

Notes from Toad Hall

Issue #4 - 2010
Winter



Six of One and Twelve Dozen of Another

I'm visiting the first session of a seminary class and listening to two favorite professors who are team teaching—Donald Guthrie, who is on our Board of Directors, and Hans Bayer, who's recently completed what's expected to become a classic *Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*—in German. That English is not his first language may explain his cache of malapropisms like the one above. Or, consider why you “don't let the cat leave the sack.” Or, why “I don't want to pull the wool over my face,” even if “the problem is glass clear” when you are “pouring out the beans.”

The class is listed as “The Gospel of Mark and Discipleship”—a semester of studying Jesus' tenacious blueprint for his disciples with particular emphasis on Peter. At once I'm delighted, wistful and wishing I could attend the whole thing. Not possible. Alas.

Donald began by having each student tell what they were expecting, hoping to get from the class. There were many comments—how to be a good disciple...to learn the character and life of a follower of Christ...to apply the Gospel to all of life. One divinity student admitted he wanted to study Mark—academically. He expressed disappointment that it sounded as if this was more about discipleship. So he was “readjusting” expectations. Donald put up both hands, palms out and asked, “But is it possible to study anything ‘academically?’ Out here? (Pushing the air away.) With just the mind? Is that possible as a Christian?” Then he drew a triangle on the board and labeled the points: Know. Be. Do. “We can’t separate them, but this is good, and we’ll be coming back to examine this again and again throughout the semester to learn that when we do anything, whatever it is, when we come to it, we come with our whole selves. Not just our minds or our hearts but with our entire selves.” I thought, I know. I know. It’s been the story of my life—returning again and again to this fundamental connection, wanting to learn to live fully integrated, surrendered, joyful.

Excavating For Hearts

Then Hans began drawing out the landscape and direction of the course. What follows aren’t exact quotes — couldn’t write fast enough—so they’re sort of got-the-gist-of notes. Please hear in a faintly German accent. He calls discipleship his “personal adventure.” Tells us he’s a recovering theoretician—“God is digging through the tunnel of my life from both ends – the intellectual theoretician, to the disciple, to meet in the middle. From intensive exegetical analysis to discipleship—causing me to focus on the phenomenal phenomenon of Jesus, who is in the process of transforming hearts, my heart.” It’s taken years and God is still digging.



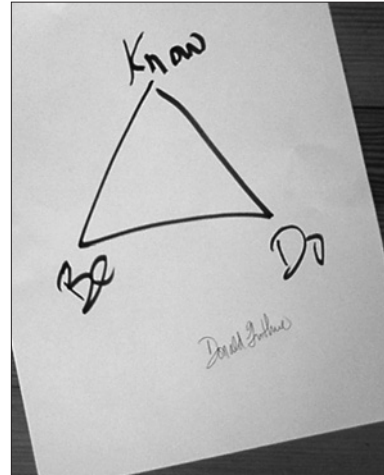
Digging

“Here, [in the class] we want to learn that God messes with our carefully constructed exegetical, methodological selves to take us to a much deeper level than where we habitually hover.” [What I hear is: God plain messes with our selves. Our pleasant sociological self. Our physically-fit, carefully fed and sculpted body self. Our controlled, responsible very

much on-time self. Our chaotic, unfocused, ten cups of coffee a day self...]

“Let me be clear, [He was glass clear.] it will be uncomfortable, more radical, and even more surprising than you could imagine. The experience of discipleship can be exhilarating, can be threatening, and it will also be exhausting.”

“Discipleship is the process of submitting ourselves



Know, Be, Do

to someone who has an agenda for us. It will be our undoing—the undoing of self just as the book of Mark is about the undoing of Peter. It will disarm us, challenge us. Jesus is not interested in our opinions about this, he is pursuing a new transformation of our selves into a redemptive community.”

“One of the interesting things about Jesus’ discipleship construction is *deconstruction*. In Mark, Jesus quickly and directly leads them into crisis. The disciples must answer: Who do you perceive yourself to be? Who do you perceive God to be? And what are you going to do about it?

The crisis we face will not be the crisis of my mother is sick, or I ate poisonous mushrooms, but the question of who am I in the eyes of God? The answer will involve letting go of self-perceived misconceptions. In our study of Mark, we will be looking for Peter and how are we like him. Are we the coolest thing? Or are we apologizing for breathing air, for choosing this chair.”

We Know, We Know

This describes my experience of God’s work over the years. Some days I think that I haven’t made an inch of progress from where I was when I was four years old and swore at our rat terrier for taking my mitten and running through the snowdrifts. I don’t know where I learned to cuss like that or even where I got the idea that it was wrong to take God’s name in vain. My parents weren’t Christians at the time. Somehow my mother knew I needed to pray and ask God for forgiveness. So my first memory of knowing God was the inevitable connecting of who we are with what we do, i.e., Donald’s triangle: “Know. Be. Do.” From that moment, oddly, I loved God without knowing who he was yet.

As I grew, I learned that my love was a response to

His love, and of knowing that I belonged to him. And yet to this day, I need him deconstructing my everyday-self and pursuing me down rocky paths and dead ends.

There's a certain irony in starting out with the condition we're all in and knowing that if we choose to follow Christ, it's going to take some time to figure out those connections.

A friend, Mary, wrote about her grandchildren a while back:

"...Amber and I drove her and kids up here in July for a week and then drove them back. We had a great time—lake, pony rides, roasting marshmal-

lows, a trip to the toy store, etc. Our neighbor gave us a ride on his pontoon boat and let each child take a turn at the wheel. When it was Adrienne's turn (just turned 3), our neighbor could hardly control the boat because she was determined to "do it myself!" She also wanted to be first on the bigger horse. She drives her brother (Nathan, 4) crazy by always announcing she's first at anything. "I got my cereal first – You're second!" She also copies whatever he says. He never gets that if he just kept quiet, the game would be over.

On our drive back to KC they were all 3 in the back seat of the mini van and starting to pinch and get louder than normal, so Amber ordered Lauren (8) up to the middle row. As she was stomping her way forward, Amber noticed the other two (strapped into their car seats) do a thumbs up to each other. How do they learn such orneriness so early?

Both Mary and I know the answer to that. We wish we didn't. Our sweet precious little darlings have an evil worm growing in their hearts. And we gave it to them. I never understood the Children-are-Born-Innocent movement and if only they were free from the influence of chemistry and environment, they'd stay that way. Or the Christians who believe if you just "grow kids God's way," they'll pick up their toys and be truthful and loving all their lives. Did they ever make babies and then live with them? It took my daughter's beautiful twin boys about a week to learn how to strip their loaded diapers and whip them at each other, spraying gelatinous polymer balls ten feet deep between their cribs.

I don't think less of them, or any other children. It's not because I don't need clean up burst diapers and

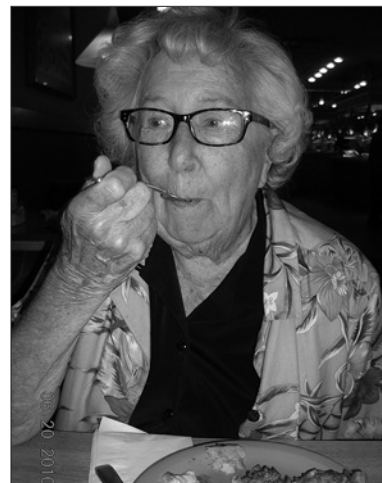
disinfect crib slats after a feces fight, which I don't. Or because I don't have to listen anymore to a teenager slumping to her room and slamming the door, because I won't let her spend homecoming night in a hotel room with the rest of her friends. I don't care that they are full of mischief and piss, I love them.

They are me. And with each passing year "And while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" becomes a more powerful reality to me. I look at my own history and see that if God had not pursued and loved me, unless he had not excavated my heart and was unrelenting in his pursuit—I'd not be a disciple.

Eating with the Great Aunt

On a day of disaster God says "No one will offer food to comfort those who mourn..." (Jer. 16:7) I know this verse is out of context, but it reminded me of how The Great Aunt sees things these days.

You may remember, The Great Aunt, who is approaching 90 and in a memory care center for Alzheimer's. Several years ago she was also diagnosed with diabetes. It began about the same time as the challenge of remembering the present escalated. Her lifetime habit of eating for pleasure is more problematic now that her stop button is lost or missing. Her hunger jumped borders and became an all-day monster: I haven't eaten for DAYS! Is that toast I smell? Let's open a can of Campbell's Pea Soup. (10:30 am. And when would that be good?) WHERE'S the ice cream?



Soup's On

When the short-bread cookies and lady fingers stopped showing up she felt cheated. When we relented, they disappeared in seconds only the crinkly packaging left. Without the memory of having eaten them, she would rummage in the cupboard wondering where on earth they were now. The pleasure was im-

mediate, then, forgotten.

While she lived with our daughter, we fought to control this and finally gave up. We simply hid the ice cream or didn't buy it at all, eating fruit for dessert and doling out "found it!" treats.

A new doctor is now employed at Autumn Leaves to oversee the health of the residents. He cares about

The Aunt's insulin levels and has prescribed no desserts, no wine, no sweets for The Aunt. Each day when they test her blood levels she is enraged. She claims to have never been diagnosed with diabetes and there is NO REASON—unless to simply TORTURE her with FURTHER prison regulations—that she shouldn't be allowed to eat butterscotch pudding, blueberry muffins and chocolate cake. None whatsoever!

We are thinking that quantity of days lived isn't the goal of life in the 90s. Can't she be allowed the happiness of the moment when staff bring hot apple pie and a scoop of ice cream into the dining room? Should she be forced to keep a regimen that makes her angry and argumentative at every meal? It seems harsh and pointless. As the months pass and her and mind body continue to deteriorate these issues are relevant. Not only for her care, but for ourselves—if we live that long—we ask: What will we do if or when we face similar circumstances ourselves?

Atul Gawandi writes (“Letting Go” *The New Yorker*, Aug. 2, 2010) :

Modern medicine is good at staving off death with aggressive interventions—and bad at knowing when to focus, instead, on improving the days that terminal patients have left...For all but our most recent history, dying was typically a brief process. ...These days, swift catastrophic illness is the exception; for most people, death comes only after long medical struggle with an incurable condition...

The questions he raises push us to places we've avoided because we imagined they were someone else's problems or that next year I'll be in better shape or the thing growing on my nose will resolve itself or whatever. Now we're learning otherwise.

Although she's more impaired, her life still gives to us. Right now it makes me think about how to follow Christ to the end. How to be honest and wise when I approach the end of my discipleship years here, when I'll be “gathered” as the King James puts it: “...when Jacob had made an end of commanding his sons, he gathered up his feet into the bed, and yielded up the ghost, and was gathered unto his people.” (Genesis 49:33) The Aunt will be some of my people there to greet me.

Ransom Notes

Thanksgiving and Prayers

As I write this we're just back from a weekend spent at Zion PCA in Lincoln, NE. It was a joy to meet folks familiar with our work and serious about engaging all of life—from technology to body image. We felt God had prepared and surrounded the time for his purposes. I was delighted and surprised to meet a man who'd been in our home for a Bible study twenty-five years ago. He couldn't remember the discussion, but he remembered the soup and the bread! I love God's power in the ordinary. But you know that already, don't you?

Finances. End of the year. Worthy ministries struggle, yet by God's grace we've made it thus far. We are full of thanksgiving and awe. Pray with us that we could meet budget needs, replace aging technology and provide some practical help at Toad Hall as we concentrate on writing. Anita continues to be extra heart and hands as she puts in part-time hours for Ransom.

Ransom's web site was hacked several times this year, so we've moved to a new server. So far it's working. Also had outrageously many internet outages at Toad Hall. The cable company has finally fixed it. (...hoping, hoping) One casualty could be emails you sent were lost. So sorry if that happened.

Life has been richly filled with weddings, conferences, retreats, friends. We struggle to find the balance and time for writing projects. Pray we'd be diligent and wise.

Coming Up

January 7-9

Ransom Board Meeting, Phoenix, AZ,

January 17-21

Denis teaches J-Term Class, Covenant Seminary, Saint Louis, MO

February 11-13

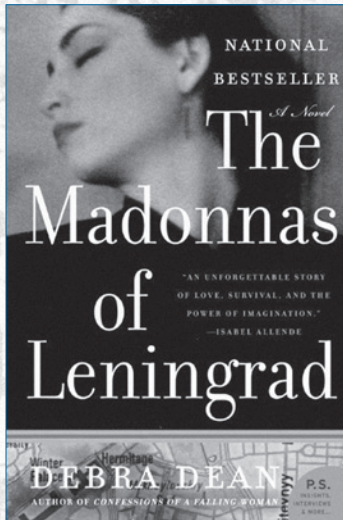
L'Abri Conference, Rochester, MN

“When Things Fall Apart: Living with Hope and Dignity”

Every day. All the time.

Write, write, write. Denis? Margie? Get to your desk. And do not open Facebook or Google.

Christmas 2010 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall



The Madonnas of Leningrad
by Debra Dean, Harper, 2006.
(Fiction)

The layers of time and voice in *The Madonnas* are natural and seamless as they reveal Marina, a Russian woman, who survived the siege of Leningrad and now lives in Seattle. She can no longer sort or retain the details of her current life—Alzheimer's. But memories of her past remain miraculously clear. She remembers The Hermitage where she

worked as a tour guide before the bombings and starvation began in WWII. Dean's careful research of history and place are a compelling bonus to this story. She remembers the thousands of family members of the employees who moved into the museum to live in the icy basement, sheltering from the bombs. She remembers as they removed and stored centuries worth of priceless art, preserving them, saving them from the Germans, leaving empty frames hanging in the great stone halls. To help forget the bitter cold, the frozen bodies removed each morning and the pain of starving, Marina begins describing the paintings of the Madonnas for any who listen. Leonardo da Vinci. Raphael. Rembrandt. The Virgin so luminous, so diverse in the perspectives of those who painted her over the years (each one still hangs in the Hermitage) that, along with her comrades, I am stilled and gripped by the deeper meaning of this story. I am captivated by wonder – that God should become human and how juxtaposed the settings of the paintings with the indescribable suffering Marina witnessed and now the quiet disintegration of her mind.



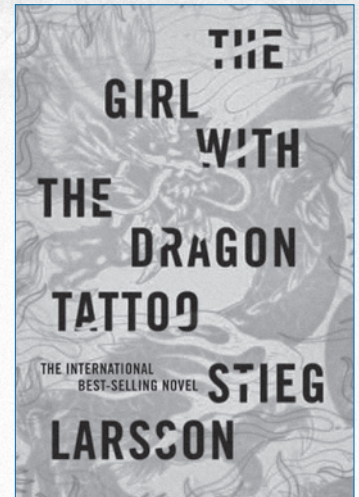
Washed and Waiting
by Wesley Hill, Zondervan, 2010. (Christian faith and memoir)

I've been waiting for this book to come out ever since I read it in manuscript form and began a friendship with the author. In re-reading it I'm knocked out by Wes's maturity and wisdom that belie his years. Weaving together reflections from his own life, he writes with courage, honesty and biblical orthodoxy about what it means to live faithfully with a broken sexuality he did not choose. His hard-won conclusions, based on the study of scripture and much agonizing, have led him to a life of celibacy. Though he struggles with same sex attraction – the knowledge of Christ's love and redemption points toward a day when complete restoration and healing will occur. This book will definitely be encouragement to those who struggle with homosexuality. Those of us who don't will gain theological understanding and compassion for those who do. What's so appealing and healthy about the author, and becomes clear upon knowing him personally, is that he's not a one-trick-pony. Wes shines with love and interest for all of life. Thus, there is a universal nature to the truth he writes and I sense it applies to me.

"The message of what God has done through Christ reminds me that all Christians, whatever their sexual orientation, to one degree or another experience the same frustration I do as God challenges, threatens, endangers, and transforms all of our natural desires and affections." (p.64)

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo
by Stieg Larsson, Vintage Books 2009. (Fiction)

The first book in a trilogy of thrillers – I read them all last summer. Could not stop. Now they're out as movies, but I don't want to see them. They're a super-smart combination of murder mystery, family dysfunction, and corporate intrigue involving millions of kroner. Classic stories of good against evil. Instinctively I want these layers of complexity because that's the story of real life. Some crimes are so hidden beneath layers of legal protection and structures within corporations and governments they simply disappear when the media is bored with them. And some are never uncovered. Larsson's characters expose. And they think that some acts (yea!) are always morally wrong—like sexual abuse and trafficking. Real life doesn't always deliver justice to the wicked for abusing and mortally wounding their victims. At least not in this life. Same with stories. Readers are often left with the hopeless feeling that the characters they've grown to care about will never be rescued or avenged. Larsson satisfies the longing for justice. Not to say it's perfectly executed, but there is an inexorable pressing of it. And it burns with an almost holy fire. Swedish author, Stieg Larsson, died in 2004 several months after submitting the first three manuscripts to the publisher. I wish he'd lived to write the remaining seven volumes he'd planned.



Christmas 2010 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall

The Church History ABCs

by Stephen J. Nichols and Ned Bustard, Crossway, 2010. (Children 4 and older)

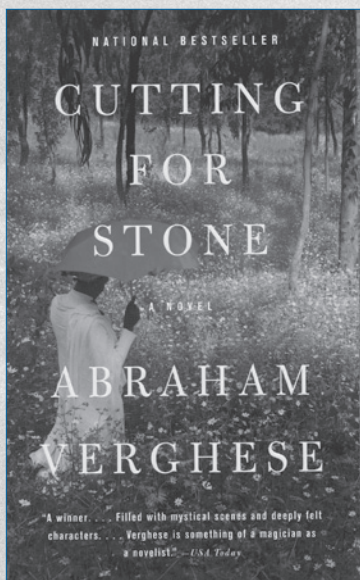
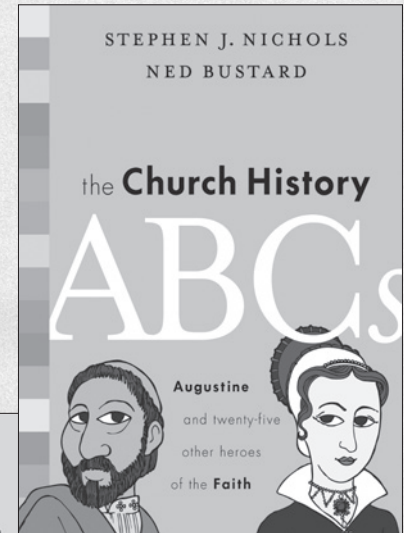
I grew up knowing very little history of the church. In my remote, rural world the church began with the Acts of the Apostles, and until J.N Darby in the 1800s, it was a dark, empty time. This children's book is an informative, joyful tribute to the Saints of God working through the centuries. Here are outstanding heroes of the faith—men and women portrayed in brightly illustrated pages from “A is for Augustine” through the alphabet to “Z is for Zwingli.” Interesting details and charming bits of humor had me laughing, eg, Charles Wesley wears a button declaring: “Almost Perfect.” Rare facts surfaced and I sensed I was a kindred spirit to a very special saint: chocolate was a favorite food of Jonathan Edwards. *ABCs* will hold the attention of a wide range of ages. Even adults will enjoy the reminders of men and women who have gone before us. Wonderful. It's going to my grandchildren this year.

Some interesting historical facts from the authors:

- *George Whitefield* was cross-eyed
- Famous preacher *Jonathan Edwards* was fired
- *Martin Luther* married a nun
- *Athanasius* outfoxed Egyptian soldiers as they raced down the Nile
- *John Wesley* invented an electric shock machine and sent it to Ben Franklin
- *Martin Luther* named his dog “Tölpel,” which is a German word for clumsy

SOURCE

<http://www.churchhistoryabcs.com/odd.html>



Cutting for Stone by Abraham Verghese

Random House, 2009. (Fiction)

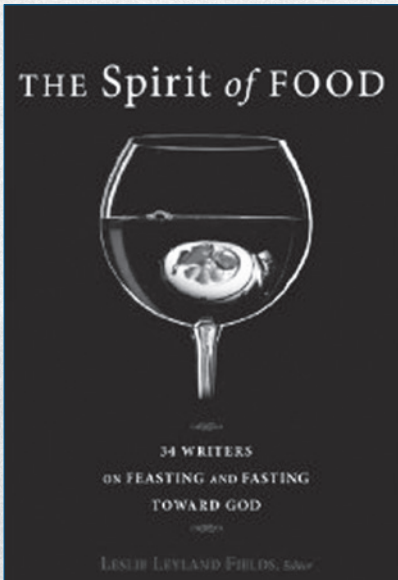
This book demonstrates the power of writing and of how stories are not “just stories,” rather they reveal the true condition and complexity of the human heart. Verghese:

- Brings a country and culture, unknown to me, vitally, achingly alive.
- Weaves together medical practice with family and story.
- Is filled with compassion and exuberance for all his characters.
- Writes scenes, voices, and landscapes so deftly they seem perfect. Perfect.
- Writes portions so startlingly funny they must be read aloud to your bedmate who is trying to sleep.
- Includes a death scene so tender, so instructive – if given the chance I want to love and serve others the same way.

Summary of the story: Marion and Shiva Stone are twin brothers born of a secret union between an Indian nun and a brilliant but socially impaired surgeon. Orphaned by their mother's death in birth and their father's disappearance, the twins are adopted and grow up in a mission hospital compound in Ethiopia around the time of the revolution. Conjoined at birth and bound by a fascination with medicine, their lives remain entwined, though wounded by betrayal. In facing the most painful choices of life and death they must decide whether forgiveness is even possible.

Mustard seeds explode in the hot oil. She holds a lid over the pan to fend off the missiles. Rat-a-tat! Like hail on a tin roof. She adds the cumin seeds, which sizzle, darken, and crackle. A dry, fragrant smoke chases out the mustard scent. Only then are the onions added, handfuls of them, and now the sound is that of life being spawned in a primordial fire. P. 225.

Christmas 2010 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall



The Spirit of Food: Essays on Feasting and Fasting Toward God

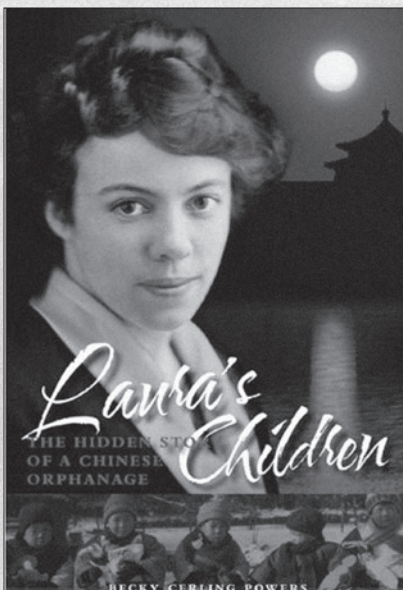
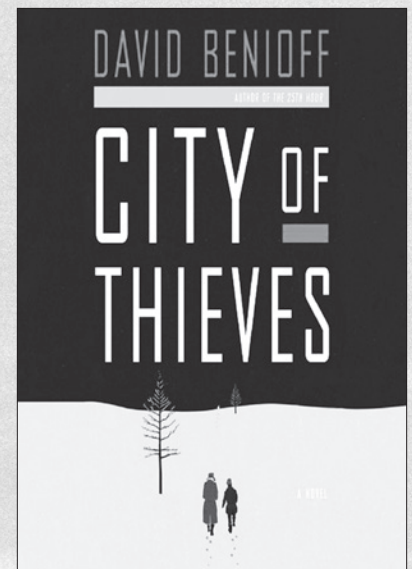
edited by Leslie Leyland Fields, Cascade Books, 2010. (nonfiction essay)

This would be a wonderful book for anyone who has even the faintest interest in food and its connection to the grace of God in our lives. So shouldn't that be everyone? Fields has drawn together a fascinating collection of essays on food that includes recipes at the end of each chapter. With an amazing array of writers from Wendell Berry to Luci Shaw, Fields creates a feast for the heart, helping me slow down and take the time to listen to what others observe about the human ritual of eating. I loved finding personal friends who were included: Steve and Karen Baldwin whose piece, "A Way of Loving," was first published in Critique, have spent many years ministering to bodies and hearts. Jeremy Huggins, who writes about church potlucks with wit and candor exposes some of my smarmy reasons for not appreciating this ritual as I ought. And Nancy Nordenson's "Things that Fall and Stand" weaves the collapse of the I-35 bridge in Minneapolis with the comfort of Swedish pancakes for her family. The many voices range from poetic and lyrical to blunt and practical – what a glorious way to demonstrate the diversity God has given us in human taste and enterprise.

City of Thieves

by David Benioff, Penguin Group, 2008. (Fiction)

When my son-in-law, Shaun, said this was his favorite book—I can't remember if he said "for all time," but it was close—I knew I should read it. It's the story of two young men bound together during the brutal Nazi siege of Leningrad during WWII. Lev, a gawky young Jewish boy, arrested for looting, and Kolya, a deserter looking for his love, are thrown into a cell and the next morning are spared the usual execution. The colonel gives them an impossible quest—bring back a dozen fresh eggs for my daughter's wedding cake and be free. In a starving city and a countryside suffering from unbelievable savagery, their humanity shines as they search for the impossible. By turns humorous, insightful and devastating, the story kept me believing in it, kept me turning the pages, kept me finding shots of redemption in the midst of hell.



Laura's Children: The Hidden Story of a Chinese Orphanage

by Becky Cerling Powers, Canon Home Communications, 2010. (Missionary Biography)

Becky has thoroughly researched and written about the largely unknown life of a woman missionary to China. The project has taken 25 years. It's wonderful to see it finally published as a book. Laura Richards was the author's mother's cousin, but for years, even if someone had documented and pieced it together, telling the story would have endangered too many lives. In 1929, Laura moved to a remote village in North China where she began taking in castaway babies and relying on God alone to supply her growing orphan family. Through years of famine, bandit invasions and war, she saved the lives of 200 abandoned and starving children. Through letters, journals, and interviews with some of the orphans themselves, Becky was able to weave together a nonfiction narrative account of Laura's life and work. Laura's training as a nurse helped her care for the orphans, many of whom were ill and consequently died, but it was her daily, unrelenting tenderness and love that drew them to call her "Mama" and for many to ultimately choose her Christian faith. Missionary tales often have that element of miracle that attracts us, and yet peeking through this story are human foibles and sin that sober us and remind us that it is only by God's grace that we live, grow, minister.

Final Notes

Gift of the Year

Last year at this time we were staying with Marsena—accompanying her through some dark days. During that time I was writing the 2009 issue of *Holiday Notes* and came across a bookmark I keep in my journal. It was from a painting called “November Storm.” The depiction of the wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald captured some of what we all felt. (Find entire context on RF’s website.) It spoke of foundering, of sinking beneath the waves of life in difficult and sometimes dangerous times. But it also reminded me of the storms the disciples faced and their literal rescues. In my heart I know we aren’t left alone and that the God, our hope does arrive. Maybe not in the way we expect: “...About the fourth watch of the night Jesus came to them, walking on the sea.” (Mark 6:48)

Paula, a friend from Green Bay, got out a magnifying glass and deciphered the artist’s name from the picture in *Notes*. Paula found Jackie Kotlarek in her studio in Duluth, MN and they located a print of the original painting. Paula bought and framed it, and last summer when we arrived at their cabin in Wisconsin, we found it wrapped and waiting on the fireplace mantle!



As you know, life this side of Consummation is tricky, to say the least. But there are moments like this of great love and generosity that sound joyful notes. They help us keep on waiting for the greatest gift ever to be completely revealed. Christ. Yes.



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.

Managing Editor - Matthew Hundley

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