

Notes from TOaD HaLL

Issue #1 - 2006
Still Winter



Psalms in the Dark

I've always thought of myself as intuitive because that is how I score on all personality tests. It is supposed to bless me with clarity of perception in the inner unconscious world, but it seems doubtful that I put that intuition to very good use. If I did, wouldn't I be perceptive enough to avoid useless tests of rationally constructed logic? Consider the following.

There is this growing popularity of Sudoku, the Japanese number puzzles, which at first I thought was just the fruit of poisonous minds.

	7		4		3		8	
		2	8	7	1	4		
	6						1	
			9		8			
5								2
			1		5			
	5							9
		3	5	8	4	7		
	8		3		7			4

Sudoku Puzzle

Or at least ones without enough to do. Then they began appearing in our daily newspaper. After ignoring them for about seven months, I tried one and finished it in twelve minutes. I was so surprised and pleased with myself, I thought I might take that IQ test on mensa.org and find out if it cost anything to join them. The next night as I was relaxing in my chair with the sound track from *Grizzly Man* softly playing, and my husband quietly reading a seminary text book, I tore out Tuesday's Sudoku and almost finished it before bedtime.

After supper on Wednesday I began my third Sudoku with a jaunty confidence. Two and a half hours later Denis begged me to please come to bed. I did, but I took it with me and worked on it for another hour without adding a single number. Only then did I notice five stars at the bottom of the puzzle with three of them shaded. A crack of light entered my darkened mind: Oh. This indicates difficulty factor. The one in my hand was a 3-star. The previous night's (with solution) was printed at the bottom; it had only been a 2-star. With logic gaining momentum despite intuition, it occurred to me that as the week goes by the puzzles increase in difficulty sort of like the *NYT Crosswords* so that by the time you get to the weekend they're so hard you want to pay your own way to New York, find the editor, and force him to eat iceberg lettuce and Velveeta cheese until he can give you an eight letter word for "rugged out-

door clothing." Carharts! Idiot! As ANYONE north of Minneapolis would know. And I don't want to hear, my friend, how you can do it in ten minutes while blogging, writing a movie review, and flirting with the barista. By then I was crushed, in addition to feeling slightly crazy. But I rallied and told myself, "You've always despised logic, so why in the name of all your precious hormones don't you just intuit the solution? A few numbers should not defeat you."

Have you ever considered, even for one second, praying that God would help you finish a puzzle? Well. Okay. Maybe you haven't. But what about scoring a three-pointer from mid-court, or beating a red light? Or shooting a trophy buck? You know it's the same thing.

At 11:30 pm Denis shut the light on his side and raised an eyebrow at me. I held the paper out for us to observe—it was covered with hundreds and hundreds of teeny, tiny numbers written in patterns, grids, and graphs. Suddenly, it was so scary because there it was: *A Beautiful Mind*! Remember that scene from the movie when the door of John Forbes Nash's office opens and on every wall, floor to ceiling, are little papers with hand-written numbers and formulas, and you suddenly understood how ill he was, even though he was a genius? This was my mind on paper and it was not well. I shrieked, threw the paper and pen across the room, and turned off the light.

CALM DOWN

In the dark I recalled a favorite Psalm.

*My heart is not proud, O
LORD, my eyes are not
haughty;
I do not concern myself with
great matters or things
too wonderful for me.
But I have stilled and qui-
eted my soul;
Like a weaned child with its
mother,
Like a weaned child is my
soul within me.
O Israel, put your hope in
the LORD both now and
forevermore.*

— Psalm 131

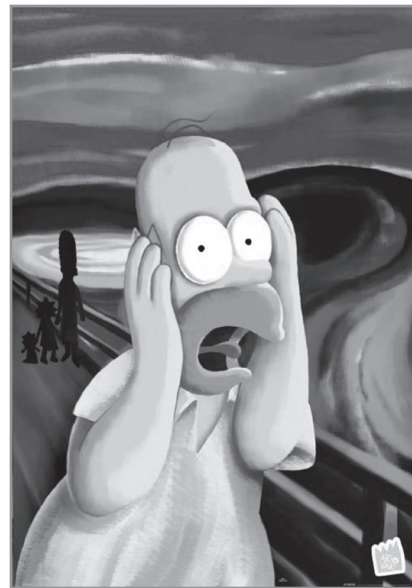
Of course, Sudoku is only a symptom—a metaphor of what's more generally wrong with me. As a mother I understand weaning a child. My baby has no idea why I've made her stop doing her favorite thing in all the world. But in order to grow she must give it up. I don't love her

any less. I still encircle my arms about her and look at her with shining eyes. Finally she quits her wriggling demand for milk and relaxes with her head on my breast. Sometimes it takes weeks.

There's nothing wrong with solving Sudoku puzzles. It's just that for the most part, I can't. In a similar way, I often try to fix things too great for me.

I push and strain

trying to clean up the messes of life and am discouraged when I can't. Often I want to ask God exactly what he thinks he's doing here. But I am abjured by David to give up my demands. We must accept that if we minister and live in the real world there will always be certain matters in life that escape human



My Scary Mind

solution—matters not resolved by efficient, practical minds or by sensitive insight either. I am redirected to quietness. To calming my soul. David turns away from inner conflict, and adjusts his focus outward: He addresses his people, (“O, Israel”) It’s a place where we stand together in community, with the body of Christ, and we resolve to hope in the Lord forever and watch for glory to be revealed. We can never be certain of when or how God will appear as the One who is able to do “immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.” (Eph. 3:20)

The next day’s paper had a 5-star Sudoku—the most difficult. I looked at it and calmly said: “I will not do this to myself ever again.” And I put it in the trash. I think that’s being weaned? Sometimes it takes years, but slowly I bend my head to God’s shoulder and rest—even as I rejoice that Jessica, who is a bright, diligent L’Abri helper, says 3x3s are so easy she needs to do 4x4s to be challenged in the slightest. Then she adds, “Sudoku is something I can do without thinking at all, the answers are just obvious.”

That is something far “too wonderful for me.”

FALLING HOUSE

Last night Denis told me we need to save more money. Then he got a far-away look in his eye like any minute he was going to excrete a kidney stone or something. It made me a little nervous. But when he said we need to make some repairs on the house, I panicked. I’m usually the one who keeps a list of the parts of our house looking seedy and down-trodden. Like the stair-well, which fortunately I can now ignore because it’s so high I’ve been able to train myself not to look up at the plaster dangling off the ceiling in large flakes. Or worry about them lacerating my skull if they fall when the front door slams. As long as the dishwasher is loaded properly

and I don’t leave too many blankets flung about the living room, Denis is fairly content. So I held my breath and tried to imagine what was so bad he wanted to save money for it. I tried to keep my voice level.

“So what repairs did you have in mind?” I was hoping it was just the bathroom window, which we already agreed needs to be replaced because it no longer rolls in tight against the



“I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me.”

frame. When it was stuck a couple of summers ago, I stripped the threads of the handle by gripping it with both hands and cranking as hard as I could. Now you can see a tiny strip of skylight all around it if you look closely at the edge. And worse, you can feel cold air pour into the shower when you stand there in the morning waiting for that blast of hot water to save you.

Anyway, that window is old and warped—one of those Anderson awning windows so it can’t be completely my fault. (We *should* buy Marvin Windows, not just out of loyalty to our son, Jerem, who works for Marvin’s, but because they make the very best windows in the whole world. However, they cost that much, too.) We had a man from Larson’s Windows out for an estimate last week. He’s so good at what he does. Just stood in our bathtub, whipped out his measurer, squinted his eye and said

\$850.00. Just like that. When we hesitated over triple thermal pane glass he said, okay, a hundred dollars less, but you won’t want to go cheaper than that. Er, I guess a guy could save a little more with a slider instead of a roll-out.

It wasn’t the window that was bothering Denis. He told me, *sotto voce*, that before the L’Abri conference in mid-February, he’d gone up

to the attic where we store boxes of his out-of-print book: *The Rest of Success*. A number of years ago the publisher let us buy up remainders. I don’t mean to get side-tracked. But do you see the irony of that? “The Rest of Success?” Still, we’re so lucky to have this big attic that is the third floor of our house and can hold so much stuff it’s going to kill our kids when we die because they’re going to have to stand up there wondering why I saved those lamp shades. BECAUSE, I’ll tell you now. They’re antique 1930’s

Flapper-girl bedroom lamp shades, and could be worth a lot of money. But probably not enough to repair the roof.

Anyway, up in the attic Denis noticed that two full boxes of books are completely soaked with water. WHAT?! I wanted to scream. For many thousands, we just had our roof REPLACED five years ago! I needed to breathe into a paper bag.

Denis tried to calm me saying: It’s winter. No rain right now. We’ll wait and I’ll go up there and try to see where it’s coming in the next time it rains.

Are you kidding? This is Minnesota! Due to global warming, have you not noticed the two inches of rain we got in early January? Or the snow that’s fallen and melted about twenty times this winter instead of remaining on the ground until Memorial Day?

In bed that night I stared at the



Ruined

ceiling. *The Rest of Success* boxes are sitting right above us. I can't stand this breach in the very roof over our heads. It's like being told you have a mushroom growing out of your foot and the doctors will keep an eye on it until it begins to giving off spores and showing signs of spreading to your calf, then they'll see if they can remove it. Of course by then it will be too late and you will die.

I thought of the things we think we need. New shoes because my heel is hurting, which, when I looked on the web, Dr. Footdoctor said was *plantar fasciitis*, oh great. A new car, because how long can our ten year old Taurus keep driving across country? I can keep on slamming the glove box shut. So what if it spontaneously falls open on my knees about five times a week? It's not much to ask when the roof needs fixing.

SONGS OF JOY

For some mysterious reason the Psalm that scrolled across the ceiling that night was both comforting and beautiful.

*Blessed are those you
choose and bring near to
live in your courts!
We are filled with the good
things of your house, of
your holy temple.
You answer us with awesome
deeds of righteousness, O
God our Savior,
The hope of all the ends of
the earth and of the far-
thest seas,*

*Who formed the mountains
by your power, hav-
ing armed yourself with
strength,*

*Who stilled the roaring of
the seas, the roaring of
their waves, and the tur-
moil of the nations.*

*Those living far away fear
your wonders;*

*Where morning dawns and
evening fades you call
forth songs of joy.*

— Psalm 65

By his Word and his unfailing provision year after year, I am utterly convinced of God's care for His people and of our ultimate destination. But I feel convicted by lack of joy. There is a Haiku poetry feeling to part of the Psalm—a powerful simplicity that condenses and intensifies the presence of God everywhere.

*Where morning dawns
And evening fades
You call forth songs
Of joy.*

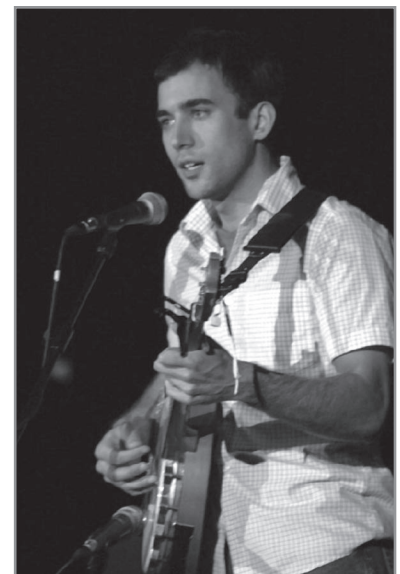
Farther than my eye can see, horizon to horizon, if we listen, we can hear God, coaxing us, inviting us to sing. Sufjan Stevens is one who hears songs of joy. (Sufjan's brilliant, creative music defies categories and is not found on the Praise Music scene.) He completely redeems, what for me was an — I'm sorry — annoying old hymn. With banjo and simple vocals, so quiet, so profound, he sings "Come Thou Fount." I didn't mean to cry, to be taken by joy with a hymn I knew so well and formerly resented from my childhood. Every word of every verse came back unbidden.

*Come thou fount of every
blessing, tune my heart
to sing thy grace.
Streams of mercy never
ceasing call for songs of
loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious
sonnet sung by flaming
tongues above.*

*Praise the mount I'm fixed
upon it. Mount of thy
unchanging love."*
(Verse 1.)

[Sufjan's version can be downloaded free and legal from <http://www.chattablogs.com/quintus/archives/019666.html> from Hark, a Christmas album.]

It's not as though Psalm 65 or "Come Thou Fount" repairs our roof or heals my friend's body which is being hijacked by cancer. I know that. It is meant to give sorely needed hope and perspective. It invites us to look beyond the confines of our own lives and be assured that even if it's the end of a particular chapter of life, it is simply not the end of the story. Now and then we catch glimpsers of another dimension all around us—a stream in the desert, a child snatched from danger, a song of joy. Sometimes in small ordinary ways we experience the presence of God, as in the ability to get out of bed in the morning and keep our children alive. Other times we know for certain in the way a particular thing has fallen out, by its timing and our lack of control over it, that a we've witnessed an unusual gift of grace. A miracle really, though we hesitate to call it that. ☹



Sufjan Stevens

Ransom Notes

Coming Up

April 4. Farmington, MN. Margie will teach Bible Study for the women of presbytery.

April 19. LaCrosse, WI. Hope Lecture Series at 1st Presbyterian. Margie gives "Journey of a Disfigured Soul." Contact: Don Campbell at dl2campbell@charter.net for more info.

April 27 -30. Tallahassee, FL. Wildwood Church. Denis & Margie do a spring conference: "Loving God in a World Gone Awry." Contact at web site: www.wildwoodpca.org.

May 12-14 Boise, ID. Denis & Margie will do a weekend conference. For further info. contact Shelton Woods at swoods@boisestate.edu.

June 2-11. Ghana. Denis joins Covenant Seminary staff for a conference on Christian Education.

June 20-23. Atlanta, GA. PCA General Assembly. We will be driving to GA and possibly speaking at a church in TN on either end – Chattanooga perhaps? Watch our web site. (We'll also take time to visit family while there. Yea!)

RF Board Decisions. Recently I asked Board member Henry Tazelaar what authority he thought he exercised over us. He replied, "Not as much as I'd hoped." Ha. But in reviewing his old bio on Ransom's web site, I noticed he said, "Denis and Margie's willingness to submit to the Board's guidance and suggestions is remarkable and a witness to their humility and desire to be accountable." Very kind words, but we know we could not do what we do without our Board's direction and wise guidance. Sometimes they make decisions that surprise us, decisions we wouldn't make if we were on our own.

For example, this past January as we met to pray, evaluate, and plan this year, one of the things we had to choose between was Denis and I doing another film festival for English L'Abri, or Denis traveling to Ghana with professors from Covenant Seminary where they will hold a conference on Christian Education. (Denis was asked to teach a track on thinking Christianly about popular culture.) Hands down, we choose England. To our amazement our board said, No. Go to Africa. At first I thought, no way. It seems the height of hubris to take our American cultural discernment and analysis to Ghana. What I didn't realize is that all over Africa, children – including Christian children – grow up, leave rural villages for big cities and universities where in massive, faith-killing doses they are exposed to the globalization of Western culture. After learning more about this, we are willing, but still listening hard, feeling scared and humbled for Denis to be a part of this team.

In the community of this Board (for our web site I'm in the process of updating their bios with affectionate little-known facts about them) we love to find the protection of God—protection in eyes that, together, see a bigger picture than we see on our own. Protection from our inclinations toward autonomy and pride. From them we

gain perspective, the reminder that we're a part, not the whole, body of Christ, and the courage to keep on with the ministry of Ransom.

Finances. The "normal" pattern for donations to Ransom is that at the end of each year we often receive enough to see our budget through the lean months of summer and fall. This year that didn't happen. We begin with bills paid but the future uncertain. We speculate that last year's tsunami and hurricanes changed discretionary giving for many who donated to relief ministries. (That was where a lot of our "extra" giving went!) Right now we don't take this to mean anything other than God wants us to trust him more month by month even, week by week. We especially need the Board's oversight for budget cuts and travel/speaking priorities this year. Please pray with us that we would live joyfully and faithfully through these times.

Writing. Our board has asked us to limit travel/speaking in order to focus more on writing, which means we try to schedule invitations prayerfully and wisely. Writing and editing is now a larger part of our life and includes publishing *Critique* and *Notes From Toad Hall*, articles for magazines, and work on manuscripts. Denis continues to work on his degree from Covenant Seminary—he's closer to completing the course work. The next part will be a writing project, ending, God willing, in a book to be published. The topic will expand his work on "Living in Babylon." No surprise. My goal is to re-edit past issues of *Notes* (More than 20 years worth. Ugh.) making them available in book form. At the same time, we love keeping our home and lives open to people as energy and time allow.

Everyday Real People. Ransom is about helping people live faithfully in a broken world. Part of that call is seeing and

naming moments of beauty in life around us. Although we live in Babylon, as Denis likes to say, we find fleeting reminders of God's existence—say, in a musical phrase by Sigur Rós, in a male penguin warming an egg on his feet in fifty below gale force winds, in a son who forgives a father, in the intensity of purpose as a toddler throws every loose toy in the toilet. Last summer our good friends Henry & Peggy Tazelaar moved to Arizona, (evidence of a broken world in my opinion) but when our Board of Directors (Henry is president) met in January, Peggy came back to cook for us—for me—I'm fond of thinking. As I sat focused and calm in our sessions, I could hear the comforting sounds of chopping in the kitchen. My sister, my friend, gracing us with roasted beets and goat cheese salad. Yum. Such a pleasure in such a world.

Toad Hall Repairs. Perhaps there is someone out there who is good at plaster repair and painting in high places, and would consider a few days of ministering to Toad Hall this summer? We can't promise anything other than a place to stay and a spiritual experience if you fall off the ladder.



Peggy Tazelaar in Toad Hall's kitchen

There's also that leak in the roof...another chance to flash-review your life while falling. ☺

Family Notes

Check this out at your local bookstore or Amazon.com: Marsena's debut novel is out—*A Dark Oval Stone* published by Paraclete Press! I shamelessly endorse it. (Denis gave more details about it in the last *Critique*.) Since we read the manuscript at different stages, I didn't get to experience the surprise of reading something newly born, but a number of friends have reported not being able to put it down until they read it to the last page. Ah! What every writer dreams of.

Every night and weekend for months Jeff has been faithfully working to remodel the lower floor of their house so Aunt Ruth can move into this lovely space as her new home. It's been a work of love and sacrifice. We thank God for the gift this is to all of us who love Aunt Ruth.

I remember when my children were little and waited for Denis to come home from work. Now every day Anson waits at the window for his Daddy. The moment the door opens he drags Jerem to the floor where they "fight."

Micah reports Anson got her cell phone the other day and was watching the fish emblems float around, then disappear. She heard him say, "Fishy go? What the heck?!" Yes. I also remember such things. No one to blame but myself when I heard much worse.

Paige—beautiful, genius child that she is—at eight months is beginning to say words. I'll get back to you later on how that goes.

Up on the Canadian border the snow keeps coming and coming. At mid-March it was still piled high in their back yard. Notice the clotheslines are half-buried.

The LaRoses have a new baby: Isobel Aneesa arrived January 31. They called her "Snapdragon" the first few days while they decided on her real name. We lobbied for a flower name. Like Lily? Ha. Here she is after her first bath, a little Dandelion head. Sember is recovering from seven months of severe illness and it seems a miracle that she is on her feet again. Perhaps it is. We thank God and pray each day for her strength—and for Shaun as they parent five children, four of them ages 3 and under.

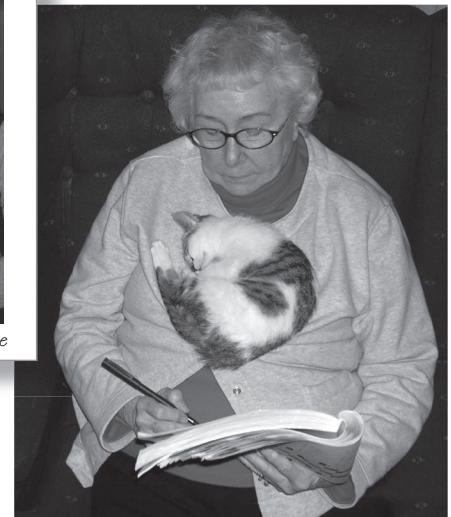
Shaun is now a full-time apprentice to a very successful artist, and all around the edges of this work, he does his own art, sketching while holding a baby, painting late into the night, trying to be faithful to his calling. Which includes the ordinary and everyday like handing out "pee-candy" to the twins who are working on *their* present calling: Get Potty Trained!

Look who else arrived. The cocoon Manessah found last fall hatched into a beautiful male *polyphemus* moth. 🦋

From our family photo archives: some captured reminders of God's grace in our lives.



Marsena Autographs Book at L'Abri Conference



Aunt Ruth with Crossword and Cat



Waiting for Daddy



Snowy Morning



Polyphemus Moment



Isobel "Dandelion Head" LaRose



"I have stilled and quieted my soul."

F

Final Notes

IT WAS ABOUT JOY

In her book *Julie & Julia*, author Julie Powell writes about how she decided to make ALL 524 recipes in Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* in one year and blog about it. I persevered to the end of the book to find this incredible acknowledgement on the last page from someone who is at once talented, profane, and pretty far from God (I think).

Julia taught me what it takes to find your way in the world. It's not what I thought it was all about—I don't know, confidence or will or luck. Those are all some good things to have, no question. But there's something else, something that these things grow out of.

It's joy.

I know, I know—it's truly an obnoxious word, isn't it? Even typing it makes me cringe. I think of either Christmas cards or sixty-something New Agey women in floppy purple hats. And yet it's the best word I can think of for the heady, nearly violent satisfaction to be found in the text of Julia's first book. I read her instructions for making béchamel sauce, and what comes throbbing through is that here is a woman who has found the way.

...I didn't understand for a long time, but what attracted me to MtAoFC was the deeply buried aroma of hope and discovery of fulfillment in it. I thought I was using the Book to learn to cook French food, but really I was learning to sniff out the secret doors of possibility.

Julie Powell precisely identifies our postmodern fear of joy. We're just cynical enough to think exhibitions of happiness will make us seem simple-minded, unsophisticated. And if we can't be rich or sexy we sure hope we can be profound.

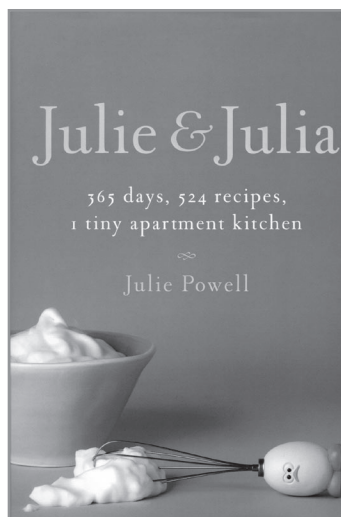
So I'm none of these things. But as it happens, I can cook, and oddly enough, it seems to be one of my songs of joy—only I believe joy is created by God and poured out as common grace upon humankind. Which means that give me an oven and I can slow-cook a chunk of moldy bread and make it smell so good Denis wants to eat in the middle of the afternoon. Yesterday I make a recipe of German beef short ribs which I found on line. (I actually do use the web for more than fanning the flames of my mental illnesses.) I started them early in the day because I thought the last stage would require hours of baking in a Dutch oven. But they were done about three and Denis was driving me crazy trying to eat them before supper. I totally refused him because I planned to make mashed potatoes and sauerkraut to go with them. X

Gloria dei.

Warmly,



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.

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) non-profit, tax-deductible ministry, are added to the mailing list automatically.

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