Notes from TOaD Hall



Tsunami Crash

My husband may have had cause to find a concubine. Of course, I would have ignored the cause and made him my ticket to martyrdom followed by sainthood. I would have been forced to move far away, change my name to Therese, live in a room with a single light bulb (you've no idea how much I hate overhead lighting), and work as a clerk at Wal-Mart.

May have had—past perfect tense. That was last December; it's better now that I'm speaking in a normal voice instead of the Schnauzer whine I'd adopted. It was our first Christmas alone, ever;

and I'd like to think that was partly to blame for my worse than usual behavior. Our children are spread out now, and the tradition of coming home; home meaning where, we, Mom and Dad live, isn't easy. Knowing this, last summer, I magnanimously set our children free, and to my surprise they took me up on the offer; like they were sweetly waiting for me, and I had just caught on. Or up.

Marsena and Jeff, being closest to us in the Chicago area,

invited us to visit them. We took our work and showed up a week before Christmas, celebrating early, knowing they would need to be in Wisconsin with Jeff's family for the 24th and 25th. Midweek, Denis got sick and crabby

with a cold, so he mostly stayed upstairs working on a seminary course. Then we had a disagreement about something so silly I can't tell you about it, but it formed an icy silence between us.

I sat by myself in the living room, listening to carols in the background, and looking out on the frozen lake, where I'd been skating every night with Jeff. Chickadees darted to the bird feeder, and juncos, their feathers puffed against the cold, hopped across the snow looking for seeds. I tried hard not to pity myself, as I watched the birds and people chase one another around the lake, building a bonfire, and then leaving, I knew, to eat turkey and dressing with their families. I thought of my grandchildren opening their presents in soft candle-light, gratefully thanking me for my thoughtful, educational, morefun-than-a-box-of-monkeys gifts. I listened to Leonard Cohen sing "Anthem:" "There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in. That's how the light gets in..." I wondered how light was going to penetrate my cracks. I am self-centered, just in general; biting into as many assorted chocolates as necessary to find my favorite, hiding a book from Denis so I can read it

eff, being closnicago area,

Tell me. Can God be a

Tell me. Can God be at once holy, furious, tender, merciful? What is the meaning of the tsunami? Have we any right to lift our voice in complaint or sorrow ever again?

myself, never filling the car with gas, resenting Philip Yancy's good writing...and many other things. I thought how The Incarnation might not mean a thing to me if I had to sit on the couch alone with my best friend mad at me.

That's' what I was doing right before or during the tsunami which crashed through the Indian Ocean.

The next day while thousands of people rolled in the ocean, I sat in a comfortable pew listening to Ewan Kennedy's good sermon: "The Love of God Shown in Christmas: the Gift We Need." I was busy repenting, feeling hopeful, and happy to receive The Gift I needed. It helped Denis and I get mended. More than mended. I was mollified, rolling in love again. That was before reports filtered, then flooded across the world.

Tell Me, If You Can

Then the international toll of the dead began. Day after day we witnessed the accounting.

How was it possible to live a common, ordinary life knowing thousands and thousands had fallen into death and grief? Who would give me permission to eat an entire chicken leg, wear thick socks warmed on the radiator, and sleep beneath a blue, polar-tech blanket with a man who loves me? Can it be right to grow alarmed because Kaiden has pneumonia, ear infections, and high blood counts? What's one sick, two-year old twin when so many little ones will never be back? Or what was one case of diarrhea and a fight with your spouse? Shame on me. I gave myself a mental slap. Everyday joys and sufferings are insignificant, meaningless, I said.

Tell me. Can God be at once

holy, furious, tender, merciful? I asked God, what is the meaning of the tsunami? Have we any right to lift our voice in complaint or

sorrow ever again?

Such ancient questions. It's like I forget the theology I claim to know, and this tragedy revealed something new and horrifying about God. I wanted wise voices to sort the tsunami for me, to give me comfort and reasons to live, even if a whole bunch remain unknowable.

Poets Ask The Best Questions

"Woman Why Are You Weeping?"
What is Brahman? I don't know
Brahman.

I don't know saccidandana, the bliss of the absolute and unknowable. I only know that I have lost the Lord in whose image I was made.

Whom shall I thank for this pear, sweet and white? Food is God, Prasadam.

God's mercy. But who is this God? The one who is not this, not that?

Shall the fire answer my fears and vapors?

The fire cares nothing for my illness, nor does Brahma, the creator, nor Shiva who sees

evil with his terrible third eye; Vishnu, the protector, does not protect me.

Looking at them* I lose my place.
I don't know why I was born, or why
I live in a house in New England, or
why I am

a visitor with heavy luggage giving lectures

for the State Department. Why am I not tap-tapping with my fingernail on the rolled-up window of a white Government car

a baby in my arms, drugged to look feverish?

[*them, meaning the people of India, not the gods.]

The voice of Jane Kenyon. It's hardly fair to quote part of her poem and not the whole. I'm sorry to do it. (Consider getting her book A Hundred White Daffodils, a collection of essays, interviews and a bit of poetry.) In this poem Jane mourns her loss of the comfort of Jesus

after a trip to India.
Her sad questions are
mine. We are struck by
the inadequacy of
Hinduism, but wonder at
our own privilege in the
face of suffering.

Czeslaw Milosz, the wonderful Lithuanian poet, offers a suggestion at the end of bewildering questions.

"4. How Could You"

It's beyond my understanding.

How could you create such a world,

Alien to the human heart, pitiless,

In which monsters copulate, and death

Is the numb guardian of time.

I am unable to believe that You wanted it.

There must have been some precosmic catastrophe,

A victory of the forces of inertia, stronger than Your Will.

A wandering rabbi who called You his Father.

A man defenseless against the laws and the beasts of this earth.

Disgraced, despairing, Let him help me In my prayers to You.

[From Second Space: New Poems by Czeslaw Milosz, HarperCollins, 2004]

The Rabbi Says

The Sunday after the tsunami, a woman at church told me the highest death toll from the tsunami hit the coasts where people were the most evil. I was speechless.

When Jesus was told in Luke 13: 1-5 about the Galileans whose blood Pilate mixed with their sacrifices, they implied the victims must have been very bad. (That kind of sacrilege made the Jews crazy.) What else could explain this awful thing other than that the sins of the dead must have been great enough to justify the defilement?

Jesus so totally destroys that thread. He uses another example of

18 men killed by a tower collapse in Siloam. "Were they worse offenders than all who live in Jerusalem," he asks? "No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

He was saying, it doesn't matter who or where. You're not better than or less sinful because the tsunami didn't hit your beloved shore. We're all in danger of a much greater destruction

unless we repent.

Okay. That helps a little. I was repenting when the tsunami happened. (See above.) I know sin and death have a hold on me. Typical: the woman at church made me disproportionately angry, and she'd probably only been listening to Christian radio. I wish it were otherwise, but along with the rest of humankind, I'm never quite done repenting.



"We cannot always say that God brought [suffering]. It's not always directly from Him. [It] can be a working out of real history, a history that is abnormal because of man's sin in general."

Can I Shout at God

One of Job's mistakes, Francis Schaeffer says, is that he shouts against God as though to accuse him of using people as puppets or machines. "The Bible insists that history is real, with a true cause and effect in itself. When the tree is blown down on the mountain, the Christian does not say, 'God knocked the tree down.' The consistent pantheist must say that, but not the Christian. The Christian says the wind blew the tree down, because that's the way God made the world.

"We cannot always say that God brought [suffering]. It's not always directly from Him. [It] can be a working out of real history, a history that is abnormal because of man's sin in general."

I can understand Job saying, So, God, why aren't you balancing the books now? Schaeffer points out that, "In Job's case, the books were balanced in this life—in the end. [It's like the country western song played backwards, you get sober, your wife comes home and you find your dog.] Sometimes, in my case and in yours, this may happen; often it won't. That doesn't change the message of the word of God...we must remember we are creatures in the total reality of

history. And as such, I simply do not know enough to shout at God." [The International Newsletter of L'Abri, Spring 2005]

"Knowing enough" would include seeing the naked human heart, all its thoughts and intentions, and a total understanding of nature and history. I'm silenced.

Steve Calls

On the phone, Steve Garber tells me a friend of his, a husband, a father of four children still at home, has taken his life. Another tsunami. I could tell Steve was tired and burdened. What comforts you, I cry out? How do we comfort others? He says, "Well, dear sister, I often think how much more difficult it would be to remain a Christian without John chapter 11."

Lazarus is dead and the Son of God is weeping. It's evidence of Jesus' choice to stay with us through pain and suffering though he could have been anywhere else. This is Milosz' wandering rabbi, the one who helps us pray, who will one day have victory over all catastrophe.

On A Good Day in Real History

"Christian faith knows that both natural disaster and human sin are part of the interim between the Fall that corrupted God's very good creation and the glorious goal toward which history is moving. (Romans 8:19-22)... The problem was so great that the Trinity offered a radical solution: the death of the Son of God for the life of the world... The discussion of God's control over people and nature today must not be separated from God's victory at the end of history. At the center of this story—at the pivotal point in the narrative—is Jesus, with his

arms outstretched."

[From Christianity Today Editorial, Feb. 2005]

That's how I see Jesus best. Come, he says, all you who are weary and burdened: You mothers who've washed the crib sheets, yet again,



because your two-year old twins peed on them. You children asleep with teddy bears. You who fell on the kitchen floor and can't rise again. Come, you men bent over your computers late at night with the

We dance like happy calves escaping the barn. Not studied, practiced grace, just spontaneous running and splay-legged jumping.

Visa bill. And come, you who don't know what tomorrow will bring.

A Table Set

I wish reasons to believe were a little more precise, but this will do for now. I pray more quietly, as Jesus taught us: Give us this day our daily bread; thank you for the table you've prepared for me in the presence of my enemies.

I pull through the drive-up at Dunn Bros Coffee and order an Americano using all the coins Denis has carefully saved in the console. Lovely—and no concubines in sight. I finish sewing a comforter for Anson, my grandson—red sailboats on one side, navy-blue flannel on the other. I'm sad for my friend whose mother is gone, died after months of suffering. I mourn for the woman pregnant with triplets who chose to abort the twins and keep The One. Neo? No, way. And what will The One think when he grows up and learns

his Twin Siblings were sacrificed by his mother? My granddaughter, Manessah calls. I'm reminded her name means God has helped me in my sorrow. She tells me all her friends are coming to her birthday party and they are dying their hair blue, won't that be special? I doubt her mom thinks so.

We are in Concord, NC, at Providence Presbyterian Church doing a weekend conference and staying with the Baldwins (Steve is pastor). Karen and daughter Rachel made anocchi (pronounced neeokee). I watch as they gently knead a dough of flour and potato, roll it into snakes and cut the dough into tender little chunks the size of fat. baby mice. Rachel presses a fork against each one leaving a tiny tread mark "to capture the butter." Simmered, drained, and mixed with melted butter and sage, newly plucked from the garden. We sit down together, hold hands, say grace, and eat gnocchi, my new favorite comfort food.

Graceless & Bounding

Back to Ewan's sermon on The Gift You Need. He ended with Malachi 4:2 "But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall." That's perfect.

I've released calves from their stalls and know how they look, what they do. It's funny that Malachi chooses them to describe us. I'd rather be let out like a Bolshoi dancer from the wings of a stage, you know? No such luck, we dance like happy calves escaping the barn. Not studied, practiced grace, just spontaneous running and splaylegged jumping, tails in the air like skinny wands.

I think we can do some of this, occasionally dance like calves and take care of each other. And trust, as my friend Nancy Snyder says, that when, or if, disaster washes up on our doorstep, we will be given

the wisdom to choose in that moment what to do. Remember, too, God never staked the success of salvation on us, that's been his job from the beginning.

You said something like that,
didn't you, Nancy?

Ransom Notes

Looking Back

November 2004, Manor House, England. We spent eleven days at the English L'Abri, ministering alongside the Workers, being part of a community of kindred spirits, observing discussions, and getting to know students. It was like oasis-time, in a way. Though extremely intense, it was wonderful to be reminded of how fundamentally life-changing it is to work, live, and study together in community. It's something this generation yearns for.

Within the Manor House, which is huge (days after arriving, I was still lost, confused by that door or this stairway), beautiful and cold, we stayed in Dawn Dahl's little "Back Flat." Thermostats were set low because of the high cost of heat, but Dawn's flat got no heat at all due to some ancient complexity. I was seriously colder than I've ever been in my life, and I grew up in Northern Minnesota on the Canadian border and am proud of being tough; yes, even macho. I was a shivering, whimpering idiot in England. Huddling over a cup of latte or hot tea and eagerly jumping into bed at night with Denis were definite highlights.

I can't say how much more I loved Dawn for being with her and observing her cheerful spirit and ministry to others. She says

"excellent" about every other word, and the thing is, she means it. The students love her, especially the ones she tutors. I have a memory of sitting in her tiny kitchen, crowded around a small table with a large vase of flowers dropping petals, cups, books, scraps of paper with poetry, odd little packets of this and that, and cutting some fantastic, smelly cheese to spread



on crackers. There were about six of us listening to favorite music groups, telling what made them special, which led to constant derisive laughter and intimate revelations. In a place completely devoid of decorator gilt, but full of authentic, ordinary beauty; a place, some would even say, of poverty, I saw the glory of God revealed.

There were about thirty students at English L'Abri for that term. All ages, Christian and non, from various countries. Here are a few reasons why they came:

- ~To recover from the months'-long care of a roommate who died of cancer. To seek permission to mourn and ask questions about suffering.
- ~To think and pray about where and what God wants you to be after you lost your dream job which turned out to be a disappointment anyway.
- ~Because you'd been in a rock band, addicted to heroin, living on the streets, suddenly converted to Christ, but still carrying wounds too deep to safely look at without the help of wise, loving community.
- ~To learn that cutting and suicide was not the only alternative to living.
- ~To complete your religious education because this was what your American parents wanted you to do.
- ~Because you were homeless and had nowhere else to go, but had become a Christian in the armed services and were thinking of becoming a monk.
- ~To appraise the long term effect of your mother divorcing your father for the love of another woman.
- ~Because God brought you and you've no idea why.
- ~To study and see whether Christianity had anything relevant to say about the arts.

Both Denis and I enjoyed lecturing at English L'Abri. I also gave a reading from my manuscript, which was inordinately satisfying when students from different countries responded eagerly to my memoir set in such a provincially isolated part of the U.S. Denis preached at the International Presbyterian Church near L'Abri. They are presently without a pastor, and Denis was informally invited to become interim pastor. Tempting, but not possible.

Denis helped plan and lead a film festival held at the local city hall. It included eight movies (Glorious! He said.) over three days for a multi-cultural audience of 100-120, ranging in age from late teens to eighty-three. He always thought a film festival would be a powerful means to help people engage ideas that matter, but having experienced it, he realized he underestimated the power of such an event. One of the best proofs was that the L'Abri students who had worked so hard throughout the weekend preparing meals and teas, cleaning up after, and participating in the festival asked at the end if we couldn't extend it another day just for them.

Another example: a student from Korea, a non-Christian was so quiet and withdrawn it was difficult to be sure you understood his doubts about Christianity. He was at every film, and surprisingly wept throughout the last one, A Man for All Seasons. We never would've guessed that particular story would break his heart. As we left the next morning, we knew that being in community meant the young man's tutor would follow up with him.



The films we showed at the festival included: Heaven, The Third Man, The Station Agent, Thirteen Conversations About One Thing, Wit, Run Lola Run, Whale Rider,

and A Man for all Seasons. Most of these hadn't been widely seen in England, so they prompted lively discussion.

We've been invited to return again next November to do another film festival, which would be lovely. This past year Ransom was able to pay our way there and back, but that may not be financially possible to do again this year. L'Abri, has always been a model for us: They don't do fund-raising, preferring to simply pray and trust that God will provide for the work he's called them to do. So, we'll continue working and watching as God directs our paths in ways we can't always imagine.

Gnocchi

2 1/4 pounds potatoes 1 3/4 cups flour (about) pinch of salt

Steam potatoes until tender but firm. Peel and mash while they're still hot. (A ricer works well for the right texture.) Season with salt and work in enough flour to obtain a firm, smooth, nonsticky dough (how much depends on how moist the potatoes are). Dough should feel very tender, not at all like bread. Roll into snakes as thick as your finger, cut into one-inch pieces. Gently score pieces with a fork.

Cook in salted boiling water. Remove with slotted spoon a minute or two after they rise to surface. Drain well. Serve with a few leaves of fresh sage, melted butter and Parmigiano cheese.

I either didn't work in enough flour or boiled mine too long and they were dangerously close to becoming mush. But the flavor was wonderful.

Finances

Too Costly. I err in both giving and receiving. Recently I sent a gift to a ministry, wished it were more, and apologized for its smallness. I received a letter back from the director of the organization, who thanked me, then soundly scolded me for such terrible theology—the widow's mite and all. (Thanks, Luke, you give glory to God.) Then we received a gift from a college student in Arkansas, and I wanted to send it back because I know how costly it was for her. (Hannah, thank you so much. You are a gift of God to us.) In either case I'm in want of humility. Thanks to all of you who so graciously give to our ministry.

Coming Up

March 24, Covenant Seminary, St. Louis. Denis guest lectures in a class taught by Donald Guthrie.

April 1 - 3, The Three Village Church, Long Island, NY. Denis will give a conference on living faithfully in our post-Christian. For more information, email Matt Woodley (mattwoodley@mail.3vc.org).

April 10 - May 22, Trinity Presbyterian Church, Rochester, MN. Denis will teach an adult Sunday school series.

May 19, Heart of the Matter Borders Lecture, Minneapolis, MN. Denis will give "Person, Android, or Machine? Visions of Humanity in Science Fiction Movies." Lecture followed by discussion. For location and time, contact them online (www.hotm.org).

Family Notes

Ah, holidays. We left English L'Abri in Dawn's little car, winding through the

countryside to Gatwick. We flew to Nice, France, on EasyJet, the cattlecar airlines; our friends alarmingly call it EvilJet. We stayed in Vence, the village where the Hilmans live. Kev's job took them there. We wallowed in five days of vacation.

From my journal: "I stopped shivering. It's warm Mediterranean color everywhere: salmon, pink, ochre, white stone, red tile roofs, and blue

sky. Our little hotel inside the old town wall even has turquoise shutters. Sun streams through open windows into our tiny room, and we look down on a real courtyard with buff-colored stones, climbing bougainvilleas, and a few flowers still bloom.

"Next morning. We can hear the church bells of St. Mary's ring the

time; it's a thirteenth century cathedral just over the roof tops of the adjoining flats. It has a Marc Chagall mosaic we want to see. I

began the day with Psalm reading and prayer. What a fine thing to receive a few days of rest and pleasure from God. For it to be okay. To love croissants and café creme, Kevin, Ann, music, fromage.

"Who would have thought? I'm fascinated by the Pizza Truck parked on a side street. The owner has a wood-fired oven in the back of this van and makes the best pizza EVER. When he feels like it. More surprising is the tiramisu made by his wife in individual servings on a very un-French-like, plastic throw-away container. In the U.S. it'd taste like coolwhip, ding-dongs, and fake rum, but this is so heavenly, I could eat dozens of them. We pick up fresh bread on our way to supper. It's still warm and Denis bites off the end. Bakeries, patisseries are everywhere. Everywhere. We enjoy dinners with the Hilmans, hours of eating and talking. They show us the French in a new way.

The common, everyday evening is spent leisurely eating, extending the time just being together with family and friends. The French, I learn, think Americans are crazy. Crazy for our pace of life and our endless acquisition of things, more and bigger. I remembered Dawn's kitchen where she regularly prepares meals for twelve people in a space about the size of an EvilJet bathroom."

Okay, I think, maybe my faded Formica counters and chipped metal cabinets at Toad Hall will do a while longer.

We've been gone for six days to Massachusetts. One of our aunts died suddenly. Aunt B was a widow without children, and we've always fancied ourselves surrogate son and daughter. For eighty-six years she's lived in the strictest of New England reserve and privacy, but we'll miss her irrepressible humor and perfect handwriting. In an old box of papers we found her college graduation photo; she was a stunning 1940's beauty. That's maybe how she'll look at the Resurrection, restored and healed way beyond brokenness. We watch our aunts and try to learn wisdom. Can we grow old grace-filled, trusting God to the end? Or will we be fright-filled, opinionated, aging brats? Help us, God.

Marsena was in Massachusetts staying with Aunt Ruth when Aunt B died. She'd been there for a month to help Aunt B get moved into assisted living. Jeff was doing what he could to support Marsena long-distance. Aunt B's sudden departure for heaven made us thankful for God's timing... for Marsena to be there... for Aunt Ruth not to be alone. Marsena's help in planning the funeral and all the details made me want to tell everyone: That's my daughter, you know. These events have taken a chunk of her heart and life. I think she's tired. I know she, too, is behind schedule. When she got back this week, she needed to work on this issue of *Notes* and an issue of *Critique*. She is editing her novel for publication in 2006. Aunt Ruth is coming home with her for a visit, perhaps to live. If you think of it, pray for her.

Death isn't the only thing that puts people behind their carefully planned schedules. Everyone faces unexpected interruptions that leave us anxious and tired. What makes me think we're so special we get excluded from these tasty blessings, I ask myself? Slap, slap. So late this month we make another trip to MA to tie up the loose ends. Denis left this morning for the L'Abri conference in St. Louis while I'm staying home to "catch up." Meaning, I reconcile bank statements or die. Taxes are due. *

Final Notes

Two Things on Perspective

I love this. An exerpt from *Rolling Stone's* interview of Barack Obama, the new Democratic senator from Illinois after the election:

- Q. Are you worried that you've rocketed to fame almost overnight and yet your career in Washington hasn't even started?
 - A. Are you saying I'm set for a fall?
- Q. No, but you must wonder if you've peaked too early. The media like to burn through their heroes quickly.
- A. I don't mean to insult you, but the media can only drag you down if you take it seriously.
- Q. What advice do you have for people who feel hopeless after the Kerry loss?
- A. Get over it. Go to the movies, go to the park, go on a date—get some perspective. Losing an election is not a tragedy. Tragedies are my mom getting cancer at fifty-three and dying in six months.



This, too. Writer and gardener Henry Mitchell says, "There are no green thumbs or black thumbs. There are only gardeners and non-gardeners. Gardeners are the ones who ruin after ruin get on with the high defiance of nature herself, creating in the very face of her chaos and tornado the bower of roses and a pride of irises."

So, 'til He comes again, I'm gardening my head off. That's it from Toad Hall.

1411.

Warmly,

Marrie Margie Haack



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

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