilling John 3:16 into a young head. In fact, serving the body and soul in ordinary ways, as in giving a meal, is as significant as saving a life in surgery or preaching a sermon to a lost tribe. Yes, because “Jesus is ruler of all.”



Chinese five-spice chicken

Here are the two recipes she mentioned. The bread is spectacular when done and not that difficult to make. Anyone who rolled snakes of clay as a kindergartner will do just fine. The recipe makes two loaves, but can easily be cut in half. Keep the yeast the same amount.



Challah



Ingredients:

- 2 1/2 cups warm
- 1 T active dry yeast
- 1/2 cup honey
- 4 T vegetable oil
- 3 eggs
- 1 T salt
- 8 cups unbleached all-purpose flour
- 1 T poppy seeds (optional)

Directions:

1. In a large bowl, sprinkle yeast over barely warm water. Beat in honey, oil, 2 eggs, and salt. Add the flour one cup at a time, beating after each addition, graduating to kneading with hands as dough thickens. Knead until smooth and elastic and no longer sticky, adding flour as needed. Cover with a damp clean cloth and let rise for 1 1/2 hours or until dough has doubled in bulk.

2. Punch down the risen dough and turn out onto floured board. Divide in half and knead each half for five minutes or so, adding flour as needed to keep from

getting sticky. Divide each half into thirds and roll into long snake about 1 1/2 inches in diameter. Pinch the ends of the three snakes together firmly and braid from middle. Either leave as braid or form into a round braided loaf by bringing ends together, curving braid into a circle, pinch ends together. Grease two baking trays and place finished braid or round on each. Cover with towel and let rise about one hour.

3. Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

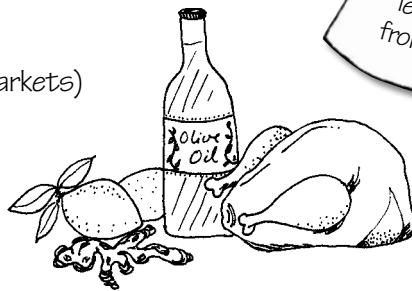
4. Beat the remaining egg and brush a generous amount over each braid. Sprinkle with poppy seeds if desired.

5. Bake at 375 for about 40 minutes. Bread should have a nice hollow sound when thumped on the bottom. Cool on a rack for at least one hour before slicing. (Source: allrecipes.com)



Chinese Five-spice Chicken

- 3 lbs chicken (any combination – works great for thighs, but I've done a variety, including whole chicken)
- 1/3 cup soy sauce
- 1/4 cup oil, such as light olive oil
- 2 tsp sesame oil (optional)
- 3 garlic cloves, pressed
- 2 teaspoons five spice powder (available at most markets)
- 1 T grated fresh ginger
- 3 T lemon juice
- 4 T brown sugar
- 3 green onions sliced



Preparation:

Combine all ingredients except chicken, and use as marinade. Marinate chicken at least an hour, but can marinate overnight. There are two ways to cook this. 1. Bake in a 375 F. oven (baste once or twice), or grill, for about 45 minutes or until done. 2. Or, place chicken and marinade in pot on top of stove and simmer, stirring and moving the pieces around occasionally – for about 25 minutes or until tender. (This will make more broth that can then be used for a vegetable stir fry, or thickened a little to make a sauce to put over rice.) Then, place the chicken on a foil-lined pan and broil for a couple minutes until the outside is browned and crispy. (optional)



Final Notes

Perhaps

On the last day of March, Anita and I went on a picnic at Oxbow Park. (Denis would have joined except he was in St. Louis.) We had to climb a snowbank to get to a sunny, sheltered spot beside some spruce trees. We felt enlivened to be outside, freed from stale air. Perhaps we thought it was spring. I don't know. As we read the *Common Prayer* and prayed together about many things – her future, ours, our scattered families – a cardinal flew to a branch a few feet above our heads and sang so loudly we couldn't stop laughing. We don't expect to hear the voice of God or angels sing as we pray, not in this life. Perhaps. But it did seem like a sign of hope and we received the song as blessing.



Zumbro River ice dam breaking

Later as we walked along the road and crossed a bridge over the Zumbro we witnessed the most singular thing – the break up of an ice dam. Suddenly the river was FILLED with floating icebergs – jagged platforms two feet thick – broken trees pushing, grinding, rushing past. I've read about such phenomenon, but have never seen one. Nothing could have stopped this inexorable movement. The power was frightening as pieces rammed the bridge abutments and we felt the rumble through our feet. It lasted about an hour; then the river returned to its banks quietly slipping muddied waters past the bridge.

I thought how God is both tender and gentle, yet terrifying like a bursting dam. I don't understand Him, but most of the time I'm okay with this. I thought of the great hymn that David Clowney wrote in 1960 when he was still (I love this fact) in high school.

*God, all nature sings Thy glory, and Thy works proclaim Thy might;
Ordered vastness in the heavens, ordered course of day and night;
Beauty in the changing seasons, beauty in the storming sea;
All the changing moods of nature praise the changeless Trinity.*

We relished the day – the cardinals, the sun, the 65 degrees of warm and that we were healthy enough to walk together down a country road for awhile.

I wish all of you to know the companionship of the Creator who walks beside you.



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 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.

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