

Letters from The House Between

Formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*

Issue 1 Still Winter 2018



Dear Friends,

There have been a few random thoughts running through my head the past couple months as I reflect on the past year. You know, both Denis and I turned 70 in 2017. Since then I've been chewing on that like a piece of gristle and choking a little over this whole thing of getting *older*. This chewing brings up some niggling questions. Like, what have you done with your life that is worthwhile? Where's my energy gone? Where's my resolve for following through on projects I've begun? How come I can't seem to keep up with what EVERYone else is doing? (As usual EVERYone is exaggerated and refers to the three or four amazing people who haunt me.)

Comparison, my thief of joy

Lately I've battled feeling worse than ever about myself. My lack of discipline. Just name an area and I'm a slacker. (I hope this is partly a psychic issue and not *complete* reality. So pitiful.) Some of this trauma has arisen because I've witnessed what others have done this past year. The troubling thing is that many of them are older than we are.

I mean, Luci Shaw who must be in her late 80s is probably somewhere building her own log cabin and writing another book of poetry. (She was at the L'Abri Conference in Rochester earlier this month and her workshop was scheduled at the same time as mine. I felt lucky to have anyone show up to mine. Update! She had to cancel because she was sick with influenza. Sadly.) Eugene Peterson is doing interviews with Bono and still writing. Bill Edgar is traveling the world teaching and playing jazz clubs and is the oldest prof at Westminster Seminary. I could go on. Oh, and another couple who stayed with us a number of years ago while one of them was being seen at Mayo (I won't reveal their names); they are pretty amazing as authors of many books and leaders in the Christian world. They, too, must be in their 80s now, but a couple years ago they moved THEMSELVES in a rented moving van from Chicago to Philadelphia where he continues to preach and teach. They bought a home with a dining area so large they can host 50 – 70 people at a time. And of course, there is our dear friend Steven Gilchrist Garber, who is younger, yes, but at the rate he is going he'll be in

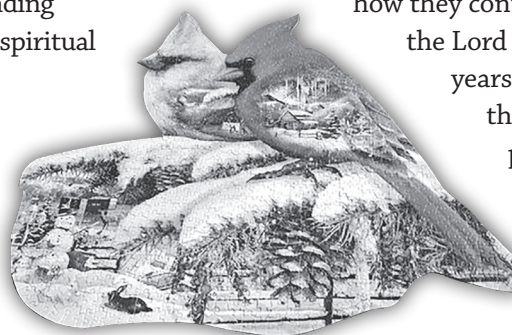
orbit around the solar system before long. To say nothing of our very own board members who are world class in their own ways.



Peterson and Bono talk Psalms.

Right. All I want to do is read novels, play games and work jigsaw puzzles. And drink a little Molson's Canadian.

This is the mildly toxic climate in which I live – reminding myself that life is a spiritual battle, fighting the accusations and insults of my conscience, and forever going to confession and drinking grace dry.



My last jigsaw challenge.

Cast your bread on the water...

Then, like ghosts from the attic, this past year we heard from some young people scattered across the globe, who somehow grew up while we weren't looking, those young high school students we ministered to back in our Albuquerque days when Denis was a youth pastor and I worked beside him. Those teenagers who we loved, who spilled coke on our carpets but made us laugh, who frustrated us to no end because at times all they wanted to do was

wheelies with their dad's cars in the parking lot and prank one another.

A woman, an accomplished artist, wrote: "From you both the seeds of truth were planted in my mind and heart. I learned from you biblical authority, thought and transformation from studying scripture. Most of all I was accepted and loved, yet at the same time challenged to grow in faith even when I wanted to wimp out."

There were several others who contacted us to say we played a part in leading and caring for them when they were young and distracted, yet tender-hearted, and how they continued following the Lord through the years. Hearing about this seemed perfectly timed to encourage us just when we needed it and to remind us that few of us know how much of the love and call of God penetrates the hormonal haze that surrounds teenagers. It was hard to fathom but it made my heart happy.

Honest, I don't tell these things so you will applaud, but so you can look at your own life and give thanks to God and be amazed that God works in and uses people like us despite our fumbling around and feeling horribly unsuited for anything more than saying grace at the table. Denis does much better at this stage of our lives, seeing more clearly the

long trajectory of our story together doing what we can as we follow God's calling.

Perhaps I am just tired. Or maybe I'm losing a bit of cognitive ability. Not sure. I know there are scriptures that warn us against comparing ourselves with others. That is a good and important exhortation. "Comparison is the thief of joy," Teddy Roosevelt liked to say. So one of my goals this year is to be reminded to carry my own load and not worry so much about how big and important a load you are carrying and I'm not.

The Comfort of Christ

This past Sunday as we took communion a wonderful peace descended on my heart. It had something to do with the knowledge that what we do each Sunday is exactly what God has prescribed for us to do. We do the same thing over and over year after year century after century because we are human and God knows how easily we forget what we are about and why. Every week I stray. Every week I come up with some disgusting sin that shames me – like envying these wonderful people mentioned earlier. We come to the table to remember Jesus and to be cleansed and forgiven. Every single week we leave hearing the same words spoken by the pastor:

Eternal God, heavenly Father, you have graciously accepted us as living members of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ, and you have fed us with spiritual food in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood. Send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart; through Christ our Lord. Amen.



I didn't mean to end on a sermon. Please take it as directed at myself. Unless you share some degree of mis-fitness with me.

Surrender to the Goal

I have **Goals** for the year! Although I've told my husband, who loves the word **Goal** almost more than he loves me and often writes **Goals** and **Lists**, how much I dislike them and what they imply about one's lack of discipline - I surrender. They may be useful. Sometimes. So:

- Finish a manuscript about the early years of our married life that follows *The Exact Place*.
- Spend more time with grandchildren. (They need grandparents whose job is to love them excessively without exception.)
- Figure out what to do about our 50th wedding anniversary. All our friends have traveled the world it seems, while we've

barely managed to tiptoe to the edge of our state. Which puts us in a category of of of ... you tell me. Don't get me wrong. I'm not hankering after a trip to Hong Kong or anything like, but something doable? Affordable? Exciting, but not out of control? We are thinking Coast of Maine. (I love that pounding ocean.)

One final thing about the past year: it may have been one of Denis' and my best years together. It's been sweet and easy. He thinks I'm sassy and funny and I think he is smart and funny. Well, mostly. Sometimes I'm petty and cantankerous, though I can't think of when just now. But I've no trouble remembering how obsessive he can be. Like, he just discovered a new one: he thinks our dishwasher door needs to remain ajar at all times except when in use because it allows it to dry out and prevent sour smells. Uh. Don't they become bone-dry during the DRY-ing cycle? Okay, I admit occasionally there's a mysterious build-up of stinky gray matter in the bottom that looks like alien guts are coming or going.

I'm thankful for a year where the disparate essentials of life – from suffering and trouble to celebrations of joy and quietness all work together to push us farther down the road to maturity.

RansomNotes

Psalms 45 is a love song written for a king, a victorious warrior who is loved by his people because his administration is marked by unrelenting pursuit of justice and peace.

*Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.
The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness;
you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. (v. 6-7)*

Here the poet becomes a prophet speaking of a king greater than all earthly kings, the one 5th century Irish called the High King of Heaven. (See the hymn *Be Thou My Vision*.)

At a time of political uncertainty when the spirit of compromise is absent, when name-calling passes for civil discourse, and when citizens consider neighbors to be enemies, I long for such a King to appear. And since I believe his coming is certain, I wonder how to live as a faithful subject as I wait. "I will cause your name to be remembered in all generations," the psalmist concludes, and I want to do the same.

In my small corner, fulfilling my calling, in hope, I want to quietly demonstrate God's existence and grace by listening, finding creative ways to speak the truth, showing hospitality, asking questions, and seeking to love even at cost. St. John writes that is how we demonstrate we are Christ's and that he has come from God.



We love hard copy!

In 2018 Denis and I will continue exploring what this might look like in our world. In *Letters from the House Between*, *Critique*, our speaking and book manuscripts that is our goal. Please pray we could accomplish this task faithfully and well. (You know my weaknesses! See page 2.)

Finances were lower than usual last year. We've talked about going digital with our publications *Letters* and *Critique* because print is expensive but in discussion with our Board we determined many of us still prefer to hold actual paper copies in our hands. This happens to be true among many in the younger generation, too. So, we've taken a cut in salary,

partly due to our moving towards eventual retirement and partly to help lower Ransom's expenses. God has been very gracious to us over so many years, and we have confidence in his love.

Please pray he would supply what we need, that we will be content in that, and that we will know how best use his provision.

The next few months are planned for writing. We will see family, scattered as they are across three states but needing grandparents as much as we need them. Relationships matter in a broken world, just as they will when the brokenness is healed.

Rumors are still abroad that we retired. I may wish it, but we are NOT there! Not yet.

Family Notes

(has degenerated into backyard chicken theology. meh)



Jane gives me the stink-eye.

On Finding Your Way Home

The girls are used to my presence and most curious about what treats I bring daily to the pen. Sunflower seeds? Dried meal worms? Leftover oatmeal from breakfast? They gather round and if I'm slow to dispense, they help by jumping up and wresting goodies from my hand. Greedy little things. But when I enter with the purpose being, I'm going to catch you and carry you to green pastures and quiet waters, they don't believe me. Especially Flannery. She must be chased around the pen and under the coop until at last I corner her, as she loudly protests like I'm going to kill and eat her for dinner. I tell her to shut up or I might. The other hens are tolerably submissive. Their crouching, trembling posture when I reach for them probably has more to do with submitting to a rooster, not that I dwell on that.

Last fall there was a perfect day for letting them into my fenced vegetable garden – bright and sunny. A safe paradise of chicken delights with a buffet of decaying tomatoes, worms and creepy insects just a scratch and a peck away. I leave them happily scavenging under the bean stalks thinking they should be okay for a while.

Two hours later I jump up from my desk having forgotten to check on them every hour. I ran to the garden and saw Eudora and Anne had escaped through the “gate” and were wandering close to the neighbor's yard. I say “gate” because it is hardly that – just chicken wire tacked to a board and the wires hooked together. No wonder they got out. Jane is still inside frantically running back and forth because her sisters are way over there and I'm here! More distressing: Flannery is missing.

I herded the little flock back to the pen and began searching for Flannery until I heard a soft murmur coming from the nesting box. Craaaaawck. Lifting the lid, there was Flannery, calmly sitting on the straw doing her business. That's when I realized, she not only escaped the garden, she made her way back to the coop because that's where eggs are supposed to be laid. What a good little hen!

So now I know. Flannery is not an early riser like the others. She's like me – a little prone to procrastination, but when you need to get your work done you get cracking, head for your desk and lay those eggs.

And Finally...

This is the time of year when cold, gray days make me want to move to the Florida Keys. However, as soon as the sun comes out, the urge gets trashed. I have one friend so who experiences so much winter sadness, even sitting in front of a bank of lights doesn't help his SAD. Thankfully, for me, there are a few fixes that temporarily restore me to a happier view of life. One of them is soup.

All kinds of soup. Holding a steaming bowl of potato leek soup warms both my hands and heart. A few weeks ago Anita discovered a new recipe and, honest, it is one of the tastiest ever. You must try this. Dig out that package of wild rice that's been hanging out in your pantry for months because you had no idea how to use it. You're going to find a delicious way today.

Smoked Sausage, Butternut Squash & Wild Rice Soup



1 medium butternut squash (1 ½ to 2 pounds)
2 T olive oil
Salt, pepper
12 cups chicken stock
2 ½ cups chopped onions
1 cup wild rice
¾ pound smoked sausage, like kielbasa, cut into ¼ inch pieces
2 cups fresh (or frozen) corn kernels
1 ½ cups half and half (use milk for a lighter consistency)
2 T chopped parsley

Directions Cut squash in half, seed, season with 1 T of oil, salt & pepper. Place cut side down on a baking sheet and roast for 1 hour. Cool, then peel. Blend with 2 cups chicken stock until smooth. In a saucepan, bring 4 cups of stock and ½ cup onions to a simmer. Stir in rice and cook until tender and liquid is absorbed, about 1 hour. Stir occasionally. In a large saucepan, add remaining oil. When hot, add sausage and brown 3 minutes. Add remaining onions. Saute until tender. Add corn. Add remaining 6 cups of stock and squash puree. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, simmer for 20 minutes. Skim off any fat rising to the surface. Stir in rice. Cook another 10 minutes. Remove from heat, stir in cream and re-season with salt and pepper. Add parsley. Serve with French bread. (Recipe adapted from <https://www.foodnetwork.com/recipes/emil-lagasse/smoked-sausage-buttternut-squash-and-wild-rice-soup-3645132>)

Although this makes quite a lot, it can be frozen and brought out on another gloomy day.



With love and the hope of renewed light and life,

Margie Haack

About Letters From the House Between

If you drive through western Kentucky where two great southern rivers – the Cumberland and the Tennessee – come together, you pass over the dams that bind them and a land emerges bordered on all sides by water, simply called The Land Between the Lakes. As we drove, we thought about the changes coming as we aged and needed to move from Toad Hall, our home of thirty-three years. We needed a place where certain features were on the main floor so as body parts fail one doesn't need to climb stairs to reach them. We thought of that place as "The House Between," a place bound on one side by years past where we raised children, continued our ministry and grew older, and on the other side, a place in heaven where God holds a perfect place of restoration yet to come. Our new home is a reminder that this is only a "place between" what is now and what will one day be true Home forever. Thus: The House Between.

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