

Notes from TOaD HaLL

Issue #1 - 2008
Still Winter



Stranger To Me

I don't think I've met you. My name is Margie. I said this as I held out my hand, warm and friendly, to a young woman standing in the foyer after church.

It's possible for someone to attend for quite awhile and I might not recognize her face. That's easy even in our relatively small church. We're out of town. They're out of town or working. Add a little weekend sickness, and there's a chance you might not notice a new person for weeks, maybe years. So even if I suspect I've seen them before I never, ever ask, "Are you new to Trinity?" I'm conscientiously neutral so we can give each other an out. "I don't think I've met you." "I've been in India." "I need cataract surgery." Anyways, it's risky--the

whole business of introducing yourself to strangers. I force myself to do it, thinking I deserve a little pat from God saying, "Nicely done, Margie. I know meeting strangers is hard. Your memory is bad. You need to pay better attention. Focus. (*Her name is Heather. Heather.*) I know you'd like to just go home, fix an omelet and watch the Vikings lose, but you reached out to someone who needed a warm greeting. Enter into paradise." Then that person will be really grateful for this small gesture and perhaps it will be the beginning of more. Who knows?

None of this happened with the above nice, young woman. She looked me in the eye and said, "Well. We have met before." (*I'm thinking. Okay. Yes. That's entirely possible. However, for forgetting your face, I'll make it up to you by being utterly charming here.*)

"In fact," she went on, "I stayed at your house last year."

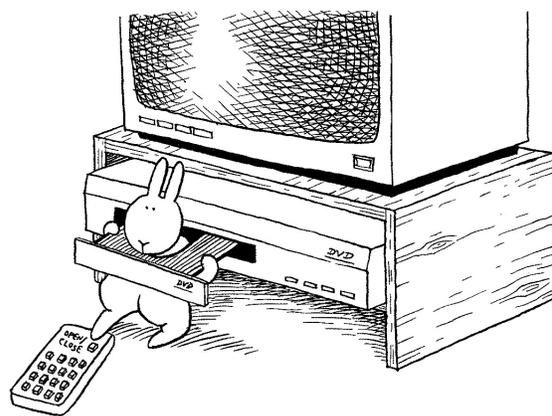
You know how comedians sometimes use the bass drum, snare, and cymbals to deliver a single, syncopated beat? Ka-ta-boom. I heard it there in the church foyer, and it drowned everything and so completely derailed my concentration that when she did tell me her name, I still didn't get it. Remember the "Bunny Suicides" calendar I'm so fond of? I thought of several bunny ways I could flush myself out of the system right then.

So much for the meaningful practice of hospitality. So much for years of modeling "I was a stranger and you took me in." I can't even remember someone who stayed in our home less than a year ago. There was a little more to the story, but later. Feeling like an

idiot is pretty familiar territory and I've learned to quickly move on--or write about it. Being confronted with one's limitations and failures isn't such a bad thing. Jung liked to point out we learn nothing from our successes and everything from our mistakes, not that I base my entire life on what he says. Christine Pohl clears it up further when she writes: "Humility is a crucial virtue for hospitality, and especially important in keeping hosts' power in check. Power is a complicated dimension of hospitality." (*Making Room* by C.D. Pohl. p. 120)

Who Knows What Risk?

As Christians, we're called to practice a rhythm of hospitality at all times and in all stages of life. We practice it not because we're perfect in caring for others or because we never stumble in remembering



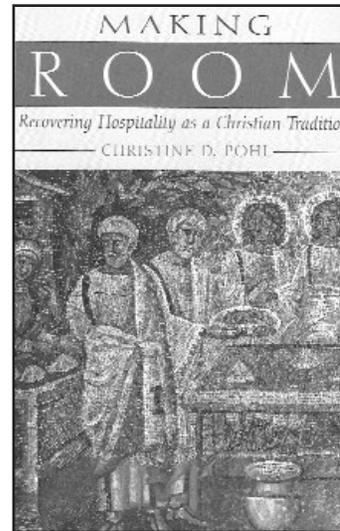
the details of another's life or are wealthy or have a lot of free time. We invite the stranger into our lives because we answer Christ who calls to us through them saying, "I was

hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in." (Mt. 25:35)

Moving out of the safety of private orderly lives, we meet Him in the lives of the marginalized, poor, and fatherless. The fatherlessness part of the equation interests me as my own father was killed in an accident leaving my seventeen year old mother with no means of support. However, today I believe the fatherless includes the one whose father is alive but has abandoned the family. Or he may

be a father who is there but too busy with his own life to be engaged in the lives of his children. We must be aware that many we meet don't carry their hungers on the surface of their lives, rather they remain buried under layers of enculturated behavior that require gentleness and time to peel back.

Over the years we've invited people into our lives, and approaching the age of dirt allows me to look back and pontificate about this practice of touching the stranger in our midst. Sometimes our encounters were brief and soon forgotten--like the young woman above. (*After that Sunday in the foyer I learned she had visited Paige who at the time was renting our studio apartment behind Toad Hall. Paige brought her over to meet us one evening, and I had utterly forgotten.*) There have been times when it seemed whatever we did was wrong or not enough or made no difference at all. Not knowing the out-



come of our efforts, we may be tempted to ask, "Will the interruption to my life be worth it? Is this person deserving of my sacrifice? Does he know I should be fixing the leak in my roof rather than hearing about what shenanigans his teenage daughter is up to? And what if my shower drain gets matted and clogged with creepy stuff, and pages are turned down in my favorite book, and the drill is never returned because I got involved?"

When we engage a stranger, we can't know the risk involved, nor should we make it our goal to see long term effects of our hospitality. The early church fathers viewed acts of hospitality in the light of the welcoming acts of the Incarnate Lord. Long before modern humanitarian relief efforts, Augustine argued directly against the tendency to gauge the worthiness of any particular person by saying, "We are not to search out only those we consider worthy, in case the worthy might be excluded. You cannot be a judge and sifter of hearts." (*The Good Works Reader* by Thomas Oden) Augustine goes on to teach that our giving should not be based upon moral worth since we ourselves were taken in by Christ when we were dark and broken. We receive strangers because in doing so we are loving Christ as he has loved us. Often we connect for a longer time and the person who comes in need becomes a friend who gives back many times over.

A Thousand Reckless Ways

The difficulties and joys of hospitality lie close together and the following illustrates both unexpected blessing and the struggle of limitations when we encounter strangers.

When Denis answered the door a slight, young woman with blue eyes and straight blond hair stood on the steps clutching a worn backpack. Denis called me to come because she was asking to stay with us and we had a policy of no crashers. I picked up our one-year-old daughter and carried her with me to

the front door. Denis introduced me, "This is Nancy. She's asking to stay with us."

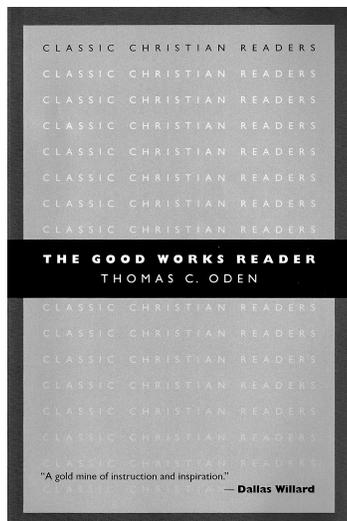
"But we're not a crash pad." I said it with a note of accusation. It was 1971 and there were still plenty of disenchant-ed hitchhikers crossing the country, searching for a place to drop acid and find the

and the amount of food they required were taxing my patience. We were leaders working with a large assortment of newly converted or spiritually searching young people. We called our home "His House"--which at the time sounded more evocative. Our living room was open forum every night for music, discussion, prayer and coffee; but we had to have limits.

"My dad dropped me off over there," she pointed to the Piggly Wiggly parking lot across the street from where we lived "and I told him I'd be staying here. He's gone back to Las Cruces." She looked at us. "Please? I heard you were Christians, sort of like L'Abri, and that you took people in." She was barely twenty and spoke with an appealing little lisp. There was a vulnerability about her and it seemed uncar-ing and dangerous to be simply dumped off in the middle of our run-down neighborhood in Albuquerque. We looked at each other and a slight nod passed between Denis and me. "You can come in and stay the night, but I'm not sure about after that. We don't have a bed

for you, but we have extra blankets and there is the floor." Her face brightened, and she entered our home and claimed a corner of the living room. That night, when Denis led a Bible study discussion, it was crowded as usual and Nancy made some precocious, insightful comments--enough to swivel my head and

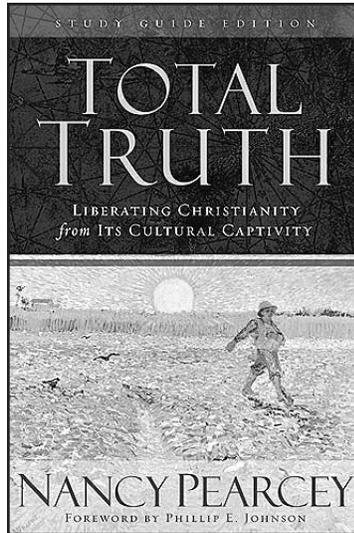
capture our full attention. Late that night after everyone left she told Denis he needed to read more of Francis Schaeffer. And she told him exactly why. We learned she was a new



Ten Years Later: Margie and Nancy

Stairway To Heaven. I was annoyed that Denis hadn't just sent her away. The four young men already living with us were funny and charming, but their all-night jamming sessions

Christian and had just come back from a place called Swiss L'Abri. She stayed the next day and the next, and that summer became the first of several summers she spent in our home as part of our family. We've loved her ever since. In 2005 Nancy Randolph Pearcey's book *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* won the Gold Medallion Award for best book of the year.



The same year we met Nancy, Kathy Barboa found us--or maybe we found her because I don't remember the first time we met her either.

Kathy had been on heroine and living on the street for a year when Teen Challenge took her in and taught her something about the power of the Gospel. She made a profession of faith and really wanted a new life. She was fifteen when she moved in with us.

Kathy had wealthy parents, but they got sick of her troubled life and kicked her out; she talked some about their detachment. When he was home, her father sat behind the newspaper never looking up, not answering or engaging her when she talked to him. To get her mother's attention she dropped syringes and needles in the hallway and on the front steps, hoping her mom would find them and be alarmed. But her mother never said anything.

Over the Rhine has a song titled "All I Need is Everything" in which they sing, "Inside, outside, feel new skin / all I need is everything / feel the slip and the grip of grace

again..." (from the CD *Good Dog, Bad Dog*, 2000) It's true that, bottom line, we all need that *everything*, but Kathy was so wounded she needed *rock bottom* everything. And what did we have to offer? Not much. We were young and poor.

One night as I sat on Kathy's bed saying good night, we talked about little things, nothing profound and suddenly she sobbed and couldn't stop. My sitting there so casual, tenderly, almost absently touching her was something her mom had never done. Just this ordinary thing undid her. We loved her, but not perfectly. She was a huge trial for us, combining little girl needs with sexy street-wise attitude. Sometimes she made me really mad. In the end she left us because she couldn't stay off drugs or away from the men who used her. We told ourselves, it wasn't our fault. For four years we heard from her, sometimes in the middle of the night crying, wanting us to pray, needing us to come pick her up from some dump. She wanted life to be different, but she never overcame her terrifying addictions.

Then one day as I prepared dinner listening to the news

with half an ear, I heard an item that made me drop the dish I was holding. A young woman had been shot by an ex-boyfriend in a lover's quarrel. I turned to look and saw Kathy's body lying on the sidewalk in a pool of blood covered by a sheet.

So had she been ushered into heaven that day? I thought so. All her wounds would have been healed by the time of the newscast. I saw her as fresh and virgin in a way that wasn't possible here on earth. Jesus would have killed her blues forever. Someday, I'm going to be so glad to see her again and laugh about the way she sometimes shocked me.

We play small parts in the lives of many people we encounter. Hospitality is practiced in a thousand reckless little ways. We don't know what will be the outcome of caring for the stranger. God is under no obligation to tell us, and yet he notices and controls the consequences of each little temporal act, and they will not go unrewarded.



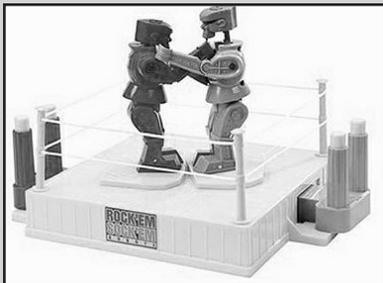
Managing Editor and Webmaster Matthew Hundley Pulls Up A Chair at Toad Hall

When I opened my E-MAIL I had a very important message waiting:

January 31

Margie Haack challenged your knowledge on a quiz called "Retro Toys & Games that we all loved playing with, and probably still do!!!". Margie's score was 85%. Can you beat Margie's score? >>7:43pm

I took up the challenge...logged onto FACEBOOK and beat Margie's score. (I got 100%). Glad I played with all those toys as a kid. Of course there are many more FACEBOOK quizzes I have not fared so well at.



Why are we talking about FACEBOOK? If you didn't know, Denis and Margie are both part of the FACEBOOK universe (which is a much tamer form of social networking then, say, MySpace).

If you haven't signed on to FACEBOOK, it *might* be worth your while. Plus, if you befriend the Haack's you're bound to discover deep, dark secrets about Margie, like:

January 29

Margie walked home in a blizzard. Her face was frozen and she should have worn boots. >>11:47am

And catch this...

Margie just ate the last piece of really great amazing toffee. Denis doesn't know yet. She'll deal later.>>3:11pm

I love that even in the digital realm Margie keeps her conversations to more analog enjoyments in life like *blizzards* and *toffee*.



If you sign on for the **Ransom Fellowship Group** on FACEBOOK you can post comments on articles you read in *Notes* or *Critique*, and contribute to dialogue on the direction of this ministry.

Speaking of WEB SITES. I had the privilege of working with Margie and Denis on the recent redesign of **www.RansomFellowship.org** (note it is .ORG--if you try the .com address you will not get to the Ransom Fellowship you know and love).

Hopefully you've had a chance to explore the site as there is a *veritable plethora* (I like that phrase) of information available for you online. You can also get back issues of this publication in case you

missed an issue or wanted to e-mail a copy to a friend.

We are always adding new and archival material to the site. Most recently we added a couple eBooks: one on Bible study that Denis wrote; another on millennial issues by Wim Rietkerk of the Netherlands. Wim's son Mark is in classes with me at Covenant. It has been great getting to know his family.

Speaking of family...we are now looking to expand the family of Ransom WEB SITES by adding a BLOG. The name is currently top secret (we're still trying to think of something clever), but will be unveiled this spring along with a link off the Ransom Fellowship WEB SITE.

I should encourage you to check out the DONATE section of the WEB SITE as there are a number of unique ways there for you to support the vision and mission of Ransom.



It has been fun watching Margie and Denis as they *digitize* their lives. Where would they be now without their MacBooks and Cell Phones. And I've heard that iPod's have been spotted at Toad Hall as well.

Fortunately they still embrace the analog realm as well, as they continue to improve publications, like this one, and discuss important books, films, music and faith issues that impact all of our lives.

To close...

Margie, Thanks for letting me occupy a seat at Toad Hall this time around.

Notes readers, I highly encourage you to utilize the resources offered by Ransom online, including tons of great articles, back issues, eBooks, BLOGS, etc. Also, I encourage you to send Denis and Margie notes of encouragement for the work they do.



Lastly, as the behind the scenes guy, please feel free to send suggestions on how we can better serve you through the two publications and the various web spaces.

Blessings.

Matthew Hundley

Ransom Notes

Give Thanks With Us

In January we were deeply blessed by our board meeting. Over the years our members, spouses included, have become a small community of people who know and care intimately for one another. (Visit our website to meet them: www.ransomfellowship.org/people.asp)

Our board annually reviews Ransom's work, establishes and approves a budget, does internal audits, but just as important time is spent in Bible Study, discussion, and prayer. We love one another and know our passions, gifts, frailties, and griefs.

All of us express amazement that our times together are such balm for our souls. We're all used to extreme busyness, board meetings, conferences, difficulties and stress on every level--this is just life. But when Donald Guthrie stands in the kitchen making a cup of tea and shaking his head, saying, "This is so pleasant in every way," and when a spouse writes, "as long as I'm welcome, I don't ever want to miss this" we know that what happens when we come together is more than Business, it is God at work among us giving us a small taste of true Home.

And finally, I was vindicated, as if I needed that. Let my sweet partner eat Apples because he is now officially a "Switcher!" Denis has a new MacBook Pro thanks to a special donation that came in last quarter to help with this purchase. At our board meeting, Ed Hague helped him put the old pc down and get the Mac up and running. Besides many other cool features, it has new capabilities which will be a great help to him in capturing the film clips he often uses in lectures and discernment exercises.

Perhaps our main take-away this year was that Denis and I were affirmed, blessed, directed to keep on, and assured that we have like-minded folk who continue to walk with us.



Coming Up

February 15-18: *Rochester L'Abri Conference*. Denis will give plenary on Film & Comedy. Workshops: *Interview with Film Director Toddy Burton* and *Spiritual Yearning in Popular Music*. Margie's workshop: *Grace at the Table: Lessons from Unlikely Characters*.

February 29 - March 1: *Covenant Seminary, St. Louis*. Denis teaches a class on *Music and Theology*. It will offer a theological framework for understanding the role of popular music in Western culture, with an emphasis upon exegesis of music, texts, and biblical/theological material.

March 1: *Kirk of the Hills, St. Louis*. Missions Conference.

March 3-5: St. Louis at large.

March 9: *Trinity Presbyterian, Rochester, MN*. Denis begins 5 week series on *Muslim/Christian Relations* for adult class.

March 21-24: Easter with family in Chicago area.

April 11-14: Tucson, AZ. Denis will be speaking at *La Vita House*.

April 17-20: Calvin College, Margie attends *Festival of Faith & Writing*.

April 25-27: *Providence PCA, Concord, NC*. Denis & I do a weekend conference.

May 4-12: Stay with Aunt Ruth while Marsena & Jeff get away.

F Family Notes

Gravy Hell



Marsena & Paige



Kaiden, Shaun & Mason



Last November we had an unexpected reunion when our kids came home for Thanksgiving. Children were born, people moved, and jobs changed since we last saw each other. Sember & Shaun have been in Chat-tanooga almost four years, and after two Tennessee babies this was Sember's first trip back. Jeff & Marsena's household grew when Aunt Ruth moved in. Some of us are twice as big as twice as old as when we last got together.

With 9 adults and 7 children our house felt like a hummingbird nest. A lot of us slept on the floor, certain toys were confiscated, and tickets were sold to the shower. We had two (only) disasters: Isobel plugged the bathroom sink with toilet paper which flooded surrounding neighborhoods; and, I broke my crock-pot insert trying to make gravy on the burner. It cracked to pieces and gravy ran to Sheol and back again.



Calling Doctor Paige

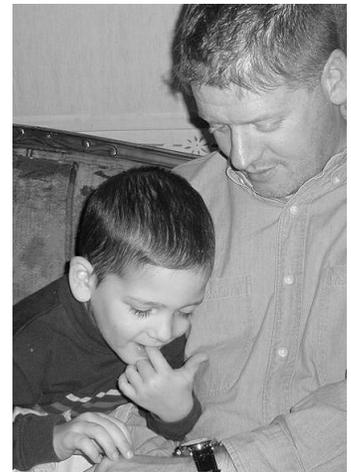
Anson's Cake



Paige & Isobel Tea Party



Jerem & Sem Kiss Micah



Lishy & Uncle Jeff

F Final Notes

Homelessness

We lie in our beds in the dark. There is a picture of the children on the bureau. A patch of moonlight catches our clothes thrown over the back of a chair. We can hear the faint rumble of the furnace in the cellar. We are surrounded by the reassurance of the familiar. When the weather is bad, we have shelter. When things are bad in our lives, we have a place where we can retreat to lick our wounds while tens of thousands of people, many of them children, wander the dark streets in search of some corner to lie down in out of the wind.

Yet we are homeless even so in the sense of having homes but not being really at home in them. To be really at home is to be really at peace, and there can be no real peace for any of us until there is some measure of real peace for all of us. When we close our eyes to the deep needs of other people whether they live on the streets or under our own roof - and when we close our eyes to our own deep need to reach out to them - we can never be fully at home anywhere.

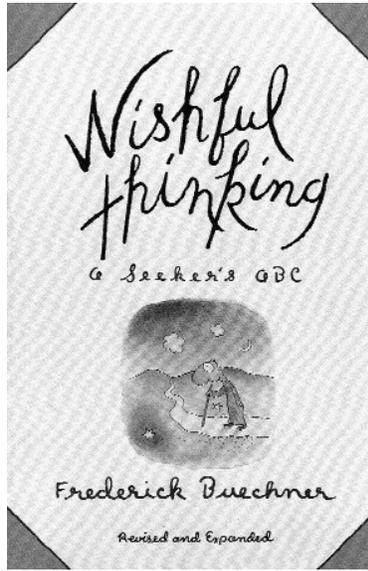
Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC
Frederick Buechner, p. 46

In this life we are blessed if we have moments of tasting, of small knowings when we're on to something very like home. We long for it to be permanent, not just for ourselves but for all who wander the wastelands of earth. The words of Christ are sweet when he assures us: "Let not your heart be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I'm going there to prepare a place for you." (John 14:1,2.) As we wait for the "already, but not yet" we are honored to share the fragrance of what's to come to those who pass by.

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.

Managing Editor - Matthew Hundley

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