

# Notes from TOAD HALL

Issue #3  
Fall 2007



## **T**he Joy of Bees

A long time ago when our children were young and we lived in Albuquerque, Denis traveled a lot. The reason I mention he traveled a lot is because when he was out of town there was some kind of cosmic balance that shifted and it did nothing to favor me. Thus trips to the ER, little fires in the kitchen, escaped animals, and most annoying, the times when our bees swarmed, happened when he was gone and I was left to deal. It was easy to imagine him in El Paso drinking Corona, eating chili rellenos someone else labored to make, and having lively conversations with students and staff about theology

and culture while I tried to capture bees from a neighbor's yard who was calling the police and demanding I be arrested.

It was a time in our lives when we were determined to live simply, become urban farmers, and eat healthy. (I admit tanning rabbit hides in the garage didn't work. Just 5 minutes at midday was hot enough to give a lizard heat stroke. My dreams of stitching rabbit hides into mittens, slippers, and rugs perished when the hides rotted with such ferocity the odor would have killed a dung beetle.) In all the books I read no one mentioned any of this would be difficult or dangerous.

Still, there were rewards. Raising honeybees made us admire what they do. That is, if you can call owning two hives "raising bees." All we did not know didn't stop us from ordering that first queen and her escorts. When they arrived at the post office, we picked her up in her little wooden box with screened sides and even though we gently placed it in the back seat of our car--in unison 14,000 jostled bees raised their voices about an octave. I began to wonder if simple living wasn't more like poking a crocodile in the eye and running like crazy.

That began our three year venture into honey, sticky fingers, and a bad-tempered queen who faithfully passed her personality on to thousands of aggressive children who swarmed in our neighbor's yard when the hive grew

too crowded. We kept on despite the risk--a risk mostly due to keeping the hives on the top of our flat-roofed garage, meaning Jerem & Sember, ages 4 and 2, frequently climbed the ladder to check them out; they could get up there, but had trouble getting down. Eventually I'd notice them gone missing and find them wailing on the roof with little clouds of bees buzzing round their heads. (I know. Remove the ladder, but somehow I didn't think of that.)



Sember, 2 and Jerem, 4

Anyway, I became very fond of the honeybees.

They do things like make you praise orchards and flowers, bake honey buns for your friends and family, and thank God you aren't required to lay 2,000 eggs a day. I say this even though on honey extraction day every surface in my kitchen and dining room got coated with a sticky amber glue. Not only did the bees find their way back inside to reclaim what we'd stolen from them, the kids industriously helped by licking the countertops and table.

Loving honeybees also makes me wonder about such things as mowing and paving every square inch of habitat I own and the consequences of herbicides and pesticides poured on crops and lawns, and whether in the end it will make any difference to them or us.

## Colony Collapse Disorder

This history is one reason I noticed stories that began showing up in the press early this year. It began in the fall of 2006 when honeybees began to mysteriously disappear.

David Hackenberg, one of the first keepers to bring this to the attention of entomologists at Penn State, had just ferried his hives from Pennsylvania to Florida for the winter. He is a commercial beekeeper with thousands of hives that are contracted by farmers to pollinate certain crops. Beekeepers move hives around the country stacked on wooden pallets on flatbed trucks and unloaded by forklifts wherever whatever needs pollination. Annually, 15 billion dollars worth of crops depend on the bee for pollination. For example, California's almond crop, which is the largest in the world, requires 1.5 million hives to pollinate their orchards. Without 60 billion bees to work the blossoms

I wouldn't be snacking on toasted almonds or spreading almond butter on my toast--the only way Margie can relate to incomprehensible numbers.

When Hackenberg checked his hives last November his bees had vanished. He opened the hives and they were simply gone. It wasn't like they were

lying dead around the entrance, they'd just disappeared, leaving behind eggs, larva, and brood. It was eerie. By the end of winter he'd lost 2,000 hives without explanation. Soon beekeepers all over the U.S. who checked on their hives in late fall and winter were reporting nobody home. No



one knew where they went. The epidemic is so widespread it received a name: Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD).

Here in Rochester at the Farmer's Market I met Marvin Schul, a quiet man in a faded seed cap and plaid shirt, who sells honey. His table was lined with plastic honeybears and glass jars full of a light golden honey. "Sweet clover honey is the best; light, flavorful, I love it," he said. I learned that out of the ten hives he owns, he'd lost nine to CCD. But he's hopeful; this summer that one hive has produced more honey than he'd thought possible. He smiled and shook his head. He's waiting for fall to see what happens. No one knows if the collapse will continue. Meantime, many keepers have gone bankrupt and are leaving the business.

No one knows what has caused this bee pandemic. It could be stress, an unknown virus, pesticides, or a combination of many things. The bees they do find and dissect from infected hives are full of mites and sick with every infection known to bee-dom. It's as if their immune system is utterly collapsed and they have a kind of bee AIDS. The phenomenon is so odd and so disturbing that Ian Lipkin, an epidemiologist from Columbia University, the researcher who discovered West Nile Virus, has logged into the race with other researchers to find the cause.

We do know that without bees to pollinate crops like apples, pumpkins and blueberries, there would be little or no harvest. It is estimated that one

out of every three bites of food we take is because bees exist. Years ago, Albert Einstein made an interesting statement when speaking of the complex interrelatedness of all things on earth: "If the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe, then man would only have four years left to live." We can hope Einstein is wrong,

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a canary deep into mines, and if it suddenly died because of an undetectable toxic gas, it was the signal to get out fast. In the case of the death of bees



Sweet Clover Honey and Biscuits.

it may indicate an earth problem (too big for me to comprehend) we've contributed to--from the way we Weed 'n Feed our lawns to drinking bottled water by the boatload and adding billions of plastic bottles to the environment. (Scientists have found that plastics increase levels of estrogen in the environment

which is thought to interfere with the reproduction of insects and animals and is possibly linked to early onset of puberty in young girls.)

Natural pollinators or wild bees have been in trouble for a while now. They play a specific role in the survival of thou-

sands of species of plants. Since the 1990's researchers have noted 90% of this native population has disappeared. This merely adds another layer to the mysterious fading of other life forms--coral reefs, kelp forests, amphibians, wild flowers, sawfish.

### Save The BEES!

I heard someone say that people involved in mercy ministries are annoying. He said it fondly with no disrespect - just an observation that wherever there is trouble there are single-hearted people trying to help. Hang around them for too long and they will convince you to fight AIDS in Africa, save the wild salmon in the Columbia River, and stop drinking bottled water. Hearing about one more trouble can make me feel hopeless.

I've thought a good deal about what it means to care for creation. How do we not give up when all around us there is misuse and destruction? And, c'mon, what difference will it make if, to store half a cut lemon, I turn it upside down on a little plate instead of grabbing a plastic baggie and adding to the land fill?

There is a Psalm that fiercely attacks my sense of despair over the groaning of creation.

*You answer us with awesome deeds of righteousness, O God our Savior, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas. (Psalm 65:5)*

Wherever the dead zones in the sea exist, (Did you know that where the Mississippi River enters the Gulf of Mexico nothing lives anymore in an



Beekeeper Marvin Schul.



area as large as the state of New Jersey?), wherever bees die and flowers disappear God is there. I love the phrase, "O God, our Savior, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas." We know that one day there will be no more suffering for human kind, but we also know God is Savior of all creation, and it will one day be restored to its glorious original state. As Julian of Norwich put it: "All will be well and all manner of things will be well" because God is, even now, in the process of bringing all things under the reign of Jesus.

In the face of disaster, we don't stop caring for people because recovery seems hopeless. We don't abandon friends who suffer a terminal disease. We don't stop telling them to hope in God. In the midst of earthquakes and hurricanes, war and disease, in the midst of things crashing down we touch the person next to us. We offer a cup of coffee, we pray, we haul debris.

Anne Lamott writes about a friend who showed up on her doorstep during a time of great need and announced: "I'm going to clean your bathroom today." To Anne it was very humbling to have someone else cleaning globs of stuff off her toilet, but she also realized these were the hands of Jesus tending to the most lowly parts of body-life.

In the same way while we wait for Christ's return and his restoration of all things, we don't stop caring about his creation. It groans along with us

awaiting our redemption, and being faithful in this small square of reality is not crazy or useless. I know it's not like I'm going to bring the bees back homes or get Conagra to stop factory farming. Even if I'm really, really polite and say please, please, not another



First batch of Robin's eggs.

container store with it's acres of black parking lots and thousands upon thousands of lights, no developer is going to listen to me. However, I can do little things. I recycle glass and plastic even if my neighbors don't. I can feed the birds and leave the wild pollinators alone.

For the past two years we've used an organic fertilizer on our lawn. Some kind of corn product thing that works pretty well. This year on our city lot, 150 feet by 50, the earthworms were so prolific a pair of robins raised three batches of babies on our front porch. Finches nested in our hanging plants. A pair of chipping sparrows hopped through the spirea eating insects. The wren sang a deafening song and made a tiny nest of sticks in a birdhouse under the eaves. Goldfinches, mourning doves, nuthatches and woodpeckers come to the feeders. Dozen are crazy about the bath - squabbling and squatting in the middle to splash their wings. They come, despite three major hotels, two restaurants, a gas station, one of the largest privately owned hospitals in the U.S., and a Caribou Coffee Shop (joy) within two blocks of our house.

God, "the hope of the ends of the earth" must agree with me that bumble bees are beautiful insects--right up there with neon-colored damsel flies --they really do buzz and bumble. The weight of their bodies is enough to make flowers sink and sway, so on a windless day you know right where they are by the gentle waving of flower stems here and there in the garden. If you look closely you can see the little balls of pollen they collect in a sac on their hind legs. Yesterday their loads were yellow, today bright orange. They are so busy gathering nectar from catnip and hostas they pay no attention to me. It turns out they have a special gift for pollinating tomatoes--tomato blossoms hold their pollen in tight little chambers where the grains are trapped like salt in a shaker. A bumble bee has to grasp the flower and give it a rapid fire buzz; the intensity of the vibrations shake out the pollen. Honeybees don't do this. We used to see more bumble bees in our yard but not anymore. So when I noticed one in my backyard today I tried to take her pic, but she refused to pose for it.

#### RESOURCES

"Not-So-Elementary Bee Mystery," Science News, July 28, 2007.

"Stung" by Elizabeth Kolbert, New Yorker, Aug. 6, 2007.

"The Vanishing" OnEarth Magazine, Summer 2006.

"Deadly Interplay of Nature's System Architecture" by Richard Thomas Gerber, [www.intenlog.com/archives/2007/06/deadly\\_interpla.html](http://www.intenlog.com/archives/2007/06/deadly_interpla.html)

# Ransom Notes

During the last half of this year Denis has been and will continue concentrating on finishing classes for seminary and beginning the writing that will become his Capstone Project. It's difficult to find the time and concentration necessary for writing when he travels several times each month. Seminars and conferences usually take about five days with travel time - while lecturing three to five times, preaching on Sunday, and informal meetings with groups of people in between. It's always stimulating, wonderful, humbling, but it also uses a kind of energy that needs replenishing. Back home the next *Critique* is waiting to be published and all sorts of office and home things cry out for attention. We hope less travel for a few months will produce some fruitful concentration on writing.

To all of you who receive *Notes From Toad Hall*: Thanks, thanks, thanks for sticking with us at Ransom Fellowship--for praying, supporting, loving us. In so many ways, so many of you have been the hands of Jesus to us.

My apologies for the last issue of *Notes*. It was a humiliating wreck of printing and layout errors--partly due to strange transfers from our computer files to the printer, and me not going down to proof it before leaving town. Denis had similar problems with an issue of *Critique* earlier this year.

## **Please Pray For:**

✦ Wisdom as we plan for 2008. How can we, with finite imagination and limited energy, know with certainty what God would have us do? What do we accept or

turn down? We proceed aware of our limitations and dependence on Him.

✦ Real (space/time!) study and prayer that renews our spirits and freshens our work. There are dangers in ministering for years: You can become shallow and stale. Or arrogant, thinking you know all the answers. Tired, discouraged, or (my temptation) cynical. We want to keep on keeping on with Christ and His church ever before us.

✦ Pray that from now to the end of the year, Denis will get a good chunk of research and writing done for his master's Capstone Project. It's easy for any of us to allow urgent things to hijack the needful things in life. Hard choices are made every day.

✦ Thanks to God for many unexpected encouragements coming at the right time and in the right package. Here's just two.

One: Denis met two leaders at the local Muslim mosque --one of them admitted he'd never studied the Bible and would like to do so. This was thrilling to Denis after taking a course on "Muslim-Christian Relations" and wanting to get to know Muslims in our community.

Two: Someone who read my confession about dishlust sent me a large gift for new stoneware. I'm pretty speechless. RAB, if I weren't already married, I'd propose. God cares for us in ways we dare not imagine.



Staying home.

# F Family Notes

Over summer we traveled to each of our children and their families. They're a bit spread out which is good and bad.

*Good for them:*

We can't drop in any old time and say what's for supper.

*Bad for us:*

We don't see them enough and I wish they all lived next door.

## Favorite Babysitting Job



Isobel LaRose, youngest granddaughter.

At the LaRoses I took care of all five children for part of a day, not even a whole. So how could I forget what that's like?! Or did I ever know? I thought I might accidentally kill them.

The twins are 4, Mason is 3 --three boys at that age? Isobel

at 18 months was trying to swim in the kiddie pool, ride a bike, and climb to the top of the kitchen stove, while Manessah



Isobel wins!

wanted to learn how to crochet. Snacks every other second, Kaiden walking on Mason's back, potty accidents... as the Pitchfords wail when things go wrong: *WE'RE NEVER GOING TO BE ON FOCUS ON THE FAMILY NOW!* No matter. I'd never trade their sweet

voices calling from the top porch rail, Watch THIS, White-Haired-Grandma!!

## Favorite Who-Named-That-Store

*In Tennessee:*

Cotton Cabin Fireworks.

*In Arkansas:*

Boomland Discount Fireworks.

## Favorite Weekend

In August we camped near Lake Superior with Jerem's family. Well, not exactly.

Denis and I stayed in a "rustic" cabin.

Meaning a bed, but no bath. Jerem and family stayed in a tent. My favorite scene,

Anson & Paige-y sleeping

behind us, the moon rising over the lake in front of us, a loon's rising call, and otters swimming in a silver wake across the bay.



Sleepy Paige.



Moon rises over Jerem, Micah, Anson, Paige.



### **Favorite Aunt**

She's here for a two week visit right now. She does amazing well for, I'm not supposed to say her age, just that she was born in 1921, but she's still a mean crossword partner. She now lives with Marsena & Jeff near Chicago.

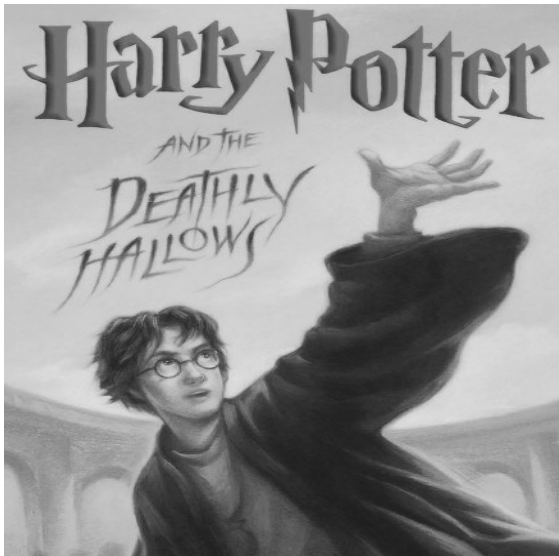
### **Favorite Verse of the Summer**

Not sure why, just that maybe, this is how Jesus comes to us sometimes. Impossible, strange, unexpected.

*"And about the fourth watch of the night, he came to them, walking on the sea."  
- Mark 6:48*

### **Favorite Fast Read**

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.* Yes, I read it in two days when I should've been doing other things.



750 pages, 2 days!

I was deeply satisfied when love--sacrificial love of family, friends, and school--won over darkness and death. Sophisticated angst and the nobility of living without answers isn't always what the heart or imagination wants. As Alan Jacobs says about the series, "They have many flaws, but I have not dwelt on them here because I forgive J. K. Rowling for every one. Her seven books are, and thank God for it, always on the side of life."

### **Favorite Painter**

Greg Pitchford, who came to help finish our stairwell and hall. It's beautiful.



Greg puts finishing touches on Toad Hall hall.

### **Favorite Pest**

A small hole in our boulevard grew to the size of my fist--yellow jackets. These carnivorous predators, a kind of wasp, prefer carrion and other insects to pollinating. At the height of the summer they're not too much trouble, unless your holding a brat and a beer. But in the fall when food is scarce and the weather is cooler they get crabby and aggressive. For those who innocently walk past our house each day on their way to work, they're menacing. So we had to kill them with poison. I've apologized to Cal DeWit.



Exterminator.

# Final Notes

We got cell phones. I know now that's like saying we have flush toilets. When everyone else got one we vowed never. We don't commute so there's no need to redeem time stuck in traffic by calling our loved ones. In fact, we scorned them. No one could reach out and touch us any time they wanted and



Verizon lights up.

we were glad of it. We are offended by the person who says, "excuse me, I have to take this call in the middle of our very important conversation," or those who shout into their palms, revealing the details of some strange habit. We don't want a higher risk for ear tumors and brain damage, and especially, don't forget the California teen whose cell phone burst into flames and gave her 2nd degree burns on her buttocks before she could get it out of her back pocket.

Lately it's been more difficult to maintain that attitude. We started feeling like we were the ones despised for missing connections, getting lost, and not holding up a lit phone at a concert. Our resolve finally collapsed in June. It

wasn't just that a good friend wandered the lobby of our hotel in Memphis looking for us for 45 minutes and I found him quite by accident. It wasn't that a friend drove in circles around the airport about 500 times trying to spot us at an exit door on the wrong concourse. In the end it was trying to find a little café for our lunch date in Nashville. We had directions but just couldn't find it. We drove around and around, we stopped people in parking lots asking, do you know where blah-blah is? No one knew. We finally stopped at a Krogers to call Aaron's cell from a pay phone to ask where are you? Denis approached a young cashier and asked if they had a pay phone and she said, "A what?" Denis replied, "You know, a public phone?" And helpfully added, "You put quarters in it." When she said, again, "A WHAT?!" like he was old and crazy, we knew. We knew when the manager said he hadn't seen a pay phone in years, but you can use my cell phone.

So this is a public apology to anyone I've abused by making fun of you for owning a cell phone, or for using it to snap a picture of the Avett Brothers in concert. I now understand, and I'm sorry. And just one thing, can you tell me how to learn not to feel there's a cockroach in my pocket when it's on vibrate and someone calls? Or is this just my problem?

I'd like to stay in touch, after all.

Warmly,



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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