

Letters from The House Between

Formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*

Issue 1 Still Winter 2020



Ahhh, there I am!

1921. Two little girls, sisters, warmly dressed, pose in a yard in New Bedford, Massachusetts. On the left is Ruth Simpson Ashworth bundled into a pram. Standing beside her is Barbara Simpson West.

Eighty-two years later this photo was given to me by the little girl on the right, Denis' Aunt B. At the time she was in her late 80s. When Aunt B gave it to me she commented; "Look at me! Even then I was good-natured and smiling and Ruth was always complaining and crabby from the beginning. She hasn't changed at all!" When I showed it to Aunt Ruth, she said; "Ahhh, there I am! Such a happy baby—my father said I was always smiling, round-faced and happy!"

I held my laughter in until later when I showed it to Denis. We knew them well and loved them both for their unique personalities and gifts. Aunt B was always a prim and proper New Englander—a careful keeper of papers and figures, but she was also generous and kind. Aunt Ruth loved Denis and I unreservedly and we loved her back. We found her hilarious, stubborn, a bit unconventional, but she could be a stinker.

It was these opposing comments that caused me to ask myself some questions. How do I see and interpret reality—how do I view my own life and relationships?

Perspective springs from our personal interpretation of life as seen from our own world view—through our own eyes. How are thoughts and opinions formed, influenced by what we see, by what we imagine? What can change, revise, or modify them? How can we wrestle with our perceptions and get down to the really real—to what truly is? Our conclusions are not always shaped by reality but by how we would like things to be. What power are we given to see life as God sees? In the case of the two aunts, who was right?

Most of the time we need the observations, the insights of someone else to help us see ourselves as we really are. When it comes to help, I've not always been the open gracious receiver of someone else's insights.



The two aunts.

There I was

Years ago when Denis majored in psychology for his undergraduate degree, one of the things he needed to do for a class was administer personality tests to family or friends. I love that sort of thing. Tell me who I am so I can feel good about myself. Tell me who I am so I can seem more gifted than average. I loved tests that ranked me as exceptionally intelligent.

One of the tests he gave me was the Taylor Johnson Temperament Analysis. It was designed to measure nine common personality traits. One of them measured tolerance versus hostility. The well-integrated personality fell somewhere in the middle of the graph and was considered healthy. My score on hostility was off the chart. Literally. It was so high there was a little warning to the administrator that if any of the scores were in the red zone that person should consider professional therapy. When Denis

showed me the results I was shocked and angry. I insisted he had not scored it correctly and I should take it again. I did, but somehow I couldn't even pad the answers to get a better score. I was still off the chart. I didn't believe it, but Denis was nodding calmly yes, you are a hostile person.

In the manuscript I'm working on right now I've written about this problem. So the questions I mentioned above concern me as I continue to write my next memoir which covers the years from when I left home in 1965 to our journey back to Minnesota from New Mexico in 1981. Sometimes I feel anxious and paralyzed knowing I write from a flawed and finite heart. I wonder, how can I do this well and at the same time give my readers The Truth?

How, in my quest to be responsible and truthful, can I also accept my finiteness? Obviously we are unable to see and know all things even about ourselves. However, That doesn't mean we can't live confidently in that small place where we find ourselves. For me, that means in my endeavor to be true to what God has called me to do, I can't allow doubts about my limitations paralyze my work. Rather, I must continue recalling and writing as honestly as possible while at the same time keeping a posture of humility.

The help I've received lately has been welcome. Denis has generously offered to go over my manuscript with me bit by bit. Over the years he has become a

much better writer/editor and I have calmed down enough to even be thankful for honest criticism. Sheesh. You don't know how in earlier years I reacted with such anger to his "help." There were times when he vowed never to help me again. When I first began writing our ministry letter called "Notes From Toad Hall," after pouring over a draft for hours, I would bring it to him. I didn't really want help, I just wanted praise. Of course, he thought I wanted editorial critique and proceeded to point out the ways in which it needed to be improved.

Inevitably that triggered my hostility, leading to epic fights. What a mournful situation! There I was supposedly writing to our supporters about our ministry, telling about how God was at work in our midst, and there we were in a yelling fest with one another. How GODLY is THIS, I would ask myself? Many times I wanted to give up altogether because I believed I was the LAST person qualified to communicate with ANYONE. So many of you have faithfully stood by us all these years. Perhaps if you'd known?? What a miracle of grace!!

There may always be the temptation to look at myself and think "there I am, round-faced and smiling" while another may look at the same and call me "complaining and crabby from the beginning." These days I find Denis a huge support in my writing and an able decoder of fiction versus truth. In turn, he no longer fears the bite of a cobra from me.

With God's help I'll finish this book by April when it will be placed in the hands of my editor, Ned Bustard. So, then, Ned, it will be up to you and Square Halo Books to deal with me. I promise to behave.

Here I should be

There is another thing to consider, if you are like me in any way.

Our troubles often leave us feeling ineffective and unholy. Bereft of talent or gifts. Failing to do anything well, like practice our calling, be a calm and loving influence on family, be disciplined in eating and exercising, or just be. How can we ever be of use to anyone, let alone God? This attitude is a good reason to review the epistle of First John for God's perspective on how love is defined. First John is embedded, garnished, filled with God's love for his people and directions on loving others and ourselves. So how dare we argue with the following?

My dear children, let's not just talk about love; let's practice real love. This is the only way we'll know we're living truly, living in God's reality. It's also the way to shut down debilitating self-criticism, even when there is something to it. For God is greater than our worried hearts and knows more about us than we do ourselves (I John 3:18-20. The Message).

Mr. Rogers and Wendell Berry both get it right. I'm listening:

You don't ever have to do anything sensational in order to love or to

be loved. The real drama of life (that which matters most) is rarely center stage or in the spotlight. In fact, it has nothing to do with IQs and honors and the fancy outsides of life. What really nourishes our souls is the knowing that we can be trusted, that we never have to fear the truth...

—Mr. Rogers. Commencement
May 2001, Marquette U.

No matter how much one may love the world as a whole, one can live fully in it only by living responsibly in some small part of it. Where we live and who we live there with define the terms of our relationship to the world and to humanity. We thus come again to the paradox that one can become whole only by the responsible acceptance of one's partiality.

—Wendell Berry



*Dear Children, love one another.
(Margie's neighbors)*

Family Notes

It may have been the highlight of my year. Perhaps the decade. Over Christmas our Chattanooga family came up for a visit. Our northern family came down. For the first time in five years we were all together. It was a wild, wonderful week with Jerem and Micah staying in a nearby hotel with their 4 kids, and Sember and Shaun with their 4 staying with us. As you may well know, family events can potentially turn uncomfortable or even nasty. But this, this was such a special time and it made us so happy.

We played games, had readings and discussions and even prayed together. The novelty of snow kept the kids sliding on the hills. I've not heard so much screaming and laughing in a long time. For several days there were 6 teenagers in the house and the Mountain Dew FLEW off the shelf. Denis often went back to the store with Isobel (who is much like Denis in personality so they got along super well) to replenish supplies. We estimated 20 mini cans of Dew were being drunk every day. For once, we felt no obligation to police sugar consumption. I cooked so much, I'm on sabbatical until further notice. It was the best mayhem and chaos we've experienced in a long time.



Flying downhill.



Christmas 2019. A new creche of nesting dolls.

Our Chattanooga family brought great news; they're moving back to Minnesota this summer. Down there they survived seven moves and some days as dark as any I could imagine. When they left Minnesota their twins, Kaiden and Elisha, 16, were a year old and Sember was 8 months pregnant with Mason. Before long there was another daughter—baby Isobel. Together, they have lived and grown and changed. Our oldest granddaughter, Manessah, wasn't able to come at Christmas. Thankful we had her for Thanksgiving. She, too, will be moving back.

RansomNotes

PAST The last few years have been quite wonderful for Denis and me. We have experienced both the pleasures and troubles of life but think it's pretty awesome to have spent 51 years together, 37 of them as directors and principals of Ransom Fellowship. When we sought advice at the beginning we were told by "experts" that our ministry would not work for many reasons. One of them being we had no plans to do fund raising. And yet, it is deeply moving to count the many of you who have been with us all this time, praying, encouraging and giving as God enabled. There have been a few large gifts and many smaller ones coming in month after month, year after year. It is difficult to express how thankful we've been.

In October we visited Covenant Seminary in St. Louis for a special event commemorating the life and work of Jerram Barrs. He's been a special mentor and friend – a man we love for his integrity, humility and love. Denis contributed a chapter to a book that honored him – *First Fruits of a New Creation*.

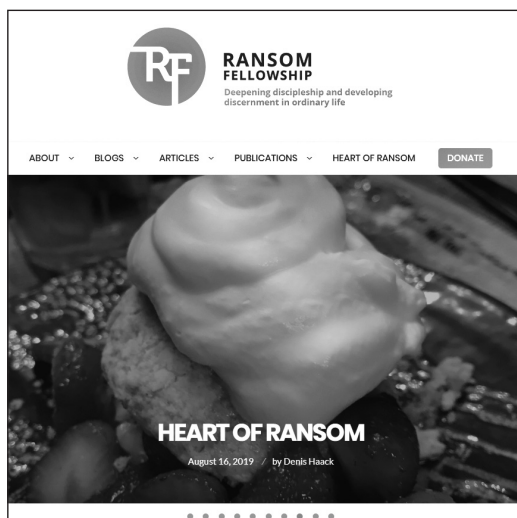


A special moment.

PRESENT In the next year or two Ransom will experience some big changes. As closing time approaches, Ransom's nonprofit status will eventually need to be dissolved, but we hope to keep our website alive as long as we can afford it. We will need to make changes for new postings to continue to appear. That will involve costs we hope Ransom can afford before we close as a nonprofit. Our Board will be overseeing these changes that will also affect our personal income as we enter our final "fixed income" stage. That may end certain "luxuries" for me like the occasional designer coffee. I'm sure that will hasten my death.

FUTURE Eventually we will no longer publish *Critique* or *Letters from the House Between*. However, like old dogs that can't stop fetching the ball, we have no plans to quit writing. Life is fascinating and inspiring enough for us to continue posting to our blogs. As long as Denis is able to toddle to his desk there will be book referrals, movie reviews, and topics sizzling in his brain. Less of that from mine, but I'm certain to find plenty to rant about.

Besides, I want to let you know how we will handle memory loss, tripping and falling, and more seriously, thoughts on how to navigate this stage of life and still walk with God.



IF YOU WANT TO REMAIN IN TOUCH

Go to Ransom's homepage at www.ransomfellowship.org and sign up with your email address to follow us. We'll send notices when something new is posted. We've already begun sending a few emails this past year to alert you to new material on our site. We promise on the grave of my hens (who were put to sleep last fall), not to blow up your inbox.

And Finally...

Friends, I'm stealing the following from Denis who wrote this to our donors in January. It struck me as certainly something I need to hear and practice.

In The Sun Magazine (January 2020) Sparrow, who has practiced meditation daily since 1974, published a series of reflections on the practice. "Meditation teaches humility and patience," he writes, "because you must constantly confront that most disappointing person: yourself." So does the reading of Scripture, another practice that should be regularly practiced by Christian believers. Both



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stillness and revelation make me confront my sinfulness, and in a broken and uncertain world that is a grace. I find it easy to hear the news and point fingers of blame for the problems that plague society.

This week a county in my state of Minnesota, Beltrami, voted to refuse any and all refugee settlement within their borders. The newspaper reported that the citizens crowded into the

chamber cheered as the board voted. And I thought of the word of the prophet, unambiguous and sober: "I will come to you in judgment," God says. 'I will be quick to testify against those who practice divination; those who commit adultery; those who break promises; and those who exploit workers, widows, and orphans, who refuse to help the resident foreigner and in this way show they do not fear me,' says the Lord of Heaven's Armies" (Malachi 3:5).

The citizens of Beltrami are not my enemies, though I believe them wrong and guilty of a grave injustice. They are my neighbors, sinners like I am, whom I am to love even at cost to myself. Cost in time, perhaps, in listening to their story and asking questions. Cost in resources, perhaps, in serving them. Cost in repentance, certainly, when I confess how as I read the news report, I despised them.

In the midst of conflict and incivility both nationally and globally, please pray for us this year, as we pray for you.



Warmly in the Lamb who forgives,

Margie

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:

Ransom Fellowship

5245 132nd Court
Savage, MN 55378

www.ransomfellowship.org

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Layout Editor: Anne Melnyk

Order Books from:



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All books mentioned in *Letters from The House Between* may be ordered directly from Hearts and Minds. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to Ransom Fellowship.



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