

Notes from TOAD HALL

Nearly Fall 2002



A few years ago our neighbor Susan rang the doorbell, which wasn't remarkable in and of itself, but since it was the third time that day...well, the whole thing became sort of memorable. She was looking rather worse: her hair was disheveled, her eyes had dark circles under them and she was shaking. She smelled like cigarettes and mildew.

'Could I use your phone?'

I invited her inside.

'I need to call the FBI in Minneapolis,' she explained to me on her way into the kitchen. I knew she had trouble with the neighbor on

the other side of her and at first I thought he may have finally done something really criminal.

Ted Jensen was an aggressive scary man who constantly harassed Susan about how she kept her yard. One time out of pure malice he aimed his paint sprayer over the fence at her freshly painted siding. His paint was white. Hers was a dark green. When Susan saw it, he loftily claimed it was wind drift. Susan cried because the whole side was spoiled.

Once he chased our son up onto our porch for riding his bike on newly laid asphalt in the alley. Ted had almost caught up to him when Jerem slammed through the front door screaming, 'DAAAAD!' The terror in his voice brought us both running. That was the kind of neighbor he was.

It's true that Susan's yard was a bit of an eyesore because she collected things other people threw away. Raccoons, squirrels, mice—and someone was sure they'd seen rats—all lived in her small yard. On the other hand, the rock wall she made along the front yard and the wild cottage garden look of her flowers made an interesting mix of chaos theory and beauty.

But it wasn't Jensen this time. She explained that someone, she didn't know who, had gotten into her house and had stolen all her important papers. The deed to her house, her insurance papers, the car title, bank receipts. She had searched and searched and they were nowhere to be found. She had gone to the police station to report this theft and they had sent out an officer to inspect the premises. He reported no sign of forced entry and since there was unbroken snow around the house he could tell no one had gone in through a window. She was not reassured by this, so she went back to the station to press them a little more and while she was there the oddest thing

happened. She left her purse for just a moment to get a drink from the fountain in the hall. When she returned she found that someone had been rifling through her purse and had stuffed in every single missing paper.

That was when she began to piece together what was going on. She knew her little house and property were valuable, being a corner lot and prime real estate. The local



Susan

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had a serious mental illness, she remained a human being, unique, God-endowed with gifts, and a good friend.

newspaper had reported that the Mayo Clinic was desperate for more parking space. Since Susan's house was only two blocks from St. Mary's Hospital, it was obvious that the police and the Clinic were involved in a conspiracy to steal her property, take down her house, and build a parking lot. However, when she was down at the station the second time, the police could see that she was a body to contend with and they began to have second thoughts about their methods. They had found the perfect opportunity to return all the papers and then accuse her of being crazy.

It was so frightening to not trust the police and she so desperately needed to feel safe that she was trying to reach the FBI in Minneapolis for help and protection, but all she got was an answering machine: "Please leave your name, phone number and a brief summary of your problem and we will get back to you."

Over the next several days she used our phone to call them four or five more times leaving a message and begging for help. She asked us to please watch her house and if we saw any strangers trying to get in, to please help her. I assured her we absolutely would. Then she and I looked at each other helplessly because who do you call when you suspect a crime and the police are in on it?



The '65 Mustang Susan sometimes slept in.

I was almost convinced. But we knew something about our neighbor, who has since died from cancer. She had a mental illness. There were times when the medical model would say that is *all* she was—a paranoid schizophrenic. But I know that was not so. True, she was eccentric, and sometimes confused, but mental illness did not reflect all of who she was. I saw evidence of this again and again.

She was resourceful and creative; I loved how she hauled brick from a demolition site blocks away on an old lawnmower bed—she had

replaced the engine with boards to make a platform. Trip after trip. From those bricks she laid a beautiful patio. When her roof needed to be replaced, she did it herself. Painstakingly bit by bit. And all us neighbors shared in disposing of her old shingles because late at night while we slept she put them in grocery sacks and deposited them in our trash cans.

She taught me how to mix mortar and build a little garden wall with stones. She gave me a recipe for pickled crab apples. She played jazz on our piano. We talked about Russian authors and argued about who was the best. Many times I saw her sitting on her stone steps half hidden behind tall ox-eye daisies and her rotting '65 Mustang ('A collector's car, you know. I've been offered thousands for it.') sitting there sorting through bags of old clothes or reading the newspaper. I would bring her a plate of supper and her keen pleasure kept me doing it again and again. To my everlasting benefit she taught me that even though she had a serious mental health problem she remained a human being, unique, God-endowed with gifts, and a good friend.

Uniquely Gifted

I've thought about Susan lately because some things have caused me to reflect on mental illness. Like seeing the movie *A Beautiful Mind* (you should see it if you haven't). One of the things that struck me about the film is how it lets the viewer in on the terrifying mental storms John Nash endured. I remember when the camera took us out to his study—this little shack in the backyard where Nash had been spending hours and hours at work. As the door opened we looked in, hopeful that we might see evidence of his recovery. Instead we saw hundreds and hundreds of bits

of paper he had painstakingly pinned to the walls until every square inch was covered with urgent messages and data, and we knew we were seeing the terrible state of his mind. My eyes welled because I had grown to care about him. I saw he was more than just his illness, more than a mathematical genius. He was a man of wit and humor, a person who despite his suffering might be able to offer skills in math to those around him. To our wonder and delight, in real life John Nash eventually won the Nobel Prize.

I have friends who suffer from mental illnesses in varying intensities and this movie reminded me of how much they must endure in order to live, work, and relate to people. And of what courage it can take to keep on with daily life. At the same time their illness does not—in fact, in the church it *must* not—negate the gifts and contributions they have to offer to the body of Christ. Too often the church contributes to the humiliation and discouragement that makes it difficult to admit when you are the one suffering from depression, bi-polar, schizophrenia, or eating disorders.

One friend who leans hard against recurring depression found a brochure at church on how Christians can defeat depression. Curious, she picked it up and learned the author



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believed that if you're a depressed person, you must begin by confessing your sin and bringing your life under the Lordship of Christ. Then get up, dust off your hands and get on with things—your faith will set you free. She talked to the pastor after the service and told him it is rarely that simple. There are many other reasons and combinations that might cause depression. One of them might be a chemical imbalance that no amount of faith or pulling yourself up by your boot straps is gonna fix and that she herself was on a medication for depression and found it very discouraging to find such literature contributing to misinformation. The pastor said nothing. Sadly, what this mostly means for our Christian friends with mental disease is that they hide in our midst pretending to be okay in public (lest their faith be called into question) while privately suffering alone.

David Hilfiker, MD, writes that his life long experience with depression is manifest by a singular lack of joy. And yet he participates in the life of the church in prayer, worship, daily Bible reading, in corporate mission, and works as a physician to homeless men with AIDS. Some Christians insist that 'One of the marks of true spirituality is the joy you feel in your life.' Following Christ has not done this for him. Yet he would attest that God

is faithful and it has been the Christian community who hold him dear and who know God's love for him. Their assured knowledge of it keeps him going. He likens his mental illness to a spiritual paradox.

If we can accompany one another through the messy reality, we do understand—at certain moments of clarity—that we've been offered a profound journey of healing and wisdom. We discover that our journeys together, with all of their messiness, bring us closer to our deepest selves and to our littleness, and indeed, bring us closer to God. This is a paradox of the highest order, understood by only the deepest spiritualities: It is precisely through our brokenness that we touch God.

(Source: "When Mental Illness Blocks the Spirit," *The Other Side*. Log on to www.thotheside.org where you can read the entire article.)

I would add: Ah, but it is also through our brokenness that God touches us.

What I discover in these particular examples is the very Christian truth that all are made in the image of God and as such we have meaning and purpose beyond any objective material witness. There is a peculiar humanness which allows us to grasp the transcendent and appreciate the beauty of creation. In turn we are able to create something even out of suffering and give it as a gift to another. Sometimes unwittingly.

This giftedness is not only seen by Christians. I have been deeply moved by author Oliver Sacks who quite some time ago wrote a book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. Sacks has professed no par-

ticular faith that I am aware of, and yet he helps us see that even profoundly impaired people again and again prove to be more than just a medical case unable to transcend disease. In the midst of suffering they reveal a human soul, a hunger for the spiritual, a god-like-



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As a clinical neurologist, Dr. Sacks recounts with compassion and insight the lives of people who have suffered incredible adversity—patients whose lives seem to have no meaning beyond suffering from neurological illness. He tells about a man whose experience of amnesia was so profound he had no 'day before.' Jimmy's face expressed infinite sadness and loss, but when asked how he felt, could not say whether he felt badly or not. He had lost all ability to organize or remember the present. He could not remember isolated items more than a few minutes.

One day Sacks asked the Sisters at the Catholic Home where

Jimmy lived whether they thought he had a soul. They were outraged by the question and said he should watch Jimmy in chapel and then judge for himself. He wrote of this:

I was profoundly moved and impressed because I saw here an intensity and steadiness of attention and concentration that I had never seen before in him or conceived him capable of. I watched him kneel and take the Sacrament on his tongue, and could not doubt the fullness and totality of Communion, the perfect alignment of his spirit with the spirit of the Mass. Fully, intensely, quietly, in the quietude of absolute concentration and attention, he entered and partook of the Holy communion. He was no longer at the mercy of...meaningless memory traces—but was absorbed in an act, an act of his whole being, which carried feeling and meaning in an organic continuity and unity, a continuity and unity so seamless it could not permit any break.

And always for a while after communion, his mood of quietness and peace would persist in a way not seen in the rest of his life at the Home.

(For further reading, see an interview of Sacks: "The Fully Immersive Mind of Oliver Sacks," in *Wired*, April 2002. Sacks is also author of *Awakenings* which was made into a movie starring Robin Williams.)

Uniquely Fallen

In the church we have often cast aside those who suffer from mental illnesses—the very ones who often already suffer as outcasts from family, friends, and community. They

are even cast aside by their own souls—yet our privilege is to call them loved by Christ and integral to our body. It isn't only that they need us, we need them if we are to believe Scripture. ('Those parts of the body which seem weaker are indispensable.' 1 Cor 12:22)

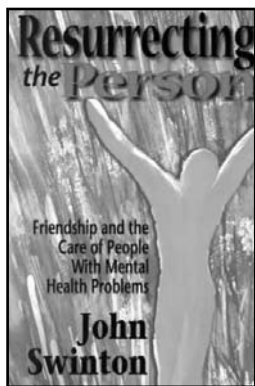
I might sound disgustingly pious going on like this. Of course, I'd hate that. In fact, I'll make a confession. I have discovered a sneaky prejudice in myself. It's like racial bigotry you think you don't have until a particular moment reveals your shriveled little heart. As in when driving Interstate 94 between Minneapolis and Madison and a new Cadillac with Illinois vanity plates saying 'Mopeas' hurtles past, do I think: Retired fat guy from Chicago? No. I think Drug Dealer from the North Side.

My revelation began this summer at the doctor's office when I was referred to a psychiatrist to renew a sleep medication often prescribed for people who have fibromyalgia. (One of the symptoms is sleep disorder.) At first, I was, 'No problem.' Whatever it takes. Then I went home and began to stew. A *psychiatrist!* What did my doctor REALLY have in mind? She was lookin' at me kinda funny. On the surface it was a meds consult, but what was her true agenda?

My appointment made me really nervous. I sat in the doctor's office trying to sit still, stop swallowing my spit and keep my hands off my face, but I couldn't. He was a young man, almost too young to be my son. He looked like a male model from A&F. I thought, what is he doing here? He had a handsome, carefully neutral face, and he leaned forward a bit as he spoke from behind his big desk: 'I will be taking notes as we talk and I don't want you to worry about that.' Well....until you MENTIONED it. He paused to stare intently at me until I won-

dered if there was something stuck in my teeth. Then he said, 'So. Why do you think you're here today?' Feeling irrational and insulted I almost said: Because I started my husband's bed on fire? Regaining control in the nick of time, I carefully reported: 'My doctor said it was to consult with you about this medication and also see whether you think I should be referred to bio-feedback for muscle relaxation therapy. If she had other reasons she didn't mention them.' (Maybe just a tiny bit hostile.)

My mind was racing ahead, wondering how many invasive questions he would ask and whether it was safe



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to be honest. Does he think I am a crazy fifty-something woman with a hysterical hypochondriacal personality? Oops. Isn't that a symptom of paranoia? And what if I am? Isn't it okay to face it here? Should I be ashamed to get help if I need it?

He did ask me about depression and other moods. I decided to be honest and admitted that 'Anxiety is my chiefest, most nuts, biggest physical/spiritual/mental flaw.' I plunged on, 'Or character defect. Whatever you'd like to call it. I work hard at not being anxious and this here is making me really nervous.' He nodded and scribbled away. Now to his credit and to my dis, he was kind and insightful and also sniffed out my evasions. After about twenty minutes I had stopped sweating and gulping air. And by the end of the hour he okayed the meds and told me with a grin that I didn't need to see him again. I still left feeling like

I'd been rescued from Elephant Island in the Antarctic. Just to breathe air in the parking lot was exhilarating.

The more I reflected on my reaction to this encounter, the more I realized how revealing my attitude was. It is just fine for you to have any number of mental illnesses. As our four year old granddaughter says, 'I am your fren.' From bi-polar to simple depression, I am okay with you having it. It doesn't make you less of a person. Blah, blah, blah. And then I had that little trick played on me, and found out it isn't okay for *me*, and suddenly I have to confess how sorry I am to be this kind of bigot.

And now that I think of it, the courage of some of my friends who have had to be hospitalized, therapied, medicated, sent to group with clueless 'facilitators' and know-nothing 'peers' is surpassing wonderful bravery. And I thank them for understanding my fear better than anyone and for continuing to be my friend despite my evil nature.

Finally, here is one last plug. There is a book....are you surprised? *Resurrecting the Person: Friendship and the Care of People with Mental Health Problems* by John Swinton. In this book of practical theology, Swinton issues a challenge to the church to think and act differently toward people and families whose lives have been radically altered by their encounters with mental health problems. He explores ways of separating people from their pathologies both practically and conceptually. He suggests Jesus is a model for countercultural friendship with those who have been marginalized and alienated by society.

Although I do not agree entirely with his theology, I can't find anything on the market so personally helpful and hopeful when it comes to exploring deep and meaningful

friendship with a person who struggles with a mental health problem. I strongly recommend this book for anyone—families, loved ones, church leaders—who know such a person.

We should be starving for this kind of help. We need it for the sake of Jesus. For the sake of his bride, the Church.

Ransom Notes

October 18-19. St Louis, MO Francis Schaeffer Lecture Series: Human Sexuality & Homosexuality. There are many questions regarding this and we look forward to attending and learning.

This fall. Local involvement continues with our church and small group which meets for Bible study, weddings (two of us got married off this summer), and theological discussions. But it also includes the ordinary and everyday like an on-going consult and argument over what color Jacob Mohler should paint the outside of their house. I won on what shade of green, lost on the trim color.

Looking Back. Denis was at the Jonathon Edwards Institute for a conference in Anapolis which went well and was well attended. He thought people on the East Coast seemed hungry for practical ways to engage culture, especially where it touches on the lives of young people. Beginning with the series on 'Living in Babylon' and then addressing popular music evoked much interest and discussion. It was extremely encouraging. Since Denis and I think and talk about these issues all the time, it begins to seem like such very old stuff to us. We forget that many have not had the exposure or the chance to think through such issues.

In August, Denis officially became a senior citizen and a student. He wonders if both can be used to double your discounts? Over the years he has become very good at broad picture analysis but has often spared himself the details. This may explain the strength of *Critique*. On his first exam, when he was asked: "In chapter 6 'Compelled by Love' the late Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones identifies a misunderstanding of the gospel. Which misunderstanding was this?" he was, um, well, as he said to me, 'I could have summarized the entire chapter and even taught a Sunday school class on it, but that particular misunderstanding?' In his current class on Ancient and Medieval Church History, he must be

On-going. Our hope is for Denis to complete two classes, catch up with office and administrative work and keep to our publishing schedule. After the first of the year, more travel and speaking resumes, God-enabling.

Your prayers are so appreciated as we think and prepare for such things as the lectures at Borders in St. Louis, and the L'Abri conference next February.

Note: Included in this issue is a brochure of Bonnie Leifer's holiday cards from the Coalition. She has several new ones this year. Artfully, beautifully-done message and design are the result of much prayer and long hours of work. All the proceeds go to this college campus ministry.

Reminder: Any of the books we mention may be ordered through Hearts & Minds Bookstore. See logo on last page.

able to identify dates, writings, and major accomplishments of 100 church leaders including Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Papias, Cyprian, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea. When you consider that Denis does not know how many years we've been married or exactly when my birthday is...can you see what I mean? Although, there are certain things. Like he could tell you exactly how many movies M. Night Shyamalan has directed, what they were about and who starred in them. Anyway, this has required a good deal of extra study and some memory deselection. Our kids are monitoring his progress, demanding to know grades and pursing their lips with familiar advice, like 'You must remember that not every class is worth an A.' and 'Don't think if you skip this you can use the car later.' It didn't help him to have recent seminary graduate Jeremy Huggins around this summer who appears to have aced all his classes without cracking a

book and never writing a paper on the assigned topic. I guess his papers were so creative the professors overlooked it. Or something. Cheez. (You can judge for yourself. He's started contributing to *Critique*.)

I'm a little sheepish about thinking, no sweat, Denis can add the pursuit of

a seminary degree to everything else we do and hardly notice the effort. Remember Donald Guthrie who was on staff with Ransom for awhile (he's also a board member) and then ended up on the faculty at Covenant Seminary? His doctorate was in adult education and this access program surely has his design marks on it. Getting Covenant's off-campus seminary degree requires plenty of work. One of Denis' fellow students reported of all the off-campus degrees he considered, Covenant was the most rigorous and thorough. Denis's most recent course expected students to regularly participate in discussion via message boards, meet with a mentor by phone once a week, read texts, write papers, take exams via the internet and watch forty hours of lectures on video. Still, there's no doubt about it, Denis loves this kind of misery. I thought you'd want to know.

Family Notes

Vacation. Cabin, Pike Lake, WI. It seemed like a long summer and I felt tired by the time we left home on August 22nd. Thanks to Dave & Paula Kaufman, we had a lovely place to stay. And thanks to a special gift, some treats were possible. By the 30th I had written in my journal:

Better now. In body and spirit, too.

Discovered Paula's chocolate stash. With kids around I completely understand. I only wish it were some rare and delicious chocolate like Godiva—then I wouldn't have dared touch it. Wouldn't even be tempted. But as it is—I who've been

on the strictest of sugar-free diets—have eaten several horrid, sticky, Baby Ruths, Butterfingers, and 100 Grand Bars. All miniature size, thank goodness. But she keeps them by her bed where we sleep and on my side, too. When I excuse myself for a nap and lie in there rattling the wrappers, I wonder. Does anyone suspect?

Just now I am making up for what I may sneak later. Sitting on the dock, the sun just above the horizon. Cool. Calm. I hear the beloved loons calling. Distant voices carry across the water. And I eat healthy. A dish of fresh tomatoes, sliced radishes, a bit of chicken and some potato salad dropped off by Gary, the neighbor. It is typical male style. Great honking chunks of potato, celery, onion. Nothing delicate about this. But also generous egg and bits of bacon. Very tasty. So does this outweigh the bad I may do later? Yes. I'm sure of it. I'm on vacation.

And speaking of the bad I may do. Some random thoughts that came through Psalms 22-25. David surrounded by enemies, very unsafe, aware of his own guilt and unworthiness, yet lies down to sleep knowing God is by his side. He requests to be taught. To know. To find or be led in God's paths. And then this pronouncement: "ALL the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness for those who keep his covenant." All of them? Yes. And of course, not that I can keep the covenant, but I am kept. Jesus has done it for me. I am on this path of steadfast love. It is a matter of believing what God has said. All things—illness, poverty, uncertainty, etc., think of the world's troubles—are a matter of trusting that God sees and keeps.

Wedding. Our son Jerem and his fiancé Micah Kent will be married in Hermann, MO, Nov 2. They will live in northern Minnesota where Jerem has lived and worked for Marvin Windows the past seven (?) years. They've had a long-distance romance and have met in Rochester for premarital counseling about once a month. Denis knows this is not his strong point, but Walter Wangerin's book *As For Me and My House: Crafting Your Marriage to Last* has been a great help. His honesty and compassion coupled with an ability to tell stories is wonderful. We have both enjoyed it and suggest it for any couple, engaged, married, young, or old. How blessed we are to get a daughter-in-law who so obviously loves the Lord and as a bonus, also loves our son!



And more. Sember and Shaun are settled in an apartment in North Minneapolis. They are thankful for a place despite some drawbacks. It is a dangerous neighborhood and Manessah cannot go outside without an adult. The apartment is expensive and has no closets at all. On the other hand, their walls are beautifully painted. As an artist it is often feast or famine, but Shaun has had steady work coming in—he does murals, faux wall treatments, and fine art. When we returned from vacation, they had news for us. Sember is pregnant. With twins. You know the path I was talking about? They had not anticipated this one. We rejoice with widened eyes. Shaun is thrilled. Manessah is excited. You might pray for Sem as she's been very sick.

Travel. Early on September 22, Denis and I are driving to Massachusetts for a week. We look forward to seeing two of Denis' aunts who are widowed and without children. Life gets difficult when health and energy diminishes. Don't I know. We would love to be some part of a solution and encouragement for them. Pray for us.

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 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 and Critique, a newsletter written by my husband, Denis, are sent to those who regularly support Ransom Fellowship. All gifts to Ransom are tax-deductible.

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Final Notes

When I was a girl I could not understand why everyone was so hot on daily Bible reading. It seemed about as appealing as canned asparagus. I thought such spiritual discipline robbed life of spontaneity. I liked Holy Spirit surprises—like the unexpected miracle of catching my brother by his shirt as he plunged past me in a sixty foot tree where we had climbed to the top and swayed back and forth until the tip broke off. My mom thought otherwise. About Bible reading—she usually didn't know what we were up to out in the pasture, which was just as well. But she claimed she could tell right away when I had not read my Bible because I was a sullen, arrogant child without it. She was actually right, but on those days confrontation made me more sullen. So earlier this year when I published a daily Bible reading schedule which I called 'The Bible Reading Plan for Shirkers and Slackers' the question came up again: why bother with all this anyway? Why not finger dip here and there when the spirit moves me? Here's an excerpt of an interview from *It's a Meaningful Life—It Just Takes Practice* by Bo Lozoff (Viking 2000) which seems a sort of answer:

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach: Full experiences of God can never be planned or achieved. They are spontaneous moments of grace, almost accidental.

Lozoff: Rabbi, if God-realization is just accidental, why do we work so hard doing all these spiritual practices?

Rabbi Carlebach: To be as accident-prone as possible.

May all your accidents and paths reveal God's gracious hand.

That's it from Toad Hall.

Warmly,
Margie
Margie



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