

Notes from TOAD HALL

Issue #4 - 2004
the Holiday Issue



The Annual American Christmas Letter

There's a large pottery bowl in our dining room which collects all the cards, letters, and photos we receive over the holidays. There are new jobs, new family members, new homes and new fitness. There are reunions, graduations, promotions and trips. I love to read these accounts as it is one way of keeping up with old friends. I always mean to answer each one personally, but by July when they are still unanswered, I give up. Most of the letters are glowing accounts of all the incredible things accomplished by family members. Behind these shining words, only a few brave ones hint that

there might have been mistaken choices, loneliness, doubt, and times of difficulty or depression.

It makes me wonder about the message we send when we present an “Everything’s GREAT” picture of life to our friends and family. We want to rejoice with friends over the good things that come to us, but what about those slammed doors, rotting foundations and bad grades? Or are we the only ones? How dishonest or damaging is our flawless life picture to a weary person or family struggling to survive in a broken world?

I’ve wondered what the stories of Scripture would be if I’d been the one in charge of editing and protecting God’s perfect image. Or what if I were an O.T. patriarch and responsible for getting out the news about our family? Um, I think I might’ve put a little different spin on things. Eight years ago I experimented with the idea, and wrote two versions of an annual Christmas letter written by Jacob son of Isaac. Here they are again.

Jacob’s Christmas Letter: Version One

Dear ones back in Ur,

Since our family moved to Canaan we haven’t seen many of you and it’s been way too long since I’ve written. We’ve been very busy these past years, so don’t think my lack of communication means I’ve grown any less fond of you.

We are still very much alive. God has blessed us incredibly and it is hard to know where to begin catching you up, but I’ll try.

First of all, we want you to know that if you ever get out this way we would love to put you up and show you the area. There are a lot of fascinating historical attractions—from the ruins of Sodom

and Gomorrah to the giant oak tree at Mamre where my grandfather, Abraham, conducted his business. Anyway, consider yourself invited. We have comfortable guest tents and are happy to share them any time. The weather here is usually fantastic. Land is a little dry, but it is cheap and very available.

As some of you know, a few years back I was living in Haran in order to be near Uncle Laban and to further my education. It was more rewarding than I could have imagined—in fourteen years, I not



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only made some HUGE breakthroughs in my genetic research with cattle and sheep, I managed to acquire two gorgeous wives! How I found time for everything, I’ll never know!

My sheep and cattle weren’t the only reproducers—my wives and, oh, yes, my two lovely concubines were very busy—make that me, too. :) We now have twelve sons and some daughters also. Believe me, our string of racing camels are VERY popular and rather overworked around here. The mess tent is also a popular hang-out. Our kitchen servants can hardly keep enough lambs on the spit to feed this tribe.

I’ve been working out lately, trying to keep the old body trim and all. It sure paid off recently during an unexpected wrestling match. Unbelievable, but I actually wrestled an angel and came out the winner!

Got a new name out of the deal—Israel, and a promise that I would become the father of many nations. (Note: I’ve been doing MY part to fulfill this!)

Another highlight was the fantastic reunion with my brother Esau whom I hadn’t seen in years. What a great time reminiscing about our boyhood.

My daughters are the envy of all around here because of their great beauty. Dinah even received a proposal from the son of Shechem, the local king. Seems like every time I turn around I’m negotiating with or chasing a suitor off. You know how fathers are.

My sons have grown up strong and healthy and many of them have taken positions in the family business. In fact, not long ago they surprised me with quite a coup—a sort of leveraged buy-out, I suppose. They managed to completely annex a near-by town (used to belong to Shechem) without the loss of a single penny to us. It turned out to be a wealthy little place and we managed

to greatly increase our property holdings and livestock. We even gained a lot of free domestic and field help out of the deal. Their creativity amazes me.

I guess our son Joseph tops all. This year he’s been promoted to a new high even for our family. He moved to Egypt some years ago. Really likes it there. Loves the urban life and has always been a sharp dresser and creative thinker, so he’s found himself a special niche over there. He holds the highest political position in the country and is second only to the Pharaoh himself. But he’s never forgotten his roots and has really been generous to us. In fact, you might pray about this; we may be moving to Egypt ourselves.

We really praise God for all his blessings and hope that your years have been as fruitful as ours.

Stay in touch and remember you're welcome anytime—even in Egypt. Shalom.

Jacob

Jacob's Annual Letter Version 2

Dear Family and Friends,

I know it's been awhile. I apologize. I've hesitated to write as things haven't gone the way I'd hoped they would over the years. But as things are now, I may as well bring you up to date on some of what's transpired. If nothing else, you might pray for us.

As you may already know, some years ago I had to flee for my life as I tricked Esau, my twin brother, into selling me his birth-right for reasons I won't go into here.

I ended up in Haran staying at Uncle Laban's and working for him. I fell in love with Rachel, his younger daughter. He promised her to me if I worked seven years for him. I was so in love it only seemed like a few days. But, he swindled me, for on our marriage night who should he send me all veiled and smelling of lilies and roses? Rachel's older sister, Leah. It was dark in the tent, so it wasn't until morning that I discovered, too late, that I'd been had. I was so angry. Of course, Laban, was only too happy to renegotiate another seven year contract for Rachel, to which I agreed.

For fourteen years I worked and ended up with nothing but two wives who fought constantly, and two concubines, whom they played off against me, and about a dozen sons to provide for. Laban's worth must have tripled under my management, but he paid me nothing for all my effort.

Finally, I went to him and offered a deal. If he would let me have all the spotted livestock (which were pretty rare at the time) I would consider that my pay. I used every

bit of knowledge and a little sorcery to help us out and, well, it was unbelievable as pretty soon females of every sort were popping spotted and striped off-spring. Almost overnight I became a wealthy man.

Then one night God came to me, telling me to move back to Canaan. Seeing that my affairs had taken a turn for the better I decided to go ahead. I knew I would have to keep it a secret from Laban as he might try to stop me or even kill me, so I left without even saying *au revoir*.



“Please pray for us as I am old and we are packing for a long journey. Pray that God would give me strength and grant us mercy.”

that he permanently injured my hip, I was able to extract a promise from him about making me the father of many nations.

I was dreading the reunion with my brother Esau. In fact, I was so afraid to meet him, as we approached the home-country, I set it up so that flock after flock (a lot of them gifts for Esau) and herd after herd would pass ahead of me, finally followed by my wives and children and lastly me. I know it sounds cowardly, but I hoped he would be assuaged. He was polite, but not very friendly. Something of a sorrow to me.

About this time, and after so many years of trying, Rachel died while giving birth to her second son, Benjamin. I was inconsolable, as she was always my favorite. That was soon followed by the death of my old father, Isaac.

As my sons grew, they seemed always on the brink of violence. It broke out in a devastating way after they found out that one of their sisters, Dinah, (who IS beautiful) had been seduced by a local fellow. They orchestrated the most cruel revenge, by pretending to agree Dinah could marry him if all the men got circumcised. It's one thing to have this done when you're eight days old. While the men lay around nursing their members, my sons killed them, carried off all the wealth and livestock, and enslaved the women and children. There was nothing I could do about it. They've always been headstrong and unmanageable. Dinah hasn't spoken since.

As if I didn't have enough sorrow, they've always been jealous of their brother Joseph who was Rachel's oldest son. I admit I favored him a little, but they didn't need to do what they did. My sons sold him into slavery in Egypt and brought his beautiful coat home all stained in blood and lied to me. They claimed they found it and he must have been killed by a wild animal. You can't imagine how I felt.

Lately we have suffered from the most severe famine. I believe we have lost nearly everything. But with it has come the only good news in years. After all this time, I have learned that Joseph is alive. He is in Egypt and holds a very powerful position in the government. We found out when my sons went down there looking to buy food.

I hardly dare hope. My sons say Joseph wants us to move there and live with him. They say he has forgiven them for what they did. I only pray that this might be so. It would give me such great happiness.

Please pray for us as I am old and we are packing for a long journey. Pray that God would give me strength and grant us mercy.

J. Israel.

Real Pictures

It's amazing that in Scripture God doesn't give us a rarified view of his people. Version Two is closer to the account Genesis gives of Jacob, but Version One is more like our annual Christmas letters which glow in a controlled artificial light.

Jacob was a man of clay feet and I'm so thankful to know it. If I had written Genesis I'm sure I would've been tempted to give a tidied up version.

Despite the sadness and sin in Jacob's life, the book of Hebrews



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includes him as a man of great faith, one who understood God's promises and at the end of his life is still worshipping the Lord. God doesn't

shrink from this real man whose troubles are written down for all the centuries to see; God refers to himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It's one of the things that makes me love Christianity. Who else would dare to

claim a guy like Jacob, and have it be so right?

This gives me the courage to share our lives with a little more clarity when we send out annual letters. We want to share good news and joy—that's what the Season is about, but only in part. With the slightest admission of failure or sorrow, we join a vast company of fellow sufferers along with Jacob, Mary, and Jesus. For those of us who don't live perfect lives, even a hint can be godly comfort and truly Good News; we are not alone in a fallen world. God is pleased to claim us as his own. †

Ransom Notes

Coming Up

November 10-20, British L'Abri.

Both Denis and Margie will lecture and lead a weekend film festival, with movies followed by discussion. For more information, contact L'Abri worker Dawn Dahl by phoning British L'Abri (44-1420-538436) or by email (enquiries@englishlabri.org).

January 14-15, 2005, Ransom Fellowship Board of Directors Meeting, St. Louis, MO.

Our board will gather for worship, fellowship, prayer, good food, and planning. It is always an encouraging and humbling time (the last is what you get when people really know you, at least these people).

February 18 - 20, 2005, Providence Presbyterian Church, Concord, NC.

Denis will return for a second year to speak at this annual conference on engaging postmodern culture with discernment. For conference schedule and information contact Pastor Stephen Baldwin (704.788.8899) or log on (www.ppcnet.net).

March 11-12, 2005, Christ PCA, Farmington, MN.

Margie is guest speaker for the Women's Retreat. Don't know topic yet. It'll be something. Hopefully good, if we're lucky. For more information, contact Heather by email (THJSULLIVAN@aol.com).

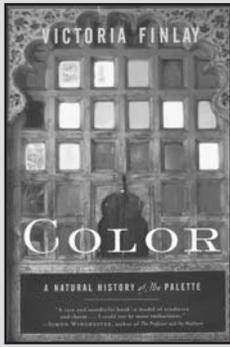
March 11 - 13, 2005, L'Abri Jubilee Conference, St. Louis, MO.

Denis will give a workshop on the challenges and opportunities Christians face in our media-driven and saturated world. For more information, contact the Rochester L'Abri (507.536.0108) or visit them online (www.labrijubilee.org).

April 1 - 3, 2005, The Three Village Church, Long Island, NY.

Denis will speak at this conference on living faithfully in our post-Christian and pluralistic world. For more information or conference details, send an email to (matwoodley@mail.3vc.org). †

Christmas 2004 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall



Color: A Natural History of the Palette by Victoria Finlay

(non-fiction) If you happen to be in the desert and find prickly pear cactus covered with white bugs eating it, and if you happen to catch one of these white bugs and squeeze until it pops, it will stain a bright scarlet and you will have touched a secret: the

chochineal, the source of one of the oldest natural red dyes in the world. Its shades of crimson are still found in the cosmetics I use every day. Um, I wouldn't have known this if I hadn't read *Color*.

Victoria Finlay has written a book that is part science, history, and travelogue. She takes us around the world to discover the source of the paint box colors. From distant mountains, ancient ruins, remote villages, to dark laboratories where we get fascinating stories from cultures, peoples, and individuals who are sometimes the last link to methods of extracting dye or mixing pigments from nature. She made me feel like I was right with her while she uncovered the mysteries of ultramarine blue and made fascinating discoveries about the sources of pigment. Example: no longer used — Mommia (mummy brown), a thick bitumen-like substance, good for shading, was made from the bodies of ancient dead Egyptians. Collectors “broke off all parts of the bodies...and brought home [to England] divers heads, hands, arms, and feet for a shewe.” You needn't be an artist to be utterly absorbed.

Greyfriars Coffee, Chattanooga, TN

(coffee) Denis and I don't like to be called coffee snobs. Although I do think of him as sort of one. Sometimes he orders a triple espresso and drinks all of it. I think a snob is someone, possibly a yuppie, who orders a skinny grande double depth charged



latte because making six decisions AT ONCE makes him feel in control of his life and impresses the hot young woman working the counter. But I digress. I do admit to having driven or walked way out of my way to find a good Americano. And I also admit I don't much like Starbucks, Dunn Bros, or Seattle's Best anymore, for example.

Anyway, a few years ago Ian Goodman began roasting beans and selling coffee at a little place in Chattanooga he called Greyfriars. He says roasting coffee beans is part science, but to get a really good roast requires art: “You just have to kind of know when it's right.” Well, he knows something all right because I think he has the best coffee I've tasted. Seriously. His business has been growing and now you can order coffee from his website. Log on to read more about its history, organics, and try the Ethiopian Yirgacheffe. We enjoyed staying with Ian and his wife, Leda, when we visited Sember and Shaun in October.

Tell them I'm your friend and you'll get 10% off your first order. (order from: <http://www.rarecoffe.com>)

Go Tell It On The Mountain,

The Blind Boys of Alabama

(CD) These guys have been singing together for sixty years and this is their first Christmas album. If I did anything half that well for half that long God would probably say well done, and take me directly to heaven.

To their traditional gospel-blues style they add a special genre-crossing guest to each track. The result is brilliant. Tom Waits' gravelly cigarette voice singing “Go Tell It On The Mountain” is so weird and wonderful. Among the other featured guests are Aaron Neville, Shelby Lynn, Solomon Burke. There's only one track I don't care for: “The Little Drummer Boy.” I can't think why every group doing a holiday album has to include that song. I need to learn how to program the delete function on our CD player.

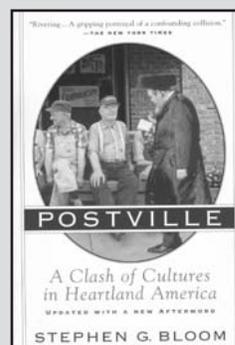


Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America

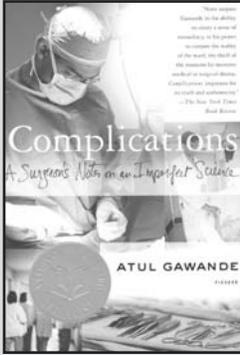
by Stephen G. Bloom

(non-fiction) In 1987, a group of ultra-Orthodox Jews from Brooklyn, NY, opened a kosher slaughterhouse just outside Postville, IA (population, 1465), both reviving and dividing the town. Quiet, restrained Iowans were aghast at the Hasidic Jews who ignored the unwritten laws of Iowa civility, and the Lubavitchers

couldn't compromise with the world of Postville. Ten years later, the town engineered a vote on what everyone agreed was a referendum: should the Jews stay? This is reporting that tells a riveting, respectful story from both sides. Bloom raises many ethical and cultural questions about freedom, democracy, and religion. An excellent book to enjoy and discuss with Christians and non-Christians.



Christmas 2004 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall



Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science by Atul Gawande

(non-fiction) In this book of essays written while he was a surgical resident, Gawande breaks the stereotype of the cool, cutting surgeon who sees only the part and not the patient. In addition to his ability to regard his fellow humans with compassion and dignity, he writes so well that this book is hard to put down once you've begun. In his accounts of true cases I was gripped, not just by the drama, the power, and the limits of medicine, but by the sense that behind all that is known, there is the unknowable, the transcendent. He writes about this gap: "It is an imperfect science, an enterprise of constantly changing knowledge, uncertain information, fallible individuals, and at the same time lives on the

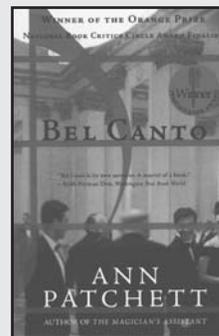
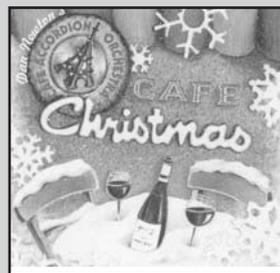
line. There is science in what we do, yes, but also habit, intuition, and sometimes plain old guessing. The gap between what we know and what we aim for persists. This gap complicates everything we do."

The chapter "Crimson Tide" describes the human phenomenon of blushing. Why is it peculiar to humans only? Though it can be described and now there is even a surgery to control it, it still can't be fully understood. He writes about "The Man Who Couldn't Stop Eating," exploring without contempt the problems and surgeries of the terribly obese. The chapter I'm trying to forget is "The Case of the Red Leg." Seventy percent of patients who get necrotizing fasciitis ("flesh-eating" bacteria) die because it progresses so fast the diagnosis often comes too late. Mere intuition once prompted him to flay open a leg, and his suspicions were confirmed. But what if he'd been wrong? Again, how to make decisions? Are they based only upon concrete observations and hard evidence? When do you go with the gut feeling? Although necrotizing fasciitis (fa-shay-EYE-tiss) may be creeping up my spine this moment, I still loved the book.

The Café Accordion

Orchestra, *Café Christmas*

(CD) Okay. Here is where I lose the sophistication and coolness I have so carefully cultivated, and which you never believed anyway. This Minneapolis group is said to perform an eclectic mix of French Mussete and vintage swing, but I think they sound like a Norwegian Lutheran polka band with a bit of cha-cha-cha and tango thrown in. As a kid I could see Dad grabbing Mom with a huge grin and swinging her around the room to this music. And what could be more appealing or amusing than Norwegians doing the polka to "Mele Kaliki Maka (Hawaiian Christmas)"? I about die. This is Christmas dance party music: from "Feliz Navidad" to "The Snowflake Waltz" to "Silver Bells Polka," they do a charming mix of instrumental and vocal tracks. I think some of you'd love this. Another bonus: you won't need to listen to "The Little Drummer Boy."



Bel Canto by Ann Patchett

(fiction) Oh, my. This novel only grows and grows in layers of complexity. I think it's one of the best. Patchett's skill as a writer takes me to a place I'll never go and hope to never experience first-hand: the Vice President's compound in a small South American country where for a few weeks a group of strangers live out a crisis as hostages and terrorists. Patchett finds universal themes so compelling we are bound to the characters—their pettiness, injustice, self-sacrifice, beauty, love, and tragedy become our own, and in the end, we know we've seen our own prejudices and need for redemption. Don't mistake me; this isn't a "Christian" novel in that sense. When Patchett writes, it is with the gift of common grace and there is a glory in it. For more on this book see Ransom's website for Marsena Konkle's review and discussion guide (www.RansomFelLowship.org/B_Patchett.html).

Christmas 2004 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall



Linford Detweiler, *Unspoken Requests*

(CD) You may recognize the name Detweiler: he and his wife are Over the Rhine. Sometimes he takes a break to do a solo album. Most of this was recorded in their

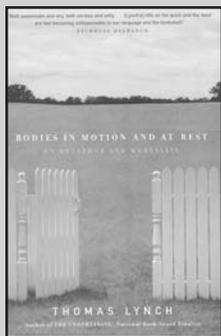
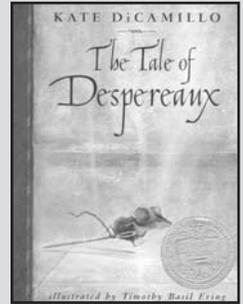
home, thus it has a spontaneous, intimate quality. He is an accomplished pianist and his playing is soothing and restful. Detweiler says: "I often wonder about God listening when there is no other audience. This unpremeditated, unspoken music may be as close as I'll ever get to what the Benedictines call contemplative prayer, a form of prayer that requires being quiet and mostly listening. I still hope to feel a little something when I sit down at the piano. I hope to hear silence as well as music. I hope to sit in the stillness of a room, maybe even in the presence of the Lord, and just be my unimpressive self. No words. The occasional grin. Painters painting, writers writing and especially new mothers nursing (all I think are forms of unspoken prayer) have expressed some gratitude for the simple, spontaneous backdrop that this music somehow provides. These tiny songs without words, these unspoken requests are for all of us who at times find that we must pray without speaking."

(order from <http://www.overtherhine.com>)

***The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo**

(children's fiction) Subtitled: "Being the story of a mouse, a princess, some soup, and a spool of thread."

DiCamillo, a young unassuming Minnesotan, won this year's Newberry award for children's literature. *Despereaux*—a mouse who gets his tail cut off as punishment for loving music and words—becomes an unlikely hero after he is thrown into a dungeon and must fight his way past sly, dangerous rats in order to save the princess. Full of subtle humor, charming stereotypes, and the pathos of the hopelessly smitten: "He was, alas, a mouse deeply in love." You need this book. Really. It's okay not to have kids around and still own it. It's a great read-aloud book—I had the pleasure of reading it to our granddaughter who would have stayed up all night to hear it. But I was the one who stayed up all night. We need stories of impossible quests, wicked enemies, unlikely heroes, and families who reconcile and forgive. Yes. Sometimes we need them as reminders of what C.S. Lewis calls "a deeper magic."



***Bodies in Motion and at Rest* by Thomas Lynch**

(non-fiction) This is the second published collection of essays (the first was *The Undertaking*) by an Irish-American, recovering alcoholic, poet, Catholic funeral director. Yes, Lynch is all that plus an antidote to the impersonal, trivialized world we've created in the west. He has his finger on what one critic calls "the bloody pulse of creation." With wry humor and poetic beauty he helps us connect the everyday business of life and death to transcendent reality.

"There is nothing like the sight of a dead human body to assist the living in separating the good days from the bad ones. Of this truth I have some experience. Many's the day I would awaken in gloom—a darkness left over from a dream or the night's drinking or a dread of the day I was awakening to. The moments spent before the mirror while tending to my toilet did nothing to lessen the lessons that Time is certainly not on our side, nor does it heal more wounds than it opens. The ever-retreating hairline, the whitening of one's beard and mustache, the bleeding gums, the basal cell carcinomas, the boils, and blisters and bags under the eyes, the belly gone soft, the withering member, the hemorrhoids and hematomas, the varicosities and local edemas, the puff, the paunch, the wrecked version of one's former self that presents itself most mornings, are enough to render most sane men suicidal... It was there, in the parlors of the funeral home—my daily stations with the local lately dead—that the darkness would often give way to light."

He was a featured author at the last Calvin College Festival of Faith & Writing and his lecture had us laughing at his honesty and irreverence, but in the end I sat weeping because he tells the truth with beauty. His writing is as good. I highly recommend his book.

Final Notes

Totally Random Thoughts on Gifts and Giving

The Humvee-Supersize-Me Gift. From an annual Christmas letter: “Dad needed a great toy to play with whenever work became too much—so Mom convinced him to buy a Hummer. Anyone who watches CSI-Miami knows the silver Hummer that no real-life forensic scientist could afford. Dad’s can be seen at the local Mexican restaurant every Friday night and at many Salvation Army stores. Mom and Dad manage to take time to cull through the cheap goodies at a wide variety of thrift stores.”

Sacrificial Gift. A pastor friend of ours says that his church helped a refugee family. The family, war-torn and penniless, arrived here with little more than broken lives and memories. They weren’t Christians, but after being hosted and helped in so many ways over the months, the wife brought a loaf of homemade bread for communion every Sunday—a small way of saying thanks. Then one week she presented the church with a communion tablecloth on which she had beautifully, meticulously embroidered the cross of Christ with his body upon it. The first Sunday it appeared, a family looking for a new church attended. They left the service, offended. At the door, they confronted the pastor on the doctrinal error of depicting Christ still on the cross. He replied, “We made the decision to risk offending Christians rather than alienating non-Christians.” Unimpressed, the family joined another church.

What Could I Give? I wish I could give something to the Lost Boys of Africa. Which probably sounds about as profound as... “I’d like to give the World a Coke...” I thought of them especially when we traveled through Colorado along the San Cristobal River. It’s a narrow river gorge with mountains rising thousands of feet on either side. The windy gravel road follows the edge of the valley and all along you look down to the water which flows sometimes deep and dark, other times ruffling over rocks and ledges. There are log houses built into cliffs, and cabins in green meadows where wild asters and desert marigolds nod their heads under a sky so turquoise you think, now that color is unreal—if an artist painted it, I wouldn’t believe it. I never tired of anticipating the next vista. Then you round the bend and a twenty foot high wooden fence runs along the very edge of the road for a mile. Someone wealthy enough to buy the view has totally cut it off. God forbid our eyes should light upon the home of whoever lives there, or catch the merest glimpse of the beautiful land and the river which lies below. Few could afford to line their property in this way and I felt affronted. What right have they to cut off a harmless, passing glance? It made me think of the poor, the meek in Spirit who will inherit the earth.

In the new heaven and earth, where the first will be last, maybe God will let me help give away land. I will give this piece to the Lost Boys who walked a thousand miles across the desert to escape death, rape, and carnage, searching for a new home and found none. I wish I could be home for them, be mother and father to them. I feel ineffective and useless, but I pray for them, and for other suffering children who aren’t so highly publicized.

That’s it from Toad Hall.

Blessings & Noel,

Marge



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.

Marsena Konkle
Managing Editor

Receive *Notes from Toad Hall* (quarterly) and *Critique* (a newsletter written nine times per year by my husband, Denis) by requesting to be added to Ransom’s mailing list. Donors to Ransom Fellowship, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-deductible ministry, are added to the mailing list automatically.

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