

Notes from TOAD HALL

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Fall 2004



Out of Blind Spots

Quite a few years ago we owned a Volkswagen camper van which we, naturally, parked in our garage. No big deal, except that our garage was built in 1919, and was designed to house Model T Fords which were only slightly larger than dishwashers on wheels. Not too many years later auto designers began to make cars with front ends and tail fins three times as long and twice as wide as the Model T. Consequently, very few modern autos fit easily into our garage. In order to relieve some of this pressure, a previous owner bumped out the lower half of the front wall of our garage to make a sort of

receptacle for the noses of the newer models. With the boxy Volkswagen Westphalia, we didn't need nose room, but we sure could have used a little wider door. Denis helped me out by suspending a tennis ball from a string, and if I lined up the van and aimed the ball right for middle of the windshield, I pulled in quite handily. Backing out required more concentration. (I have a habit of doing too many things at once in order to save time, which is why—I am told—I can reach for rye crackers while looking at the next item on my grocery list, and accidentally come home with something else. It must be true, because if I really want a substitute for rye crackers, it wouldn't be coconut-covered pink Sno-balls which I seriously hate.) So one day, although I thought I was giving it my full attention,—I may have been buckling my seat belt, tuning the radio, and popping the clutch in reverse—I heard the rending of metal, and the slow crackle of glass being crushed. I came to a stop in the sunlight with the side view mirror neatly folded against the front fender like I'd just closed the pages of a book, and exactly even with my husband's face. He'd just "happened by" at that moment. Darn. Without a mirror to obstruct, we had a clear view of one another's face. His was registering shock and I suppose mine was defiance.

I had forgotten about those seven extra inches of space where the side view mirror exists, even though I was in the act of using it as I backed out. And I had forgotten about the doorframe which had disappeared into my blind spot right through the words "Objects are closer than they appear."

He's Nearer Than You Think
I have a friend who likes to remind me that God has a remarkable way

of sitting in our blind spot—close, but not visible. So close that most of the time I can't see him even when I look over my shoulder. I try to remember this between crashes and other odd indications of his presence.

The other night we were praying with friends and I wished God were more visible, more present. It was a

sad time as we reckoned God had closed yet another door on them. There've been many over the past ten



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years. Maybe like an angel standing in the way with a sword, our friend said. As we prayed, I pretended that in the periphery of my vision, I saw movement. There were angels nearby. One did have a sword that glistened now and then in the light of our lamp. God was out of sight, behind us, as usual.

But when I looked, it was just the oscillating fan standing in the doorway and the painting on the wall behind me of a father welcoming his prodigal son home as a flock of sheep dumbly watch. The father hugs the son so tight he lifts his feet off the cobblestone path.

Sometimes I hear stories of God moving out of our blind spot, and I want to save them and bring them out when I think I'm alone and God has disappeared. They can



remind me: "You see? He is close and active among us, even if today you're not the lucky winner." Sometimes these stories are enough. Enough to enable me to get to the repair shop. So, with their permission, and in their own words, I share two small evidences from friends. Well, you decide if they're small. (I thank them. One wishes to remain anonymous so I have changed the names.)

God is up to Something
Margie,

The new news is that I'm now driving, again. I'm like a teen with her first driver's license, giddy with the power and freedom. Last spring when I was not feeling well I implored a number of people to ask God to heal me. [Anita has suffered multiple surgeries for a heart condition which has

been difficult to control and has baffled the doctors.] One friend in particular really believed God had healed me. But, my small feeble faith could not lift that concept. The nature of this thing is that it comes whenever, and it would be tricky

to know if or when God actually worked His miracle.

One day I was sitting on my deck studying my lilac bush. I love lilacs and dug this one up at my childhood home in Minneapolis. My dream was to sit on my deck in the spring awash in the sight and smell of my favorite flower. In fifteen years that darn bush has never bloomed. Anyway, on that day last spring I pulled a Gideon and asked God to make my bush bloom as a sign that He had indeed healed me. The only one I told was my believing friend. Well, the bush never bloomed. And I just decided it was a stupid request to make. God has far more important things to

attend to than my obstinate lilac bush. Last week I was finally able to sit out on the deck without the danger of frostbite. I had just read some stuff out of Richard Foster's book, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*. His words shed some clarity on the spiritual funk I've been in the past five years. He said God is still at work even when we don't feel it. As I pondered this idea, I turned my head and stared at my lilac bush. Tucked in the mass of green leaves were three small tufts of lilac blossoms! I couldn't believe it. He heard me. All these months and years of feeling so disconnected and unmoved by His grace. He is still there. His ear is still bent down listening to the cry of my heart, even those things I whisper with little faith. "The bush is blooming" has become our chant, our reminder that He is up to something in our lives.

Painted Ladies

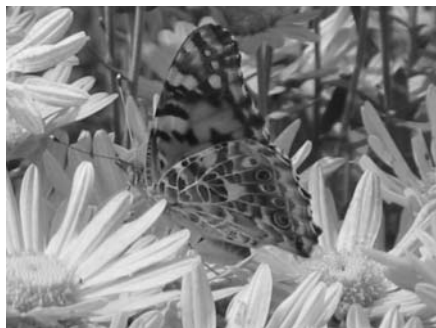
Margie,

How wonderful to hear from you on this rainy day. Of course we were in the garden even though it was pouring rain. Seth [4 yrs] and Callie [2 yrs] made mud and leaf soup for all their animal friends so they wouldn't feel cold today. I stuck a few more seeds in the ground with hopes they will grow. I hope you have sunshine where you are.

Ah... The full story [about the butterflies] is that our neighbor to the side of us installed a huge pool in her backyard at a level that made her yard two feet higher than ours, so we have had terrible drainage problems in our yard. We finally saved up enough to have a drain put in and have it re-graded. The guy who helped us with our drainage problem carved out a garden for me in the process. The only problem was that I had nothing to plant and no money to buy anything to plant because we spent our money trying to get rid of the three inches of standing water that was

our personal mosquito breeding ground. So of course I asked God if he could help me out with something to plant in my new patch of ground.

Meanwhile, my sister-in-law had just quit her job as a horticulturist for the University of Minnesota, and she had grown a ton of stuff in the green houses for her own butterfly garden. Being that she was pregnant with her



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second son by the time she quit in the spring, she found that she wasn't able to get everything in the ground. So she loaded up my car with more annuals than I could have ever imagined.

By the time I got it all home and started planting, it was late June... far too late to expect any butterflies to find my small backyard. As I was planting away day after day, my neighbor behind me would occasionally comment that butterfly gardens never work, that his brother-in-law had planted a bunch of stuff to attract butterflies and never had any, and that he hadn't seen a monarch in so long that he wasn't sure they existed any more. So I got a little discouraged and started to pray that maybe one... maybe just one butterfly could find a peaceful home in my garden.

And there he was one day in July... a monarch in my garden. Another followed and then another

until there were eight that seemed to live in the garden. A few Swallowtails would come and go, and the Cabbage Whites were hard to count, they zipped around so quickly. But by the end of August, it was really the Painted Ladies that amazed me. Seth had his most difficult hospital stay during the first week in August, and I spent the rest of the month trying to engage in life again after seeing him so ill. Day after day, it seemed there were more Painted Ladies in our garden until finally near end of the month, I went outside to a near swarm of them. I stopped counting at over one hundred... and the following day there were even more. And of course, I cried.

God finds ways even at my hardest points of life to remind me that I have been heard. And if he hears my prayers for flowers and butterflies, surely he hears my prayers for help in the middle of a lonely night in a hospital room when my beautiful little boy with leukemia is so very ill. When Seth is so sick, I can't hear God, I don't feel His presence in that little ten by ten hospital room, I don't even know what to pray most of the time... but none of that matters. A God who cares enough to give me butterflies is there in my darkest moments whether I see Him or not.

Just Show Yourself!

This summer a pair of chickadees raised a family in the wren house that hangs off our back porch. The male would sit on the clothesline with an insect in his beak and call his mate so sweetly. If she wasn't too busy warming eggs or doing other birdy things, she'd come out, and he would tenderly feed her. Lovely. He got pretty territorial, and daily on the street side of the house I saw him—a furious little bundle of feathers, attacking the side view mirrors of parked cars. Systematically he went from one car to the next, always finding that same pesky male chickadee, and

he'd fly at the mirror.

Sometimes don't you want to fly at the mirror and tell God to come out in the open and do your Godly business where we can see and appreciate you? But a question we all have to face at some time, is what will we do if the butterflies and flowers don't show up?

And they might not. Parts of the earth are polluted and barren. Children die. Hearts fail. People kill one another and themselves. We are filled with misery and doubt. And

although God is with us in more ways and dimensions than we know,

I hang much on the word "blessed." I'm His, he's keeping me forever, and some day, honestly, He will fix everything.

he has reasons for not revealing himself according to our demands. But I sure don't know many of them.

In the end, we must choose Christ for himself and not even for

these wonderful evidences. We must comfort ourselves with his words to Thomas: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." I hang much on the word "blessed." I'm His, he's keeping me forever, and some day, honestly, He will fix everything. I'm guessing I only have the faintest notion of what it means to be blessed by this God. And who's to say tomorrow, or even a little later today, he won't let me steal a kiss from my lover and drink an Americano with him? ~~no~~

Ransom Notes

Looking Back

July 5-7, Jonathan Edwards Institute Conference.

We met some good folk there, people striving to understand post modernity and to love the people of this generation. Had wonderful conversations with a some of the younger attendees. We met a young woman who is involved in "death metal" bands (a genre largely devoid of Christians), who shared her vision for using her classically trained voice and lyrics from the Psalms in this music. The foil of this subversive idea inspires and delights, as in, how like God to totally surprise us with grace where we'd least expect it!

Denis's lectures were designed to help us safely look at popular culture and see how the big questions of life are often found in the very midst of a movie or a song. We don't need to be subtle about bringing up the questions which lead to discussion of the deepest issues of life. One such movie is *Wit* (see www.ransomfellowship.org/M_Wit.html for a review and discussion guide). Denis played several scenes which depict a woman (played by Emma Thompson) grappling with the meaning of her life and work as she slowly dies from ovarian cancer. A few who attended found these clips so disturbing they thought it invited Satan into the conference, and they retired to their hotel room to pray. Their response was a helpful reminder that not everyone is willing to hear this message. It isn't our desire to offend people. Our ministry takes us outside the church and into the world of music, videos, movies, and literature because we have a passion for equipping the church to understand this generation so it can be reached with the gospel. It is simply not possible to do this without hearing their stories which are inseparable from popular culture.



August 20, Seven Rivers Pres. Church, Lecanto, FL.

On August 20 at 1:05 pm Denis was scheduled to arrive in Tampa Bay. That was five minutes after Hurricane Charley. The conference at Seven Rivers was cancelled, and he stayed home, no surprise. We continue to pray for the many people who suffered from this storm, especially the poor who sustain far greater losses with fewer options for recovery.

Christmas Cards from Bonnie Liefer.

Every year at this time I include a brochure from one of my favorite graphic artists. Bonnie has a unique touch and a passion for what is true about the incarnation. Sometimes she hits it in a way that expresses both suffering and joy. I like that. And in case you wondered, all the profits go to the Coalition's ministry to students.

New Assistant, Yea.

We have one! In just the few weeks since John Hake has been with us, he's made such a difference. We don't expect we can keep him forever since he is between jobs and needs a better position than Ransom can offer. In the meantime, he's been like having our own tech department. He's, um, I don't know what to call it, but he's reformed some of our felonious computer programs, making them do what they ought to be doing. He's spent some time teaching me things about my programs which would have taken me hours, perhaps years, to learn on my own. He works in other areas helping out with some of the mundane tasks that must be done. We're grateful and consider this God's timely provision for our work.

Finances

Income is lagging this year. Which is not unusual among non-profit ministries. As always, we are prepared to have God speak to us through good times and hard. During lean times we are more inclined to ask ourselves how far are we prepared to go in our trust for God's provision? Is he testing us? Is he indicating a change in direction? Because we've existed for more than twenty years doesn't necessarily mean we must go on existing. Humanly speaking, it's hard not to want guarantees, salaries, and stock options that promise a cozy retirement. No such thing for us. Or for anyone, really. We've all seen the financial collapse of people and institutions that shock us. It shouldn't really. (Here's a digression I can't resist—after earning somewhere between a whopping 450 to 740 million dollars, Mike Tyson, 37, has filed for bankruptcy.) What Denis and I can affirm is that God has always met our needs. And yet we want to acknowledge that even if (or a better word—when) God puts his children through hard times and suffering, it isn't evidence of unfaithfulness on His part. We mention these things so you might pray for us.

Coming Up

September 21, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Mpls, MN.

Margie will speak to a women's group: "Getting Past Mini-tops & Tattoos: How do we love this generation?"

September 21-23, Washington, D.C.

Denis will be with RF Board member, Steve Garber for thinking and praying as Steve's life takes a new direction.

October 1, Borders Bookstore, St. Louis, MO.

Marsena Konkle, Ransom's managing editor, will give a lecture: "Body Image and the Search for Identity." Covenant Seminary hosts these talks, calling them "Friday Nights at the Institute." Since she's our daughter...we may show up.

October 8-10, Trinity Presbyterian Church, Murfreesboro, TN.

Denis will return for a second year to speak at a weekend Word & World Conference on faithfully engaging our post-Christian world with the Gospel. For specific meeting times, directions, and more information call pastor Brian Howard at the church office (615.895.2018) or by email (bhtrinity@acelink.net).

October 19, Covenant Theological Seminary, St Louis, MO.

Denis will lead an evening session taking a look at music videos, their significance for a postmodern generation and how the church can respond with understanding and compassion.

October 21, Covenant Theological Seminary, St Louis, MO.

Denis will guest teach a seminary class, "Campus Ministry" on Christian discernment in a pluralistic culture and engaging the postmodern generation creatively with the gospel.

October 22-23, Francis Schaeffer Lectures.

This year's theme: "And the Beat Goes On: How to Listen to Music." Denis will lecture on popular music and its enormous significance as a window into the hearts of the postmodern generation. Other speakers include Luke Bobo, Jeffrey Heyl, and Mark Dalbey of Covenant Seminary, and John Hodges of Crichton College. For lecture schedule or information, contact Covenant Seminary by phone (800.903.4044) or online (www.covenantseminary.edu).

October 29-31, 2004 Angelfire, NM.

Denis will lead this small group in a weekend of Bible study and cultural discernment.

November 10-20, 2004 British L'Abri.

Denis and Margie will both lecture and lead a weekend film festival, with movies followed by discussion. For more information contact L'Abri Worker, Dawn Dahl, at The Manor House, Greatham, Liss, Hants GU33 6HF, United Kingdom), or via email (dawnhdahl@yahoo.co.uk).

F Family Notes

“How we labor to believe that for a moment...things can and do exist outside the embattled realm of the utilitarian and the manipulated. How we treasure and cherish the peaceful occasions, too few in number, when we gaze upon something without evaluating its cost or its usefulness: without evaluating it at all, only gaze upon it.”

~Rick Bass, “June, The Green Hours” from *A Year in Place*.

A Few of Those Moments:



1. Anson & Micah. At 7 months, he's such a golden child. Gorgeous, patty-caking, laughing.

2. Can you see it? Jeff Konkle & The Smallest Sunfish Ever Hooked by Worm.



3. Denis on a moored pontoon boat. As exciting as life gets at our age.

4. Jerem & Jeff at a game of horseshoes: Looking cool, but scoring low.



5. Vespers at the fireplace. Marsena, Margie, & Micah kneel for roasted marshmallows.





5. I've been stealing flowers from the butterflies all summer. Did you know nasturtiums are edible? Pale butter, tomato red, and sunset orange—their petals are delicate, peppery. I'm sorry you can't see them in color.



6. "Wouldja give me a hand with the driving?" Kaiden.

7. Female giraffe pregnant with triplets. Manessah, 6.

8. Manessah tenderly holds Mason. Brothers don't stay tiny and helpless for very long.

9. Mason La Rose born July 7. Black-haired, silken-head, perfectly fits the palm of my hand. He's no trouble. Eats, sleeps, and cries (hardly at all) which is perfectly good. The rest of family doing well in new home—Tennessee.

10. Paddington. Ten years ago, I bought him, trained him, and flew him to Mass. to live with Denis' Aunt Ruth. She loved him from day one. He died last month leaving her bereft. We wish she were closer so we could comfort her every day.



Final Notes

Katherine Lanpher used to be the mid-morning talk show host for Minnesota Public Radio. I have always made fun of her, because I can't stand her voice. It's funny when Ellen DeGeneres speaks "whale" in the movie *Finding Nemo*, but when you do it every day on MPR, it gets so annoying you want to drive up to St. Paul and strangle her. I could only bear to listen to her once in awhile when she had a great guest, like Leif Enger, author of *Peace Like A River*. Thankfully, she's left for NYC where she's co-hosting a talk show with Al Franken. So someone must like her.

Like a lot of the shameful cynicism I project on others, this came back to get me. I logged onto Covenant Seminary's website and "accidentally" found an audio tape of a Border's lecture I did earlier this year on tattooing. I was stunned to hear myself. Why has no one ever TOLD me that giving a lecture to adults is NOT the same as reading *Amos and Boris* to a five year old. I am so sorry. I don't think I'll ever, ever lecture again. It was so bad I wanted to kill myself. And why did I pick on poor, innocent Katherine Lanpher who I've never met and who's just trying to do a job?

But you know, I probably won't be able to stop with the lecturing just yet, which is pretty humiliating. We must all do what God calls us to do in the midst of peculiar weaknesses, whale voices, and strange personal hygiene. I sort of get it—the up side is that when good things are accomplished, God gets the glory, not us. But I hope some day before I die I'll learn to not mock what God has made and what others can't help.

That's it from Toad Hall,
Chagrined and heading for confession.

Warmly,

Marge



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

Marsena Konkle
Managing Editor

Receive *Notes from Toad Hall* (quarterly) and *Critique* (a newsletter written nine times per year by my husband, Denis) by requesting to be added to Ransom's mailing list. Donors to Ransom Fellowship, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-deductible ministry, are added to the mailing list automatically.

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