

# Notes from TOAD HALL

Issue #4 ~ 2011  
Winter



## **T**he Snowman in the Basement

This time of year it's daily: suppressed panic about what to give family and friends for Christmas – it needs to be something extremely thoughtful and not too expensive if new, ingeniously re-purposed if picked up in the alley, and not too cheesy if hand-made. Guys are especially tricky. I admire friends who have the ability to give the just-right gift. I so lack imagination that I often end up giving what I'd want myself, and then, for fear of obligating them to like it, I relieve pressure by offering, "If you *don't* like it, you can give it back, because I like it very much." This is completely misunderstood by major people in my life.

I would like to offer wise reflections on what are the most important things we give: like our love, our time, and our selves. I know that might sound *excessively sentimental* – like the carols blared in every single store from now until January 1. They can't be avoided because one *must* buy groceries, and they make me *excessively, profoundly cynical, because, for example, who REALLY even KNOWS* what "chestnuts roasting on an open fire" taste like? Or, "Giddy-up, giddy-up, giddy-up it's grand, just holding your hand." WHAT? Who on earth wants that thought or tune running on an endless loop through your brain. Not me. (Stop ranting. Slap.)

The reality of life is that in our culture, Christmas has become a materialistic, commercially driven holiday that is difficult to avoid even when our circumstances may eliminate options for expensive or even cheaply acquired gifts for those we love. So I'm always thinking about how to push back. If our means are limited, (perhaps even if they're not) we should think of gift-giving in other ways that still represent our love. Despite my low average for hitting the right one – that is exactly what I want. I would like the gift to say: "I love you."

*The Book Thief*, one of the books I mention in this year's gift suggestions, (See page 7) tells about a Christmas during the Allied bombing of Germany. Death, the narrator, talks about "the strewn pieces of beauty" he finds in the midst of unspeakable suffering. He recalls a home where a Jewish man is being hidden. Max has not been out of their dark, cold basement for months. A friendship has grown between him

and the young girl who lives upstairs with her foster parents. On Christmas Eve a deep snow fell, covering the town and giving a temporary aura of quiet peace.

"... Liesel brought down a double handful of snow as a present for Max. "Close your eyes," she'd said. "Hold out your hands." As soon as the snow was transferred, Max shivered and laughed, but he still didn't open his eyes. He only gave the snow a quick taste, allowing it to sink into his lips.

"Is this today's weather report?"

Liesel stood next to him.

Gently, she touched his arm.

He raised it again to his mouth.

"Thanks, Liesel."

It was the beginning of the greatest Christmas ever. Little food. No presents. But there was a snowman in their basement."

### Existence Verified

In recent weeks I've received several meaningful gifts and none were wrapped. One was a poem – a random gift, some would say, an online accident. I'll never be able to thank the author for this strangely beautiful piece because I was interrupted by some life-twitch before I could save it, and now I have no idea where to find it. It was beautiful in the way that common words can be arranged to catch the heart in sudden spiritual insight.

The author was writing about an evening that was supposed to be a date-night with her husband. They went to a loud, noisy place where you sit at a high table and drink martinis late into the night. The music and patrons were deafening. They were not



Snowcover

celebrating; they were fighting under the cover of din, slamming words at one another. As I read, I identified with that sickening wonder of how can this be me and my mate, and we be at such odds? She held back angry tears because she would NOT be weak and vulnerable. She would fight back. Strike. Argue. To read the poem was to wish you didn't know what she was talking about – that two people could be so close and yet venture into what feels far from safe and loving. There is comfort, though, in knowing that most of our human experiences are shared. There, under the canopy of noise, they allowed themselves to shout and strike the table with fists, because who paid attention in that atmosphere? When they rose to pay their bill, they learned someone had already paid for them.

I had only glanced at the title, which was something like "One Proof for the Existence of God." I read the poem, pondered it, then returned to the title and WHAM! I got it.

There are others out there, some of you are my friends, and I know that someone heard us when we were angry, desperate, and ugly. And that Someone *still* paid. That was the gift.

## I Felt Like That

Sometimes I lose track of meaning and purpose. Like Serena, our GPS, when she's "acquiring satellites, acquiring satellites . . . searching . . . searching . . ." she can't find them no matter how long she tries because she's in an underground garage. That was how I felt yesterday. Although one might think I should be otherwise, I had no use for readings or prayers. I know some writers make best-selling memoirs out of the bleak and pathetic. I only manage to stare out the window and watch the neighbor tie up her Rhodesian Ridgeback dog and leave him on the chain. He looks so forlorn. I know it's absurd to think the cure for ennui is a coffee from Kopplin's. For one thing, it's ninety minutes away in St. Paul.

Some days the greatest gift is the person who comes along, sees what you need and prescribes a day of rest and refreshment. When Denis asked what was wrong and I replied that ALL I wanted in LIFE was a cappuccino from Kopplin's, he said, GO. Anita would like to go with you. Take the day, have lunch – go to your favorite yarn store. Accepting seemed like such extravagance. Denis. I love him.

After ordering the dark charm of my special coffee, we wandered around the corner into a small consignment shop with home furnishings that were fun and

reasonably priced. I found a perfect little footstool to replace the broken one at home. Next door was a clothing thrift store, attractively organized, mirrors and dressing rooms in easy reach, and (for my amusement) two little boys quietly barking like dogs, as they waited for their mom in the play area and watched 101 Dalmatians. We smiled. We did not hurry. (Guys, if you think this is too girly, fine. But I know you wander through Fleet Farm trying on Carhartt boots in case it snows, rifle through the lumber bins for pieces that might be good for something, you can't think of just now, and then you go to Best Buy or REI, okay? Same thing.)

As I slowly rifled through the winter coats, I remembered that for years Denis has been harping at me to get a new one. Last spring, looking at my old one in strong daylight before I put it away, I could see why. It wasn't just that the black wool had attracted wads of white rabbit fur that piled under my armpits (thanks, Honeysuckle); it was so obviously stained with coffee spills, muddled

along the bottom, frayed at the collar, the lining torn . . . I had a moment of extreme shame for having sat in front of anyone in church, and them staring at my back for hours during the sermon? Lucky me, I found a red jacket and a long coat with furry trim for just a few dollars.



*Flock of chickens*

Honest, I'm not saying that shopping is a cure for depression. What I'm saying is that in the company of a trusted friend, in the white feather-fern across the surface of a cappuccino, and in the blue Mississippi lined with golden trees beneath the 10th Avenue Bridge, I detect beams of

Sabbath. Which I seem to need more of these days. Pausing is not just a necessity, it is a gift from God.

## A Flock of Chickens

As I continue stewing about which Christmas gift for whom, Anita (she is Ransom's Resident assistant, helping to keep Toad Hall, sharing in hospitality, web-site management, so many other things) leaves a little hand-made gift in the kitchen. For no reason or occasion, just a surprise saying, they're yours – a little string of knitted chickens, lovely and whimsical. They hang above the stove and they make me smile almost every day. (I will post the directions to my website so if you are handy you can make them, too.) They were a priceless reminder that not all gifts must be big and costly to be the just-right-thing.



*Kopplin's cappuccino*

# Ransom Notes

## Finishing the race

When Marsena described the last quarter of a Chicago 5K run down a street packed with people clapping and cheering and yelling runners on: it was moving. Not only because it was her first race ever and she finished, or that she has survived two very difficult years, but because of those who struggled toward the finish line, carrying extra weight and pushing bodies with disability. They had the courage to finish because the crowd was so with them.

I especially wanted to thank you and encourage you as God has radically provided for us several times this year. Once in the middle of summer when things looked very bleak, and at the end of September after we'd gone without salary for a month. At the last moment, the mail brought in some large and small gifts which together were enough to meet the most pressing bills and pay some salary in October.

Although we believe God does not measure success in numbers of people converted, books written, or hits on your blog, in lean times we can doubt our calling and ministry. Did we hear right? Should we be doing this? But everyday Jesus helps us when we feel small and full of stumblings. Against our doubts we pose evidence of God's existence and care. We see one of those evidences in those of you who cheer us on – by your prayers, kind notes and gifts. Our love and thanks to you, and of course, to God, our Father.

## Looking back

- In these weeks and months, Denis has continued to write – working on his book manuscript and other writing projects.
- This fall he has led Bible studies for our small group, film discussions with several groups in Minneapolis and is teaching leadership training classes for our local church.
- Anita has helped with much hospitality at Toad Hall, organized books, films, and music, maintained a lovely presence in the yard and nurtured Honeysuckle, the celebrated rabbit.
- She spent many hours working with me as we developed [margie.ransomfellowship.org](http://margie.ransomfellowship.org).
- My writings are now more accessible from our website. You can also follow Ransom way more than you'd ever want via facebook, twitter, website, blog.

## Coming up

**December 31**, St. Louis, wedding.

**January 2-7**, Covenant Seminary, St. Louis. Denis teaches course on Theology and Film.

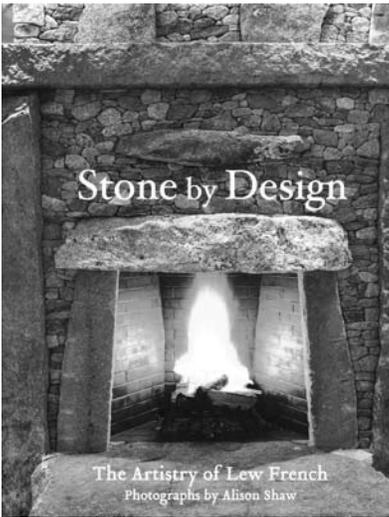
**January 11-14**, Scottsdale, AZ, Ransom's internal audit and Board meeting.

**February 10 & 11**, Rochester, MN, L'Abri conference: "In the Beginning" – Denis will give a plenary on film and a workshop interviewing a film director.

## Please pray

- For those we encounter who have deep doubts about faith – that they would be drawn by God's faithful loving-kindness.
- That we would grow in wisdom, in knowledge of our calling and shifting priorities.
- That we would serve, not ourselves, but God and others at all times.
- That we would trust God for our care during these uncertain economic times.
- Give thanks for the crowd that cheers us on and for God's timely provision moment by moment over the past year.

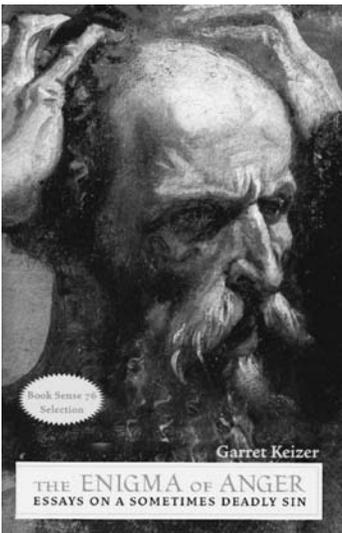
# 2011 Christmas Gift List



## **Stone by Design: The Artistry of Lew French** Gibbs Smith, 2005. (non-fiction)

*Stone by Design* must be the best book yet on building and landscaping with stones. Considering French's work gives welling joy, even if you can't do what he does. His stone walls, walks and fountains are lavish with earthy elegance, perfectly balanced in weight and patterns of light, because, as he says, "Good stonework has a sense of being solid and grounded, but also has a rhythmic, flowing lightness about it." Photos of his work captivate the viewer because they reflect the natural beauty and grace of stone where he places them in harmony with their surroundings. For one of his large projects, a client

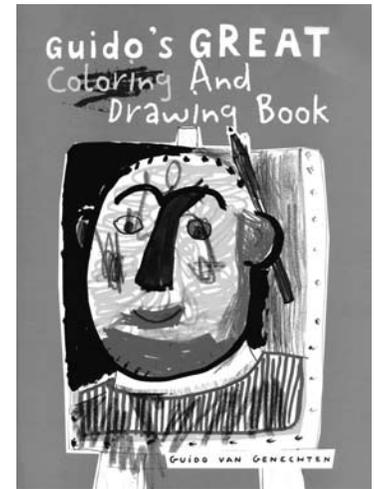
on Martha's Vineyard asked him to design a garden that now thrives among the boulders and stone walkways he built. I want it! Most of his work is found on the island, but he grew up a few miles from where I live in Minnesota. I feel the vibe. All he does could easily be part of what Adam and Eve did in keeping Eden. I hope, one day, perhaps in the next life, God will give me a quarry, hand me a stone mallet and say, go ahead, create. I was going to give this book to a friend who shares my interest, but I couldn't part with it. (Sorry, John.)



## **The Enigma of Anger: Essays on a Sometimes Deadly Sin** by Garret Keizer, Jossey-Bass, 2002. (non-fiction)

A book on anger may seem like disturbing a sleeping black mamba – better to leave it alone. Giving this as a *gift* to someone you think *needs* it, may not be a safe idea. So unless you are sure, consider this for yourself. Anger is an unreasonable emotion and it sometimes breaks through in me, despite my niceness veneer. Keizer, an Episcopal priest, thoughtfully leads us toward a "break through to the rocky depths, to the matrix itself." Using his own experience, accumulated stories from life and literature and wisdom, he draws us in to consider anger's causes and manifestations which are sometimes violent, disproportionate, unreasonable,

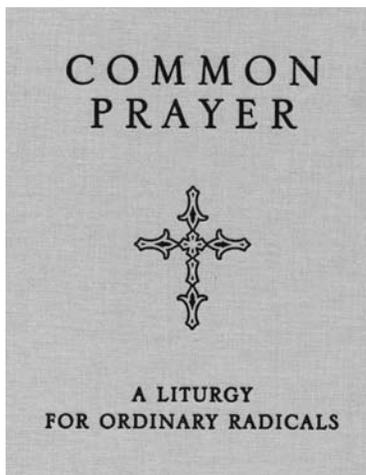
depressing or, yes, even justified. His insights are not all equal, nor do I necessarily agree with him in every case, but there is enough here to make it a worthy dig. All year I've been reflecting on his thoughts, so if you're lucky this might be my final plug. Another favorite quote: "... many of our angry outbursts are the result of grief that never comes to sobbing." Yes.



## **Guido's Great Coloring and Drawing Book**

by Guido Van Genechten, Clavis Publishing, NY, 2010. (Ages 4-II. I'm guessing.)

"Give this boxer a black eye." "Make labels for these jars full of delicious food." "Draw an unlucky person." "Draw a lucky person." This book has lots of quirky, fun ideas for drawing and coloring. I know. Coloring inside lines stifles creativity, but kids *like* coloring books and this one really *is* different. It was first self-published in Belgium by Genechten, who is an artist and author of children's books. It is a large book printed on good drawing paper which means markers won't bleed through to the other side to stain your tabletop. Available on Amazon. I've seen it listed for \$8.00.



### **Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals**

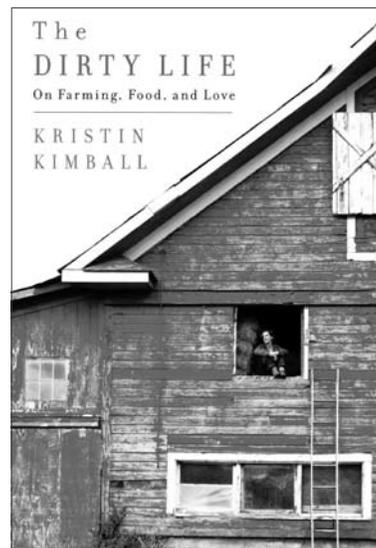
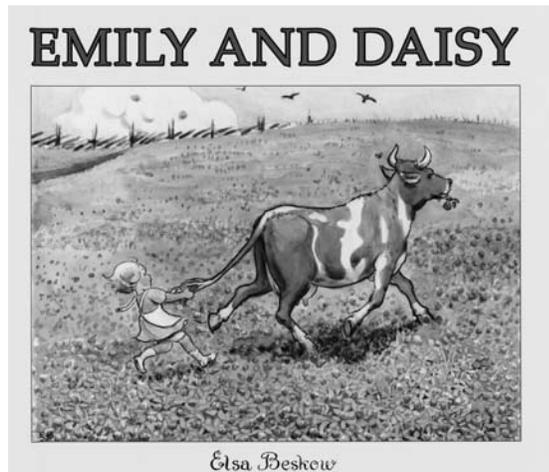
by Claiborne, Wilson-Hartgrove, and Okoro, Zondervan, 2010

For a year now at Toad Hall, we've used this patchwork quilt of prayers, quotes and Scriptures to greet the day. Not every calendar day, but many. It's meant to be used in communities, families or by groups of friends anywhere – all kinds of folks from the over-churched to the under-churched. It is pan-denominational, which is good – we need the reminder that we are part of something larger and more diverse than the little holes we live in. Each day's structure includes Scripture and an appropriate quote ranging from ancient church fathers like Augustine to contemporaries like Frederick Beuchner. Each one ends with the prayer: "May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you: wherever he may send you; May he guide you through the wilderness: protect you through the storm; May he bring you home rejoicing: at the wonders he has shown you; May he bring you home rejoicing: once again into our doors."

### **Children of the Forest, Peter in Blueberry Land, Emily and Daisy,** (or any book) by Elsa Beskow, Floris Books, Edinburgh, 2005. (Picture Books)

Beskow's books were first published over a century ago, and only recently discovered here at Toad Hall when a friend gave us a copy of *Emily and Daisy*, the story of a girl who must find their cow who has escaped the pasture and bring her home. Beskow proves that some authors get it so right they become favorites for children of any time or age. I gave a copy of *Children of the*

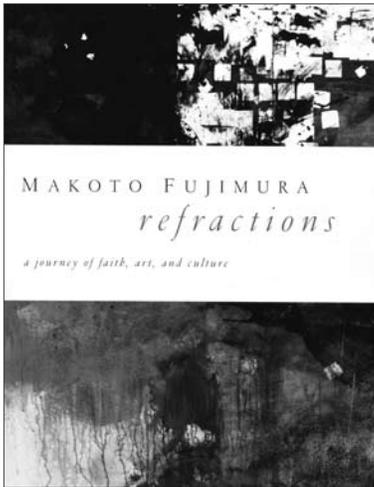
*Forest* to our five-year-old granddaughter, who went to bed with it hugged to her chest every night for weeks. Both kids and adults are charmed by her illustrations and pleased with her characters, who like us (most of us), love animals and miniature worlds. We easily imagine the adventures of little people who live under mushroom caps, wear sweaters knit with thistle down, eat acorns as big as their heads, and ride the backs of butterflies. I am a firm believer in keeping books for children whether you have them or not. It's part of the hospitality you give the occasional child who strays into your life.



### **The Dirty Life: On Farming, Food, and Love** by Kristin Kimball, Scribner 2010. (Memoir)

When Kimball, a NYC hipster journalist, took a writing assignment to interview a young Pennsylvania farmer, she wasn't looking for a mate or a new career. But it was almost as if she had a conversion experience and before she realized it, she impulsively shed her old life and joined Mark to achieve the dream of establishing an organic farm that grew everything their CSA members needed. As much as I should know better, this story might be my ultimate romantic dream. However, the rawness of the physical labor, the random nature of weather and animals and the eternal dirt would kill me in three days. But Kimball makes it clear (with humor) – there is a fulfilling pleasure in hard work and the wonder of food that comes directly from garden to table.

"It was Shane who dispelled the rumor that had been circulating around Dale Ranger's barn in the valley west of ours . . . I think it started because at the time I was still wearing the standard-issue city clothes that I'd moved with, tailored shirts and skirts cut above the knee and boots with a little bit of heel, and this is a town where lip gloss is considered daring, a special-occasion accessory. Someone decided I was formerly a high-end prostitute in New York City, and this news was fully believed and widely disseminated by the men at Dale's barn until Shane got to know us and reported back that I was not an ex-whore after all and had graduated from college, to which, . . . Bud Campbell had replied, *I don't know, it's just what I heard.*" (p. 74)

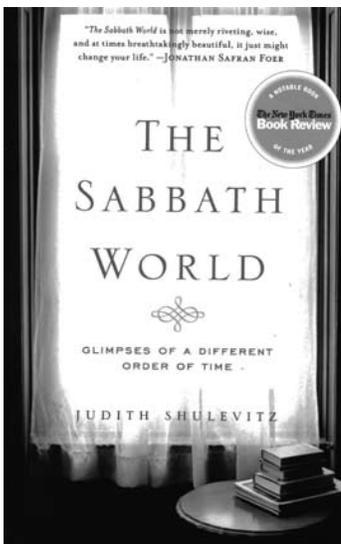


**Refractions: A Journey of Faith, Art, and Culture** by Makoto Fujimura, Navpress, 2009 (Personal essays)

Fujimura, an artist living near Ground Zero, began a blog several years ago. From his home and studio near Ground Zero, he sends out a collection of dispatches from various points on his journey. One of his paintings hangs in our dining room – a simple trout, subtle, refracting light from her hiding place in the depths of the paper – just a small sample of his internationally recognized art. We are blessed to look at it every day. In one sense, it hardly seems fair that he is also an

artistic, thoughtful writer. Ah, and yet, Christ speaks to us through his reflections, helping us bend light into the corners of life to find that we indeed “carry the dust of Eden in our DNA.”

“I have learned from Scripture to pay attention to works in my life of which I am not proud. They speak to teach me. I have learned that what the ancients called “repentance” is a journey of coming home to a place where all of our wretched works rest, but also where our wretchedness is overcome by light. This reality can powerfully alter how we view our lives and our art. Even our wretchedness cannot confine us, ultimately, or keep us from reaching across boundaries of cultures. But indeed our wretched state may be what draws us together.”



**The Sabbath World**, by Judith Shulevitz, Random House, 2010. (Non-fiction)

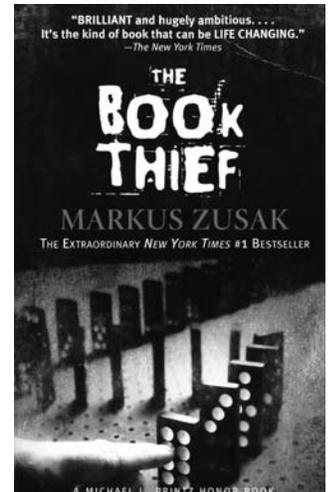
If you are edgy, tired, hurried, over-committed, no margins in life, maybe it’s because you don’t take a Sabbath rest seriously? Shulevitz is hardly one to make you feel guilty about that, as she can’t keep it perfectly herself but calls it a torturous dangle between two orders of time – a kind of “time sickness.” As postmoderns, it’s not easy to disconnect long enough to have meaningful rest one day a week; perhaps I’m drawn to this subject because of my own failures. This book on the Jewish and Christian day of rest is part history, part philosophy and part personal experience.

“Most people mistakenly believe that all you have to do to stop working is not work. The inventors of the Sabbath understood that it was a much more complicated undertaking. You cannot downshift casually and easily. This is why the Puritan and Jewish Sabbaths were so exactly intentional. The rules did not exist to torture the faithful. They were meant to communicate the insight that interrupting the ceaseless round of striving requires a surprisingly strenuous act of will, one that has to be bolstered by habit as well as by social sanction.”

**The Book Thief** by Markus Zusak, Alfred A. Knopf, NY, 2005

I definitely didn’t want to read another WWII novel about Nazi Germany, there are so many, but Zusak’s rich, artful writing sucked me in. The main character, Liesel Meminger

– a little girl taught to read by her foster father grows such an appetite for books that she begins stealing books from Nazi book-burnings.



Death, who is the unlikely narrator, is exhausted from carrying souls away by the thousands, and yet his stories are about Life: the ordinary lives of ordinary people making choices of consequence – seemingly small choices that reflect the landscape of their hearts – some pondered and carefully reckoned, others spontaneously springing from bitterness and hate or kindness and love. *They pedaled ahead of the parade, toward Dachau, and stopped at an empty piece of road. Rudy passed Liesel the bag. “Take a handful.”*

*“I’m not sure this is a good idea.”*

*He slapped some bread onto her palm. “Your papa did.”*

*How could she argue? It was worth a whipping.*

*“If we’re fast, we won’t get caught.” He started distributing the bread. “So move it, Saumensch.”*

*Liesel couldn’t help herself. There was the trace of a grin on her face as she and Rudy Steiner, her best friend, handed out the pieces of bread on the road. When they were finished, they took their bikes and hid among the Christmas trees.” (p.440)* As death hovers in the background for all of us, by faith we receive mercy and look beyond for a greater Justice.

# Final Notes

## The Finest Gift

I remember my Grandparents Frolander. How I *LOVED* the gifts they brought every Christmas for all six of us kids! They always drove out to our farm on the evening of December 23 to deliver a load of packages - two for each of us. That far north, darkness settled over the countryside by four in the afternoon and as night fell, the temperature dropped far below zero. Our breath hung in frost from our parka hoods, as we hurried to clean the barn and feed the cows for evening chores. Already anxious about their coming, Dad increased our worry by predicting blizzards and drifting snow. No one with brains would venture thirty-six miles into the country on back roads to merely bring presents, he would tease. As I ran from the milk house to the stock tank, I kept an eye on the sky; when stars were bright there was always hope. Every approaching car gave me a heart attack if it passed by, and there were so few. Surely, I thought, the next one will be theirs. I don't remember them ever failing to come. Their arrival gave us one night and an entire day, (because we opened gifts on Christmas Eve) to imagine what wondrous things were wrapped and waiting under the tree. I'd like to say ... and then ... and then I understood waiting for the finest gift of all - the Baby Jesus. But no. Christmas was about what Grandpa and Grandma Frolander brought us.



Now, years later, what I remember are the intangible gifts they gave. It saddens me to think I never adequately thanked them: my grandfather for being the man in my childhood who loved me without reservation, even after I ruined his best rod and reel; my grandmother for her patient indulgence - and that she allowed me into her life every summer during the busiest weeks of the year at their Canadian resort on Lake of the Woods.

Perhaps such gifts require time and maturity to recognize. I hope and pray they are among the lasting ones I give to those I love, especially my own grandchildren.

Wishing you to be blessed; to give and receive the finest gifts.



Merry Christmas from Toad Hall,

Margie Haack

## About Notes from Toad Hall

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 them, a midwestern Gothic four-square looked amazingly like a mansion. Possibly even as great a house as Toad Hall.

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