

Notes from Toad Hall

Issue #4 - 2007
The Holiday Issue



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Matters of Perspective

When we were staying with friends Leslie and John near NYC in October it was, I think, our second day with them--a Saturday. They were outside working in their pleasant yard with its meadowy borders of butterfly bushes, roses, and boxwood. I was relishing a nap in the cozy guest bedroom; the window was open and sounds of dirt scratching and pots thumping floated up. I was content to hear someone else purposefully engaged until John's voice drifted in and I heard this snippet "Oh, by the way, Leslie, we have rats again, so don't...." I sat up fast and looked around. Rats? Where? When there was no female shriek in response I thought, either Leslie is one tough chick (who writes business plans for Bloombergs anyway without owning

some self possession?), or it's just not that unusual to live in a sweet old neighborhood of Connecticut and have urban rats. I lay back down. Later I learned they'd invaded their garage for the second time. Leslie was apparently un-moved by nests of black plague and gnawed foundations, she merely intoned her favorite saying: "It is what it is." Oh?



Chickens and the Egg

While in New York we also visited with friends Joe and Becca Schwen, who manage an organic vegetable farm at Stony Kill. This year they raised a little flock of hens which we stood around admiring. They were busy scratching for worms and being beautiful. One of the shiny black hens stood on a pile of wood and eye-balled us. She was giving innocent little praaaawk praraaawks, but if you sat still in her pen for a minute she'd gladly peck your eyes out. You wouldn't necessarily know that if you didn't know chickens.

We talked about the strangeness of certain foods and how did humans ever perceive what was good for eating, and did God give some hints to Adam and Eve? Denis' favorite food is the lobster which looks about as ugly and threatening as you can get. Becca's is the egg. She told us that twice, by chance, as she gathered eggs, placing her hand beneath a hen on the nest, it dropped a warm brown egg into her hand. She pulled it out and looked, wondering who ever saw this smooth hard thing that fell out of a chicken's you-know-what and thought, I'm going to eat it? When you crack an egg open and see a sac of yellow oil surrounded by transparent thick

snot, what would give you the idea, now here's a tasty little morsel?

It's weird that despite the way an egg looks and the route it takes to open air, it is a nearly perfect food. You can serve it with almost anything that can be snipped, chopped, or grated. Fried, poached, scrambled, all good. Add it to any cookie or cake and it will be richer. Whip slimy whites to a tight froth, add them to butter, flour, sugar, and lemon and you get a soufflé that kills. And what crazy French person thought of beating olive oil into yolks until your arm breaks and suddenly you get mayonnaise? None of these things would exist if we had to rely on the way I look at things.

Human perspective, at least mine, easily draws erroneous conclusions from what look like

duties left undone, emails unanswered (so *why* did I join Facebook?) is surely not good for my health.

And speaking of health, I certainly have a rotten body. True, I should be thankful I have no terrorist organization after it, no rats are nibbling my feet, and I have a doctor who insists on adjusting my thyroid medication about every five minutes. But my body's obvious deterioration disturbs me--funny bumps on the skin, wiggly waving triceps, and the only time it considers running is to the bathroom.

My need for severe adjustments in perspective is almost constant. For help I often consider the wisdom of those who mentor me through their lives and writings, they seem a lot farther along. In *The Good Works Reader*, Thomas Oden writes

*Lemon Pudding
Cake (Serves 9)*

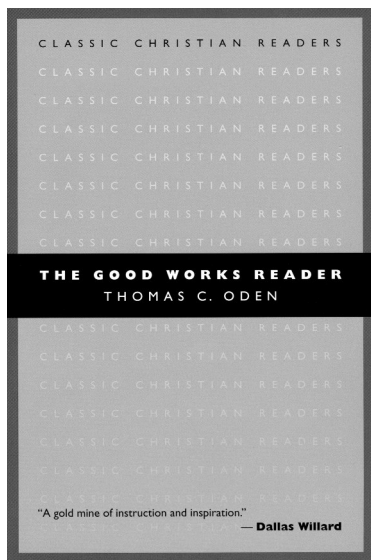
3 lemons
1 1/2 cups granulated sugar
4 large eggs, separated
1/3 cup lemon juice
1 tablespoon grated lemon peel
1/3 cup unsifted all-purpose flour
1 1/2 cups milk
Whipped cream
Mint sprigs

In large bowl mix egg yolks (beaten), 1 cup sugar, the lemon juice and grated peel at high speed until pale - about 5 minutes. Combine flour and 1/2 teaspoon salt. At low speed, alternately add with milk to yolk mixture.

In large bowl, beat egg whites at high speed until foamy; gradually add 1/2 cup sugar. Beat until stiff peaks form. Fold into yolk mixture. Pour into 8-inch square baking dish. Place in another pan and pour hot water into pan halfway up dish. Bake at 350 until cake pulls away from sides - about 50 minutes. Cool. Serve with whipped cream. Soooo good.

unassailable observations. I shouldn't do this, but there it is. It looks to me like God, The Master of the Universe, wastes a lot of my time. Why else should I need to spend fruitless hours waiting in line to renew my license, waiting for the schmuck driver ahead of me to decide whether they are turning right or left, waiting for beets to roast (they take FORever), waiting for weariness to leave, waiting for renewed joy in work and ministry when with a wave of his wand all these troubles could evaporate? Watching the hours and days escape one by one with unmet deadlines,

about the Lord's Prayer and the larger meaning of receiving our daily bread: "*Ultimately the bread we most pray for is the clarity and truthfulness of our own purpose and destiny.*" That is what I crave, I'm hungry to understand my purpose, to believe that human finiteness is okay, and to know and believe when God made us to live in daily-ness he said, "It is good." I'd like to live with certain clarity that though the day inevitably comes with suffering, it's still good, and I would like to gratefully receive that day with all its shuffling and waiting as a gift.



Virginia Owens startles me with her sweet patience and observations about bodies: "Caring for my mother has, as you might expect, changed both my perception of my own body and the rounding off of my life. I accept my aches and pains with better grace these days, knowing how hard my body has worked to do its job, uphold its end of the bargain. I realize now that however well I look after it, it's still going to break down, first in one place, then another. I'm no longer impatient with it when it does, though, nor as frenetic as I used to be about staving off its losses. Joints, lymph nodes, retinas, I'm grateful they've carried me so far, filtered my juices, filled me with light." (*Caring For Mother*. See 2007 Gift List for review.)

Old Eyes

From the Advent story one of the characters we don't hear much about because she's such a minor player is Anna. What attracts me is that she's old, like really old. Luke tells us "she was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day." (Luke 2: 35-37) It seems she never forgot the memories of her young husband and his untimely death which could have left her angry

and bitter. Probably her joints ached, her skin sucked, and her eyes got gunkier each morning. From a modern perspective she didn't have much of a life, although her contemporaries called her a prophetess. One morning in walks this couple with a baby, one among hundreds, maybe thousands she's already seen, but she has the clarity of truthfulness and purpose that helps her recognize something different about this baby—he's The Christ of God. She walks over to touch this child that all the world is waiting for, and there in front of everyone she blesses him and thanks God.

In the Gospel of Luke in the chapter just before we hear about Anna, Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, says a profound thing, and I think it captures exactly what Anna was doing



with her life. He says that the Messiah is going "...to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days..." (Luke 1:74,75) Which is exactly what Anna was doing, right there in the temple with corns on her toes and moles on her neck.

If I am busy considering either my body or time as enemies then I have succumbed to a limited perspective which is informed by my senses and, more subtly, by cultural pressures that determine whether we are good, successful, disciplined, worthy people, thanks to iCalendar, diet, and proper exercise. Both body and time are gifts that enable me to serve God in holiness and

righteousness "before him (embodied) all our days." That means being contented with twenty-four hour days where God says it's good to live - from babyhood to end of life. If I understand Anna's life correctly, this child she blessed has the power to transform our fearful concentration on self (in whatever form), forgive our complaints, and direct us in acts of service to others.

As Anna Sees It

Our friends in CT have a gap in the hedge surrounding their yard where a path leads from their back porch to the neighbor's back door where John and Anna live, confined by age and poor health. Early each morning the Eddys carry a carafe of fresh decaf coffee across the dewy grass, up the steps, and quietly leave this small token of care. Each day John totters back with the empty carafe. When Denis met his wife, Anna, who is bent and frail, Denis told her how many wonderful things he'd heard about her. She grasped his hand in both of her dry, papery hands, pumped them up and down and without missing a beat rasped, "My g-d, they LIE ALL the TIME!" We could see how much John and Anna adored this younger couple who have chosen to love them with something so simple as a cup of coffee.

Jesus said: "And whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward." It's those little acts of mercy that are large in the Lord's eyes.



Ransom Notes

So We Can Serve

Perhaps the most significant thing of the last quarter was our October trip to New York City. All year we looked forward to something our Board told us to schedule: "Go away somewhere for at least two weeks to a place where you might be refreshed, creatively renewed, do a bit of work, and also make it fun; just go." Nice, huh? As we counted down, we knew getting away was almost a matter of survival. I sat dully, not writing, just looking at the screen trying to decide: mahjong or solitaire? I started finger-dipping the Bible looking for Holy Spirit Fortune cookies. When you're in the pits it's also good if you can take someone down with you and knock them around a bit, too. Everything Denis did annoyed me: "Why are you parking HERE? Can't you speak a LITTLE FAS-ter? WHO ate the leftover stir-fry?" I questioned whether I should be in ministry at all. After years of observing downturns, I don't trust these feelings; I've learned God helps us through, but not always in a way or time you'd expect.

We thought of many options for our time away and finally settled on staying with friends in Connecticut just outside New York. I wasn't sure of this - I hadn't met them yet and the energy of NYC didn't sound peaceful. But we had plenty of time alone for talking and reading. Some days we took the train into the city to visit museums. We saw a play and went to a concert. We visited Redeemer Pres. in Manhattan. We ate some great food. We had wonderful wine and cheese every night John and Leslie were home. (They've become wonderful friends who thoughtfully kept their jobs and were at work a good deal.) So a small miracle of restoration grew up; Denis became charming again, I joined a 12-Step program for game addiction, and rediscovered the Gospel of Luke. As we headed home I thought, God gives great grace not only for our own little survivals, but so through him we can serve others, however, if he let me come back again, I'd visit Chinatown and find those pork soup balls the Fongs say are the best in the U.S.

Denis continues writing, working on courses, and preparing for upcoming teaching responsibilities. I'm a kinder, gentler woman who's writing and home-keeping again. Please check out our new website www.ransomfellowship.org and tell us if it works for you. Also tell me if it would make any difference if I had more of a voice on the site. I'm getting pressure.

Favorite café: New Leaf at The Cloisters.



Favorite spot to people watch: The steps of the Met.

Coming Up

Christmas - with Jerem & Micah.

January 18-20 Ransom Board Meeting, Panama City, FL.

January 21 Denis takes Mac Class with Ed Hague.

February 1-3 St. Louis, Covenant Seminary Rev. Dankwe from Ghana teaches class on preaching.

February 15-18 - Rochester L'Abri Conference. Both Margie and Denis speak.

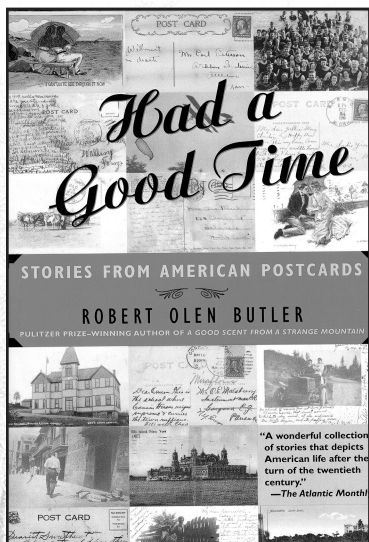
February 29-March 1 - St. Louis, Covenant Seminary. Denis teaches course on Music & Theology.

March 9, 16, 30, April 6 - Rochester, MN, Trinity Presbyterian. Denis teaches adult class.

March 21-24 - Easter with Marsena, Jeff and Aunt Ruth.

Christmas 2007 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall

Had A Good Time: Stories From American Postcards by Robert Olen Butler (fiction)



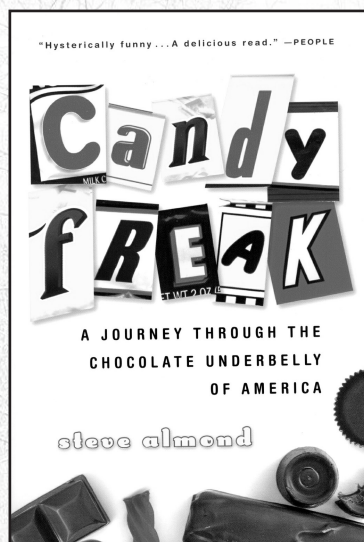
For many years Robert Olen Butler's hobby has been collecting picture postcards from the early 20th century. From among them he chose fifteen and wrote short stories based on the real messages scrawled on the backs--stories full of wit and humor. He captures souls of people living when the auto and the aeroplane are just beginning to move across the continent and yet life is still hard-scrabble and dis-

ease-ridden. They are people who find joy and sorrow in work and love.

Butler crafts perfect regional voices whether they are class-conscious and angry ("Hotel Touraine") or anxiously in love ("Carl and I" and "Sunday"). It doesn't matter where the characters are from, rural south, East Coast, California, male or female, I believe him. My favorite character is Hurshel Hudgens, a man from Tennessee, who has the Bible "Up By Heart" and intends to leave his job as a miner and become a preacher. If that doesn't work out maybe he'll get up a clown show. He talks about his wife, Beulah:

"Beulah helped me. She is my helpmeet. When I hadn't got my abc's, she read the Bible to me over and over, and the words of God were like sticky burrs on the pant leg of my mind. I have walked through his field, and though I stumble on the rocks in his high grass, I am covered with his burrs." (p. 202.)

Candy-freak: A Journey Through the Chocolate Underbelly of America by Steve Almond (non-fiction)



Totally, completely, this book is for fun and should be avoided if "language" is a problem or you don't have good dental insurance. Almond writes, "A few years ago, my friends began urging me to write a book about candy. Their reasoning ran as follows: Maybe if Steve writes about candy, he will shut up about candy. I didn't listen to these suggestions, of course, because I'm fairly stubborn and because, at

the time, I considered candy to be a subject unworthy of my artistic consideration, meaning that I might actually enjoy writing such a book and thus automatically violate the serious young writer's credo: Suffer at all times, preferably in such a manner as to convey to the rest of the world just how much you're suffering." Steve thinks about eating candy about once every hour and eats at least one piece every day. He stashes candy in the freezer, under his bed, and claims to have 14 cases of Kit Kat Limited Edition Dark stored in an undisclosed warehouse. He finally succumbed to writing a book when he couldn't find his favorite candies from childhood. Do you remember Caravelles, Choco-Lites, Atomic Fireballs, Sugar Daddies, and Star Bars? Almond does. He set out to explore why so many favorites have disappeared and to visit the last surviving little-guy candy producers around the country.

The 2008 Bunny Suicide Calendar

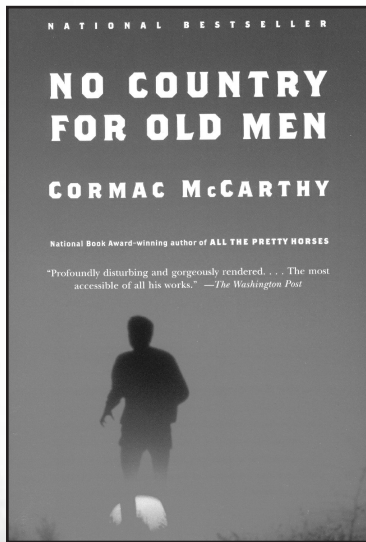
It is with many, many apologies to Manessah, my nine year old granddaughter who loves rabbits, that I confess I have purchased a calendar of fluffy bunnies who no longer want to live. I know it's kinda creepy, but right now I don't want to explore why they are so funny. I hope to be a better person one day; in the meantime, for your loved ones who might not be there yet, check this out.

Order from: www.teneues.com



Christmas 2007 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall

No Country For Old Men by Cormack McCarthy (fiction)



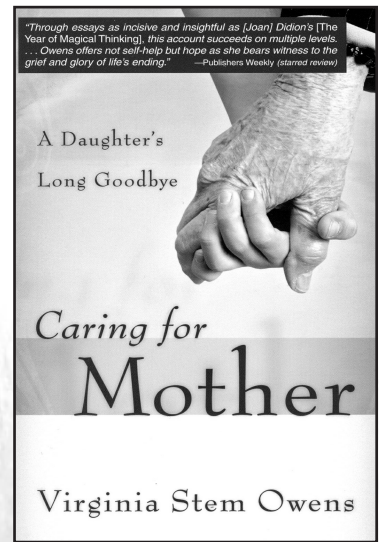
I didn't think I could read this novel because I knew it was about a sheriff, a good, honest man who all his life had done everything possible to protect his people from crime, to make them feel safe and at home where they live, until one day he finds a pickup surrounded by dead men, a load of heroine, and two million dollars in cash missing. I have a brother who is a county sheriff and I was afraid of the reality of this man's pain. I knew

that when I read the book I would also know my brother and the pain of facing undiluted, pitiless evil. But. I picked it up one day and couldn't put it down—I forget to breathe when I read some of McCarthy's sentences, he's so good. In the end, none of us are safe, none of us are really at home, and he drives it to heart like the weapon his assassin uses by writing characters so perfectly drawn and a plot so intense we cry out for relief. And yet there is a distant campfire (in the last chapter, you'll see what I mean) that shines through the dark, and from there, if you'd care to discuss it with me, it's a nanosecond's journey to the hope found in Christ and his promise of eternal home where both justice and mercy agree as one, though McCarthy doesn't mention this in those words exactly.

Caring For Mother: A Daughter's Long Goodbye by Virginia Stem Owens (memoir)

In the seven years that it took for Owens' mother to succumb to Parkinson's and dementia she says: "it often seemed as if she were trapped under the rubble of an earthquake, her rationality, curiosity, humor, and generous spirit slowly suffocating under the wreckage of her ruined brain. Nothing had ever confronted so forcefully my faith that an ultimate graciousness dwelt at the heart of the world and cared for us." In a way,

Owens forces us to examine the place none of us want to visit. We don't want this to happen to someone we love nor do we want it to become our own path to the next life, yet, the possibility is very real. Owens bears witness to the grief of life with a hope that doesn't yield to pat answers or Christian sentimentality. This book isn't so much self-help for care-givers, as it is reflections on the painful journey taken together by the dying and those who love them to their end. Her honesty in beholding the fear, anger, spiritual doubt, and all the unanswered questions about where the true seat of our being exists makes her book deeply powerful and moving.



The Trumpet Child Over the Rhine (CD)

A singer/songwriter team, this couple's music has long been a favorite. *The Trumpet Child*, with 11 new songs, has been getting rave reviews. It's like a shout of joy after their last CD, *Drunkard's Prayer*, which came out of the crucible of life and touring stress when their marriage nearly collapsed. This is one sweet album with a kind of joyful New Orleans style that weaves in sax and horn players with Detweiler's fabulous piano. Bergquist's swingy, jazzy voice is at its best ever. Even when the lyrics are playful they don't lose their beauty and edge, which could otherwise make a song like "Let's Spend the Day in Bed" merely trashy or sentimental. Rather, everything about the arrangement makes it a powerful invitation to reassess our priorities while enjoying the music.

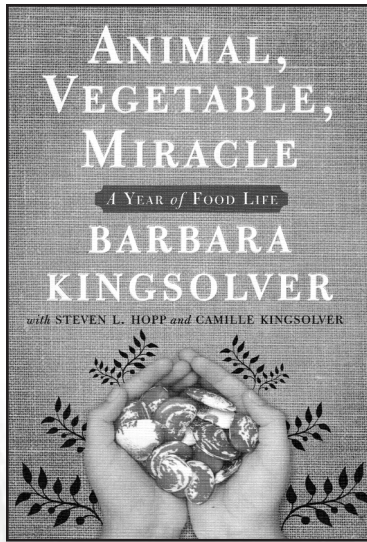


Christmas 2007 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle

by Barbara Kingsolver

(part memoir, part journalistic investigation)



This book chronicles the year that Barbara Kingsolver, along with her husband and two daughters, made a commitment to become locavores--those who eat only locally grown foods. Moving from their home in non-food-producing Tucson to a family farm in Virginia; they got right down to the business of growing and raising their own food and supporting local farmers. The book begins as an environmental treatise--the oil consumption related to transporting food-stuffs around the world is enormous--but it ends, as the year ends, with the celebration of foods that physically nourish and hospitality found in community which nourishes heart and soul. Nice balance. Recipes are included throughout the book to help with inspiration and healthful alternatives to processed foods. Some of her humor is a bit forced and I don't agree with everything she says about eating or politics, still, it was a fascinating read.

“August is all about the tomatoes, every year. That's nothing new. For a serious gardener, the end of summer is when you walk into the kitchen and see red. We roast them in a slow oven, especially the sweet orange Jaune Flammes, which are just the right size to slice in half, sprinkled with salty and thyme, and bake for several hours until they resemble cow flops. Their slow-roasted, caramelized flavor is great in pizzas and panini, so we freeze hundreds of them in plastic bags. We make salsa in huge quantity, packed and processed in canning jars. By season's end our pantry shelves are lined with quarts of whole tomatoes, tomato juice, spaghetti sauce, chutney, and several kinds of salsa.” (p. 199)

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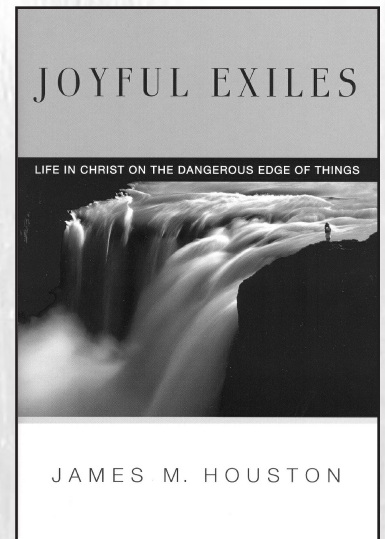
Joyful Exiles: Life in Christ on the Dangerous Edge of Things

by James Houston (nonfiction)

I've been quoting Houston all year so I figure if I include him here, it may reduce my incessant yammering about him. I felt mentored by him as I worked my way through this book at a time when being joyful was pretty scant. I learned the book was less about "JOY!" and more about deepening our grasp of what it means to be "in Christ." In many ways his life and teachings are countercultural, opposing what many Americans see as evidence of success--like moving from a prestigious academic position in the U.K. to begin a small college in Vancouver (Regent)--he called that being "downwardly mobile." Or in the area of spiritual growth, where just like everything else in life we expect a cyber-fast solutions. So although I may be discouraged about how long it takes for certain people to become saints, he insists that any progress God gives occurs at the slowest pace of all.

“While we can speed-read theological knowledge and idealistically accept certain doctrines, faith invites us to commit our whole person in our everyday existence to living out the gospel of Jesus Christ as fully as possible. So we find that becoming Christlike progresses almost imperceptibly. For authentic integration we need to expect appropriate rates of apprehension, conversion and transformation. ...we must maintain humility, gentleness, perseverance, fortitude, courage and especially patience with ourselves as we pursue the journey. As Dante experienced, the higher we climb, the rougher the way becomes.” (p. 129)

There is relief in hearing this and even a shade of joy.



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Final Notes

I Give You The Monster Gun of Tanjore

When we were in NYC and visited The Met, I saw an exhibit called "Impressed by Light" and was fascinated by this piece.

Linnaeus Tripe, a British photographer, shot it in India in 1858. He was employed by the military and his photos have become valuable pieces in art collections.

The curator didn't explore this, and I don't know much more than what was printed on the little tab beside the photo, but it set me thinking about men and their relish of useless weaponry. I suppose it's no stranger than the nineteenth century feminine love of the bustle. A matter of hindsight, or perspective, I guess.

In a way I love them (men) more for the flawed thinking demonstrated by The Monster Gun of Tanjore. It was, according to the museum, "24 feet long and 10 feet in circumference, made of rings of iron encircled by brass rings, and welded together. It was said to have been fired once. On which occasion the inhabitants of the Fort were warned by the beat of a drum to leave their houses. A train of powder was laid for 2 miles, and 40 minutes elapsed before fire reached the gun. The sound, it seems, was as if Mount Meru had exploded."

Perhaps my own flaw (a love of Wile E. Coyote) makes this amusing. But I include it so you can look, too, and enjoy the absurdity of telling your enemy ... "hold still while I arm this darned thing with two miles of gun powder. I'll be right back." Or envision the inventor bent over paper, drawing the plans, thrilled to sell the military on his idea of how to blow the landscape to smithereens.

Perhaps it's thinking of Christmas and what to get the males in our family. Do we go practical or useless? Should it be something that makes a lot of noise? Drums? Guns?

Music? I think I'll shoot for music--that lovely art still reminds us we are created in the image of God. No matter what our perspective, and in contrast to our absurd, and sometimes destructive inventions, music can help us restore the ordinary and catch glimpses of the sublime in the everyday.

Warmly,

Marge



Toad Hall is the name of our home, christened by our children. It is from the book *The Wind in the Willows*, a favorite of ours. In it Mole, a shy yet daring character, and Ratty, who is much nicer and more sensible than his name would imply, have many adventures along the river. One of their friends is Toad of Toad Hall. Toad is something of an aristocrat and lives in a mansion. Otherwise, he has very little to commend him and really doesn't deserve friends since he is a callous liar, lacks common sense and, well, he lives for the pleasure of the moment—which brings him no end of trouble.

When we moved to Minnesota in 1981, our children had rarely seen such tall homes with their imposing three stories. They were used to one-story adobes which rambled along in the hot New Mexico sun. So, to our children, a midwestern Gothic four-square looked amazingly like a mansion. Possibly even as great a house as Toad Hall.

Managing Editor, Matthew Hundley

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