

Notes from Toad Hall

Issue #3 - 2010
Summer Into Fall



The Work of Art

For two years in the late '80s I delivered several hundred weekly newspapers to our neighborhood. The pay was pennies. Anyone seeing me might have thought I was...who knows? Subbing for my kid? On welfare? Homeless? Unless you knew me, you wouldn't have guessed I was working to pay off a bronze sculpture from an artist whose work we loved and wanted to support. It was the only way to afford it at the time.

The Dancers reflect the influence of Japanese art and Samurai wrestlers, and in this piece the artist combines weighty lines that anchor muscle and flesh to earth with the paradox of graceful movement that sets them free. *The Dancers* stand side by side, male and female, lifting their legs in fluid unison appearing ready to fly away despite gravity. I still look at them

almost every day and think, “Thank you, Bo Bush, for your wondrous work and for letting us make payments so we could own this beautiful piece of art.” The sadness of life is that for various reasons, some due to great battles he’s fought, he hasn’t been able to continue his work.

“Be compassionate for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.”
—Philo of Alexandria.

I like this quote or, of course, I wouldn’t have kept it at the bottom of my emails for months. It reminds me not to assume what’s behind public faces of friends and strangers. Like why the tips of your slippers are bit off. Denis?

(Answer: Anita’s angora rabbit nibbles on them as he sits on the porch. You may not have noticed, since I try to keep him from wearing them out in public.) Or why you have a tattoo on your wrist? Or drive a Mercedes and wear Jimmy Choo shoes? Or are skinny, or fat... or...anything at all?

But more often, lately, I have been thinking of the quote in regard to the difficulties we face in earning a living, of how to keep going in our vocations. In countless conversations the surprise would be that our working life falls out according to schedule, resulting in meaningful relationships, well-earned rewards and lots of options. Rather, what’s revealed are setbacks, injustices, injuries and exhaustion. (I’m not saying there aren’t moments or even stages of life when the opposite is true.) But the notion of being compassionate causes me to ask how we help keep heart, particularly when work seems insignificant and without apparent reward or appeal.



Working into Silence

I’ve been reading about a man who worked as a minister in poor parishes in Liverpool and Glasgow, and though he loved God wholly and desired to serve the church, he was not effective as a pastor nor was he a good preacher, and he knew it. Trained in the clas-

sics at Oxford, he moved on from being a curate to teaching at university. As a lecturer his students considered him dull and irrelevant, and he had difficulty keeping order in his classrooms. He began numerous scholarly papers but rarely finished them. He composed a little music and did a little sketching, but it was never

considered worthy. He struggled with depression and sometimes the darkness was so great he was tempted by suicide as a way out of the fierce personal battles he fought in his heart. He was celibate all his life, yet he knew the love of Christ, who bends to enter our

lives and suffering. He was forty-four when he died of typhoid fever in 1889. Posthumously, Gerard Manley Hopkins became famous as a poet. He had no idea that his most familiar work, *The Grandeur of God*, would be perfectly relevant to our own times:

THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared
with toil;
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell:
the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent:
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah!
bright wings.

Working Anyway

Yesterday I called Junk-It and talked to a young twenty-something guy, Brady, about hauling away branches and yard debris left by a huge storm that blew down trees. Thirty minutes later Brady stopped by to give an estimate. I was happy to pay his reasonable offer so I could get on with my very important day. But he wanted to talk, after all I engaged a person, not a telemarketer. Or is it my white hair? We stood in the driveway sweating in the hot sun, and for who knows why, he told me all about his current life and trying to make it with Junk-It. He was unfairly fired from a position because of an argument with his employer about taking a day off, he says. He told me he’d be back in a couple hours after he changed a tire on his truck, because “even though I just bought new tires that cost a thousand bucks, someone was illegally dumping wooden pallets at the brush drop-off, and I musta run over a spike. What’s a guy gonna do?” Now what he used to do for extra income during his off-hours has become his livelihood and he’s trying hard to make it work. He came back just like he promised. I’ll definitely call him again when we need a hauler.

Hannah, a friend of ours, raises flowers and sells gorgeous fresh bouquets at out-door markets near here. Her flowers represent hours of weeding, pruning, months of waiting for them to re-grow after winter’s dormancy. More hours cutting and arranging.

On one of her opening days she had many bouquets ready but only sold three at seven dollars each. Not like you can save them for next week. We applaud her business and hope her determination



Hannah preps for market.

and love of gardening will help sustain her. In times of drought, both personal and real, knowing her, I’m quite certain she will find even deeper reasons to continue.

Darcy, our favorite Caribou Coffee shop manager, who is now a member of our small group, got arm-chair shifted to another site by corporate last week even though her store was tops in every area. Five days notice. No choice. Not good. They claimed to have reasons, but it looks like revenge from a district manager who seems uncomfortable with women in power. Most discouraging to her is missing the team she built, which became like family, and the fact that a shopping mall just isn’t a neighborhood.

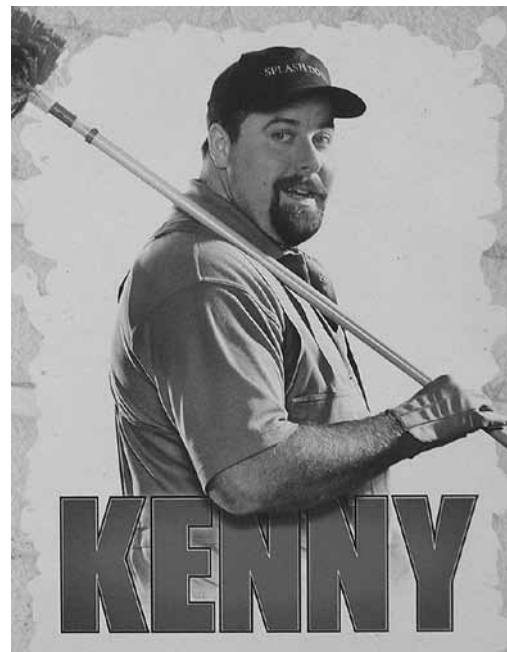
When things are difficult we may not understand (it’s rare and hard won if I get it) that God may be forming something altogether different and more integral to our growth than what we’ve had in mind and tried so hard to achieve.

In a recent article “Crossing the Sahara” by Jedd Medefind that appeared in *Comment*, an on-line magazine, he reflects on what it takes to keep going in his own work—that of stirring Christians to the plight of orphans. It’s easy to be capsized by need or motivated by all the wrong impulses. He suggests that to go the distance we need to draw from a deeper well.

I identify with this as oftentimes Denis and I work into silence, not really knowing whether the fruit we hope for is happening anywhere. Medefind is right when he suggests that God’s deep abiding love for us is the only source capable of nourishing us across the desert. To “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” needs to become our wellspring. “Learning to be truly nourished by God’s stance toward us is the journey of a lifetime. It is a long obedience, one that weaves together both our faithfulness and our failures, times of engagement and times alone, unshakable confidence and icy doubt...all undergirded by the God who is carrying to completion the good work He began in us.”

Worthy of Praise

On the 4th of July we were on our way home from Nashville when we stopped in Iowa City about 7 pm to get a room at a sort of cheapie hotel—Holiday Inn Express. When Denis walked in there was a young woman working the front desk who came from somewhere in the back. She was taking a phone call as she approached and Denis could see her face change to fear. She was shaking-scared and apologetically asked if he would accompany her to the laundry room, which was around the corner and down a hall so she could close and lock the door which was accessible to the public. The caller was male and sinister, as if he could see her, saying things like: “How does it feel to be watched?” “Does it feel like you’re in a movie?”



There were video cameras set up so when an employee wasn’t at the desk they could see a customer walk in. According to her, in order to save money the corporation that owns Holiday Inn has let the laundry people go and made it mandatory for the front desk clerks to do laundry, as well as check in guests. Between times they run back to rotate loads and fold hot linens while keeping an eye on the monitors. Denis said he’d be glad to go with her, and as they rounded several corners, hurrying past darkened rooms with equipment whirling, they turned on lights and locked doors, then made their way back to the front desk. It was an opening scene you could imagine on *Law & Order*.

So while we pay for a bath and bed that we hope doesn’t harbor bedbugs or pandemic flu, there are those who work for a pittance to make our stay possible. They work in situations that can even be risky and we thank them in person when we can. Not that that necessarily makes it more tolerable, but it acknowledges: You are a human being and without your being here I wouldn’t be getting into this bed or taking this shower.

The next morning as we left, as is now finally our habit (sadly it’s taken years to establish), we left a tip on the bed with a brief “thanks” to housekeeping, usually an immigrant woman with children, working her way down the hall, room to room, bending to sweep up hair, gathering dirty towels, making ready for the next batch.

Lately I’ve been talking up *Kenny*, an Australian film about a man who owns a porta-loo business that has made me appreciate a convenience I take for granted. How often have I used one of those units at a festival or sports event? Plenty of times: holding my nose, creeped out by the drips on the floor and the steaming opaque light seeping through

plastic walls. In this very funny mocumentary Kenny and his faithful “Splashdown Crew” deliver porta-potties and deal with the waste revelers leave behind. And yet there is a serious side to *Kenny*, whether the filmmakers intended it or not, that affirms the very Christian notion of knowing the worth of our work and doing it well, however humble or however despicable some may find it.

Ultimately it is God who gives meaning to our labor and is present with us through the hours of our days. The Apostle Paul insists that whatever our work—we ought to “serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does.” (Eph. 6:7)

God rewards without kickbacks or favoritism and regardless of whether you are a Daughter of the American Revolution or a descendant of slaves. God banishes all sniffing and classism which causes me to love Him the more. Partly cause it means: I’m in!

Give us Orchids

Steven Garber, whose work is with the Washington Institute for Faith, asks, “Why is it that when we pray together as the people of God gathered for worship on Sunday, we regularly pray for our missionaries in Kenya and Kazakhstan, but not for our attorneys on K Street? (area near nation’s capital where many attorneys work) It seemed to us that the butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers of the kingdom needed to understand their work as blessed by God and prayed for by God’s people, just as much as those whose callings take them to the far places of the

earth as Bible translators, church planters, evangelists, and pastors. So, while we said a loud ‘Yes!’ to the importance of praying for Kenya and Kazakhstan, we pleaded for K Street too.

Now written into our weekly liturgy is a time of simple, heart-felt prayer for a handful of people, by name and by vocation... It is good that we do this because it reminds us that we are in this together, a congregation taking up the ministry of truth and grace in our terribly fallen world...”

So it is with compassion, if this doesn’t sound too cheesy, that we bless, affirm and pray for all the Hannahs, the Darcys, and the Bradys whose work touches our life and whose callings honor God. And one day—when all things are made whole and right by Christ, perhaps for some it will be in this life, for others of us it may not be until the next—our work will be like my orchid that sits dormant for months, it’s large awkward ears of green flopping over the edge of the pot. And then, suddenly it sends out an altogether ugly pointless looking shoot that

I almost cut off, but then am very glad I didn’t because it starts to bloom with flowers so exquisite I’m astounded and chagrined that I didn’t know they were coming.



Ransom Notes

Reminder: We often work not knowing whether we touch hearts in right places. We want to remain faithful in work regardless of measurable results. Then just when needed: a conversation or note reminds that what we do isn't directed into emptiness, but into Christ and his Kingdom.

Recent example: "I am constantly being reminded of a conversation I once had with you about beauty...Somewhere the knowledge of Restoration is lodged in my brain, but a printed reminder* is always helpful. ...I can't wait for the world to be restored and I long to no longer feel like a sojourner, but to be at home." (*Notes Issue #2, 2010. pdf www.ransomfellowship.org.)

Confession: I contribute to the problem of "working into silence" by taking months to answer the wonderful personal letters I receive. I often begin with an apology: "...am only now answering your dear note of a hundred years ago, and by now you're either dead or think me a wretched ungrateful slob..."

Review: Sometimes for those new to Ransom, I review how we keep our ministry going and us sheltered in a house with the green chili and pinto beans we seem to think we need. Oh, and to re-stock the library now and then with books and films that keep us somewhere near the edge of postmodern culture.

We are sustained by tax-deductible donations sent by mail or on-line through our website. We don't do fund-raising, partly because it doesn't fit us and because we've been influenced by the examples of George Mueller, who founded orphanages for thousands of homeless children in England, by Hudson Taylor, who began a movement that brought hundreds of missionaries to China, and by Francis and Edith Schaeffer of L'Abri. Each of them prayed year after year for the funds that allowed them to continue their work. That's the direction we aim – praying, often stumbling in our trust and yet desiring to believe God will provide for as long he wants us here. And if not, then he has other plans.

Our Board of Directors sets our budget each year. Out of the general fund they determine categories and amounts for Ransom's expenses—like printing, postage, our salary. Careful records are kept and an internal audit is done every other year. Denis and I make recommendations, but they determine actual amounts. This accountability frees, blesses and protects us.

Through the years we've been equally touched by the poor college student who makes a small contribution, the steady monthly donations of long-time supporters and the occasional larger gift that helps through a lean time. We pray that God will, in turn bless those who have loved us.

Family Notes

Visiting the La Roses in late June was sweet. Remarkable that our grandchildren survive my urges to squeeze them to death. Chattanooga just seems far. In August, Jerem & family will join us for a few days in Northern Wisconsin. We cherish these times and the fact that the kids think it's Grandpa's cabin. We wish!



Key left to right:

1. All Mason wanted for his birthday: "A big, soft shark I can sleep with."
2. Sisters. Manessah & Isobel.
3. Kaiden & Elisha. Why glasses for one identical twin?
4. Margie, Marsena, Denis at Chicago Botanical Gardens.



Marsena has okayed sharing what's happening with her: She and Jeff are divorcing. This has compelled her to begin a whole new life after years of marriage. So stark, so hard to write the words. We've all grieved and groaned, none more than Marsena. As the worst unfolded over the past nine months we've been comforted by the support and direction she's received from her pastor and elders and the way friends have cared for her. To us, she's become more beautiful as she's turned her face toward God for guidance through this wilderness. She's thankful to have found employment. Seems miraculous in the current environment. Still.

Coming Up

JULY

July 2-3: Recording of readings from Margie's memoir went well. They'll be posted to the web once production is complete.

July 30: Denis' Master's Capstone project due.

AUGUST

August 30: St. Louis, Covenant Seminary. Denis presents his Capstone.

August 15-22: Family vacation.

July/August/September: Margie writes and works on details for self-publishing.

July/August/September: Denis completes 2 issues of Critique and continues other writing projects.

Hours between: Lots of office & administrative work. Hosting. Home-keeping. Leading and being part of church's local small group.

OCTOBER

October 22-24: Zion PCA, Lincoln, NB. Denis & Margie speak at a retreat.

Final Notes

White Trash Salad

Usually my work at the end of the day is to see to dinner. On a hot summer day when I'm not in the mood to cook for anyone, this humble dish dating back to childhood makes me happy. You won't find it in any of the snooty cookbooks I own, but throwing this together pleases most other snobs, too, especially if you use fresh garden peas and more especially if you serve it along side fresh fruit and a nice French bread. Warning: Do not compare this to the sugary, wet slop from the local salad bar buffet. No comparison. The simpler the version the more likely children will like it. All amounts are flexible and most are optional.

Pasta Tuna Salad

2 cups rotini pasta (shells, ziti, elbow macaroni work, too)
1 10 oz package albacore tuna
1 cup celery, diced
¼ cup red onion, finely chopped
3 T chopped chives
1 cup mild cheddar cheese, cubed
2 cups fresh peas, blanched in boiling water for 2 minutes, drained and chilled in ice water. Or use frozen peas and thaw slightly under warm water. Drain.
½ - ¾ cup mayonnaise
½ tsp garlic salt
salt & pepper to taste
Optional: chopped pickles, cucumber, tomato, pepper.
Cook pasta al dente. Drain. Cool.
Mix all ingredients in large-ish bowl.
An hour in the refrigerator melds flavors if you can wait.
Serves four.

Hoping you've rerouted and arranged summer so you can offer attention to the gracious presence and activity of God. It requires slowing down.



That's it from Toad Hall,
Warmly,

Margie Haack

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 mid-western Gothic four-square looked amazingly like a mansion. Possibly even as great a house as Toad Hall.

Managing Editor - Matthew Hundley

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 to the mailing list 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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