

Notes from TOAD HALL

Holiday 2002



When I was growing up, Bing was the most cheerful and brave of all the dogs we ever owned. He was a white rat terrier with half a brown patch on one ear, a spot on his side, and a tail that curled tightly over his back and wagged furiously when he was having fun, which was most of the time. He was also the smallest dog we ever owned.

The winter after we came to the farm, he caused my first spiritual encounter. I was four. The day was bitterly cold and millions of diamonds glittered in the air and on the snow. My mother did not consider twenty below zero an excuse to stay indoors suffocating

and underfoot the entire day, so I was stuffed into a padded snow suit and sent out to play. Bing was turned out behind me and we sat on the steps blinking in the sun and breathless in the crackling air.

All around us, the snow lay in brilliant piles and deep drifts. The wood stack in the middle of the yard was a round mound with a black cave in the side where Dad had dug through to the fire wood. The fence posts were capped with snow. The farm machinery lined up along the edge of the woods was softened and half buried like pieces of driftwood on a beach. Sunken paths led in three directions like an English hedge maze—to the milk house, to the out-house, to the barn.

Bing, whom I loved almost as much as my mother, was trying to get up a game of chase. As I struggled and rolled to my feet he grabbed a mitten. Tugging and growling, he managed to pull it off. He flew through the snow, disappearing and reappearing like a white dolphin in the surf, carrying his prize. I floundered after him, falling down and burying my hands in the drifts. I came out shaking my naked, red hand, and yelling for Bing to stop.

'Bring that here,' I wailed.

He ran on, viciously growling and shaking the mitten as if to break its neck.

I cried in fury and let out a shocking string of blue curses at Bing. I don't remember one word I said, but Bing's reaction is still emblazoned in my memory. Instantly, he dropped my mitten and looked at me with horror and even fright.

In that bright light, I waded through the snow, picked up my mitten, and slowly pulled it on. Bing was not one to give up a thing once he had hold of it. The power of my words began to frighten me. Bing was acting not hurt or repentant, but afraid for me. What did Bing

know that I didn't? Who had I insulted? Something bigger than both of us?

I struggled back to the steps, sat down, and soon began to sob. At that moment, my mother opened the door, the dog raced inside, and she asked me to explain what was going on. I don't know what my mother really thought. At that time she only had residual spiritual knowledge left over from her own childhood. But she did not find my



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problem insignificant nor did she laugh. Kneeling in front of me, her arms about me, and her face near mine, 'Go,' she instructed me, 'into the next room. Get on your knees and ask God to forgive you for swearing and he will.' Her confidence was a relief.

It is strange how childhood memories can give you this much and no more. I don't remember what happened after that, but I must have done it. Strangely, from then on I loved God, whoever he was. I didn't know anything about him except that I shouldn't swear using his name no matter how enraged I was.

In the early years on our farm, Dad discovered rats in the old broken down granary. They lodged in the walls and under the foundation and came out at night with their skinny tails and red eyes to eat prodigious quantities of oats. I knew it was only a matter of time before they took over our farm in seething squeaking masses. It was Bing who saved us. He thrilled to do them battle. He refused to give up on even the biggest, meanest old rat until it was dug out and shaken til its brains fell out. When the job was done he had permanent scars from the wounds he received and a permanent place of honor among us.

Because of his bravery and willingness to do whatever we asked, Dad always warned us not to 'sic' Bing on the horses when we were in the pasture.

'Why?' we asked.

'Because they'll kick him!' he replied in a tone reserved for idiots.

It didn't matter that Bing chased the cows and bit at their heels. Although cows can kick, they really aren't athletes like horses. Cows are clumsy and oafish and run with an awkward gait, whereas any old nag of a horse can accurately place a powerful kick backwards while running at a full gallop.

One day I was out in the pasture looking for buttercups when the horses noticed me. Being curious, they snorted and came closer to see what I was doing and if I was worth a sugar cube or two. Well, I wasn't. I picked up a stick and threatened them. They flagged their black and blonde tails and trotted a little way off.

Slowly they came mincing toward me again. Knowing Bing would do anything he was asked, and being tempted to use that power, I decided I could easily send the horses away by having Bing chase them; expressly

against the warnings Dad had given us.

A lot of horses love an excuse to panic. They can fake a heart attack over a little piece of white paper on the ground. We had several of that kind. One of them was Duke, a two year old bay colt, tall and rangy. So when I pointed and yelled for Bing, it only took one 'sic em' and he obediently ran after them yapping and trying to bite their heels. With a flying hoof, it was Duke who sent Bing's little body somersaulting through the air until it rested quietly on the floor of the woods among the decaying leaves and tiny blue violets. In the distance he looked like a still life of small white flowers.

My face flushed with heat and my eyes began to burn. I ran to him and stood a way off hoping this was a dream and I would soon wake up. My throat ached. I called him softly. Bing? Bing? I could not breathe. I bent down and there was a tiny bit of blood coming from one ear, but he did not move. He was dead.

You could not use me to support the popular belief that children are born innocent—that if you provide them with the basics: physical protection, intellectual stimulation, and emotional love—then they will do what is right, that they will listen to their parents and be kind and good. I had all I needed. I had most of what I wanted. So why did selfish interests and the power I exercised over Bing corrupt me like a perverse little Pol Pot?



My childhood home.

I stood for a long time. At last I turned away and left him alone in the dim woods. I stumbled home. My lungs hurt. My stomach churned and I hoped I was going to die. I made it to the outhouse where I threw up. Slowly I went to the house and to bed where Mom found me a little later. 'I think I'm sick,' I said. I was sick. With grief and remorse.

Knowing Bing would do anything he was asked, and being tempted to use that power, I decided I could easily send the horses away by having Bing chase them; expressly against the warnings Dad had given us.

I decided not to tell anyone what happened because if I did, I would immediately be turned out of the family. A little girl forced to wander and make her own way in the world. Or more likely, the family would keep me, but they would hate me and never speak to me again because I had done something so dreadful there was nothing that could ever ever make it up. I thought of moving into the cellar.

I lay with my face in the pillow sobbing. As I wept, I suddenly became aware of my brothers' voices outside. Loud and alarmed. One of them was yelling for Mom to come quick. Something was wrong with Bing. My heart leaped. Could God actually bring a dog back from the dead? Would he? I peeked out the window and my heart broke.

Bing was weaving his way across the pasture, dragging himself home, bobbing like a car with three flat tires.

It was his heart that brought him home. It couldn't have been his brain. That was damaged beyond



repair. We fixed a box for him, and even though we lined it with our softest raggedy old towel, he couldn't lie down. We tried to feed him the most treasured of treats, a fried chicken gizzard, but he couldn't eat. Leaning against the wall and the kitchen stove, his injured brain made him go round and round in a circle all night, softly whining. We cried and cried.

When Dad got home he took one look and said, 'He's been kicked by a horse,' and turned his eye on us. 'Did any of you sic him on the horses?' We all said no. The next morning Dad gently carried him out and we never saw him again. ♀

Note:

This is an excerpt from my childhood memoir in progress. It's taken from a chapter called "The Dogs of our Lives." Giving new meaning to 'progress,' I creep toward the finish line.

Ransom Notes

Resigned Board Member

In October Craig Chambers, a local Ransom Board member, resigned and we will miss him. The pressure of his medical practice has forced him to reassess the rest of his life and commitments. We support anyone who tries to live life based not on response to need, but on what God has called us to do. Craig has served as secretary/treasurer for nearly ten years. His careful attention to board minutes and help with internal audits and computer purchases has been much appreciated. We had a limited appreciation for his love of puns—in practical terms that meant he could not exceed three puns per board meeting which tended to raise their quality. We



thank him for his work with us, for his family's willingness to share him and we bless him as he endeavors to please God in all parts of his life.

Website Teaser

Ransom's website is gradually taking shape as Marsena Konkle continues to develop it. We like the way it looks so far. We haven't wanted to launch it until it was fairly complete. To do it carefully and creatively takes a lot of time and funds. I recently learned that building a good site can take up to \$80,000. We are thankful we haven't needed to lay out that kind of money and yet because of Marsena's commitment and generosity we haven't had to compromise on quality either. It will feature information about Ransom, and include some of our movie and music reviews, selected essays from *Critique*, past issues of *Notes From Toad Hall*, discernment exercises, and downloadable handouts where appropriate.

Recently, Marsena reported on progress: 'As part of the design for Ransom's website, I would like to have some artwork on the home page and a reduced version on all the interior pages. For a long time I toyed with different logos or clip art, but nothing was broad or beautiful enough to capture the feel of Ransom's ministry. The idea of using fine art instead of clip art appeals to me, not only for aesthetic reasons, but because it fits with Ransom's stand on the value of art in a Christian's life.'



New Board Member

Three years ago our board began to pray about adding a pastor to our number as it's important for us to hear the voice and concerns of the church regarding our ministry. We want to serve the church with clarity and sensitivity at the same time acknowledging we (Ransom) do not take the place of the church. A man who serves the church as a pastor and who also understands our calling was exactly the guy we needed. So last March we welcomed Ed Hague, pastor of Christ Church, PCA, Athens, GA, to our Board of Directors.

Ed has been married to Betsy for 23 years and has four daughters ranging in age from 17 to 5. He says he runs a sorority house, but I need to find out what they say. Born and raised in Indianapolis, on his grandfather's farm he reports, 'I attended church every Sunday. When I was 14 years old, I left during the sermon with my father's car keys to teach myself how to drive. I then passed my grandfather as he was coming late to church. Everything from that point on is a painful blur.' As you might deduce from his current address he made it back both to Christ and the church.

Ed says, 'Participating in the gospel being worked out and into people's lives is an enormous privilege. Discovering and helping to restore beauty, rest and space in our frenetic culture is my place in helping Christ's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.' When asked why he agreed to join our Board: 'The money, definitely the money! Apart from that, Ransom makes my heart beat louder for our King and His kingdom. My role is to help Ransom relate well to the church, serving it and calling it back into the culture, adorned with the beauty of Christ.'

This Fall and Looking Ahead

We've done less ministry travel this quarter—due to historical family occasions and Denis' course studies. 2003 is coming up quickly. So...

January 9-11, Annual Board Meeting. Toad Hall, Rochester, MN
January 17 Borders Bookstore, St. Louis. Sponsored by the Schaeffer Institute, Denis lectures: "Listening to the Movies: The Stories of a Postmodern Generation."

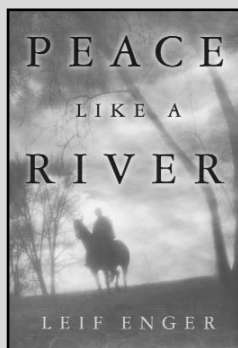
January 21-25 Covenant Seminary, St. Louis. Denis will take a week-long residency class: "Bible Application Seminar"

January 24 Borders Bookstore, St. Louis. I will lecture: "Postmodern

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Christmas 2002 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall



PEACE LIKE A RIVER

by Leif Enger

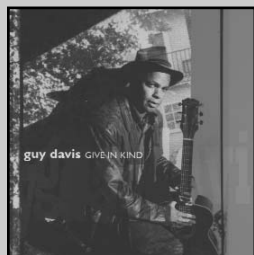
(fiction) My best pick. This is a piercingly beautiful story about a family's quest to retrieve its most wayward member. Reuben Land, an asthmatic eleven year old, recounts the rupture of their lives when his brother Davy kills two teenage boys. With the father, Jeremiah, at the helm this story becomes an unforgettable journey

filled with mystery and faith. Jeremiah believes in the God of the King James Bible (which he reads) and to whom he prays. His faith is appealing and real, but the book won't be found in a Christian bookstore. It has received critical acclaim in the secular press because it is so well written, no matter what your spiritual beliefs you can't put the book down. Jeremiah's faith and sufferings are so honest we are completely disarmed.

Although tragedy abounds, an undercurrent of hope rolls across the pages. One chapter is titled "When Sorrows Like Sea Billows Roll"—a phrase from a famous hymn which is never mentioned. But the hymn is such a part of our heritage we unconsciously know the end: "It is well with my soul." Years later Ruben addresses the mystery of God's presence during that dark time. He says: "An admonition to the mind-sick: Be careful whom you choose to hate. The small and the vulnerable own a protection great enough, if you could but see it, to melt you into jelly. Beware those who reside beneath the Shadow of the Wings."

Guy Davis, *Give In Kind*

(CD) If you are preternaturally happy skip this, but if you have blues of any kind then Guy Davis speaks to you. When he sings the rolling rhythmic: 'I never have one woman at a time/I always have six, seven, aay-ate or nine' we are reminded with ironic humor that we have only ourselves to blame for a lot of our troubles. He reminds me of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee with some of that old style rocking blues, simple lyrics, and acoustic guitar. Davis has written many of the tracks. If the CD is a journey Davis begins with the troubles of addiction and love, moves down lonely roads, through prayers of desperation ending with the hope of the traditional spiritual 'Hold to God's Unchanging Hand.'

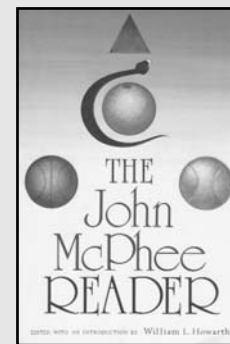


The John McPhee Reader

(Nonfiction) For years, journalist John McPhee has been writing about real people and events with compelling craft. *The Reader*, an excellent introduction to his work, will entertain and challenge you with essays and excerpts about people like a Georgia naturalist who eats D.O.R (Animals found Dead-on-the-Road) and an isolated people who live in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey.

"...[Basketball star Bill Bradley] tossed a ball over his shoulder and into the basket while he was talking and looking me in the eye. I retrieved the ball and handed it back to him. 'When you have played basketball for a while, you don't need to look at the basket when you are in close like this,' he said, throwing it over his shoulder again and right through the hoop. 'You develop a sense of where you are.'"

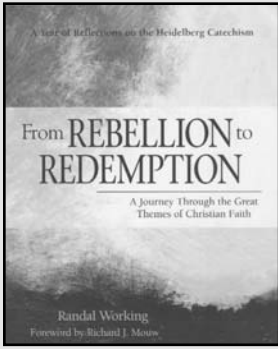
"...After heaving up a half-dozen buckets of mud, Causey moved backward several feet [with an 82 ton dragline crane]...beyond one bank he had a fuel tank large enough to bury under a gas station, and every so often he would reach out with his hook and his hundred-foot arm and, without groping, lift the tank and move it on in the direction he was going. With his levers, his cables, his bucket, and hook, he handled his mats and his tank and his hunks of the riverbed as if he were dribbling a basketball through his legs and behind his back. He was deft. He was world class. 'I bet he could put on a baby's diapers with that thing,' Sam said."



LOW, *Christmas*

(CD) This is a little hard to find, but cdnow.com has it. I was so surprised last December to see a GAP commercial and hear this group on the sound track. The song was "The Little Drummer Boy," distinctly in their style. LOW has finally been getting the attention they deserve on some of the college rock/alternative stations. I think most college students would like this and it would really surprise them if you are, you know, like around my age and picked it up. Some people call LOW slo-core rock and most of the people I know who like them enjoy alternative, more thoughtful kinds of rock music. The CD includes a mix of traditional carols and ones they've written themselves. They are Mormon so there is a definite spiritual moral basis to their work.





From Rebellion to Redemption: A Year of Reflections on the Heidelberg Catechism
by Randal Working

(nonfiction) Since I first read the Heidelberg, I have been enthralled with its language and its power to distill the doctrines of Creation, Fall and

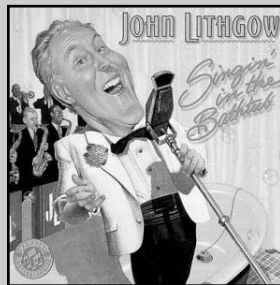
Redemption in a way that encompasses life from its terrible bitterness to its awful joys. It ever points us to Jesus our Lord. This is a great way to go through it on a weekly basis with Working's comments and a collection of quotes from disparate sources: John Stott to Theresa of Avila. Working (lovely name) writes about grace: '...one of the most difficult lessons for Christians is also one of the most fundamental—that we live by grace, not by works. It is so easy to work ourselves into exhaustion by having to appear busy, busy, busy, as if anything less proves a lack of seriousness about life...Faith doesn't make us right with God because of any quality in us. Faith makes us right with God because it is a response to the grace of God, an appropriation of Jesus' own work.'

IDA, You are my Flower

(CD) A collection of very fine happy folksy songs for children. I have thoroughly enjoyed listening to it with my four year old granddaughter. Clear, simple and fun. Includes lovely renditions of "This Little Light of Mine" and "Freight Train." Boston Phoenix gives it the "Children's Record of the Year Award" and says 'A hip New York band's labor of love...this is kids' music that's a balm to every mother's savaged nerves.' Stores seem to have trouble getting it, but you can find it on amazon.com.



John Lithgow, Singing in the Bathtub
(CD) In his sometimes nasal, other times booming Broadway voice John Lithgow (of Saturday Night Live) sings to children. Part of this CD's charm is the children who lustily sing back-up for the album, especially on the "A, You're Adorable, B, You're so Bee-you-tee-full" from the alphabet song. When despite yourself you begin belting out "Nobody Loves You Like Your M - o - double m - y" you know you've been captured by one of his crazy remakes of an old song. This CD makes you laugh and want to dance around with some little person.



re:generation quarterly

(magazine) If you are looking for a special gift for some Gen-xer, this is it. A quarterly magazine by post-moderns for postmoderns. Always challenging, always unique, funny at times, and never shy—as in the story of an engaged couple (also Christians) who wrote a column in a campus paper (U of Chicago) inviting dialogue on whether they should cohabit. Dozens responded to the debate which encouraged couples on both sides to think seriously about the public and private aspects of the choices they were making. ('You Gonna Do That In Public?' Vol.7 #3) Other recent titles: 'A Smoker's Paradise,' 'What Would Jesus Eat?' 'Shame and the Cross,' 'Romeo Must Die.' If you want to hear this generation address their serious issues or know someone who does check them out. You can contact them for a free copy at www.regenerator.com or 800-783-4903. One year subscription: \$19.95.

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Credo: Hypocrisy Rots, Authenticity Rules.”

February 7-8 Rochester L’Abri Conference. The theme this year is “Rhythms of Grace and the Glory of God.” This is what we are scheduled to present:

“Grace in the Dark: God’s Glory & the Films of Babylon” - Denis

“The Movie *Wit* and the Poetry of John Donne” - Denis

“Life Should be Fragrant: Glimpses of Grace in Modern Literature” - Denis & Marsena

“Will This Poison Scar My

Eyes?” *Grace in Popular Culture*” - Margie

Other speakers include our Board Member Bonnie Liefer , Bill Edgar, and Jerram Barrs.

Please pray for all of us as we study and prepare, as we interact with people. Even in writing *Notes* I feel woefully inadequate. I take Isaiah’s words as comfort where God says: ‘Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel! I am the one who helps you.’ (Is.41:14)

Finances

We are so thankful that through these economically uncertain times God has provided for this work through his people. Thanks. Thanks for standing with us. Some of you for years. We never want to take it for granted nor as a sign of our own merit. The final weeks of the year will still be crucial since year-end giving tends to see us through the later lean months when Ransom’s expenses exceed income. 6

Family Notes

Wedding.

On November 2 our son Jerem married Micah Kent in Hermann, MO. I can understand why some of you who are new to our mailing list wish I’d shut up about stuff like this. So go ahead and skip this part. But there are others who’ve known our family for years who like to know and have wondered whether Jerem could find a wife, living as he does in the wilds of Northern Minnesota where single women are scarce and where some have resorted to mail order and signing bonuses. Thankfully Jerem got by with just email and a bouquet of flowers. (Don’t misunderstand, we know that a partner in this life is grace and not something we merit or count on. Many good people are single and a lot of losers get married.) It was a ‘Big Fat’ wedding (Note the term and go see *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*) complete with three ministers, two flower girls, a trumpet, a trombone, three hundred guests, fifty homemade pies and a thousand ham salad sandwiches. In all it was a lovely celebration for which we thank God. His grace was evident in so many ways.

Several images stick in my mind: Micah on stage at the reception singing “Side by Side we’ll travel along” with her entire family: mom, dad, ten brothers and sisters (well the youngest was too young to sing exactly, being only six weeks old). They had tears in their eyes, grieving for Micah who is the first to marry and leave home. We didn’t know Jerem was marrying into The Singing Von-Kent Family—and him not able to carry a tune!

Another image: Finding Micah downstairs in a room at the church sitting on a stool, her dress billowed about her, serene, regal as a queen just waiting. I learned later that her bridesmaids had her dressed by 11:30 a.m.—the wedding wasn’t until 3:30 and she didn’t get out of that dress until



10:30 that night. I’m getting old when just the thought of eleven hours in any dress gives me a kidney stone. She is a precious laid-back kind of person and we welcome her into our family and especially plan to enjoy her balmy nature since the rest of us are pretty much cardiac arrest kinds of people.



New Life

Sember hasn't been feeling so well with her pregnancy. She's been in the hospital with severe pain in her side. No one can quite figure out what is the cause. It seems to have diminished some, and the twins (two little boys) appear to be doing alright at this point. The doctors are hoping she will carry them until the first part of February—they're due in March. Then, oh boy, won't we have fun?

Job Search

Our son-in-law, Jeff (Marsena's husband) finished up his MBA just in time for the criminal crash of Enron, Worldcom (and weren't there others?) and for record stock market losses. Not a whole lot is perking in upper management right now. He is so good at what he does I'd hire him in a minute, but he would be severely underpaid. And quarantining my one computer virus and overseeing my purchase of driveway repair, mudjacking, and earthmoving equipment wouldn't keep him alert for very long. Though I would like to have all those things. †

Final Notes

Writing about my childhood over the last several years has caused a nearly constant reflection on what it means to be a child of God. Christmas is a particular reminder as we think of Jesus as a child—the knowledge that he, as our elder brother, has made it possible to belong. Belong to a family in a way we may never have thought possible. Sinclair Ferguson puts it like this:

No short-cut that tries to bypass the patient unfolding of the true character of God, and our relationship to him as his children, can ever succeed in providing long-term spiritual therapy. But the knowledge that the Father has bestowed his love on us, so that we are called children of God—and in fact are his children (1 Jn 3:1-2), will, over time, prove to be the solvent in which our fears, mistrust, and suspicion of God—as well as our sense of distance from him—will eventually dissolve. (Children of the Living God, p.14)

May God unfold his love to you.
Merry Christmas from Toad Hall.

Warmly,

Margie
Margie



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.

Notes from Toad Hall and Critique, a newsletter written by my husband, Denis, are sent to those who regularly support Ransom Fellowship. All gifts to Ransom are tax-deductible.

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