

Notes from Toad Hall

Issue #2 - 2010
Spring



Facing North

The front of our house faces north. It sits on a slight slope so that from the sidewalk you go up three steps. Then you walk over five slabs of cement that are slowly shifting toward the street, opening gaps between them. Arriving at the porch, you climb another three steps and cross it to the front door of Toad Hall. As I step over the cracks I've tended for years, I wonder how long it will take the whole front walk to complete its journey to the street. From between them each summer, I pull wild violets, crab grass and a small weed I can't name, which begins innocently enough, but in a second spreads across flat surfaces, branching, blooming sticky little flowers that turn to millions of teeny seed balls. One year I filled the gaps with tar. Bad

idea. Then I found a kind of plastic foam rope you shove between them and encase in a poisonous mix of asphalt. Not much help either. If a violet wants to grow there it does. Nothing you chose to grow would take root —like Woolly creeping thyme.

(I'm getting to the point. The women are probably still with me. A psych friend claims it's a gender thing. We are about context, landscape, men are about getting to the point. Right.)

Anyway, including the slight incline, the three stories of our house rise higher than a gardener would like. The third story that makes our house seem sort of Gothic grand is just a walk-up attic full of spiders, insect hulls, and a few boxes of *valuables* I'm saving so that one day our children can say, "and WHAT was she thinking?" The house casts a long enough shadow to create a front yard that doesn't want bright daisies or colorful peonies. It wants shade lovers, which are big-eared and boring. If they get flowers at all, they're tiny and anemic.

On a cold winter night not long ago when three of us sat in the living room engaged with our computers our housemate, Anita, announced, "I've sent you a link for shade-loving plants. Tell me what you think."

Well, in general—I guess I've already made that clear—I don't like shade. I like sun. You know, the light. I'm a good Christian. People love darkness because their deeds are evil, don't you know? Underneath all that shady greenery you can't be sure what's going on. Slugs mating, voles eating, nuclear fusion, whatever. But I looked anyway because as

Ransom's Resident Assistant, the Housemate and Friend, also keeps our yard where lately I haven't been much use, except to love her clamshells embedded in mortar, recycled brick edging and

blooming dogwoods. Her signature springs up everywhere despite the rabbit who nibbles hedges and squirrels who dig flower beds like they work for the cable company. Where I see dampness and fungi, she sees potential for life that gathers light and sends roots to a place where I would die from depression. Oh, wait, we speak of plants.

To my surprise, I found tons of lively shade plants, and once

I got past their names like Bugbane, Toad Lily and Masterwort and short of intentionally growing such things, I found them attractive. In their way. Even familiar ones deserved reconsidering. Begonias can bloom in shock-orange flames. Coleus I only knew in variegated green and white comes with leaves of every shade—from "Claret" to "Sedona"—the colors of Arizona sunsets. There was also the Shamrock, with a single good-luck leaf at the end of a graceful stem, and, okay, teeny white fairy flowers, but more charming than I remembered.

Another familiar shade plant—Lily of the Valley—one I dissed long ago for invasive roots. But why is Christ called this, the Lily of the Valley? In late spring if you walk past them and the wind is right you catch their fragrance. But looking for the flower among wide green tongues you only find a slim stalk hanging 5-10 small white bells that chime with tiny splendor.

Sometimes I get it. Or at least a little of it. The reveal of shaded places: unpredicted beauty, I like red-stemmed willows, delicate cinnamon ferns and northern sea oats with their flat fan-like heads that



gently nod all summer, and even in winter when their buff-colored stems wave above the drifts. I want Christ unexpected, divine, living in my north-facing life.

From Creation to Restoration

Denis is teaching a class on Sundays and last week he put these words up in a row: *Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration (Consummation)* and proposed that a lot of Christians focus on the middle two. He had us thinking about how that emphasis affects the way one sees life.

Among other things, I think giving prominence to Fall and Redemption over Creation and Restoration increases potential for sadness and despair.

We, of course, believe in God's remedy for sin, that is, that redemption comes to us through Christ. However, when we focus on the middle of the series and not the full story, we are more likely to expect if redemption is truly at work in a person, then the changes that heal all, or almost all, things will happen shortly. We are dismayed when they don't.

Most of us have nurtured tender seedlings of some sort that died despite sacrificial care—the dream of living in a perfect space, the job we should have had, the work of art that was never framed, the child that never was or the one who didn't grow up healthy and safe. Redemption hasn't fully shown up like we imagined it would.

Like everyone, Denis and I are witnesses to some painful stories. We lament and want God to fix life for these people. It seems urgent and necessary that it be done now. Sometimes what we see of

life is more wreckage than repair and restoration.

But a surprising comfort descends on me when I consider all four parts as best I can. The last word—Restoration —pushes the boundaries of my expectations beyond what I know or see now. We live in the middle of a plan we can't completely comprehend; we don't *know* the detailed ending of this or that story.

Everywhere we look in God's Word, He reminds us to have hope, to believe and trust him, to remember all he's done in the past when his people were up against a wall. We don't yet have all he is bringing to us. Jeremiah, for example, prophesied to the ancient church in the midst of personal and national collapse with no end in sight. As I read

through his book recently, I was impressed by how often in the midst of current events God paused to reorient his people—knowing we may lose heart during difficult times. The phrase

“I will restore them” appears over and over. “I will make an everlasting covenant with them,” he says.

“I will never stop doing good to them”... “I will restore their fortunes and have compassion on them,”... “I will make the descendants of David my servant and the Levites who minister before me as countless as the stars of the sky and as measureless as the sand on the seashore” (a remarkable reference to you and me—for by faith and adoption we live among

them).

Like the church waited for centuries for the Messiah to come, since His resurrection, we also wait for him to return again, wondering how best to live with fragments in the meantime. As N.T.



Wright put it in his interview with *Time*: “What the New Testament really says is God wants you to be a renewed human being helping him to renew his creation, and his [Christ’s] resurrection was the opening bell. And when he returns to fulfill the plan, [my emphasis] you won’t be going up there to him, he’ll be coming down here.” When that happens, what seems like impossible twists to plans we’d never have included in a million years had we been in charge, now will be seen more clearly as parts of a greater story God has controlled all along.

In his book *Surprised by Hope*, N.T. Wright, addresses some very pragmatic issues about living with a sense of hope and purpose. He writes:

How does believing in the future resurrection lead to getting on with the work in the present? Quite straightforwardly. The point of the resurrection, as Paul has been arguing throughout the letter, is that the present bodily life is not valueless because it will die. God will raise it to new life. What you do with your body in the present matters because God has a great future in store for it. And if this applies to ethics, as in 1 Corinthians 6, it certainly also applies to the various vocations to which God’s people are called. What you do in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself—will last into God’s future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether (as the hymn so mistakenly puts it, ‘Until the day when all the blest to endless rest are called away’). They are part of what we may call building for God’s kingdom.



Wright goes on...

When we turn to Paul, the verse that has always struck me in this connection is 1 Corinthians 15:58. Paul, we remind ourselves, has just written the longest and densest chapter in any of his letters, discussing the future resurrection of the body in great and complex detail. How might we expect him to finish such a chapter? By saying, “Therefore, since you have such a great hope, sit back and relax because you know God’s got a great future in store for you”? No. Instead, he says, Therefore, my beloved ones, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.

The contributions I, Margie, make to the “work of the Lord,” may look trifling in the extreme compared to the work of others, but I have to trust what God says is true, and believe “he is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine according to the power that is at work within us...” (Ephesians 3: 20) So despite the unfinished nature of what I see, this work will not be in vain. Restoration will complete the story.

Of Quail Heads And Bumble Bees

When I consider Creation, my hope and love for God is increased by, some would say, insignificant sightings of glory. For example, I’ve considered the extravagant single feather on the head of a quail. I’ve seen a flock of them run across the back wall of a yard in Arizona,

(And YES. I did say, H. and P., that you SHOULD’N’T move there because were NO birds, and now every time you see one you remind me of that absurd argument, but it was because I didn’t want you to

leave.) with their one feather sticking up like an afterthought, as if the artist didn't know when to quit. But God did this. It fills me with amusement and eagerness for Christ's return so I can experience more of creation as it first was.

In our back yard, where I often meet God, in mid-April I spotted the small miracle of one who made it through winter without a down comforter. An enormous bumble bee stumbled into the sun looking for flowers. I know she's a queen because it's too early in the season to be anything else. She's overwintered under our porch and is beginning another cycle. I'm delighted. How does she do this? If I had found her in her suspended dead-like state in mid-winter and didn't know what science has taught us, I'd have thought there is no hope for this bumble bee. But soon, very soon, I will see her workers, not as big as she is; they will be bumbling through the Catnip and dangling from the oregano flowers.

Restoration and Recovery

There are categories of Restoration, and this one may rank near the bottom: words I've forgotten this week. But the following list might make you feel more hopeful about yourself. One day I'll get them all back, perhaps even tomorrow.

* Our neighbor who's lived next door to us for years. I know his last name is Aasome, but, dang, I can't think of his first name.

* The name of one of C.S. Lewis' famous books. NO. NOT *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The one about the devil.

* A word meaning something impossibly illogical but actually true. As when you exclaim: "HOW can this BE? And yet it can. Like the fact that Margie forgets which night her favorite TV program comes on even tho it's the same night every week.



* Denis' cell phone number. Oh. Wait. Not a word. Those are numbers I never learned. But am starting to recognize the sequence.

* Another word for red. The color. I see it in my mind and it's gem-toned.

* The name of that movie that starred a certain actor I like whose name I don't recall and can't remember anything about except that it was good and set in NYC....right.

Drinking Coffee

Finally, some good news. You won't be punished for drinking coffee after all. Not by me, anyway. (My father-in-law and the Mormons think it is a sin, though.) In England at the University of Cambridge, researcher Yangmei Li and colleagues reported that drinking coffee lessens possibilities of stroke. They analyzed the health records of 20,000 European men and women over a twelve year period and found coffee drinkers were only 71 percent as likely to have a stroke as coffee avoiders. Like I needed this statistic to continue. Oh, and they say, it didn't matter if the brew was drip, decaf or even lowly instant, nor if people drank one cup a day or four. Source: *Science News*, March 2010

Ransom Notes

Denis has slowly been working on a seminary degree for the past number of years. Covenant Seminary has an excellent distance program so he has been able to take courses from here in addition to getting to Saint Louis for special weekend classes each year. He has been equally blessed by his professors' wisdom and humility. Their mentoring and example has challenged him to think outside his normal interests. Denis wouldn't have traded all the effort and travel, the mountains of books, the billion papers written late at night, or the sacrificed brain cells for anything in the world. Except for me. He'd trade for me. In mid-May Denis will graduate from seminary. I'm so proud of his accomplishments.



In Denis' own words:

My studies have provided me with three rich graces. The chance to study under godly, wise scholars whose love of Christ and knowledge of Scripture is remarkable. The chance to reflect on what I believe in an organized way. And the chance to have my walk with God deepened as I have been challenged anew to see all of life and culture under Christ's Lordship.

Prayer Requests

**Pray that after a spring with lots of travel we can make good use of a six-week period of catch-up. Writing for *Critique*, continued work on Denis' thesis, and many other projects and people kept on hold.

**We will be attending the PCA General Assembly in Nashville. Ransom Fellowship will have an exhibit set up. Pray that God would graciously allow it to be time and money well-spent. Being there is a way of net-working, re-connecting with pastors and friends who minister around the country and for making new contacts. While we're in Nashville, Kenny Hutson will record some readings that are headed for our website as podcasts. A wonderful offer from him, so thanks and pray I'll not be a difficult sound to work with and that, again, it would be worth the time spent.

Coming Up

MAY

Many local events with our small group and visiting guests.

Denis continues SS series at church.

Graduation at Covenant Seminary, St. Louis, MO.

Working and writing between the cracks.

JUNE

Another month hosting family, guests, and local commitments.

June 24 - Head south to Chattanooga to see the LaRoses, then back to Nashville.

JULY

July 6 - Head home from TN. Immediately write next issue of Notes

Host visiting friends.

July 10 - Celebrate an Avett Brothers concert.

Family Notes

I love that Micah sent me this photo. It tells more about real life than all the carefully posed, perfect snapshots we often present to the world. I wonder if the kids will remember that Mom was NOT asking them to watch a bunny get butchered? It was just that Ava was slipping from Anson's arms and Paige was wondering whether she should grab her or sit still and smile as Mom asked?

Early in life we begin storing memories of personal history. Children begin to recount their life. Isobel, now four, begins conversations with: "When I was a little girl I used to...."

Recently she told her mom: "When I was a Fairy God-mother, I used to work soooo hard."

Sember: "Doing what?"

Isobel: (with a big weight-of-the-world sigh.) "It was soooo hard getting all the other fairies to collect teeth. I had to do sooooo much of it myself."

She was also overheard saying to her

brother: "Kaiden, know what?"

Kaiden: "What?"

Isobel: "I'm not shore..."

Perhaps memory loss begins earlier than we'd thought.

The Great Aunt has been in a memory care place for six months. Interesting moniker: *Memory Care*. A few months ago she punched a male resident in the stomach because he was taunting another woman. He grabbed The Aunt's arm (left a big bruise) before the staff could intervene. The police came and the man was taken away. We teased her about having a police record but she was adamant saying, "He was a bully and deserved to be hit." Now she no longer remembers this incident. As we, particularly Marsena, walk this stage of life with her, we watch her memories fly away. We discuss the progress (is that a good word for this?) of Alzheimer's. When the gates that guard behavior and words come down, some say it

unmasks who you really are. If you were generally sweet and considerate of others, you will continue to be grace-filled in what you say and do even though it may not make sense. On the other hand if you were cynical and critical that will be revealed. Others say there's no relationship. When the brain breaks down there's no telling what it will do, and this doesn't reflect the real person. Beneath her public persona, The Aunt was perhaps more the latter kind. Last time I saw her, she was nasty to me and I had to get a grip. She does this plenty to Marsena, but I hadn't been the bad guy before. In a short while she forgot all about whatever made her angry and only remembered the wonderful time she had with me. We ask God to spare us certain personal destinies, but if not, please help us drink the cup with eyes steady on Jesus.



Final Notes

iForgive Myself

Denis and I refused cell phones for a very long time because we didn't want to be like you, my Friends, and be in touch with anyone, anytime. However, standing in a storm outside St. Louis airport because a Friend, thanks Donald, forgot what terminal we were at, and being lost in Nashville for important engagement, trying to get help from an infant Kroger's clerk who'd never heard of a public PAY phone, we gave up.

We've also got Serena, a GPS, who fondly and frequently recalculates our routes without any complaints, and I'm so DONE reading maps and missing exits as I shout instructions across the nation's freeways.

Last month we got a debit card. Yes. We were SHAMED into it by our daughter, who was with Denis when he checked out of Hy-Vee. He waited for the total, and as he wrote a check Marsena staged whispered: WHY don't you use your DEBIT CARD? Denis: Because I don't HAVE one. Eye-rolling from her. The young clerk, also an infant, cheerfully reported: Oh, it's okay; a lot of our older (OLDER? Oh, never mind) customers still write out checks. From there, to the pharmacy, to the bakery, Denis wrote checks under the daughter's sardonic eye. Finally to halt the abuse we've ordered Debit Cards. For the first time the other day as Denis rode shotgun, I screeched up to the ATM, without cracking off the side-view mirror, punched in the pin and got \$200 cash. I could do this EVERY day it's so much fun. We've only had one fight over who records what and how—I'm in favor of no records just prefer trust and hope, you know?

Last weekend the iPad came out and, Friends, I'm not waiting. With my Debit Card and Serena, I'm sure I can beat you to the Apple store in Minneapolis and be reading books in bed and playing with apps in no time.



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 adobes which rambled along in the hot New Mexico sun. So, to our children, a mid-western Gothic four-square looked amazingly like a mansion. Possibly even as great a house as Toad Hall.

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