

# Notes from TOaD HaLL

ISSUE #3  
FALL 2008



## Shreds of Life

Our three-year-old granddaughter, Paige, has a habit that got me thinking--it's pretty common among kids--she sucks the index finger of her left hand while grasping the satiny edge of her baby blanket between the thumb and remaining fingers. Her right hand clutches another part of the ribbon edge in the exact place where she knows there is a hole in the binding and can slip her other thumb in and out. The blanket used to be lilac with a lavender satin binding. It's now faded to a sickly, gray color with stains and holes that would make a sensitive person gag. Even with all its disgusting strings and shreds hanging off, to her, it retains the mix of soft flannel and slippery satin she

she needs to comfort herself.

When part of our family was together in June, I watched her, thinking what a metaphor for life--hanging on to the shreds, trying to find some comfort in the fragments of life. Towards the end of our stay at the cabin when everyone was ready to be done with vacation, Paige's daddy had to take her on his lap to give her a scolding about some things she does regularly. He talked to her at length about not going on the dock without a life jacket, not hitting her brother with a stick, or not walking in the water with her shoes on, I don't remember what all. I do remember, she was holding her blanky and sucking steadily. When he was done speaking she took her finger out of her mouth and



Paige and her blanky

a sour batch of Ethiopian Yrgacheffe (get over it) that I paid good money for? Oddly enough, God can use the stars to "speak" to us and to offer some healing perspective when the world tempts us to distraction or despair. They are there to say, "Pay attention. I'm talking to you."

So it happened that this summer I reconsidered the stars and planets, in a pretty unscientific way, granted.

Did you see the moon in July and part of August? I hope you noticed. There was a bright star that followed the moon across the southern sky dwarfing even the city lights. The star was so close and unblinking, I almost thought it was a giant space station just a few miles off the cross on top of St. Mary's Hospital, moving steadily toward our back porch. It turned out to be the planet Jupiter, 365 million miles away, as close to earth as ever it can get. It gave me shivers, and I immediately thought: God!

You get the same feeling of observing some powerful, alien universe if you've ever camped in a far valley or forest and lain down at night under the sky or swam naked in a lake when the stars were



"You talkin' to me?"

asked:

"You talkin' to me?"

Even while laughing I was struck by my adult ability to do the same thing. I favor hanging on to the shreds of

life and sucking madly rather than listening to God. I can't believe how hard it is to find the exact combination of chocolate, books, coffee, not too much global news, a good sitcom, sleep, and controlled interactions with every significant-other in order to make my life pleasant. It's tough to pay attention to the ways God "talks" to me about the limits of my ability to "re-imagine" life. I can see myself barely lifting my eyes long enough to say, "You talkin' to me?"

## Star Talk

We walk under the stars every night whether we notice them or not. What difference can they possibly make in this disparate world where refugees stream away from burned homes and someone sells me



Jupiter nears the earth.

reflected all around, and it felt like you were floating in space with nothing to tether you to the mother ship. It makes some grown persons cry because they get a notion of how small they are and how vast the universe.

Thinking along this misty trail, I was reminded of Abraham and the Milky Way. In Genesis God told Abraham that his "off-



Milky Way.

spring would be as numerous as the stars." I wondered, how could Abraham believe such a thing when he was old and childless? Even now it just seems so over the top. Back then in about 2000 B.C. he would have looked up at night and seen the stars from the dark of the wilderness, a place where no one lived, a place of deep silence. Today there is nowhere on earth, and hasn't been for centuries, where the stars are so bright, or as many as Abraham saw them. With towns and cities and gazillions of bulbs generating waves of light energy across the atmosphere of the earth, there is no place on the planet free of light pollution.

So from this pristine place in the deep desert where he watched millions of stars light years away and saw the distant dust of galaxies that look like space fog to the naked eye, and as the constellations swung in myriads across his retinas, Abraham listened and believed God. He believed God meant what he said, and this impossible thing of having a baby with Sarah would come true, and that through him all people would be blessed

because he would become the ancestral father of Jesus, who would gather us all into one family with countless brothers and sisters and bring us home.

So I looked at Jupiter, and the fact that I could say "God!" signals (at the least) I've taken my thumb out of my mouth long enough to get this: Thanks to Abraham, thanks to Christ, thanks to God. I am, I was, one of the stars Abraham saw. (Not literally. You know.)

And on one of those nights in August when the lights were so brilliantly on display I also remembered a piece of David's poetry and thought, yes, I do catch a tiny drift of what he meant when he wrote:

*The heavens declare the glory of God.  
The firmament showeth his handiwork.  
Day after day uttereth speech; night after  
night showeth knowledge. There is no  
speech nor language where their voice is  
not heard. Their line is gone out through all  
the earth, and their words to the end of the  
world....*

and on it goes--Psalm 19. The rhythm of the old King James language seems right for these ancient words. Their power and mystery can lift the heart and eyes from dragging in the dirt. There is deep hope in knowing that this knowledge about creation is not exclusively imparted to some religious, white woman living in the USA. No, not at all. I look up with, perhaps, billions of others, whose language I don't begin to understand, and know that any of us, anywhere, can hear and see something of the glory of God in the stars.

This is not meant to disengage me from



The Milky Way from the desert.



the world, but rather, to give courage, and to see it in such a way that I am calmed. I know that the God who made Jupiter reflect the sun at night also has a plan for a time yet to come when he says:

*I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise... at that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home... (Zeph. 3:19, 20).*

I can imagine a little bit of this just from how good it feels to be back home today, sitting in the sun on the back steps, eating a fresh tomato, and watching the bumble bees pollinate my coral bells. Zephaniah's words help cork my impatience while I wait for what seems like a long, long time to see what glory looks like. Jupiter helps the wait.

And, oh, by the way, two days before I'd thought of getting a pic of it, Micah had clipped the strings and sewn the rips on Paige's blanket.

### Other Star Moments

I confess I like most of what Monty Python does even though I sometimes wonder what kind of twisted person laughs at their stuff. (Me?) Not to go into all that here, but they did a movie called *The Meaning of Life*, which has moments of, well, vulgarity, but also moments of great brilliance. It includes a song written by Eric Idle--"The Galaxy Song." Here's one of many links where you can listen and read the lyrics:

<http://dingo.care2.com/cards/flash/5409/galaxy.swf>.

I appreciate it because Idle makes paradox work. He asks this huge question about what is the meaning of life by forcing you to consider the solar system and the unimaginable statistics of star distance and size. When perspective is established and you are smiling at the swiny melody and rhyming lyrics he sticks it to you by offering no answer at all:

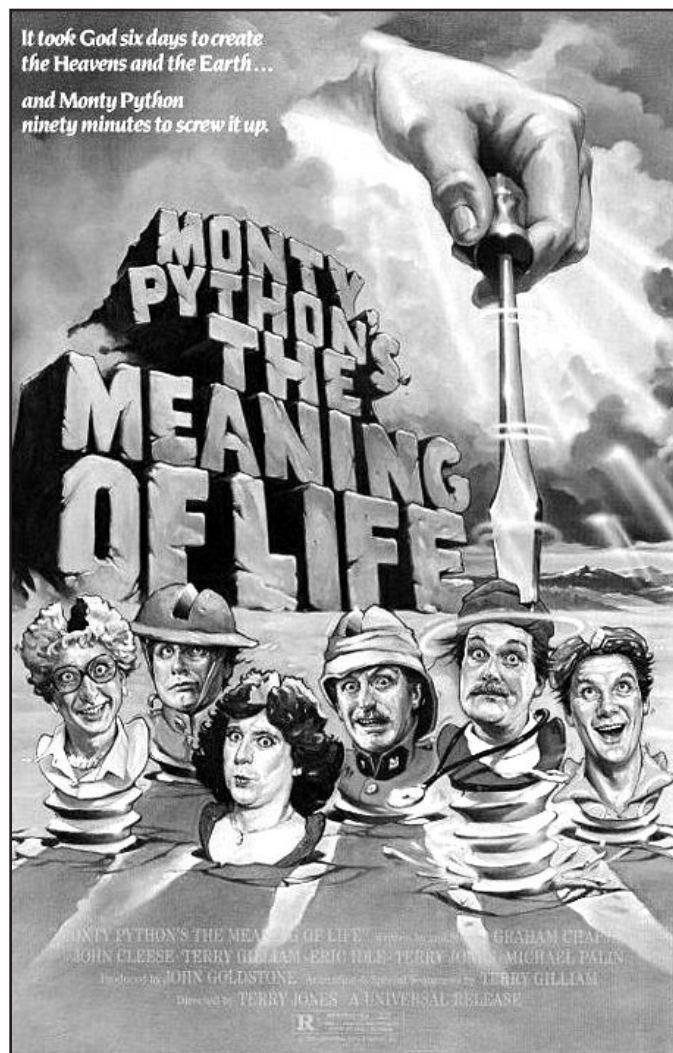
*And remember when you're feeling  
very small and insecure  
How amazing and unlikely  
was your birth.  
And pray there's intelligent life  
somewhere up above,  
Cause there's bugger aught  
down here on earth.*

Idle is right. Life is meaningless, not to mention frightening, if there isn't some higher intelligence running the cosmos. And if "It" is there, but doesn't give an Arby's French Dip about you, then there isn't much reason to live.

However, when I lie on the dock at a little lake in northern Wisconsin and watch the northern constellations that come out, my problem is not that I doubt God's existence, my trouble is why we suffer and what does God mean by it?

This past summer I've wondered why our neighbor brings his little boy with him when he makes drug deals outside my kitchen window, and why Chinese girls are purposely suspended in pre-menstrual childhood to make

them gold-medal stars, and why I must endure my own little slice of pain and



distress.

When God talks to Job about suffering he never explains why, instead he tells Job to look at creation, and he sounds pretty scary stern about it. Among his questions to Job:



"Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades (The Seven Sisters)? Can you loose the cords of Orion?" (Job 38:31). No. And, no.

Still, this is an interesting moment when God joins Job on earth and looks up with him from a human's finite perspective. Think of it. From wherever God is, at any single point in the universe, or at all points at once, this configuration of stars could look like anything. What pattern do they form? It's only from earth that they look like "Seven Sisters." So to communicate with Job, God descends to earth, looks up, and calls it with the human eye. I love that.

Frederich Buechner reflects further on God's non-answer to Job about suffering:

*Maybe the reason God doesn't explain to Job why terrible things happen is that he knows what Job needs isn't an explanation. Suppose that God did explain. Suppose that God were to say to Job that the reason the cattle were stolen, the crops ruined, and the children killed was thus and so, spelling everything out right down to and including the case of boils. Job would have his explanation.*

*And then what?*

*Understanding in terms of the divine economy why his children had to die, Job would still have to face their empty chairs at breakfast every morning. Carrying in his pocket straight from the horse's mouth a complete theological justification of his boils, he would still have to scratch and burn.*

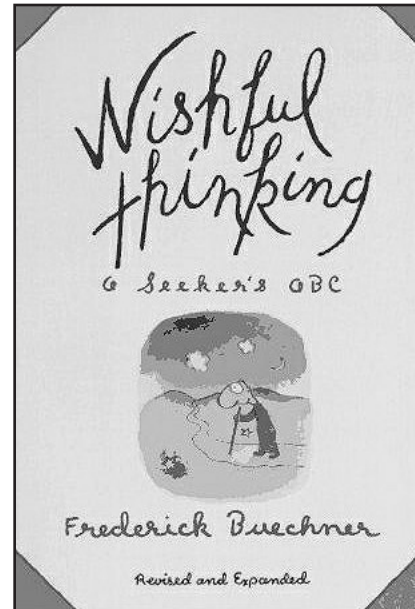
*God doesn't reveal his grand design. He*

*reveals himself. He doesn't show why things are as they are. He shows his face. And Job says, "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see thee." Even covered with sores and ashes, he looks oddly like a man who has asked for a crust and been given the whole loaf.*

*At least for the moment.*

- Frederick Buechner in:

*Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*



### **The Point of Stars**

I was surprised to see the new Christmas card our friend, Bonnie Liefer, designed this summer. We seemed to have been thinking along the same lines. Its subject is stars. (Her brochure is included in this issue of Notes.) She says,

"Twenty-three years ago, I looked out the window on a summer night in Colorado and I will never, ever forget what I saw. The sky was packed with stars. It was stunningly, achingly beautiful. I had never seen anything like it before and I've never seen anything like it since.

"Those stars are still there, even though I can't see them in Pittsburgh. In the same way, there is an unseen spiritual reality that lies behind everything, even though we can't see it. And behind that unseen world is Christ."

In a world that can wear us down, the stars can restore our hearts to a proper upright position, they can be a reference point of hope reminding us that Christ, who suffered as a human, is also the one who is "before all things and in Him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17).

# Ransom Notes

## Looking Back

These past months have been busy as we've done a good deal of traveling and speaking. Lots of wonderful, intense conversations about life. I've revised another version of my manuscript, which is now called *Through Devil's Gap*. I got me a literary agent who's marvelously supportive and already has editors wanting to look at it. Denis is finishing his seminary degree next May and is beginning work on his capstone project which will be a book for publication. Thomas Nelson has already expressed interest. Very encouraging! Now and then we had surprise visitors--like yesterday morning, as I got out of the shower, Sarah D. called to say she was passing through and could she say "hi." Turned out she was calling from our front porch. Cell phones! Toad Hall's kitchen has been repaired and painted. My potted flowers are showing stress, and I just accidentally ate a rotten plum while working on this. Life is pretty normal.

## Blogspotting

More and more communication today is done via blogs and Facebook, so both Denis and I have joined this ongoing Web conversation. For us, it's a part of being faithful to our calling--thinking, talking Christianly about all of life, of being "in the marketplace." You're apt to find most any topic--from recipes, to a movie review, to an argument with airport security. Please join in the conversation. My Blog: <http://toadsdrinkcoffee.blogspot.com>  
Denis' Blog: <http://blog4-critique.blogspot.com>.

## Finances

Long ago I stopped saying "God has been so faithful to us" when there is enough money in Ransom's coffers to meet our budget. God is always faithful whether we are rich or poor. The last six months we've had to test this belief in lean times as we've gone from week to week, sometimes day to day, watching, wondering, praying.

We don't *do* "fund-raising" in a typical way, although it has occurred to my sinister mind to threaten to stop writing *Notes From Toad Hall* because we can't afford the printing and the mailing. But that's both manipulative and disingenuous since writing *Notes* is the hardest work I do and it'd just be an excuse to quit.

We could never have come these many years in Ransom Fellowship without all who have blessed us with regular support, both prayer and donations. (Donors can now opt to give via Ransom's website [www.RansomFellowship.org/donate.asp](http://www.RansomFellowship.org/donate.asp).) We are utterly thankful for them. For whatever reasons our finances are lower than we've seen in a long time. We'd like to ask for prayer. That we would be faithful and wise during this time. That we wouldn't lose heart. Pray that we'd be discerning and listening closely to God.

Because of this, we only decided last week to go ahead with our long-planned vacation--to celebrate our 40th wedding anniversary. I've looked forward to it all year, and the thought of not going away for this bit of rest and reflection was depressing. However, we've been graciously given a lovely retreat and even a gift certificate for a dinner out. Far too often we forget that REST is commanded and that it, too, requires the practice of faith - faith that God will keep you and the world while you relinquish the helm of the universe to him.

## Looking Ahead

### September

- ▶ Critique Issue #3--in the mail.
- ▶ Critique Issue #4--to the printer.
- ▶ Vacation and Writing Retreat.

### October

17-18

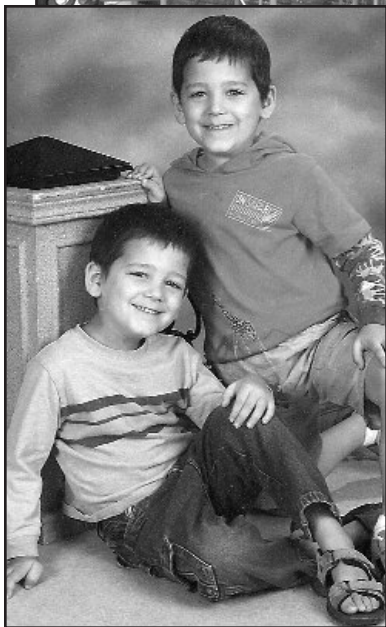
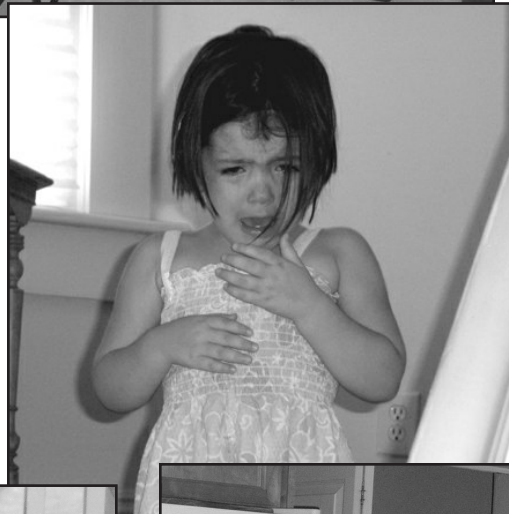
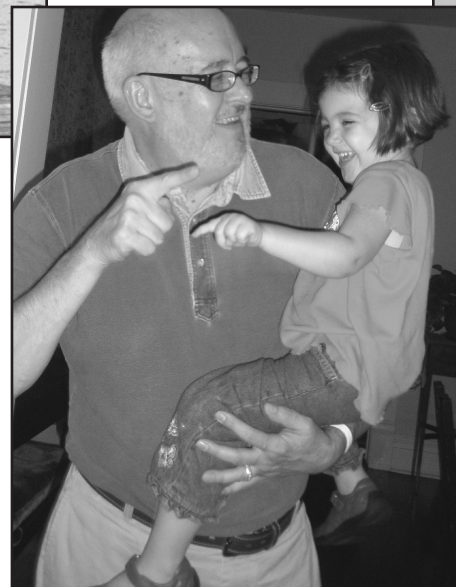
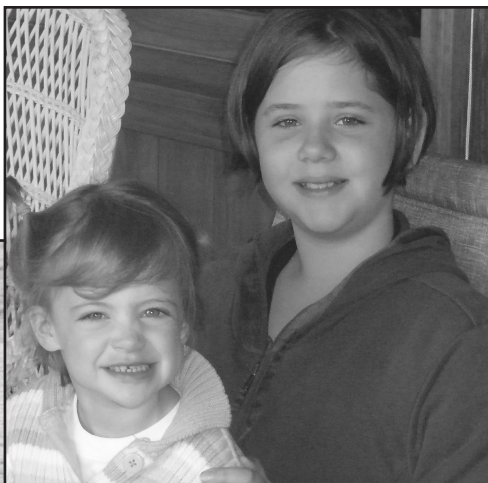
- ▶ Kirk of the Hills, St. Louis  
Margie speaks to Women's Retreat.
- ▶ Denis takes seminary class, library research at Covenant Seminary.

23-27

- ▶ Care for Aunt Ruth while Marsena goes on break.
- ▶ Write next issue of Notes from Toad Hall.



# F Family Notes



## Summer 2008 Photo Key

**12:00** Girl cousins. Manessah and Paige at Wisconsin cabin.

**1:30** New shoes from Grandpa & Grandma.

**3:00** Bedtime for the Diva.

**4:30** Cooking with Grandma.

**6:00** Storytime. Sember reads to her 4 youngest.

**7:30** Elisha & Kaiden start kindergarten this year!

**9:00** Shuan's Chattanooga mural, not quite finished yet.

**10:30** Stick battle. Anson and Paige fight it out.

**Center** Denis dances with youngest granddaughter Isobel.

# F

## Final Notes

### The Wounds of Ambition

Did you watch women's gymnastics during the Olympics? Breathtaking! I kept looking at the Chinese girls and saying, "They're just babies. Look at them!" Later, evidence was published that some were underage.

I know that many Olympic competitors suffer deprivation and pain because someone else (a parent, a coach) pushes them so hard there's no choice, or they choose it because it's what they want for themselves. (Shawna Johnson would be an interesting example of this.) There aren't as many competitors whose governments control every, every square inch of their lives with the inexorable absolute power of the Chinese government.

It's common for their gymnastics girls to be taken away from family to begin training at three years of age, and no matter how much it may hurt to have the coach stand on her little legs everyday, and no matter how many tears are cried, because money is sent to parents living in poverty - she cannot go home. I deeply wished they could live and be loved like little girls and play (or not play) everyday like my three-year-old granddaughter.

There was also Lin Miaohe, the nine-year-old, who sang during the opening ceremonies, and we all watched thinking how lovely, only to learn she wasn't singing at all, just lip-synching to the voice of Yang Peiyi, who wasn't pretty enough to be seen.

Beijing was a reminder, in many ways, of how ambition can wound. It's difficult sorting through the broken beauty of this world. And I'm not trying to kid myself that I or our country are free from guilty, wounding ambitions.

Whether eaten, made into pesto, rubbed on the skin, whatever, I can't wait to see the tree in heaven which John describes as having leaves "for the healing of the nations." (Rev. 22:2).

That's it from Toad Hall.

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 adobe homes 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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