

Letters from The House Between

Formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*

Issue 1 Still Winter 2019



Sudden Death

Looking back to November of last year with all the cantankerousness and incivility of mid-term elections, on the day we voted we decided to reward ourselves for practicing our civic duties. First, we planned to visit a favorite book store. It is small and warm and friendly with comfy chairs and no one minds you sitting and reading the whole day. Next door is The Breadsmith, a great little bakery and coffee shop. In addition we were going to swing by Anita's to pick up our laundry. The day before our dryer had made ear-splitting screeches and bangs as it walked across the floor. The dryer died while I survived. Anita

had kindly taken the wet laundry home to dry at her house and it was ready to pick up. All of this was a great excuse to get out of our offices and into the real world where ordinary people curse traffic and fight congestion every day.

As we turned the corner heading into the city, Denis received a phone call from his mother's care center. She had fallen. Her glasses were broken and she had cut her forehead. We were headed in that direction anyway because her lift chair had arrived – she can no longer rise from a sitting position – and we needed to unpack and set it up, hoping it would never malfunction catapulting her into the opposite wall. His mother is not a complainer, but she was obviously shaken by her fall. A trip to the ER would have made it worse for her so we were relieved when the nurse at the center managed to staunch the bleeding and tape the edges of the gash together. We comforted and calmed her as best we could. That isn't always possible because every stressful moment turns her mind to the question – *Why hasn't Milton visited me? I know he's in the area but he never comes to see me.* This thought brings fountains of tears. At this point, we don't think she'll ever be able to remember he has died. Not long ago when

we reminded her, she was able to remember this fact for several minutes: *He died a year and a half ago and that's why he can't visit you.* Nowadays she remembers for about 60 seconds and then asks again.

On that day in an effort to help her think of other things I mentioned how she used to make the BEST popovers ever – golden and crisp on the outside, warm, soft and hollow on the inside. Her



Denis & Margie voted. Yes.

response was generous and sweet; she immediately promised to make them for me the next time I came to visit.

Her glasses had been purchased at Costco years ago, so we did a quick run to the store to see if anything could be replaced and whether the old lenses could fit into new frames. The employee helping us was a gift of kindness because the frames were long gone and the lenses weren't shaped to fit any new ones, but she took time

to think outside the box and for \$40.00 she dug out frames close enough in shape so they could be molded to the old lenses. She did it right there, without hesitation while we explained that Denis' mother who is 95 had fallen. That prompted her to tell us about the sudden death of her two grandmothers.

One day one of them severely burned her finger as she was cooking and had to be taken to the ER to have it treated. She feared and hated hospitals so intensely that while there she had a heart attack and died. "So", as the clerk said, "we like to say that cooking killed our grandmother! Women beware!" Her other grandmother lived on a city street with neighbors on either side and across the street from her. Some of them she disliked very much. To be

honest she hated them. The hated neighbors lived in the two houses on one side and the third one lived kitty-corner across the street. She loved her other neighbors just fine and considered them friends. One lived directly across from her and the other was on the side of her house opposite to the ones she hated. One unfortunate day a gas leak spread into her basement and blew her and her house to smithereens. The blast destroyed all three houses of the neighbors

she hated. The homes of the ones she liked were completely spared. Our Costco helper concluded, “Our family likes to say ‘Way to go, Grandma! You took them hateful neighbors with you and spared the ones you liked!’ ” As you might imagine, she redeemed our day to us! I mean in a way, you understand?

The new frames looked rather fashionable with a bit of red over the bridge and on the sides – a nice complement to her white hair and ivory complexion. The next time we were with her we asked how she liked her new glasses, expecting some positive pleasure for giving her more of a modern look. “I hate them,” she insisted, “they are so ugly!” Denis and I grinned at each other. When I’m old (older) and infirm I hope there are people around who will ignore my crabby pants and still love me. We find it easy to love this woman, Denis’ mother, given the story of her life and the difficult circumstances she endured.

Little by little we learn that what *we* consider an improvement, even a necessity to life and well-being is, to *her*, not welcome at all, and considering her state of mind and memory loss, we don’t contradict her, we let it go. As we should.

By the time we got his mother, the new chair and the glasses

squared away, it was too late to go to the bookstore. No matter, we’ll go another time. Her life and its decline continues to teach us about what does matter.

Bernard Palmer, author of *On the Brink of Everything* asks “who will I be when I can no longer do the



work that has been a primary source of identity for me ... I no longer ask, ‘What

do I want to let go of, and what do I want to *hang on to*? Instead I ask ‘What do I want to *give myself to*?’ The desire to ‘*hang on*’ comes from a sense of scarcity and fear. The desire to ‘*give myself*’ comes from a sense of abundance and generosity.”

I try to face such questions myself. They call me to not give up too easily, but to reconsider and be patient at whatever stage of life I’m in and see it as a chance to reevaluate, see it as the challenge to give myself to new things in new ways as I continue following Jesus into whatever is next.

In case you think it is only the ancient who must consider these things, I say no. Not at all. God loves you and he will inevitably give you painful little lessons that force you to face the fallacies you have so fondly nurtured whatever your age. About 16 years ago I

grappled with a new and unwelcome physical health problem. It left me unable to do things so ordinary and routine to life that I never paused to think about not doing them. Suddenly I was in so much pain I couldn’t hold up a book while lying down. And how I cried, for such a condition kept me from doing the very things I loved and thought justified my existence. I wondered, who is going to love me when I can’t do all these things? In addition, I was unhappy to learn that there I was, someone who should know better, someone who preached the opposite, clear as a mountain stream, measuring my worth not in who I was, but by what I could do.

So as it comes to my current time in life, I consider the question Palmer asks: *What do I want to give myself to?* I am finding answers. I am encouraged. Some of it will be what I’ve always done only amped down – lower and slower. And as I let go of some things – others flow in to fill in the spaces. It is sweet to continue writing with renewed confidence. Not so much in writing super-stunning sentences, but in simple belief that God calls me to keep on doing the basics. And so, setting aside the crippling envy that I will never be as good as Cormac McCarthy or JK Rowling, I will be giving myself to exactly what I should be doing.

Family Notes

I have always wished I had known my father. Hardly a week goes by when I don't think about him and wonder what he was like. He was killed in a plane crash a few months after he and my mother were married. He must have loved her deeply. There are at least two reasons why I think this.

One. He insisted if I was a girl I be named after her. Interesting, isn't it? Boys are frequently named after the father and are known as Junior the rest of their lives. But for a girl to be named after her mother? Rarely. And what is that girl called? not "Junior" for sure. But there I was a newborn, named Margie Lou Sorenson according to my father's wish. The only difference being her name is spelled with a "J" and mine with a "G" – an attempt to reduce legal confusion.

Two. On the day he died a friend – a student pilot – landed a small plane in a field by their house. He was a man he had known since the end of WWII. He knew of the harrowing flights my father took over Japan and that he never wanted to fly again. Instead, he offered to take my mother for – what do you call a short plane ride? A spin? I don't think so. My father was alarmed. It was illegal to fly *any* passengers when you didn't have a license. His response: "No! Not until I check you out first." They never came back.

I would love to know he is safely in the arms of Jesus. Perhaps he is. The only thing he ever said to my mother about God is the often repeated phrase of men who survive combat: "There are no atheists in the fox hole."

Last summer I received a package in the mail. When I opened it there were two brass candle sticks with the inscription: *In Loving Memory of Keith Sorenson*. I didn't know that since the year he died they sat on the altar of his parents' local Congregational Church. This past year the tiny church closed its doors and my aunt and uncle sent them to me. Now they sit on either side of our fireplace reminding me of a man I hope is in heaven. Which makes me wistful how much of life requires us to live with the unknown, the mysterious, with things forgotten or lost, with the unresolved. What makes a difference for me is the comfort of this – that however long or short our days, for those of us who believe ... *from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children – with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts. (Psalm 103:17.)*



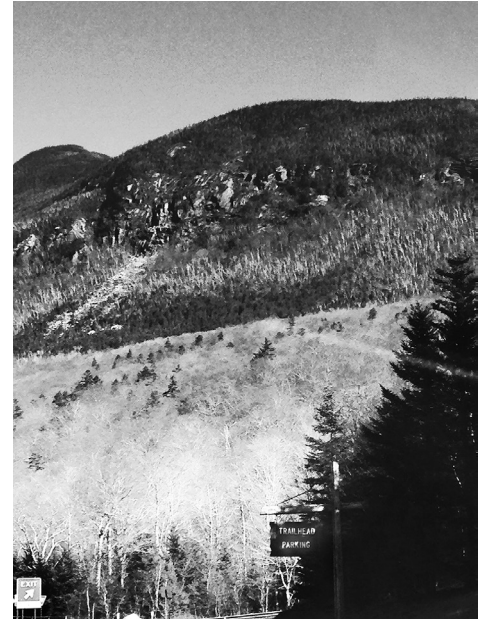
In loving memory of Keith Sorenson

Ransom *Notes*

COMING UP

Hopkins, MN, Church of the Cross, February 1-3

Denis will speak at the annual Men's Retreat. He will be using an old-ever-new series about "Seeing with the Eyes of Elisha." I have always loved where this story takes us. An Israeli village was stealthily surrounded during the night by an enemy army. When Elisha's servant got up in the morning and went to the rooftop (I think of him stretching and watching the sun rise) he saw a menacing, great army surrounding them. In fear he told Elisha whose response was to assure him he was not seeing correctly. When Elisha prayed for God to open his eyes he saw a stunning scene – the sky and the hills above bristling with angels and chariots of fire. We learn much about ourselves from this, about God and how we see only what is obvious to the physical eye. When we look on a dangerous world with fear and dismay we must remember we are not seeing as God sees. I never tire of this story and need to be reminded of it about every six seconds.



There may be angels on those hills

Rochester, MN, L'Abri Conference, February 8-9

The theme is "Living Life Vocationally." Denis will give a plenary and a workshop – *Visions of Work and Toil* with an emphasis of how it is depicted at the cinema.

Savage, MN, Ransom's Board of Directors Annual Meeting, January 18-20

(This will be over by the time it reaches your mailbox.) We always look forward to this time as we meet to review the past year and establish budget and priorities for the coming year. Each year brings us closer to retirement and as Denis and I discussed recently, we feel not quite ready to shut RF's doors yet. It seems there is still work to be done. We feel confident in the hands of these people who have borne with us for so long. They are good people who have our backs.

FOR PRAYER

As the year ends, at the time of this writing we haven't quite closed the books, but so far it looks like we will be able to plan financially for most of the upcoming year. We are always grateful and humbled by those of you who pray and give. Living this way, being uncertain of future provision and how God will lead, causes us to listen hard and tread lightly with plans. We maintain God is *always* good whether we see feast or famine. Please pray and feel free to check back on my attitude.

Pray I will continue to press into the manuscript I'm working on. I'm at the point where self-doubt and criticism insists I am no good. But I refuse to give up. Pushing ahead, hoping this will be finished before the end of the year. Working title: *No Place*.

And Finally...

From around the country friends are reporting unrelenting rainy gray days. They are causing mold to grow on windows, gloomy spirits, crabby pants, and Zillow searches for properties on sunny Mediterranean Islands in warm blue seas.

I don't have a great cure, but what about a newly released book by Louise Penny? *The Kingdom of the Blind* is her latest in the series of mystery novels featuring Armand Gamache, Chief Inspector of Suretedu* Quebec. He has been suspended from his position for his conduct in a recent take down of a drug cartel that led to his needing to make a horrendous decision on whether to apprehend the criminals that would risk the lives of his agents or let the largest amount ever known of a deadly street drug slip through their hands. That's a simplified summary. What makes this character so outstanding and thrills me is that there are writers like Penny who value morality. Gamache has lived by a code of conduct and insists his agents live by it also even though the cost of living according to this code can bring sorrow and pain in real life and to the ego. Gamache claims it leads to wisdom:

*I don't know.
I need help.
I was wrong.
I'm sorry.*

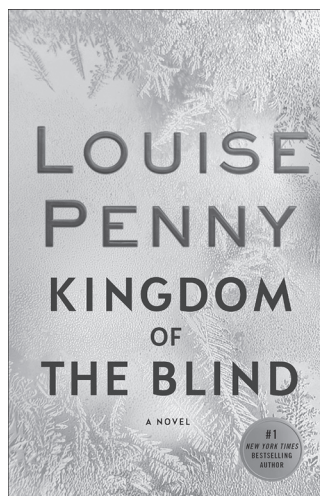
This is so antithetical to, not just many of us, but think of it as applied to the leaders of our country. Or Fortune 500 companies or any company. The code strikes a chord deep in me. I want more of this scary stuff in myself. In any of us. Our church leaders. Between husbands and wives. Our families and friends. It is the aroma of humility and honesty, pleasing like the scent of lavender and rosemary.

Anyway. I respect Penny. When she developed a character that is human, flawed, but has honesty and goodness and even love at the center of his soul it was a commercial risk, and yet, and yet, in this age that loves power and wealth and the bottom line more than almost anything, her series have become best sellers everywhere. I bless her.



Warmly,

Margie Haack



About Letters From the House Between

If you drive through western Kentucky where two great southern rivers – the Cumberland and the Tennessee – come together, you pass over the dams that bind them and a land emerges bordered on all sides by water, simply called The Land Between the Lakes. As we drove, we thought about the changes coming as we aged and needed to move from Toad Hall, our home of thirty-three years. We needed a place where certain features were on the main floor so as body parts fail one doesn't need to climb stairs to reach them. We thought of that place as "The House Between," a place bound on one side by years past where we raised children, continued our ministry and grew older, and on the other side, a place in heaven where God holds a perfect place of restoration yet to come. Our new home is a reminder that this is only a "place between" what is now and what will one day be true Home forever. Thus: The House Between.

Letters from the House Between 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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* French for Department of Criminal Investigation