

Letters from The House Between

Formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*

Issue 2 **Spring 2015**



Dear Friends,

'No More' the 2014 pro-football ad campaign against domestic violence declaring that men should not physically abuse their partners came to mind. Wasn't that a ground-breaker. In this instance, however, "violence" was complicated because Denis, my pacifist husband who claims he *never* dreams, was having a nightmare. (The previous night I'd been the dreaming one, whimpering in my sleep when he pulled me out of it with reassurances and consolation. You know how you can be wailing like a dropped baby, but can only manage a feeble moan? I was seeing some kind of beast humping along, searching for someone beneath the foundation of our house and as I peered at it with deepening fear, I realized there were two beasts

present and I was screaming because one of them was on my back about to do I-don't-know-what because Denis woke me at that very moment. I nearly cried with relief. (Not trying to interpret *that* one. No-no.)

His dream was about a little boy getting harassed and threatened by a group of older boys and men. It was a courtroom setting and the judge had just dismissed the case against the perpetrators. In the hall outside the men were waiting and advanced on the little boy to beat him as he left the courtroom. Denis, who had become an advocate for this boy, stepped forward and delivered a punch to the lead guy's face. That's when he hit me in the back of the head. It was startling.

I am told that our subconscious selves connect with memories and events, parts of life we may not even be aware of when awake. Recently a friend mentioned that it wasn't until she was in her mid-thirties that she finally stopped having nightmares about being late for class and failing tests in high school.

Waking with a lurch from this dimension and after my heart slowed to normal, I lay awake



wondering who can explain that mysterious union of the physical, emotional and spiritual that are busy blending even as we sleep?

Most of us have probably experienced the fear of darkness under the bed

or in the basement – or in places populated with beings who stink and want to kill you. When I was a child I dreamed that our 10 gallon cream can would roll me safely into my parent's bedroom. Eventually that repeated dream was replaced by the comforting knowledge that God watches over us even as we sleep. He invites us to lie down in peace even when surrounded by enemies. We are assured that the part of us that is eternal – our souls – cannot be destroyed by Satan – and even if, I mean, when we die,

our physical bodies will one day be reunited to our hearts and we will be forever whole and nightmare-free.



It is most often at night that I am thankful to know a God who rules in all the dimensions of the universe, who sees me as his own. In my particular dimension, in the space where I am now living, I'm also

glad to have someone beside me at night who tells me it'll be okay. I don't take this for granted.

Did I complain?

I can't ever remember my husband dressing me, or brushing my hair, except one time. I've never really wanted one of those Francine River moments where I let down my hair and my lover tenderly



brushes my locks before we have hot sex. I mean, not that it is totally of no interest. I had only been towel-drying my hair after I got out of the shower when something happened to my neck. I managed to inch into the bedroom and fall on the bed moaning for Denis. When he arrived he was so concerned I thought of faking a faint to see where that got me. He managed to get my shirt on backwards the first try, and he kinda of brushed my hair—gouging my scalp, and scraping my ears. (It's been a long time since he's had hair of his own.) By then I was heavily into meds and didn't care if I looked like a drunken dandelion

head, but the occasion wasn't entirely lost on me – it was a first and I was thankful to be loved in this way.

With little ammo dumps going off up and down my right side, I shuffled into the chiropractor who, I think practices a form of chiro-voodoo. He doesn't chant or anything, but he's so cheerful about pain, which bothers me a little. "Lie down," he says, "and we'll have a look." "Oh. You can't get down there." Thankfully, his tray table stands on end and if you can walk over, plant your feet in front of it, and lean forward slightly, you can gently ride the thing to a prone position. After gently tapping my spine, bending my knees, and asking me to look over my right shoulder – which I couldn't do in any case, he said, "Okay, then. That should calm down, now." "So what's WRONG?" I wanted to wail, but I said it quiet, like I was only marginally interested in my ruptured disks and severed nerves; I couldn't even breathe without screaming. Inside. But no, it was nothing. He said I'd just wrenched my neck. Actually, I did start to feel better. But my day was not as productive in the way I had imagined.

Back home Denis got me settled on the couch so I could watch daytime television. I was excited to see Jack Van Impe talk about End Times even though he makes me want to



convert to Islam. (temporary feeling) I wanted a nasty illustration for my next publication, but Jack was off-stage at the moment. Only Rexella, the blonde with witch-nails, (I'd like some myself, except I don't think I could afford them.) was sitting in a Queen Anne Chair, sincerely saying, "...you wouldn't miss a doctor's appointment or an appointment with your hair-dresser, so should you miss an appointment with GOD?" No, ma'am. I moved on. An interior designer was re-doing a house so the incompetent bachelor could sell it. Charles Bronson was killing someone. A young lady with a thin waist and gorgeous fat lips (I'd like them, too.) was in a top register hurling notes, "You tore up my heart..." Oklahoma was under a tornado watch and flights out of LaGuardia were 70 minutes late. I shut it off, disappointed.

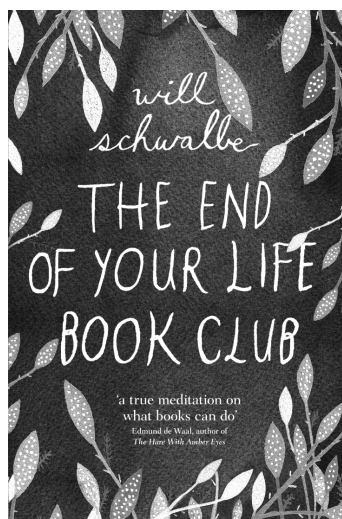
I was getting ready to nap when Denis brought the mail. I swear

I never get packages unless I've ordered them myself, but that day I got four! Two from a St. Louis friend who sent me a pound of Ethiopian Yirgacheffe and a CD mix of Page France and Sigur Ros. Another package came from

friends in Ghana – a tote bag, perfect for my computer. From our friend Ann, who was in Turkey with the State Department, I received a joke gift – a disgusting, beaded, yellow smiley-face coin purse. I'd like to know how God managed to converge these things

from across the globe and deliver them to my lap on the very day I was discouraged because this wasn't what I'd planned for the day. I certainly don't deserve this. I am sorry for my complaining and filled with gratitude.

In *The End of Your Life Book Club*, Will Schwalbe writes about gratitude as he remembered how his mother made her children write thank you letters for Christmas gifts when he was a boy. (It's an interesting book. When his mother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, they decided, in the time left to them they would read books together and talk about them through the hours and days of waiting rooms, hospitals and treatment for as long as her life lasted. It was deeply touching as their love and respect is plain to see even though she was clearly a woman of faith and he was not.) He detested that duty of writing thank-yous, but it became a lifelong habit – a way to affirm and thank others for what they do for you, to be grateful even if you don't know them.



...gratitude isn't what you give in exchange for something: it's what you feel when you are blessed – blessed to have family and friends who care about you, and who want to see you happy. Hence the joy from thanking. In a Japanese philosophy called Naikan, people are reminded "to be grateful for everything. If you are sitting in a chair, you need to realize that someone made that chair, and someone sold it, and someone delivered it – and you are the beneficiary of all that. Just because they didn't do it especially for you doesn't mean you aren't blessed to be using it and enjoying it. ...[thus] life becomes a series of small miracles, and you may start to notice everything that goes right in a typical life and not the few things that go wrong. – Will Schwalbe

We don't need to look further than our own Scriptures to see that God has, from the beginning, established a pattern for his people. He wants us to remember and be thankful. Paul affirms this when he writes: "in *everything* give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (I Thess. 5:18)

"Victimized self-righteousness"

As I encounter ordinary difficulties in life you would think at my age a thankful attitude would be as easy as swallowing yogurt, but I am often busted in the very way Anne Lamott writes about below – she says you can be feeling like a victim, being all in a muddle and ungrateful in so many ways, until you spend time with someone who is very sick or dying. You may remember that I've written about a man who has stage IV prostate

cancer. I love that guy. Ed was on Ransom's Board of Directors for a long time until all hell broke loose for him. He is brilliant with everything computer – especially Macs. He helps us any time of day or night. He is often able to cheer me up on a gloomy day. (You can read his blog here: www.wedonotloseheart.com.)



I was in Tennessee visiting family not long ago and had the misfortune of dropping my iPhone in the toilet. Yes. Do not tell me you've never done this. I don't want to hear. I was obsessed with getting my replacement running immediately as I "bathed in a high level of agitation." When I FaceTimed Ed I could see that on that day he felt a little like road kill. He shouldn't even have been thinking, let alone talking, but he insisted that, "no problem, he could help." He was grateful to have a bed. To have pain medication. And to eat the mashed potatoes and chicken a friend brought by. Cheesh.

Lamott writes: "*The worst possible thing you can do when you're down in the dumps, tweaking, vaporous with victimized self-righteousness, or bored, is to take a walk with dying friends. They will ruin everything for you.*"

First of all, friends like this may not even think of themselves as dying, although they clearly are, according to recent scans and gentle doctors' reports. But no, they see themselves as fully alive. They are living and doing as much as they can, as well as they can, for as long as they can.

They ruin your multitasking high, the bath of agitation, rumination, and judgment you wallow in, without the decency to come out and just say anything. They bust you by being grateful for the day, while you are obsessed with how thin your lashes have become and how wide your bottom.

- Small Victories -

Often I use this evening prayer to thank God for the mercies he has given, especially as we review the wounds of nearby friends, the suffering of people far away in Nepal. In Syria. Iraq. The church, our brothers and sisters, who live in all these precarious places of the world. With thankfulness for what we have – so undeserved – we pray for others...

Before I sleep, I would for a moment rejoice in the loves and friendships wherewith Thou hast blessed my life. ... whom now, with my own soul, I entrust to Thy keeping through the hours of darkness. And for all who this night have not where to lay their heads or who, though lying down, cannot sleep for pain or for anxiety, I crave Thy pity in the name of our Lord Christ. Amen.

- A Diary of Private Prayer by John Baillie -

Hospitality *Notes*

Some folks who live in colder climates are not deterred from grilling by the weather. But at our house we wait until the spring weather is warm, the gnats are biting and the mosquitoes are flying before we ritualistically pull out the grill and gather friends on the deck to eat barbequed chicken. This is the time of year when I begin looking for my favorite marinades. This is one that suggests a wonderful oil I only learned about a few years ago. A friend brought it back from Key West. I think it's expensive so I probably won't get another for a long time. Key Lime Avocado Oil is the color of green sea glass and bursts like fresh lime and yes, avocado, across your tongue. Beautiful. Sexy. I want to put it on everything. However, if I keep licking the cap on this bottle it's going to be gone in no time.

I also have a heavy mortar and pestle – a lovely wood-fired pottery thing. This means I can get rid of the wooden one I've had for a hundred years, i.e, for so long it yields vicious splinters not ground spice. With spring and the increased urges to grill, I've also been wanting to crush and pound things into potent little masses. Or messes. So I made a pasty substance that I share below. Somehow over a period of 24 hours, I don't know how or why, I had thawed brats, chicken thighs AND pork chops. Denis was eager to grill all of it. So I spread the paste on the pork chops. They were fabulous.

Coriander Pepper Paste

Ingredients

5 cloves fresh garlic
1 small Jalepeno pepper or 1 t. red pepper flakes,
or whatever amount of heat you can take, whuss
1 ½ T of whole coriander seed
3 T soy sauce
2 T. brown sugar
2 T olive oil plus 2 t. avocado oil



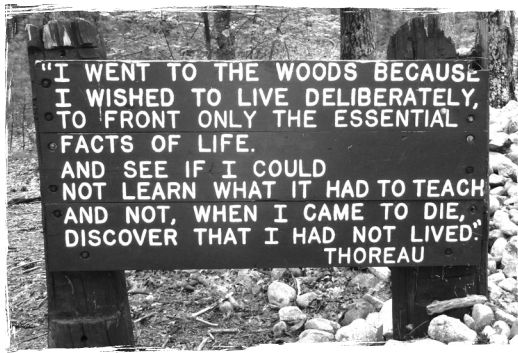
Directions

Crush everything together, but add the soy sauce and oil bit by bit after you get it going. I think the avocado oil isn't necessary, but it certainly adds interest.

If anyone wants to send another recipe that requires mortar and pestle I would be grateful. Anything that requires repeated blows and hammering is good therapy.

RansomNotes

In 1854, *Life in the Woods* was published by Henry David Thoreau. It was a reflection on simple living and self-reliance set in natural surroundings on Walden Pond. What I didn't know is the bit of irony Amanda Palmer points out in her TED talk on "The Art of Asking." She reminds us that Thoreau could not have observed and written his book without help from others. The land where he built his little cabin was given by Ralph Waldo Emerson. He gave little thought to what he would eat because every Sunday his mother and sister brought him a basket of food, and it always included fresh donuts. Which makes me laugh and say oookay – that would simplify my life, too! However much we might disagree with his transcendentalist world view, he has helped many to value loving, caring for, and being intentionally present in nature. So Palmer exhorts us to "Eat the donut!" when help comes.



Our supporters have enabled Denis and I to write our publications for years. *God in the Sink*, the collection of essays published in December is witness to much time set apart for writing.

A young mother recently wrote: *I'm reading "God in the Sink" these days and it is a huge blessing to me right now. Thank you for your writing...It weaves God into the daily things in the BEST way I've ever been taught or experienced. Things I know but are coming out with clarity. AND giving me something to reflect on during the day. I've been reading one a day over my breakfast while the family chaos whirls around me. I just ignore it for a while or get interrupted and then go back to it.*

Another supporter writes: *...I have benefitted greatly from your ministry for over twenty years. Your publications have encouraged me to think outside the "Christian culture box." ...impacting the way I interact with family, friends and co-workers. I'm raising my children to ask questions, avoid quick judgments and see threads of common grace in our culture and world at large.*

There are times when I feel guilty for "eating the donut" but I know this is how God has provided for Ransom and we should not discredit that gift. Ransom enables us to practice our calling and use the gifts God has given. We are able to take time to listen, to read and research. To live and give hospitality. So *thank you* for continued prayers and support from all of you.

Coming Up

- June 8-12** Chattanooga, TN. PCA General Assembly. Ransom will have a booth in the exhibit hall.
- June 16 & 17** Nashville, TN. Meeting up with friends of Ransom.
- June 14 & 21** Chattanooga, TN. St. Elmo Presbyterian, Denis preaches Sunday morning services.
- September 24-28** Santa Rosa, CA. First Presbyterian Church, annual church retreat. Both of us give presentations and lead small group sessions over the weekend.
- May 29** Rochester L'Abri Friday Lecture and reading from *God in the Sink*.

Family Notes

- May 31st is anniversary at the House Between. One full year of watching as summer blossomed and ripened into a bright fall, then the woods faded, turned black-boned with stark beauty and filled with the light of reflected snow. We have a new strawberry patch. The chives are blooming, the gnats are biting and leaving little bloody footprints on our skin. There is a brilliant Baltimore oriole at the feeder. We still love it and find it unbelievable that God led us here despite my impatience and lack of faith.
- When you raise your children which often includes a stage of sports and tournaments, it's difficult to imagine that one day you might be a grandparent and get to enjoy it all over again without the expense. We are at that stage. So far it has been Anson traveling down to The Cities for hockey tournaments, but this summer there will also be basketball camp for Paige. We get the fun of having them stay with us and being entertained by Ava Lou who has her own sport pleasures in the arena – making friends with any stranger who will loan her an iPhone or iPad to play games. How does a five-year-old do this?

- In March I spent a week with my good friend, Peggy. I was completely spoiled and healed with rest during those days of seeing and feeling the Arizona desert. The light and color is unparalleled before summer turns it to a furnace. I couldn't drink enough of it.

- It was good to be rested because in April I visited my family in Chattanooga for two weeks. It was my pleasure to see everyone and spend time with grandchildren. Sember has been unwell since December so dropping into their schedule to meet the school children with a snack every day and feeding hungry mouths at supper was deeply rewarding.

There were lots of interesting conversations. In a serious one with Kaiden, he explained his desire in life: "If I don't die naturally of old age or of disease, I want to die saving someone's life." Perhaps his own suffering with a broken back and chronic illness has given him something rare for a twelve year old?

- It took time but my broken ankle healed quite well. It's a good reminder not to pay too much attention to Google with multiple predictions of how terrible recovery will be and how it will never be the same even after years of therapy. Blah-blah. It's true there's nerve damage and some restricting pain because of the hardware, but I can walk up and down stairs no problem and ride my clunky old retro bike with balloon tires. Good enough for me.



Arizona Saguaro cactus



Kaiden & Grandma

And Finally...

Beulah Land – Home

There was an old gospel hymn we sang in strained high-pitched voices at the country church I attended through childhood: “O Beulah Land, sweet Beulah Land! As on thy highest mount I stand; I look away across the sea where mansions are prepared for me.”

I knew this song was about heaven, where I did want to go, but I sang with a sigh of disappointment because mansions were not what I hoped for. I did not like the cold, metallic sound of streets of gold or bejeweled gates. I wished heaven would be a log cabin in a place full of perfect sunshine, a horse with an Arabian pedigree, my mom’s fried chicken every night, evenings in the sauna with a mirrored lake full of stars and a special someone who loved me so much it didn’t matter that I was skinny and poor. A journey toward the Fair City or the Crystal Cathedral still does not appeal to me.

Beulah is an old word out of the King James Version of the Bible “Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate; but thou shalt be called Hephzibah and thy land Beulah; for the LORD delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married.” Isaiah 62:4. This I liked. I still like it. Green. Bucolic. Lush. The opposite of desolate. Last Sunday our pastor spoke of the way all persons have a homesickness for Home, even people who claim no faith have a longing for flawless places and rare perfect days we wish would never end. This tells us, he said, that we are made for something more than our temporary homes and fields on earth with the occasional day so perfect we never want it to end. It is a sign of what is planted by God in each human heart – that desire to reach our home Home that is only found with him.

As often as we travel through desolation and wilderness, Scripture gives us hope and anticipation for what’s to come. From the beginning it has always been God’s plan to bring us back to Beulah Land, to a renewed earth, to what will be our true Home.

From the House Between – looking forward to that day.



Warmly,

Margie



About Letters From the House Between

If you drive through western Kentucky where two great southern rivers – the Cumberland and the Ohio – 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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