

Notes from TOaD HaLL

ISSUE #4 - 2008
The Holiday Issue



Slowly Slipping Southward

You may not have noticed this in the news since it came out the week before the elections, and we were all very preoccupied and weary of the media, but it's kind of fascinating. *Science News* (Oct. 25, 2008, Vol. 174) reported that astrophysicists looking at data gathered by a NASA probe have observed a kind of slope in space where something like 700 galaxy *clusters*--involving hundreds of thousands of galaxies about one billion light years from earth--are slipping southward (which way is "south" in space?) at a speed of 1000 kilometers per second. Mysteriously, they seem to be "under the attraction of an invisible force outside the visible universe." The speed boggles me.

Okay, so does the distance. Not that anything faster than chicken thawing or farther than the coffee shop doesn't. Not that I understand, but this observation has caused consternation for some scientists because it flies in the face of theories about the uniformity of the universe. It changes things, makes the cosmos appear a little shaky.

When I read it I thought of God upholding the universe in the regular old way he's done for millennia before this discovery. It's hard to imagine what's impossible for humans--that God is everywhere, unchanging, immutable. He's always known about those clusters and where they are headed.

Other Shifty Things

I watch *Project Runway*--a reality program. Perhaps that's a questionable pastime, though I could defend it if I had to. Every week Heidi Klum begins with obvious relish in her little German accent, "As you know, in fashion, one day you're in (pause for a beat) and the next day you're out." Most of the designers who compete can't deal with the challenges and changes each week. They cry and whine and backstab. Once in awhile one stands out because he or she is uncharacteristically kind, and even tempered, which is how I think everyone should always act in the face of change (note use of superlatives).

Not that I apply this to my life. I may only be a tiny, little collection of atoms, compared to the universe, but I have a sharpened ability to catalog change especially bad changes. I'd like to poo-poo them, but they trouble me. My hair is falling out. I grab a chunk and run my fingers through it and count, ten, twenty, a hundred drifting off my hand onto the floor. It's a side effect of medication for rheumatoid arthritis and I don't know where it will end. The rheumatologist overseeing my "progress" has me on a potpourri of drugs about which he says cheerily, "most of my patients don't lose their hair."

Americans have watched national corporations (eg, Enron, Freddie, Fannie) go bankrupt and loyal employees who thought their retirement and benefits were secure

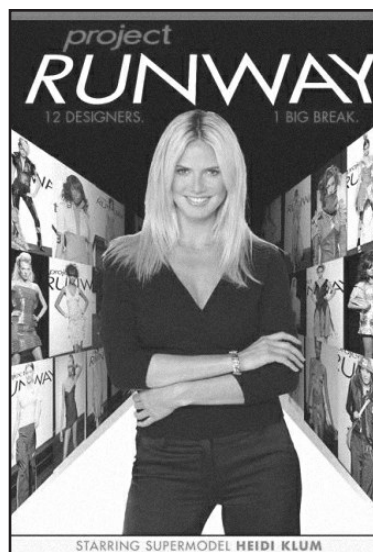
sent packing while executives lined their own nests. I have sympathized, even ranted at times. But, I remind myself, anyone's fortunes can shift in a heartbeat, and even the rich and the stable need to trust in God. It's a tiny bit hypocritical to say this when your own situation is pretty cozy. However, the economic



plunge of our country reached out and touched us, too.

When we were young, I paid little attention to finances. We never had much money, which put us in a low socio-economic class with attitude--the kind where you might not have enough for shoes for the kids, but you might squander a few dollars on a useless hobby (growing earthworms) with a get-rich-quick scheme in the back of your mind. Cars were huge, unaffordable expenses, and yet to this day, most of the ones we've owned have come to us undeserved, miraculously. We were forced to trust in God.

Eventually, due to the wisdom and insistence of our board, we began a small retirement account handled by a big investment firm, overseen by a man--I don't even want to know what his cut is. I thought of his bonuses every day when the markets were plunging. During that time, some of our friends put a widget on their computer so they could watch the Dow Jones fall by the hour, and thus feel really up-to-date in their sense of helplessness and despair. Our retirement fell along with everyone else who has invested in stocks. Listening to NPR--another way to



feel current on despair.com--I heard an analyst skewer hope as she asserted that if you were young it was going to be okay, you'd have time to recover, but if you were approaching retirement age, you were in serious trouble. We're in the serious trouble category along with a lot of others, I imagine. And now we, too, are a little shaken by this shift in fortunes.

We Are Not Made of Iron

Each day I've come to my desk hoping to find words to explain that God cares for me no less on a day of disaster than on a day when the sun shines. ("Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." Hebrews 13:8) But I've had problems getting my head organized to write. I'm learning (I hope) to cope with more pain and some disarray due to medication. Sometimes when I can't work it seems like character flaw - I shoulda killed that thought a long time ago.

So for this issue John Calvin is going to help me out with a comment on Philippians. I understand some Christians dislike him, but when I read him I find he has a pastor's heart full of compassion for his people. His honesty about his own frailty shines, and I'm feeling frail. His wisdom and comfort seem timely. He affirms that in the everyday ordinary challenges and changes I face as a Christian, irrelevant to place, race, or whatever holiday, God is the same. He loves us as much on the day before our retirement fell as he did the day after. He's the same God whether I have 50,000 hairs or 5, and we shouldn't be worried--those 700 galaxies aren't going anywhere they shouldn't be going.

I really wanted to edit Calvin a little, change the translated language, which was done by John Owen so long ago. It's archaic and some sentences seem a little too complex. But I thought better of it.

The Attraction of an Invisible Force

Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your moderation (gentleness, reasonableness) be known to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests

to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 4: 4-7

Rejoice

"Rejoice in the Lord.' It is an exhortation suited to the times; for, as the condition of the pious 'the Philippians' was exceedingly troublous, and dangers threatened them on every side, it was possible that they might give way, overcome by grief or impatience. Hence he enjoins it upon them, that, amidst circumstances of hostility and disturbance, they should nevertheless rejoice in the Lord, as assuredly these spiritual consolations, by means of which the Lord refreshes and glad-

dens us, ought then most of all to show their efficacy (meaning ability to produce an intended result) when the whole world tempts us to despair. Let us, however, in connection with the circumstances of the times, consider what efficacy there must have been in this word uttered by the mouth of Paul, who might have had special occasion of sorrow. For if they are appalled by persecutions, or imprisonments, or exile, or death, here is the Apostle setting himself forward, who, amidst imprisonments, in the very heat of persecution, and amidst apprehensions of death, is not merely himself joyful, but even stirs up others to joy. The

sum, then, is this--that come what may, believers, having the Lord standing on their side, have ample sufficient ground of joy.

"The repetition of the exhortation serves to give greater force to it: Let this be your strength and stability, to rejoice in the Lord, and that, too, not for a moment merely, but so that your joy in him may be perpetuated. For unquestionably it differs from the joy of the world in this respect--that we know from experience that the joy of the world is deceptive, frail, and fading, and Christ even pronounces it to be accursed (Luke 6:25). Hence, that only is a settled joy in God, which is such as is never taken away from us."

Help is Here

"The Lord is at hand.' Here we have a most beautiful sentiment, from which we learn, in the first place, that ignorance of the providence of God is the cause of all impa-



tience, and that this is the reason why we are so quickly, and on trivial accounts, thrown into confusion, and often, too, become disheartened because we do not recognize the fact that the Lord cares for us. On the other hand, we learn that this is the only remedy for tranquillizing our minds - when we repose unreservedly in his providential care, as knowing that we are not exposed either to the rashness of fortune, or to the caprice of the wicked, but are under the regulation of God's fatherly care. In fine, the man that is in possession of this truth, that God is present with him, has what he may rest upon with security."

Entirely

"But in all things.' ...in every matter... In these words he exhorts the Philippians, as David does all the pious in Ps. 55:22, and Peter also in 1 Peter 5:7, to cast all their care upon the Lord. For we are not made of iron, so as not to be shaken by temptations. But this is our consolation, this is our solace--to deposit, or (to speak with greater propriety) to disburden in the bosom of God everything that harasses us.

"The term 'requests' he employs here to denote desires or wishes. He would have us make these known to God by prayer and supplication, as though believers poured forth their hearts before God, when they commit themselves, and all that they have, to Him. Those, indeed, who look hither and thither to the vain comforts of the world, may appear to be in some degree relieved; but there is one sure refuge - leaning upon the Lord.

"With thanksgiving' as many often pray to God amiss, full of complaints or of murmurings, as though they had just ground for accusing him, while others cannot brook delay, if he does not immediately gratify their desires, Paul on this account conjoins thanksgiving with prayers. It is as though he had said, that those things which are necessary for us ought to be desired by us from the Lord in such a way, that we, nevertheless, subject our affections to his good pleasure, and give thanks while presenting petitions. And, unquestionably, gratitude will have this effect upon us--that the will of God will be the grand sum of our desires."

- Calvin's Commentary on Philippians.



Ransom Notes

Please Pray:

- * Praise God for generous, kind hearts who have faithfully prayed and supported Ransom for years.
- * For trust in God's sovereignty when finances, health, and unforeseen circumstances become opportunities to wait patiently.
- * For wisdom and guidance as our board meets in January to review our ministry, set goals, and determine budget. (I love and trust these people. They're a great blessing to us.)
- * For year-end giving to be sufficient for us to continue as God wills.
- * For us as we write, prepare, and interact with people - that we would minister grace.
- * For my book manuscript, now being sent to NY publishers after being turned down by Christian publishing houses. (Denis says this is good.)
- * That I wouldn't be too discouraged by the late date for publishing this issue, which has been mostly my fault and has caused me anguish. (My apologies.)
- * For Denis and I as we travel many miles to see children and grandchildren in December. (I would love to have more energy for this.)
- * For joy in Christ in this season and always.

Looking Ahead:

Jan. 15-18. Ransom's Board meets in Rochester, MN.

Jan. 19-23. Denis co-teaches a seminary class with Donald Guthrie on Small Groups at Covenant Seminary in St. Louis.

February 13-15. Rochester L'Abri Conference. "Proclaiming All God's Wondrous Works: Creation, Redemption, and Future Glory." Denis will give a plenary ("Creation as Glorious Ruin") and workshops on the unlovely, or ugly in art & life. I give one workshop - an interview with a young couple - organic farmers. Please come if you can.

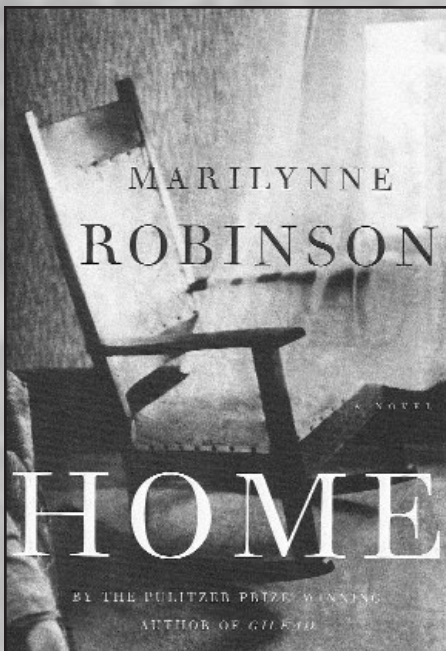
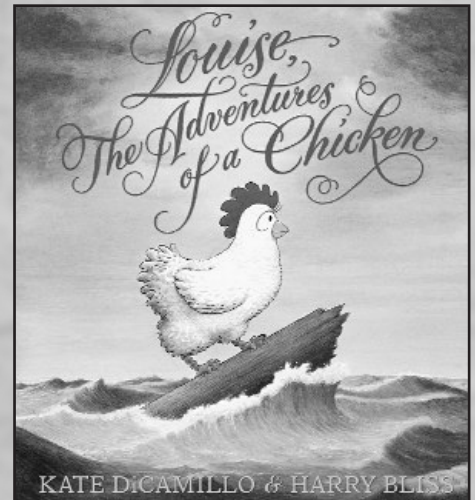
March 13-15. Concord, NC, Providence PCA. Denis does a weekend conference.

Christmas 2008 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall

Louise, The Adventures of a Chicken

Kate DiCamillo & Harry Bliss, Joanna Colter Books, 2008
Children's picture book

Louise is a winsome little hen who wanted more excitement than the henhouse offered so she left hoping to find adventure. She found more than enough at sea, in the circus, and at the hands of a tall, dark stranger. In the end, the pleasures and perils she encountered couldn't replace the allure of home where she was surrounded by her sisters, she was "inside the henhouse, safe and warm, where all the chickens slept the deep and dreamless and peaceful sleep of true adventurers." I love DiCamillo's stories and this is no exception. The illustrations are so completely charming - Bliss makes a wonderful partner in putting together this book. This is a great book to give to children ages 3 to 7 or just to have because you love the art of well-done picture storybooks.



Home

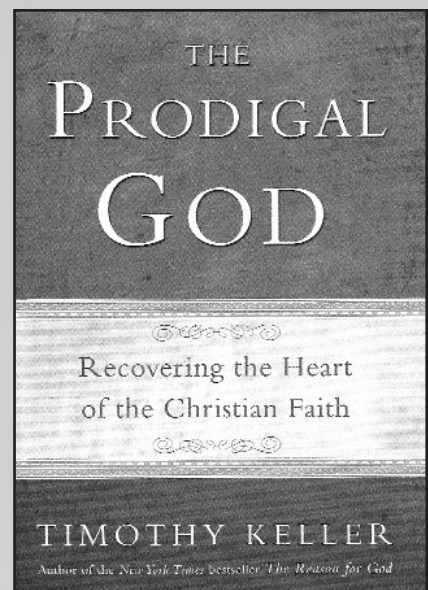
Marilyn Robinson, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008. (fiction)

Home (just the word itself denoting place) embodies my most tender hopes for love and perfection, a place of safety and warmth where we might live forever. Perhaps this is evidence that it is God-made, an impossible longing that springs from our very DNA. Robinson takes us to that place in a peaceful town in Iowa where on the surface, it might seem possible to find perfect home. We are soon disabused of that notion as layer by layer the heart of this family is gently exposed. Like *Gilead* its predecessor, *Home* is most notable for its spirituality. Its language has a scriptural power and resonance. Much of the imagery is biblical, especially of Jack, the main character, who is both Prodigal Son and a "man of sorrows." Reviewer Salley Vickers writes, "*Home* is not a novel in which plot matters. Like Jane Austen, but in a different key, Robinson's intentional focus is the super-subtleties of human exchange. The heart of this utterly absorbing, precisely observed, marvelous novel is the fumbling inadequacy of love, its inability to avert our terrible capacity to wound and maim, not even but especially, those nearest and dearest to us." I continued to ponder this novel long after I read it.

The Prodigal God

Timothy Keller, Dutton, 2008.

This is the second book published by Tim Keller in 2008. (In the first one *The Reason for God*, he offers rational explanations for belief in God--I recommend it, also.) Since 1989 Keller has led a church in Manhattan--many predicted it would be impossible to establish. However, the church has continued to grow as it reached people who live and work in the city--many of them young, professional, in the arts, and non-Christian. *The Prodigal God* unlocks the treasures of this familiar parable to bring a particularly hopeful, unexpected message to both the skeptic and the old religious guy, like myself, that's been around the church for years. Using the word "prodigal" in its original meaning (recklessly extravagant) to refer to God, I loved this message of grace that is for the irreligious younger brother and the moralistic uptight older brother. It's a beautifully bound, small book and may be just right for someone considering Christianity.



Christmas 2008 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall

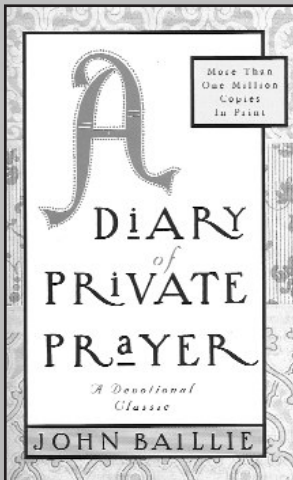
World Next Door

100 Market St, Chattanooga, TN
www.worldnextdoormarket.com

These days there are plenty of enterprises offering fairly traded and hand-crafted goods of people from emerging economies, and we like to support them where we can. The goal of Fair Trade is the direct exchange of goods based on principles of social and economic justice. This is the first time I've ever recommended a specific store - World Next Door owned by Kim & Will Honeycutt. Working with organizations that represent more than 40

of the earth's poorest nations their store offers products that are beautiful and useful, all handmade products. For example, they have impressive baskets from Nepal made of woven plastic. Normally I'm reluctant to use the word impressive and plastics in the same sentence but these

baskets are surprisingly attractive and really sturdy. My favorite product is Elephant Poo-poo paper - made into attractive notepaper and stationary. It is, of course, 100% recycled, earthy, and altogether lovely. Lots of kids would enjoy this paper for the idea alone. Yes. They have a cool website, check them out.



A Diary of Private Prayer
 John Baillie,
 Fireside Edition, 1949.
 (devotional)

Teach us to pray. If this has ever been a desire of your heart, then I suggest this little book. Framed by the rhythm of days, Baillie has written a month of private prayers for morning and

evening. There is a time for the very simple prayers of "Help me, help me" and the breathed, "Thank you, God!" but I also crave prayers that address Him with more complexity, with wonder and respect. Rather than being offed by his use of Thees and Thous, I'm drawn in to confess, worship, praise.

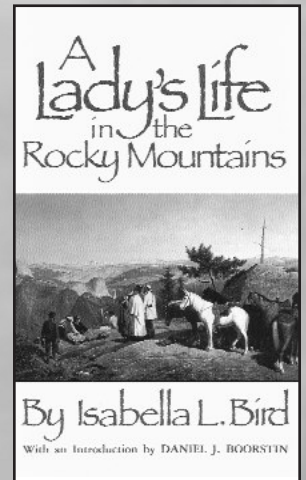
Forbid it, O Father, that the difficulty of living well should ever tempt me to fall into any kind of heedlessness or despair. May I keep it ever in mind that this human life was once divinely lived and this world once nobly overcome and this body of flesh, that now so sorely tries me, once made into Thy perfect dwelling-place.

Show Thy loving kindness tonight, O Lord, to all who stand in need of Thy help. Be with the weak to make them strong and with the strong to make them gentle. Cheer the lonely with Thy company and the distracted with Thy solitude. Prosper Thy Church in the fulfillment of her mighty task, and grant Thy blessing to all who have toiled today in Christ's name. Amen.

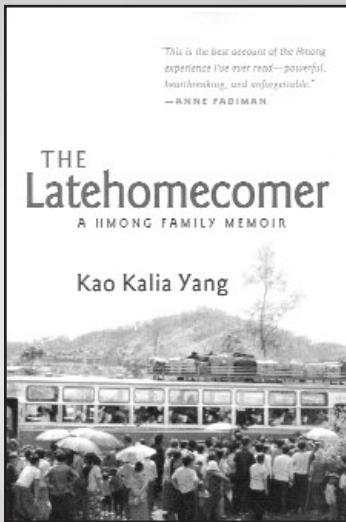
A Lady's Life in The Rocky Mountains
 Isabella L. Bird,
 Univ. of Oklahoma Press,
 1960.
 (memoir)

From September through December of 1873, a young English woman wrote letters to her sister as she traveled on horseback through the mountains of Colorado. I

picked this up on a whim when we were at the ranger's station near Grand Lake, not expecting such a riveting read. Hers was a journey of 800 miles on horseback, many of them alone, some through trackless wilderness in the midst of winter storms. Today, many of the places she visited are popular vacations spots, back then they were not fit for either tourists or women. Her spunk, good humor, and keen-eyed descriptions of mountain peaks, ranges and frontier towns (she called Colorado Springs "a decayed-looking cluster of houses bearing the arrogant name of Colorado City"), are fascinating because we recognize them. She often falls into worship as she tries to fathom the creator who was author of such extravagant beauty. Not a girly book: Denis enjoyed it, too.



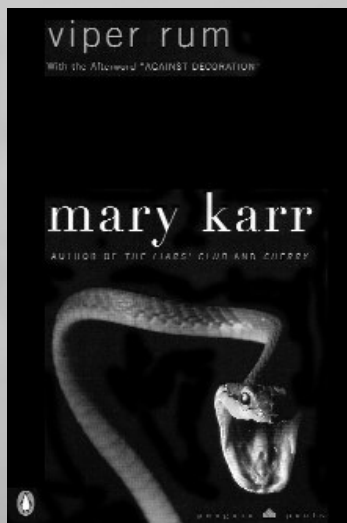
Christmas 2008 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall



The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir

Kao Kalia Yang, Coffee House Press, 2008. (memoir)

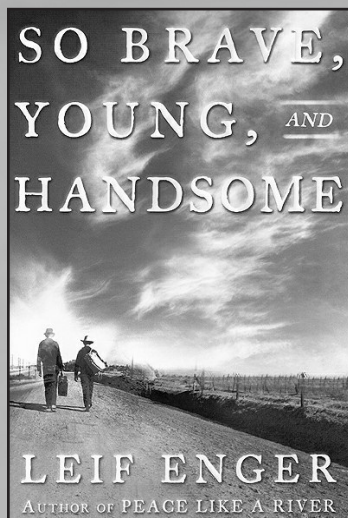
When Kao Kalia Yang was a baby her parents often asked, "What are you?" and the right answer was always, "I am Hmong." Not a name or a gender, but a people. Although Yang is a young woman, she's lived through enough change and suffering to fill a century. This is a well written, painful, sometimes joyous, account of her family's escape from Laos, her birth in a refugee camp in Thailand, to the life as immigrants in St. Paul, MN. Throughout the book she weaves in the religious beliefs and history of the Hmong who are a people without a home country. The Hmong were originally farmers, making their living from the jungle hillsides of Laos and Cambodia. Though small in stature they were a strong, tenacious people living in close communities. Their undercover involvement with Americans during the war with Vietnam left them completely vulnerable to genocide after the Americans pulled out. In America they learned to work at whatever they could find in order to support themselves. As I read I was reminded of "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." (Leviticus 19:34.) This book has helped me appreciate the Hmong and other displaced, immigrant peoples who live as neighbors right here in Rochester



Viper Rum

Mary Karr Poetry, Penguin Books, 1994. (poetry)

Author of best selling *The Liars Club*, Karr was a poet before her memoirs hit the big time. Her conversion to Christianity (Catholicism) as an adult changed the trajectory of her life, but not her unflinching reflections about that life. Her poetry glimmers, and her faith flashes in unexpected places, illumining her soul. Personal catharsis is portrayed in many guises from the sexual to the spiritual; don't expect her to spare you with subtleties too difficult to imagine or understand. Included is her essay "Against Decoration" which began a national controversy over her belief that poetry shouldn't be embellished with verbal ornaments and "high-brow doily making," rather poetry ought to be personal and accessible.



So Brave, Young, and Handsome

Leif Enger, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2008.

Set mostly in the old West, this is also a story of forgiveness, redemption and finding home. Monte Becker--"a man fading, a disappointment of persons"--has lost his sense of purpose. Monte's only success lies long behind him, and he lives a simple life with his loving wife and whipsmart son until he befriends an outlaw. Beginning in Minnesota and ending in California he embarks on a long and dangerous journey where a new world of opportunity and experience presents itself. This has all the elements of a great story: mystery, romance, outlaws, murders, and strange acts of nature. Enger weaves them all smoothly together to create a good read for all ages.

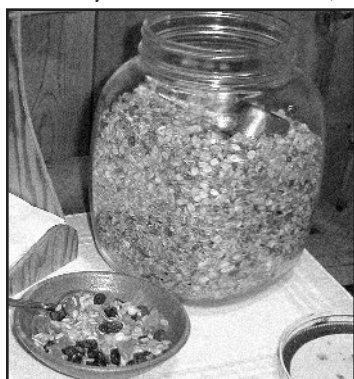
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Final Notes

I'll Make Granola

Is it possible that the financial stress touching all of us may also bring unexpected blessing? Perhaps the economy will become a catalyst for new or forgotten ways of connecting and caring for one another. Perhaps we don't need so much space and so much stuff after all. I think I want a simpler life, but let me keep my cell phone, please.

I'm a proponent of living faithfully in the everyday. Maybe that's why I follow a column in our newspaper written by "The Amish Cook." It borders on the boring because her writing isn't very compelling and it's always an account of the simple happenings of an ordinary week: snow falls, kids have colds, husband builds horse stalls, laundry is hung, sisters help can tomatoes, and God be praised. But since she really is a thirty-five year old Amish mother with eight children, who sews, cooks, and gardens all by hand, I'm kind of hooked on her. Of course, another fascination is the simplicity of the Amish life style revolving around an intimate community of people who depend greatly on one another.



Yesterday I baked a large batch of granola and the aroma filled the entire house with the sweet scent of toasted nuts and honeyed oatmeal.

Wholesome, delicious, affordable, almost Amish, it can be divided into quart zip-lock bags with another small bag of dried fruit tucked in the top to keep the rest of the granola crispy.

So, here, with a wish that I could make you this simple gift, is the recipe again--even though I published it once long ago.

Margie's Baked Granola

12 cups oatmeal (thick cut or long cook kind)

1 cup each of the following:

Oat bran

Coconut

Dried soy milk powder

Sesame seeds

Sunflower seeds

Pecans, peanuts, walnuts, whatever amount of nuts you can spare or afford.

Mix in a very large bowl.

Heat the following in a saucepan and pour over dry ingredients:

2/3 cup canola oil

2/3 cup brown sugar

2/3 cup honey

2/3 cup water

1 T. vanilla

2 t. salt

Spread in pans and bake by the batch at 350 degrees until lightly browned and crisp, about 30 minutes. Stir frequently to prevent burning on bottom.

May you be blessed because Christ was born,
That's it from Toad Hall.

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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