

Notes from Toad Hall

Issue #4 - 2006
The Holiday Issue



Faster

[This essay first appeared in the December 1999 issue of Notes From Toad Hall] December is a bad month for speed and stress. Nearly every Christmas letter we receive complains about how fast life moves. With each passing day the pressure of December mounts. Christmas looms before Halloween as the stores begin to stock holiday decorations and wrap. The newspaper supplements remind us of sales, tempting us to clip coupons, (I hate coupons and yet, I feel obliged to at least look at them) and rush out to

the best bargains. Charities implore us to help. We compile lists and lose them. We need Palm Pilots with alarms just to coordinate place, time, and food for Holiday Teas, Cookie Exchanges, and Open Houses. Christmas cards begin arriving the day after Thanksgiving reminding us that some people are on top of things while I still have unanswered mail dating to last December, and I am way, way behind with this issue of Notes.

There are always people around who seem to fly through life with Martha Stewart-ish ease. But not me. I'm not one of them, as Sember pointed out when she, and Denis, and I stood around the turkey the night before Thanksgiving. They held it while I stuffed it, using both hands to force large, sticky lumps into the cavity, dropping crumbs everywhere and, against professional advice, cramming them in tightly. "Mom," she said, "Martha Stewart would have at least used a spoon."

Then, strangely, the next day, a guest brought me a card which read: "Poor Martha Stewart. She's trying to encourage gracious living and what happens? Her gardener sues her. Her brother libels her. And frankly, I'd love to slap the h. out of her



myself."

The acceleration of life is hardly the fault of Martha Stewart or December. Sadly, it is simply the cultural air we breathe every day. This fall Denis and I read a book called *FASTER: The Acceleration of Just About Everything* by James Gleick. It has heightened our awareness of the speed of life and its effects, which appear everywhere.

FASTER, FASTER

As Denis and I drove from Massachusetts to Pittsburgh last month, we had an experience that represents all we've come to expect from the speed and efficiency of life. It was a long drive and we were running a little late in arriving at Bonnie Leifer's home in time for dinner. Construction slowed us down, but between times we hurtled along as fast as the turnpike would allow. As we rocketed off the turnpike and up to the toll-booths in the Pittsburgh area, we had a choice, which booth do we choose? We swerved past the booths with longer lines of cars and two with semis slowly pulling through. Counting ourselves lucky, we bolted into one with just one vehicle ahead of us. Quickly counting out the exact bills and change, I handed it to Denis. He rolled down the window, ready to hand out the ticket. We watched, ready to rush forward, but the red pick-up from Iowa wasn't moving. The attendant was on the phone. Denis rolled the window up. The attendant was off the phone talking to the driver. The attendant was back on the phone. In the meantime two cars and a semi solidly blocked the lane behind us. The attendant came out and wrote down the pick-up's license plate number. The attendant got back on the phone. A supervisor came over. He leaned out and handed something to the driver. The supervisor got on the phone. The driver handed something through the window. The attendant passed something back. Traffic screeched and roared on every side, vehicles were slamming to a stop, paying the toll and hitting the accelerator while we sat there. Sat there! Wasting Time! At last, Iowa pulled away and we drove through.

It took all of about ten minutes. But because we were running a little late, because of the speed of the cars around us, because whenever we choose a line we bet on our instincts to pick the fastest moving one (wherever we are: the bank, the

checkout lane, etc), and because we have expectations of how long it should take to hit the end of a line and get out the other side, we found the tension and irritation unbearable. We said things like: "Let's get out of this lane." "Impossible" "This SHOULD only take five seconds." "I can't back up!" "What's wrong with that guy?" Then we became utterly irrational: "He's probably a



There are consequences - things we lose - when things speed up.

felon." "Can you push him out of the way with your bumper?" "Why do they even let Iowans DRIVE?" "Honey, get my gun." Then we laughed. WHY ON EARTH should we get our knickers in such a twist over ten minutes at a toll-booth? Because our insides, our heart, our thoughts take on the speed of life around us. Delays, human error, and inefficiency give us heart attacks. (Unless they are our own.) Some days I could almost die to be Amish and in the country. I would slowly drive my horse and buggy to the general store and back again and I would never leave the county.

SPEED COOKING

This week I noticed another example in *Bon Appetit*. An ad showed a time exposure of blurred people rushing through life: a woman off to play tennis, a man with a briefcase running to work, a boy batting a ball, and a little girl doing a ballet step. The caption read:

"If your life moves this fast maybe your oven should too."

Introducing cooking at the speed of life with ADVANTIUM Oven from GE."



Obviously, there is nothing morally wrong with baking a chicken in 15 minutes rather than the hour it takes in a conventional oven. There are simply unintended consequences that we rarely think about when things speed up. Slower speeds give back time in an unexpected way. When I roast a chicken, the air in our house begins to slowly drift about with just a hint of oregano and thyme. Soon the air becomes laden with an intense aroma, it creeps into all parts of the house dislodging people from computers, couches, and play stations. Denis comes up from the office asking what am I trying to do? Kill him? Hunger grows, as people must wait until the chicken is done to a crisp golden brown. We have time to anticipate. Then eat. We eat with more delight and thankfulness because what we desired was delayed. It's a human thing. God made us that way.

SLOW GARDENING

Gardening is still one of the delightfully slow things in my life. There is nothing I can do to hurry one season to the next. I can provide the nutrients a plant needs. I can try to protect it from predators and weather, but I can't make it flower or fruit faster than sun, rain, and God allows. I wait. I watch the slow unfolding of a delphinium so per-



fect I am sure it has to be creation's prototype. I marvel at the creep of scarlet runner beans as they curl round their strings on their way to the top of the porch. Why do they always wind clockwise? The slow process of gardening restores sanity and hope.

The fall has been long and warm here in Minnesota. Putting my garden to bed for the winter has been prolonged and strange-like trying to convince a teenager he needs to go to sleep now at a reasonable hour. This is very weird as by now we should have snow covered ground and below freezing temperatures all day and night.

On November 21 we arrived home from a trip to find my potted Sweet William still in bloom. Beside the back steps was Stella D'oro, a small daylily bravely blooming her golden yellow head off. The purple kale which last month had been eaten by slugs or worms right down to its lacy ribs and veins had recovered and was lush with new fleshy leaves. Its destruction so impressed Denis he took pictures to document its recovery.

CHANGING LANES

Failures like this are described by Theresa Earle. She

You must not be surprised if you have moments in your gardening of such profound depression and disappointment that you will almost wish that you'd been content to leave everything alone and had no garden at all.



writes: "You must not, any of you, be surprised if you have moments in your gardening of such profound depression and disappointment that you will almost wish that you'd been content to leave everything alone and had no garden at all." (In your mind, you must hear her in a crisp British accent.) I'm tempted. But these days I mostly get disappointed, not desperate. Garden disasters are fleeting and I've learned to laugh about them and wait for another day. Or a kinder season. Or wiser choices. Nothing seems to quench my hope. Garden failures are a lot like the afflictions Paul describes:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. (2 Cor 4:16, 17)

I suppose all this ties together in an odd way - the speed of life and weathering affliction. Although I am convinced most of us travel too fast for our own good, and need to join me in a little ranting about it, I have reason to notice it more because I have less choice about my speed. It is slow and slower.

After struggling for months, I learned why I had lost my hyperdrive. Earlier this year I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia. I hesitate to mention it, but it has been changing my life. I

have always been energetic, and I was raised with that farmer's daughter mentality: You don't feel well? Tough. There are plenty worse off than you and the cows still need to be milked. Fibromyalgia isn't life threatening. It involves some discomfort, and regrettably, it

saps energy. That's been hard to face, and I've stumbled around griping about it. I've fallen asleep at the dinner table, at the movies, Bible studies, and discussions. (But, of course, cannot sleep at night.) Wallpaper is peeling, (some of it helped along by our granddaughter, Manessah, who began a redecorating project one day after a nap), some rooms need painting and in alarm, my daughter even mentioned the

dust. It has been disappointing not to accomplish all I've wanted, or to grow weary long before I should. I've tried not to let this interfere with our relationships with all the people we know and love, but I'm still shifting about trying to learn how to do the really needful and find eternal glory in this "light and momentary trouble."

Denis has been good about it. I was afraid of his being disap-

pointed that our dream of having far more people into our home for Toad Hall Sabbaticals might need to be curtailed. But he is simply putting his fer-tile mind to work on other ideas, rightly concluding that God has other plans for us, plans we simply haven't envisioned yet.

Ransom Notes

COMING UP

January 12-14, Phoenix, AZ

RF Board of Directors Annual Meeting
Hosted by the Tazelaars.

January 19-21, Santa Rosa, CA

First Presbyterian Church Conference

February 2-4, Ohio Valley

Presbytery Men's Retreat

February 16-18, Rochester, MN

L'Abri Conference

Denis gives plenary and two workshops.

Margie's workshop: "Tina, you fat lard, come get your dinner:" Common Grace in Food & Eating.

March 2. St. Louis, MO

Covenant Seminary

Travis Scott & Margie: Tattooing in light of current culture.

March 9-11, Norfolk, VA

Trinity Presbyterian Church Conference

March 23-25, Tucson, AZ

Rincon Mountain Presbyterian Church Conference

March 30-31, Calvin College

Festival of Faith & Music

Ransom will have a display booth.

PRAYING WITH US

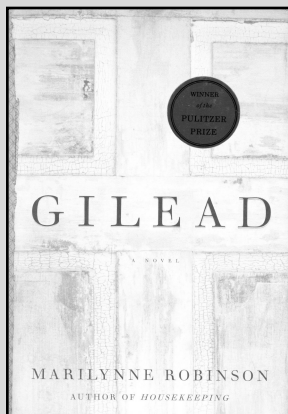
By God's grace and the generosity of his people, Ransom usually ends each year with an increase in donations - a blessing which gets us through the lean summer months. Last year was an exception, and we began with less than usual. All our bills have been paid, and we are grateful. However, as we look ahead to next year we'd ask you to join us in praying for two things.

First, that God would provide sufficiently and that we and Ransom's Board would have the wisdom and creativity to be good stewards of the financial resources we do have. We want a budget which is lean, yet sufficient to continue the ministry to which we have been called.

Second, that God would provide enough to do a technical upgrade on our web site, which is costly. With around 43,000 visitors logging on each month, it seems a good investment. We'd also like a design update for our publications and web site - as more young adults are drawn to our materials, we want to be faithful in both content and in how that content is presented. Plus Denis' laptop is beginning to hiccup, not a good sign.

We're thankful for the extra help we received this year which gave us a new storm door, bathroom window, and indoor painting. (More painting available in case anyone wants to help out at Toad Hall!) We're grateful for your willingness to pray with us.

Christmas 2006 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall



Gilead

by Marilyn Robinson (fiction).
Winner of the Pulitzer Prize.
I cheat. This is from the jacket.
"In 1956 toward the end of
Reverend John Ames's life, he
begins a letter to his young
son, an account of himself and
his forebears. Ames writes
about the tension between his
father - an ardent pacifist - and
his grandfather, whose pistol
and bloody shirts, concealed in

an army blanket, may be relics from the fight between the abolitionists and those settlers who wanted to vote Kansas into the Union as a slave state. He tells a story of the sacred bonds between fathers and sons, which are tested in his tender and strained relationship with his best friend's wayward son. It is also the tale of the vision of life as a wondrously strange creation, of how wisdom was forged in Ames's soul during his solitary life and how history lives through generations. This is both a hymn of praise and lamentation to the God-haunted existence that he loves passionately and from which he will soon part."
I felt touched by grace just to read this book.
Some of it begs to be read aloud.

[Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2004]

by demonstration: God

by Wade Bradshaw (non-fiction).
[Piquant Editions, 2005]

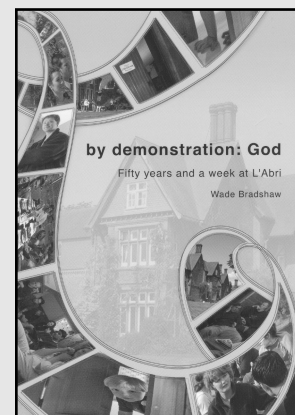
October 19, 2006

Hi Wade,

*Maybe you'll get this if your
spam protection doesn't weed me.
I've meant to let you know since
last year sometime when I first
read your book:*

*It's totally one of my top
picks of the year. My copy is
marked, dog-eared, and stained
with coffee. We've given away at
least 12 copies. I insist this is must reading for anyone who
breathes, for anyone who wants to understand or communicate
with this generation. We need your stories and your insight. Thank
you for writing this wonderful book. For what it's worth, if this is
ever reprinted and you need a humble endorsement from Denis or
me or Ransom, we would gladly give it.*

*I know your lives have radically changed since we last saw you
in England. Was hoping our paths might cross in St. Louis at
Jeremy Huggin's wedding, but one can't do everything, can one?
Sometimes one even does nothing about anything, and just has to
be a disappointment. We'll look forward to at least passing you in
the hall and genuflecting at the Rochester L'Abri conference. btw,
you need to make sure they have a ton of your books there. I think
it should simply be mandatory for attendees: You no buy book?
You no come to conference. Now get out.*
Cheers, Margie



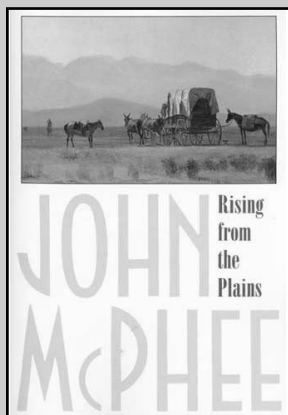
Rising From the Plains

by John McPhee (non-fiction)

Geology. Who would have thought. McPhee is a great non-fiction writer and always stirs my wonder. But to stir my love for creation in the geology of Wyoming where every period of the history of the world is seen in its outcroppings, streambeds, embayments - not possible. But he captivates readers with a detailed account of the life of Wyoming geologist David Love, who has uncovered secrets of the earth and its movements, secrets that have become foundational to the research and scholarship of geologists world-wide.

"Feeling a segment of the earth, you were touching a body so great in its dimensions that you were something less than humble if you did not look upon your conclusions as tentative." [p.135]

[Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1986]

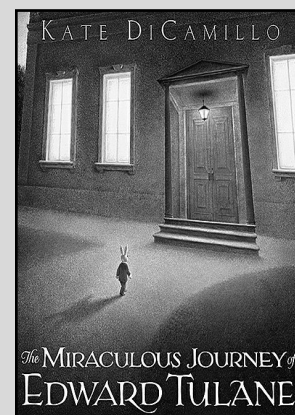


The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane

by Kate DiCamillo (Juvenile fiction).

A truly good story for children is so magical the age of the reader is insignificant. This past summer Manessah, my 8 year old granddaughter, and I, discovered *Edward's Journey* and she pronounced it a "Best" book. I, too, was completely smitten. Edward is a china rabbit who is very pleased with himself, and for good reason: he is owned by a girl named Abilene, who treats him with utmost care and adores him utterly. Then one day he was lost. Thus begins the journey of a heart that begins with unsmiling self-absorption, and only gradually, through suffering and loss, breaks and breaks, and only then, learns what it means to love. The story is good, not just because it is true to life and wise, but because DiCamillo writes with a powerful artistry that never lags.

[Candlewick Press, MA, 2006.]

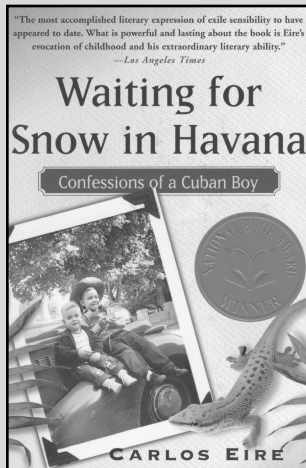


Christmas 2006 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall

Waiting For Snow in Havana

by Carlos Eire (Memoir).

I'm sorry, I left this on my night stand for two years before I read it. Now I'm sorry I read it because I can't ever experience the virgin shock of it again. On the otherhand, my second read-through let me laugh every other page, shaking the bed, forcing Denis to *listen to this*. I'm not sorry this exiled Cuban wrote about being one of 14,000 children air-lifted to Miami, away from his parents and childhood life with its green lizards, exploding firecrackers, turquoise seas, and Fidel's total hijacking of every living cell on that island, and that I got to examine the way this fabulous book was put together.



"BANG! ... A good blast can be felt all over one's body. And those shock waves, the air itself moving, our invisible ocean of gas ripped from top to bottom, just like the veil of the Temple in Jerusalem when Jesus died on the cross, the air pulsating with energy that seeps into your very skin, your pores, your nerves, and ultimately, your brain, making every other sensation vanish, making you say 'Yes, I live.' Sometimes the shock waves bombarding your skin force you to say 'God.'

"Of course, firecrackers seem a lot less lyrical or cosmic when they blow up in your hand. At least while you're feeling the pain, I should know; it happened to me." [p. 65]

... "let me bring up my third proof for God's existence. Of course, it involves a head. Mine. And, of course, it's the kind of proof that no one who takes Immanuel Kant seriously would be eager to accept.

I have nothing but the utmost contempt for Kant, and so should you. He was foolish enough to trust entirely in one kind of reasoning alone, and verbose enough to convince many other smart people that he was right. Benighted fool, that lousy philosopher Kant, curse of the thinking class.

May you burn in hell forever, Immanuel, you obsessive-compulsive pedant, or find yourself in heaven, right next to Mel Blanc [the voice of Speedy Gonzales] and the airport guy who laughed when he peered inside my underwear. And may you be eternally rid of the double set of garters that you wore on your precisely timed walks around Konigsberg every afternoon, those jaunts that were a more accurate reckoning of the hour and minute than that of any clock in your gray Hanseatic town. You need not fear that your hose will slither down around your ankles in the afterlife, dear Immanuel, as you discuss the Categorical Imperative with Mel and Airport Guy...Socks and philosophy are even more useless in heaven than in the tropics." [p. 92] [Free Press, 2003]

The Psalms of David

with illuminations by James S. Freemantle

This is a facsimile edition of the King James Psalms done in calligraphy accompanied by hand-painted illumination.

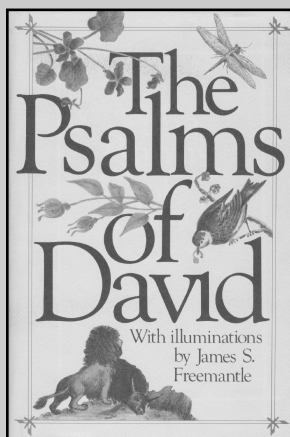
Throughout the book exquisitely detailed paintings of flowers, animals, and sailing ships mingle with the text.

Born in 1859 in southern India, Freemantle painstakingly recorded each Psalm in this life-long work.

He completed it shortly before he died in 1934.

Beautiful, hidden work known only to God and a few other people until 1982 when his son had it published.

This book is a labor of love, a work of art, and a volume to treasure.



A Dark Oval Stone

by Marsena Konkle (fiction).

This is my daughter's debut novel. It is an excellent story. Get it. I'll be asking you about it the next time I see you.

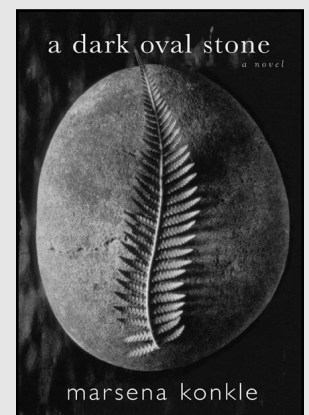
"Miriam's stomach purged itself of raisin toast, coffee, all memory of chocolate martinis, the monstrous hope that this was all a dream. She was grateful for the way her eyes burned.

"Darling, your face is dirty," whispered Steven.

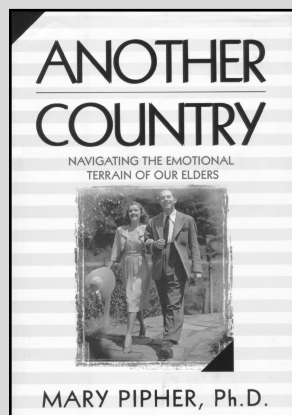
"When she finally looked up and saw her brother kneeling on the tile floor with her, she felt pain—a sharp intake of breath—not for herself, but for him. Because she saw that he knew from experience what it felt to be her. At this exact moment in time. In his eyes was an awareness of suffering that caused her to despair. He pushed her hair over her shoulders, kissed her forehead.

"Miriam looked over his shoulder at the cubbyhole where a nurse could reach through the wall and retrieve cups of bodily fluids left by patients. It was fitting that her face was dirty. Ashes in place of tears. 'I'll wash when I cry,' she said." [p. 19]

[Paraclete Press, 2006]



Christmas 2006 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall



ANOTHER COUNTRY:

Navigating the Emotional Terrain of Our Elders

by Mary Pipher (author of *Reviving Ophelia*) (non-fiction).

Last year Paul Woodard gave me a book, saying it was the singular most helpful book he'd read on ageing and the differences between our generation and that of our parents. Paul is chaplain of a large retirement community in St. Louis, so when he addresses issues of growing old, I listen to his wisdom.

As our grandparents die, our parents grow older, and we ourselves age, we find the aging process surprising and painful. We are unprepared to care for those who've always cared for us, and we have no idea how to grow old ourselves in a culture that often sternly reminds us if we take care of ourselves properly we don't need to be sick

or even slow down to the end of life. Pipher's insights which are distilled from her own work and love of the ageing helps us understand the language and culture of our parents and grandparents. Her observations are piercing and wise. Her lovely narrative style makes a helpful, hopeful guide for all ages.

As we think of what it means to be faithful in the next stage of our own lives, I will be listening to Pipher's voice.

"Young-old people may love their mountain cabin or Manhattan townhouse, but old-old people need relatives nearby...luxurious surroundings, entertainment options, natural beauty, and good weather are less important than people. As songwriter Greg Brown said, 'You can't have a cup of coffee with the landscape.' At bottom, I think the search for the right place is a search for the right people. It's a search for love and respect. What's important is a community of friends and family." [p. 32]

[William Morrow & Co, 1982]

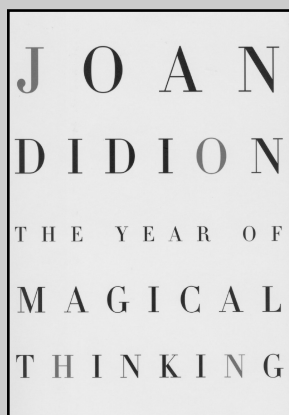
The Year of Magical Thinking

by Joan Didion (memoir).

This is a journal of Didion's first year of widowhood. It is brilliant in its sorrow and nakedness as she attempts to make sense of the "weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I ever had about death, about illness...about marriage and children and memory...about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself." While their only daughter, Quintana, was in the hospital in an induced coma and suffering from septic shock, Didion's husband of forty years died from a massive coronary. We are confronted by our own fragility and forced to face our own mortality. There is artistry and nobility in her writing, even wisdom.

There, "...in the larger picture I had come to recognize, a matter of abiding indifference. No eye was on the sparrow. No one was watching me. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end." This window into the life of an agnostic should give Christians insight and compassion, for without the Hope of the resurrection we would be just as lost.

[Knopf, 2005]



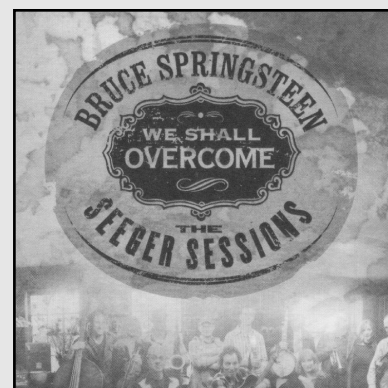
We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions

by Bruce Springsteen. CD

I don't care much for Bruce Springsteen mostly. But I've found myself listening to this and enjoying it. There is such spontaneous joy to the music I can't help singing along with some of these old American folk songs and spirituals. He is accompanied by the E Street Band and the sound they create is like a bunch of people just sitting around jamming.

To capture the lively informality of folk music they set up in Springsteen's farmhouse and recorded everything in three one-day sessions. My favorite: "O Mary Don't You Weep."

Be sure to watch the filming of the sessions on the included DVD. Exhilarating.



Final Notes

Gift Lust

At wedding showers it is the tradition among women that the bride opens each gift, looks at the person who gave the gift, smiles sweetly, and says thank-you, this is just what I wanted. She then passes the gift so we can each look, feel, and assess its worth.

Was it hand-made? Purchased at TJ Maxx? Or is it in a colored foil box with tissue and a silver sticker from Marshall Fields?

This bride, a good friend, had registered for Fiestaware - if you're any kind of female, you know it's a dishware that comes in luscious colors like scarlet and peacock. She received a few pieces, and I wanted them. I'm bored of my old chipped pastel and white stoneware. Why did I ever choose it? I've thought of putting it all in a box in the alley with a "Free" sign on it.

Arelene, sitting next to me, admired a shiny red platter before carefully passing it on, and as though she'd hacked my brain, she asked what I did about dish lust. I thought a moment and said internalize it. (Down boy, down.) I can't allow myself more than one or two strokes per dish or I know I'll be on eBay looking for best deals in Fiestaware.

I was still swallowing globs of lust when Nancy invited us to pray and asked me to close the prayer time. I couldn't tell everyone I first needed a quick confessional before addressing God. When it was time to close, I'd only had time to think about one quarter of the Lord's prayer. "Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." I wasn't ready to pray aloud, but I stammered through the blessing of this fine couple, thinking I should have matured beyond this. In an age of consumerism I should be the model of godly prayer and clean living, but I'm not.

I'd also rather eat e-coli than end this anecdote with a shouldn't we be thankful for the greatest gift of all - God's Son, Jesus Christ? Yes. Yes. Yes, we should. But how contrived and what a liar I'd be if I told you that's where I ended.

I have a very old cast iron Dutch oven. Once I thought of pitching it, but I've learned to appreciate it over the years. It's crusty and blackened. It weighs about 10 pounds and takes a crane to lift it out of the bottom cabinet. Right now it's in the oven holding a chuck roast smothered with garlic and onions. Some salt, pepper, and a little Hatch red chile. At a very low setting, it's going to slow roast all day and drive us crazy. I'm going to pull it out around 6 and we're going to eat it with a couple of friends and will we care if I don't have Fiestaware to serve it? I'm keeping the Dutch oven and the pastel stoneware. They're plenty good enough.

For daily bread, and Jesus, and so much more we thank thee.

Blessings & Noel,

Margie



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.

Managing Editor, Matthew Hundley

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