

Notes from Toad Hall

Issue #1 ~ 2014
Still Winter



Gentle Madness

A “People have always collected things. Whether a vestige of our hunter-gatherer days, a need to forge order amid chaos, or a simple desire to have and to hold, the urge to possess is a hallmark of the human psyche. Yet pathology is a danger. Compulsive hoarders find value in everything. Others fixate on a single thing, succumbing to what author Nicholas Basbanes calls ‘a gentle madness.’ In 1869 the bibliophile Sir Thomas Phillipps said he needed ‘to have a copy of every book in the world.’ His final tally (50,000 books, perhaps 100,000 manuscripts) wasn’t bad.” (*National Geographic*, January 2014, “The Things They Brought Back.”)

As we prepare for a move that we pray happens later this year, we are looking into closets, corners and other hidey-holes in the house. What to sell, pitch or move? Denis and I each have collections we think indicate pathology or at least a “gentle madness” in the other. He has too many books, and I have too many containers of unidentifiable organic stuffs in the refrigerator. He accuses me of housing colonies of cholera – little does he know that that gelatinous mass of kombucha tea could improve his health, if only he would drink it. But, I ask, shouldn't some of his books go away, especially titles which no one, not even he, will crack again? We have twenty-three bookcases packed full! At one point he reluctantly agreed to get rid of most of them. I know it hurt because they are his friends, but he had steeled himself. When our Board of Directors learned about this plan, one, who won't be named, in the time it takes to wave a hand, dismissed the idea, saying Denis should keep them! Otherwise, how would he do research? Several others agreed. Check. Mate. Perhaps they will help us move.

Still, I don't think 7,000 books compare to the refrigerator Denis frequently visits trying to sneak things into the trash without my knowing. Things I am saving. Like creamy horseradish sauce, pepperoncini, capers, fish sauce, angustora bitters (What are they for, ANYway?) ... all these necessary ingredients for that wonderful something I might make some day. When I catch him with his head in a shelf crying, WHAT'S this???. You never use it! It looks like rotten raccoon carcass! I'm throwing it out! NOOOOO. That's



Aunt Ruth's jewelry collection

like me throwing away all the obscure titles Francis Schaeffer wrote over the years. No. Do not throw away my fermented carrot condiment which I made and which I may or may not begin eating everyday for the microbial health of my intestines.

Little by little, we have begun to sift through thirty-three years of home-making at Toad Hall. Today, in early January, I'm going through my filing cabinet. Back, back into the dark ages of my life. Dumping, dumping. Throwing files of essays, clippings, reviews. Children's authors. Crocheted blanket patterns. Homosexuality. Bank



Precious condiments

loans. Pathetic poems by Margie. Trying not to stop and read and wonder: WHAT was I thinking? It is easier to declutter and pitch when I remember that I'm lightening the load my children will one day bear to the trash. It will be one less box to handle when I die. I don't think my death is immanent, but I'm motivated.

It's more difficult to know what to do with jewelry boxes that belonged to Denis' Aunt B and Aunt Ruth. Fake pearls, pop-beads, paste diamonds, heavy bracelets. Strangely configured brooches. Nothing of much value. Is there a granddaughter who would love these things? Perhaps turn them into glittering sculptures? Add them to vintage clothing? I don't know.

So, through the house I go, from the attic to the basement sorting, deciding. A few items sold on Craig's List, others posted "Free", some taken to Salvation Army. I know this purging is doing me good because when the single bedspreads and button collections are gone, I feel freer, lighter.

We laugh about these things, but underneath I am anxious. How we will manage the future? Why does every little thing need to be a hurdle of spiritual growth for me? It seems as if I am constantly being prodded to reach a level of maturity I can't achieve – that elusive place where I finally trust fully in God's interest in all my unhistoric struggles. I constantly stray.

Take the tour

If things go as planned by early March we will be ready for the 360 degree show-off the home show with bare surfaces, artfully placed bowls of fresh fruit, where no human has ever put their feet on a coffee table. Our

house will never look better, but don't you dare believe we live like that every day. When we are finally listed watch our FaceBook pages for the MLS listing and you might be able to visit us at Toad Hall for the last time. I know that over the years many of you have wished you could stop in. We do, too. I would have had everyone of you, if it were possible.

Two weeks later

We are back from our annual Board Meeting which was in Chicago this year at Donald and Mary Guthrie's. Our directors are all old friends, peers who know and love us well. We've all been through much together. Their role in our ministry and lives seems to involve three things in varying degrees: Directing. Consulting. Blessing. We trust them.

In our discussions this year as Denis and I outlined what we think of as the next phase of life – a gradual reduction of some responsibilities over a period of years, a move to a home on one level, and a look at what increased writing might involve – the Board sharpened their focus and tackled: *where?* We had been looking in an area north of Minneapolis and St. Paul. A rural area where we might own several acres and to tell the truth? It is sort of in the middle of nowhere. The questions they piled on boiled down to: *What and who are you moving to?* Well, we're moving to Margie's dream: to expansive horizons with birds and wild animals. To gardens and no traffic or helicopters. To quiet beauty. (Denis was with me in this, but easier to please.)

I don't know how it happened that I determined we should move to

"nowhere farm," because we have often advised people about *where* to move when they faced a big change. We say you must not move without considering *where* and *who* your community will be. What church or body of Christians will you become a part of? Who are



Toad Hall Living Room

the people who will be your friends? Everyone ought to have people with whom you develop deeper relationships – more than just a friendly wave at the checkout counter or a "peace be with you" at the appointed hour in church.

Processing

As I write this, we are still processing and I'm trying to understand how I could have blown past all our own advice. In her book *Another Country*, Mary Pipher warns people our age not to move to some exotic location where you've always dreamed of living but then in the following few years as your health disintegrates you are far away from a community of friends and family who would surround you with help when you are deeply in need (that phrase scares me; I don't WANT to be in deep need). Community trumps location in Pipher's mind. I didn't think I was ignoring her advice. It's not like

it was the Florida Keys or Flathead County, Montana. But in fact it is pretty dreamy, when I'm forced to think of it. Imagine me being 76 (in ten years!). It's 30 below. The porch is sheeted in ice. The car won't start. Denis is sick. And we live 45 miles from the ER in St. Paul.

Then there is the Anita-Factor. She's been with us for almost six years now as our assistant and her work has been incalculable. She has owned many things; she doesn't just complete a list of duties, but rather she comes alongside with her own initiative and gifts. But lately, she, too, has sensed a need for change. We love one another, so that isn't the reason for wanting new direction. She and I share a lot of likes, and I fantasized

breathing fresh air while she did the chores, raised chickens, and mended fences. Yes, I imagined her still doing all her Ransom work, too. It's embarrassing to admit I willfully ignored her signals about needing change, and the Board's suggestions that when we move, we *need* to look for a place where we could live minus what Anita



Anita getting ready to "work"

can do, because in the near future she may need to find a different position for many good reasons.

As for what's to become of my dream? I am emotional about it. And confused – feeling one thing now and the opposite the next day. On one level, I am quick to accommodate. That's what I did at our Board meeting when pressed about where we should live. I immediately saw my inconsistency. Then, as the people-pleaser I am, I quickly gave up my dream to saying, yeah, I could live here with a narrow little view in a Chicago suburb. So fine. Give me a row house with a microchip yard.

On another level, I'm angry with God. Why doesn't he just give me what I want with a lot less fuss? I've worked hard all my life. I deserve this little piece of cake. I also embarrass myself because I almost always process things verbally. So after blabbing, (like I'm doing here) everyone knows what I'm thinking. When I'm forced to change my mind, I have to go back and say, oh, sorry, that's not going to happen. Not even close. So, here I am acknowledging that a place in the country won't be likely.

As often as I return to these wise words, they remind me of God's love: "God knew the worst about us before he chose to love us, and therefore no discovery now can disillusion him about us in the way that we are so often disillusioned about ourselves,

and quench his determination to bless us. He took knowledge of us in love." J.I. Packer.

Revisions

We have lived through many crises and changes and seen how faithfully God delivers us time after time, year after year in ways I couldn't have imagined. But I still can't confidently shout: Don't worry about where you will live or . . . "what you will wear. . . ." Or as the Message puts it: "Don't



fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or if the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your inner life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the ravens, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, carefree in the care of God. And you count far more." (Luke 12:24)

I know it. I know it. I know it. But, God help me, I still doubt. I don't know where Home is!

A prayer from *Common Prayer* touched my cloudy eyes today "Lord, we all suffer varying degrees of blindness. We are blind to love, to justice, to grace and to life. Help us not to condemn one another in our blindness, but rather to work together to help one another see more clearly by your light" (January 22). I am so happy not to be condemned by others (like our Board) for my blindness. I'd even be happy if I learned not to condemn myself for blindness.

People don't normally write about things such as this to their mailing list – although many of you are personal friends. It seems, well, UN-spiritual in the way of ministry newsletters. However, declaring it "unspiritual" is antithetical to all we've stood for over the years. We maintain that there is not one square inch of life over which Christ does not reign. So all this dilemma and fog-giness is part of our being human,

struggling with our own faultiness and finiteness. It is exactly what God wants to take us through right now, even though I hate the uncertainty.

In some corner of my heart, I can give my hopes and dreams to God for safe keeping. I don't know where we will be in six months. I know there could be a spot for us that is more urban yet doesn't rule out a clear horizon and a quiet neighborhood. And if not? Will I eventually find grace and contentment in where we land? I think so.

I'm going to watch to see how all this turns out. In the meantime, if any of you understand just a portion of this – if you have lived counting down the days to some inevitable change in your life, then I'm comforted. You can pray for us. You are my friend.

"Lord, to laugh in the midst of trial and to rejoice in the darkest valley is another way of saying, 'Our hope is in you.' Fill us with laughter and joy while we work for peace and strive for justice. Amen." *Common Prayer* (January 27)

Family Notes

Paige, 7, sits on my lap eating Laffy Taffy, as we watch Anson, 10, play hockey in the Crookston arena. Even though we are inside, we are bundled against the cold. Outside the arena, it is 21 below with a howling north wind. Ava Lou, 4, has been given permission to play on the children's jungle gym in the corner opposite us. We can look across ice rink and see her. She has taken off her boots. Now her coat. Then we forget to watch her as we follow Anson on the ice, then suddenly the people next to me have quit watching the game and are exclaiming about a little girl: She's BAREFOOT!! And sure enough Ava Lou runs up, arms outstretched, nothing on her feet – GRANMA!! she shouts with delight on finding me. (How I love that greeting!) I scoop her up and hold her reddened, bare feet – Where are your boots and socks?? Your feet will freeze to death! They're NOT cold, she insists. She jumps down and runs away to find her mother who will deal with her. What strange trials children give their parents.

Anson's team won one game and lost two in the tournament. We can see he is more skilled this year than last. He made some sweet moves playing defense, skating backwards and stealing the puck from the offense. As I watched Anson, I thought about when Jerem, his father, was a boy competing in soccer. How I wished him to be a star! There is hardly anything in my life that was so obviously self-centered. I wanted him to succeed for me not for him. I was prepared to pretend humility when other parents noticed what a great player he was, but inside I was, Oh, yes, I delivered and raised that child myself. Look on him! It had so little to do with his good.

It feels more healthy to be a grandparent with much less at stake and fewer impossible expectations. There is a lot of joy in simply seeing and loving our grandchildren as they are. Scores don't matter as much anymore. Great athletic ability, perfect grades, award-winning art is fine, but now I know there are deeper, heart things that can't be measured or expressed by scholarships and scores. Those are the things I pray will grow in each of our grandchildren.



Anson



Paigey



Ava Lou

Ransom Notes



New Board member Paul Woodard

New Board Member

We have known Paul Woodard from St. Louis, MO, since 1980. He and his wife, Kathy, have been good friends to us all this time. Last year, after many years in the ministry – the last sixteen spent as a chaplain at a large retirement center – Paul retired. Denis and I have always admired Paul's work at Friendship Village where he demonstrated a kind of gospel hospitality – helping older people live and die well – walking with them right up to the final door, helping them bid good-bye to their families and then turning to comfort those left behind. So, we welcome him to our Board of Directors. He seems perfectly suited to help us in a stage of life (we aren't planning to die soon!) that will involve transition. We need his wisdom, his kindness and advice to move ahead. We also need courage to do it. Paul will add much to our group.

Finances

This past year, many of you joined in making it possible for us to continue Ransom's work. We are often amazed by God's matchless timing – which you might guess doesn't always coincide with our own! When we meet for prayer, as staff and as a Board, we pray for you who share with us so generously in this work. We express gratitude for you and pray you will catch glimpses of glory in our sadly broken world. We have no idea how those prayers are answered, or what glimpses of glory you need, but we address our words to the One who regards you from all eternity, world without end. Sometimes not knowing the details is all right.

So, thank you. Thank you for being part of a little community that is used of God to show us glimpses of grace. We are grateful for your prayers and financial gifts.

For Thanksgiving and Prayer:

- We're thankful that God's grace has allowed Ransom to continue on into another year of writing, speaking, and hosting discussions.
- As we look ahead to 2014, we believe God is leading Ransom into transition, including concentrating on writing more, moving from Toad Hall into a more efficient home, and Anita into the next stage in her vocation – we need wisdom.
- Margie is working on a collection of essays and planning to start the second volume of her memoirs, and Denis is working on two book manuscripts – solitude and creativity are our prayer requests.
- Openness to growth and change is never easy, but we desire openness, trusting God to unfold steps in his good time.
- Prayer for finding our next home.

Until we meet again

Last February we said goodbye to Ed Hague. None of us expected to see him again as stage IV prostate cancer devoured his bones. He has been on Ransom's Board of Directors and our Apple tech guy, taking care of the computers for a lot of years now. More than that, he has given us pastoral care, talking, praying, laughing and sneaking up on us with questions that frighten the clothes off our hearts. He often jokes that we must heed everything he says now because, "I'm a dying man." Hard to argue with that.



Asleep but still dangerous.

We can't begin to say how crazy-wonderful it is to still have him around. (Read about his journey at his blog: <http://wedonotloseheart.com/>) He recently wrote the following about our Board meeting this past January:

Betsy and I have just returned from a board meeting in Chicago. This is a board that I resigned from a year ago, thinking that I was a goner. Unable to go to last year's meeting was great loss. These people love me and I love them – fiercely. We skyped together last year and said our goodbyes, with all of us thinking – this is it.

Well, this was before I learned that I was bozo the clown. Did you have one of these punching bags growing up? You would punch him down, but he would just keep popping back up!

"The hope of the Christian faith is dependent on God's display of strength, not ours. God is in the business of destroying our idol of self-sufficiency in order to reveal Himself as our sole sufficiency. This is God's way – he kills in order to make alive; he strips us in order to give us new clothes. He lays us flat on our back so that we're forced to look up. God's office of grace is located at the end of our rope. The thing we least want to admit is the one thing that can set us free: the fact that we're weak. The message of the Gospel will only make sense to those who have run out of options and have come to the relieving realization that they're not strong. Counter-intuitively, our weakness is our greatest strength." ~ Unknown. (I lifted this quote from Ed's blog. He would say that "on his back" is where God has had him for the last year.)

We plan to remind ourselves again and again that God delights in our weaknesses, because that is where He demonstrates His strength and glory. There is so much evidence of this as we look at Ed. Ourselves. Those around us.

Sleeping through one of our sessions, he claimed to be "really tired, but just as dangerous." We believe it.



President Donald Guthrie leads in prayer and discussion.

Final Notes

I really like your shoes

The first year of *The Exact Place* being out there is done. There were a few fleeting moments when I thought this could turn into something big. I should probably thank my mother, my editor and the few I blackmailed for making it Kalos Press' best seller.

Last November I was the featured author at the Warroad Public Library Book Festival. Flying up to Warroad on the Marvin Windows and Doors' corporate jet was much more awesome when I didn't know they were obliged to fly me because they underwrite the library's budget.

After a short introduction and a reading, I gave time for questions and conversation. It was uncomfortably quiet as I waited for the small crowd to say something, hoping that, please God, I could deal with locals who knew some of the people and places I named. I was relieved when a teenage girl finally raised her hand. I smiled encouragingly.



Pink, mango and honey.

"I really like your shoes. Where did you get them?" I'm not lying; that was the first question. I gripped the podium to keep from laughing hysterically. If I had any grandiose feelings of literary accomplishment this is where they were cropped.

Later as I was signing books, a man came up and said, you don't recognize me do you? It was Hal Bitzer on whom I had a terrible crush in third grade and quoted, referring to the weekly Friday cafeteria menu of baked salmon cakes with gravy: "It looks like puke and tastes like dog poop." I hadn't seen him since 4th grade. It was fun to give him a huge hug and feel no crush at all!

This past weekend I did a reading in the home of Bekah and Keith Jones, friends from St. Paul. Among those attending were the Batemans, who had made it their Family Date Night. They had no idea if it would appeal to their two daughters ages 9-11, so had advised them that if the book seemed interesting, they should pull on an ear indicating a desire to buy a copy. While I read, Denis noticed the two girls yanking their ears and giving intense stares at their mother. He thought perhaps they were signaling: "Let's get outta here now." To have children get my book is a deep and rich blessing I didn't expect.

May you trust God for all your own stages and moves,



Warmly,

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.

Notes from Toad Hall 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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