

An Interview with Margie Haack

An interview with one's self conceived, prepared, and written by Margie Haack



Margie Haack, Co-Founder of Ransom Fellowship

*I'm nobody. Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
Then, there's a pair of us - don't tell.
They'd banish us, you know.*

*How dreary to be somebody.
How public, like a frog,
To tell your name the livelong day
To an admiring bog.*

I think Emily Dickinson might actually be from Minnesota where I was born and live, and not really a nineteenth century poet from Amherst, Mass. Where I grew up, here in Minnesota, we were taught that being quiet and shy was a virtue, not a problem for a Twelve Step Program. It's hard to get over your heritage, but the manager of our website says I must. So I am trying to think of anything I have done that might be worthy of being co-director of Ransom Fellowship for twenty some years. I can't think of much except that it is evidence of God's great grace in allowing it, and that I married the other co-director and for years there wasn't anyone around to help him seal envelopes for our mailings. I collect and identify mushrooms, but some people have said what does that have to do with anything? I would agree, but when you look close you see that God made them strange and beautiful and they make you want to know...

In any case, to keep myself from constant tangents and divergences, I will interview myself:

Q: So. Where were you born?

I was born in Warroad, MN, which is a very small town on the Canadian border. My mother was a seventeen year old widow at the time. We have always joked that we'd be in a nursing home together.

Q: And where did you grow up, then?

Oh, up there. It's pretty remote. Kind of a cross between a Twilight Zone swamp and the forests of The Lord of the Rings. But I got out. [Smirks.]

Q: How?

I went to the University of Minnesota on a scholarship and majored in pre-med. [Looks smug.]

Q: Does that mean you're a doctor?

Well, no. I met my future husband while there and he was having a very bad experience living with a medical person. You see, his parents were missionaries in the Philippines and he had been left behind with people from his church and the mother in that family had a bit of a problem with germs and such. So it left Denis very wary of medicine and the people in it so he didn't want anything to do with the profession as a whole. Of course, we now know how unfair this was. And possibly not mature. But there I was and he loved me and I loved him quite madly and one of us had to give something up. So I said, awww, who wants to study for m-cats anyway? I also wasn't doing so good in organic chem.



Denis and Margie, circa 1970

Q: Did this decision to leave your studies and hook up with, er, marry Denis ever come back to haunt you, that is did you have any regrets?

You bet I did. Every mother who has several babies in diapers, a husband who works long hours in a calling he loves, one family vehicle, and no money has some second thoughts. Around then I became a feminist for a couple of years. I was really mad. [Furrows brows and looks grim.] I was very influenced by both Francis and Edith Schaeffer's writings—Mrs. Schaeffer modeled something very wonderful as she understood how important beauty and creativity are to the making of a home. At the time it was revolutionary among evangelicals. She helped me see that the intimacy and nourishment of even a simple meal can make all the difference for someone who is hungry for God. Not only for friends and visitors, but for our own family. I was able, without guilt, to go from Melmac (plastic dishes) and paper plates to pottery and china. That was a small thing in a way, but it represented moving from a throw-away, impersonal kind of culture to one that valued beauty, thoughtfulness, time spent together that says: "as another human being, you mean something to me and are worth this effort because you are made in the image of the Creator God."

BUT then I went through this time where I was extremely nasty to Denis because he seemed to get to do all the fun things and I was sick of serving the tea and the tea-cakes and changing diapers while he sat in the living room with pearls of wisdom falling from his lips. He could not ask a thing of me during that time because I completely unloaded on him. We had a lot to learn. I began to think about how much more fulfilled I would be if I had gone into medicine. And then I would have had money, too. You can see where all this might lead. What finally got through to me was a simple passage from Matt 20:26-28 "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." And then in John 13 where Jesus washed the Disciples feet, he asks them point blank: "Do you understand what I have done? Do you?" I had to answer, yes I do understand. And it pierced me to suddenly realize how very very destructive my attitude was. There were just no excuses against or around what God calls each and every one of us to do. I'm not only saying women here. I simply could not argue that I was the one exception to this calling and I could ignore that Jesus expected me to follow his example in all things including serving. It was hard to give up that anger. But it was so good for me and both of us grew through this time. Later as we came to know more and more physicians, I knew I never would have made it through the punishing schedule they keep. And it became obvious that my interests lay much more in arts and culture.

Q: So let's get back to Ransom Fellowship. Exactly what do you do for Ransom?

Well, Ransom has always been a lot about who we are or what we do in our home. Our home—Toad Hall—has been a place where people have come to stay, to talk, to eat, even to do something that is more and more needed today and that is to sleep or to rest. It has been important to us that our home reflect something of creativity and beauty, that you should be able to walk in and say “I could sit down and feel comfortable here, I could read a book, or I could talk about something very personal and important because I feel safe.” This atmosphere depends on what you do with things like color, art, and space, and how you put it all together. It has less to do with how much you spend on furniture (ours is eclectic and some of it is shabby) and decorating than it has to do with a certain dimension of humanness or perhaps of proportion. So throughout our years in ministry we have had people in for Bible study, discussions, play readings, music, movies, and meals. And much to our delight we’ve been able to feed people both physically and spiritually and in serving, we ourselves have been blessed many times over.

In addition to being a fallen domestic goddess, I write and sometimes lecture. I put out Notes From Toad Hall four times a year with the help of our managing editor, Marsena Konkle. I sometimes write essays for other publications and am working on a book manuscript about my childhood. Writing is very hard work for me and I often feel like a cat we once owned who needed a daily dose of medicine. We had to wrap her in a towel to immobilize her—that didn’t stop her from trying to bite us—then we had to force the pill between her clenched jaws and stroke her throat until she swallowed it. I feel akin to her; God makes me swallow this pill of writing and has even wrapped me in a sort of towel which has curtailed a lot of my activities.

Q: Do you have a favorite lecture?

How did you know I wanted to answer that question? Yes, I do. I really enjoyed one I prepared titled “Piercing the Tattooed Generation.” I love this generation. Getting to know them and understanding the issues they face has been a watershed for me. They are full of the deepest griefs, some of the wildest humor, and most profound joys I have known. Knowing them should be critical to the church if we are going to have any sort of significant dialogue regarding Jesus. And okay, I confess that I also like it that some young people come up to me afterwards to show me their tattoos which, of course, you wouldn’t necessarily know they had because they’re hidden. I feel honored.

Q: Umm, let’s get back to some of the more basic details of your life. Like do you have any children?

Three. Marsena, who is married to Jeff and lives in Lake Zurich, IL. She was our first child and was so compliant and easy to discipline some of our friends decided they would have children after all because she appeared so perfect. Denis and I thought it was due to our wonderful godly parenting and he even taught a Sunday School series on “How to Raise Children.” Then God gave us two more children who were far more normal, meaning they were more challenging at times and had a knack for engaging our dark sides. Now Denis wishes like anything he could find the tapes of that Sunday School and destroy them all. Our son, Jerem, lives in northern Minnesota having returned to his mother’s roots, and is married to Micah with a son of his own, having weathered his growing up years and post adolescence very nicely. And our youngest, Sember, has turned into a lovely young woman. She is married to Shaun, and they have four children. There is no doubt that Jerem and Sember were gifts from God for many reasons. But, distinctly, one of them was to keep us from becoming insufferable prigs. For that reason and for many others we love them.

Q: What’s it like to be in ministry with the same person for so many years, to be married to the same guy, to have your offices in the same building, and do all the same things together? [His office is in the basement, hers is on the second floor and they have an intercom where they talk back and forth as in: Can I have the leftover manicotti for lunch? Or what have you done with Calvin’s Institutes of Religion?]

I know. It’s weird. [She laughs.] But we still like each other. Sure there are times. I’m glad to mention them when appropriate. We make each other laugh a lot. I really admire and respect him. One very wonderful thing about him is that as we have partnered together over the years, he has encouraged me and been my best advocate in developing my particular gifts. He has never acted as though I were competing with him or somehow eclipsing him. I am far more competitive than he so that has been a remarkable model for me. We have really learned to appreciate and rely on one another’s gifts not just in our ministry, but when it comes to family matters, decisions about finances, and the household. We defer to one another or come to an agreement. So, ya, we do a lot together and some people think it is sick and boring, but we love it. And, oh by

the way, so you don't think we are completely pathologic, we can function quite well apart and have distinct hair styles. (Please see photos.)

Q: Do you have an accent?

Ya. But I try to hide it. If I don't, people think I starred as myself (Marge, the county sheriff) in the movie Fargo. This pains me.

Q: What do you like to do in your spare time?

I have a, like, it's a carved oak wooden post, really heavy, about two and a half feet tall? It is flat on top and just right for a cup of coffee or a glass of iced tea? And I like to drag it right up close to the couch so that when I am lying down I can reach out and grab it, and I have a crossword puzzle and the latest sales catalog from Eddie Bauer, and the book I'm reading, like right now it's a collection of short stories by Alice Munro, and the remote for the CD player and I'm probably listening to Over the Rhine or LOW (but not loud in case I doze) and that is what I like to do.

Q: You didn't have to answer that. Remember? You're the one asking the questions.

[Silence.]

Q: So finally, do you ever read your Bible?

Everyday. Well. Almost. (Please see Notes From Toad Hall, Still Winter, 2002)