

Letters from The House Between

Formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*

Issue 3 **Summer Into Fall 2018**



Somewhere near the end

Earlier this summer we had this rather rash idea of taking Denis' mother to Cinco de Mayo in West St. Paul. We knew she'd never experienced such frivolity, having been sheltered all 94 years of her life from such worldly expeditions. The outing measured up. There were thousands out to celebrate. There were women and girls in brilliant fiesta dresses, and men in low riders dragging their underbodies on the pavement with sparks flying. Mariachi bands sang and danced and the scent of spicy chili and cheese enticed us to the street food vendors. Even the hilarious and ridiculous lucha libre – the masked Mexican wrestling competition was featured.

That reminded us of the bizarre comedy movie, *Nacho Libre*, starring Jack Black who played a heroic role as a cook for a monastery. When the monastery faced a financial crisis, he thought he would help the house of God by becoming a wrestler. We had never seen lucha libre in real life, but here they were pleasing the crowd with acrobatic slams, throws and fake injuries. We pushed her wheelchair right up to the edge of the ring where she declared them stupid. But I could see her smiling and watching wide-eyed. Denis and I were exceedingly entertained by their strutting and shouted insults. (sorry to disappoint those of you who thought better of us)

Lunch for Mom was a good old fashioned American hot dog, Tom Thumb donuts, topped off with a large butter pecan ice cream cone. No burritos for her, por favor. In the end, four hours was way too long for her. We should have known better.

She needed to use a bathroom and could only tell us she felt sick. It was never in her vocabulary to say I need to pee really bad. The stinking row of public portapotties were no help to an elderly woman who can barely walk. We left as quickly as we could. Denis waited with the car illegally parked while I pushed her chair into a nearby Burger King only to find a line waiting outside the door. By then she had bowed



*Masked Mexican wrestling
- a learned appreciation*

her head into her hand feeling the agony of her body's need. I managed to put her in a stall, and waited until she emerged but I didn't know it hadn't worked. Later she admitted there was too much noise, too many waiting, and too much debris scattered on the floor. We hurried as fast as one can hurry in a wheelchair, bouncing it over a crowded sidewalk, off the curbs and back to the car. As we pulled into heavy traffic she once again expressed feeling very sick. Do you need to vomit, we asked?

No. She still had to "go," but couldn't mention those words. It took another 20 minutes through traffic lights and onto



the freeway before getting to an exit far enough away from the festival for a public facility. We were all silent. Denis was probably praying. Anita was driving as fast as she could and I was wondering, "God, oh no, will this be me some day?"

Slow Breaking Brain and Body

We have noticed an increase in the stories she tells as her mind becomes untethered from reality. They have become more fantastical and delusional. Most recently she told us she had been making trips to the store for supplies and baking treats for all the events at the care center. She "knows" that the residents who pretend to be friends don't really care about her, they are only interested in what she bakes because it is so delicious. This she reports with a big sigh. The little exaggerations are numerous: she claims she walked around the building twice, in the nice weather. For a moment we believe, we hope. But when she mentions meeting up with neighbors who live in another city or have passed away long ago, and the staff tells us she rarely leaves her room, we nod in agreement with her stories and smile at one another. We are sad.

These days and the unknown number of months she has left to live keep me vigilant. We've no idea how long she will be here, but her departure could be soon. I'm tuned in. I'm paying attention. No one wants dementia. No one wants end-of-life expenses that eat all your finances and destroy the

inheritance one hopes to pass on to their children. No one, but no one wants the end of life to be an enormous burden for their family or care-givers.

Being with her increases reflection on what life may bring to myself, to any of us. I don't want to be humiliated by my broken brain and body.

But what choice do we have? Someone I know and love well plans to circumvent this by moving to Oregon and seeing a doctor who will end her life before the final stage. I can't do that. If suicide is out, and I believe it is, then what choice do we have except to endure life until the

days God has numbered for us are over? And if the end of my days are hard, I will try to be comforted by how much better the next life will be. Unfortunately I have a tiny surfeit of imagination and this hyper jump to the next life seems long and difficult.

I've concluded that if I go slow and low in the end, by that time the lesson won't be so much about me anymore, but more about what my caregivers learn about patience and compassion. Believe it, I do not relish the idea of being anyone's lesson with this kind of suffering.

Before I reach that stage of life when I am aware that things are winding down, I want to learn to be more thankful. At this point, I could be doing better. I'm far too

agitated by things gone wrong. Eyelids that blur my vision and rest heavy on my eyeballs, swollen knuckles and bent fingers that look as though I've been street fighting. Things too numerous to mention, but all of it accompanied by a high-pitched whine regretting my thinning hair and broadening thighs.



Why not make your feet uglier?

Carry us, Lord

I have a lengthy history of falling down. I can trip over anything. It is always a surprise bomb, that sprawling on the ground. Last weekend I was carrying a watermelon to the refrigerator in the garage. My mother-in-law was seated at the dining room table sorting jigsaw puzzle pieces.

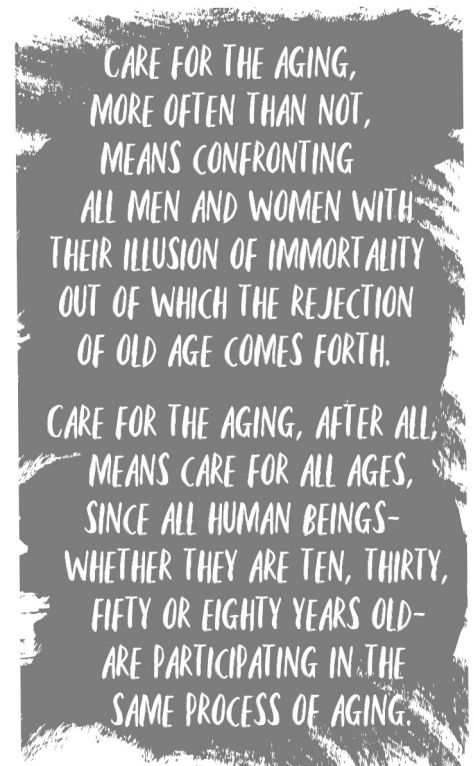
Denis was running an errand. Okay, I admit I was hurrying too fast when suddenly I tripped. With a loud bang, I tossed the watermelon (which luckily did not burst) and did a face plant on the tile floor. As I lay there assessing the damage, I was tempted to just stay awhile enjoying the cool surface because my mother-in-law hadn't even heard the fall, nor was she capable of helping if needed.

When I finally got off the floor I realized how much worse it could have been. I landed on both elbows and one knee. A toe quickly blew up and matched the crimson polish on my toenails, but other than a sore my elbow I was fine. (A few days later an x-ray revealed it was badly bruised not cracked.)

I limped back to the dining room determined to be more thankful for a body that has carried my weight, filtered my juices, and allowed me to see, hear, and taste the preciousness of life for many years. It has done a great job. So I pray, please, God, help me trust that you mean what you say when you tell us you will be with us even to the end of our days. Help me walk in this way with a better attitude. When I am doubting and even now before I fall into serious decline, tattoo this on my my forehead so I don't forget your grace and your love:

Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.
Isaiah 46:4

So be it, amen.



From *Aging-The Fulfillment of Life*,
by Henri Nouwen.

RansomNotes

FOR PRAYER

Our 50th Anniversary is this year. What a milestone!! In October friends have offered us their cabin on the coast of Maine where we've dreamed of visiting for many years. What a gift! Praise God with us!

We're grateful to God for you who have given so generously to Ransom. All bills are paid and we continue day by day doing the next task before us. Still, income is squeaky low, so would you pray we would be wise in making the decisions that lie ahead. Should we stop printing *Critique* and *Letters from the House Between* since they are costly? Should we retire? Are there other ways to decrease expenses? We keep asking questions wanting to be open to whatever the Lord asks of us. For now, we believe God may want us to keep going. He's guided and provided for us for many years and it fills our hearts with thankfulness.

Please pray we would be quick to listen – to God, to those he brings into our lives, to one another as we work and live in community, to the Scriptures as we write and prepare lectures. And finally, to the voiceless who live in trepidation in our uncertain age.

Pray specifically that *Letters from the House Between* and *Critique* might encourage readers to hope in God, and provide moments of clarity and humor.

COMING UP

St. Louis, MO, Covenant Seminary, September 21-22

Denis will participate in the FSI Lectures. Friday PM lecture: "What Film Suggests for Christian Apologetics" Saturday workshop: "Leading Inviting Film Discussions" Also speaking are Dick Keyes of Southborough L'Abri and Holly Ordway, author of *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*. Another special person: my new editor from Square Halo Press, Ned Bustard, will be doing a workshop. I will be along, hanging out, being inconspicuous or relevant as the moment demands. <https://www.covenantseminary.edu/events/francis-schaeffer-lectures/>

Nashville, TN, City Church of East Nashville, (www.cityeast.org) October 5-7

Denis and I will be speaking at their fall retreat. Lots of young married folks with little children. Praying to engage their hearts and minds. We haven't negotiated talks yet but Denis is super at one topic: Cultural Engagement. Me? Don't know yet. Backyard Chickens? On Being Married 50 Years? We look forward to loving and listening to these people.

Hopkins, MN

The first art gallery at our church opened in June. (Denis organized it and I planned food bits – savory and sweet.) 45 people attended the opening to see the art of James Disney and hear him discuss his work and answer questions. There was an excellent response from the viewers.

- **His work is featured on our website** at <http://ransomfellowship.org/james-disney-gallery/>
- **Read an interview with him here:** <http://ransomfellowship.org/article/reformed-iconography-the-art-of-james-disney/>

Church leaders declared it a success.



Ps. 139. *Where can I go from God?*
by James Disney

Family Notes

If you give a child a cherry...

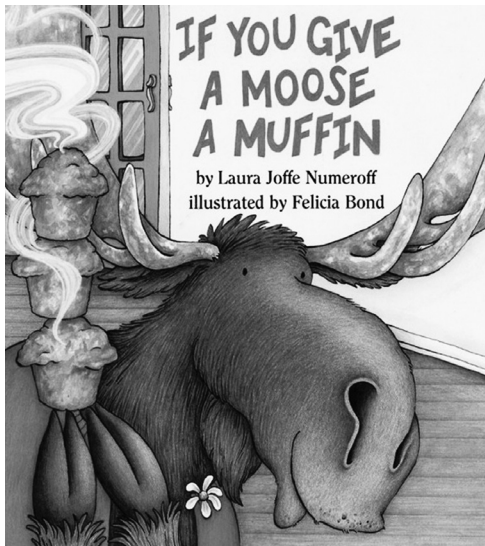
I was startled by a little voice beside me saying, "Oh, here you are. I was looking for you. Can I have more cherries?" It was Alvin our six-year-old neighbor who entered the house uninvited and looked until he found me in my office working at the computer.

The children's book "If you Give a Moose a Muffin" crossed my mind.

If a big hungry moose comes to visit, you might give him a muffin to make him feel at home. If you give him a muffin, he'll want some jam to go with it. When he's eaten all your muffins, he'll want to go to the store to get some more muffin mix.

And on he goes until he has consumed everything.

We've been getting to know the family next door who have three children and whose parents both work. We want to know them better, and be good neighbors. We sense they endure some sadnesses and difficulties and we wonder how to love them.



It was supper time and Denis and I were on the deck when Paige, 12 and Alvin wandered over to see what we were eating. Do you know Rainer cherries? They are a pricey seasonal treat. I rarely indulge in their glory and am often selfish about sharing. A bowl of the shiny yellow globes were beside us and you know what was next. "Can I try one?" asked Alvin. Certainly. Paige joined him testing a fruit they'd never tasted before. One led to two and within five minutes the dish was empty. Next, they wondered if we had anything else to eat. Alvin, less inhibited than his sister said he was very very hungry. I brought them a tangerine. Again, devoured.

Next morning the doorbell rang at 7:30. Alvin wondered if he could come in for something to eat.

This makes me a little uncomfortable because while I want to love them, boundaries aren't my forte. Better to avoid the problem altogether. Ignore the insistent doorbell. How to set limits and yet love them?

We Americans highly prize comfort. I'm no exception, and the cost of being a good neighbor conflicts with my precious efficiency and work goals. After all, who gets an award for handing fruit to a kid?

I thought of Jesus' words – "I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me ..." (Matt. 25: 42 & 43) There are many ways to be poor and starving. Poor in wealth. Food. Poor in spirit. My neighbors have a certain kind of poverty that deserves our attention.

So, welcome, Paige and Alvin, here's a muffin. That may be all for today, but tomorrow, I promise, there'll be more.

And Finally...

A book for summer reading.

I once babysat a child who no matter what she did constantly shouted “Look At Me! Look At what I did/made/said!” I pathologically fear becoming this kind of braggart. What I do well I discount by misapplying the biblical exhortation to not let your right hand know what your left is doing. Perhaps it’s genetic. Or maybe I took my step-dad’s warnings too seriously: *Don’t you go thinking you’re something, girlie, because you’re not.*

Maybe that’s why I suck at marketing. I don’t even know what it means to sell *yourself* let alone a book you wrote. But here’s the thing, today I’m trying.

Awhile back I wrote a book titled *God in the Sink*. It is a collection of essays from the years we lived in Rochester, MN. They originally appeared in *Notes From Toad Hall* and are pieces about every day life where I complain, fight with my hus-

band, make ridiculous choices, catch myself shoplifting, and try to love others, especially my children. In the midst of fallenness, I find moments of crazy delight, experience God’s tender love, and surprise my heart by occasionally growing an inch or two.

Recently a young mother read the book and wrote to me. Her response made me cry a little:

I so loved every word of God in the Sink - maybe someday I can sit down and tell you the many ways your words applied to exact situations at the exact right time. God met me through your words and sharings. – A.P.

My heart’s desire would be to encourage people to know beyond doubt God is present in our mundane, ordinary lives. He delights to bless us in the midst of efforts to just make it through life one day at a time.

I have copies for sale if you would like to try it – send me \$16.00 to cover book plus shipping and I’ll mail it to you for your summer reading. Or even easier, go to Ransom’s website and under publications click on books and order there.

May summer give you moments of rest and sunny bliss.



Warmly,

Margie

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.

Letters from the House Between is not available by subscription. Rather, interested readers can request to be added to Ransom’s mailing list, which is updated frequently. Donors to Ransom Fellowship, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-deductible ministry, are added automatically unless requesting otherwise. Everyone on Ransom’s mailing list also receives Critique magazine. To receive them send your mailing address to:

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