

Notes from TOAD HALL

Issue #2 - 2003
Summer



Prematurely Arrogant

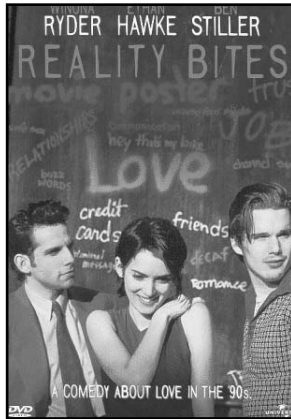
Every year when high school graduation rolls around I hope I will be too old and demented to be reminded of my own. So far I'm not. This year we've received six announcements and attended one hooding—Sandy Oster got her master's degree in nursing. (Denis and I felt invested because she wrote a lot of her thesis at our dining room table.) I was struck by the speeches of students, department heads, professors, it hardly mattered who; time hasn't improved what people say. Graduation is when we haul out the most sentimental saccharine phrases in the English language and nobody

laughs. You know them. “The future is YOURS.” “There is NOTHING you can’t do.” (Not true *and* bad grammar.) “Against all odds we have overcome.” “The BEST is yet to come.” Or getting really literary: “These were the best of times, these were the worst of times.” They’re reminders of the speech I gave at my own high school graduation and of how my mom was so proud she cried. And of my knowing I didn’t deserve the kindness the principal showed by never revealing in public that I was not valedictorian because that was the first year the school merely listed all the honor students in a lump.

Maybe it’s why I still love the opening scene of *Reality Bites*—the leveling factor of real life, the way it can sock the stuffing out of you when you least expect it. Wynona Ryder, as valedictorian of her class ends her graduation speech by asking a grandiose question: “And they wonder why those of us in our 20’s are not willing to work an eighty hour week just so we can afford to buy their BMWs. And why we are not interested in their counter culture as if we did not see them disembowel their revolution for a pair of running shoes. What are we going to do now? How are we going to repair all the damage we have inherited? (dramatic pause) The answer is... (fumbles around) The answer is.... (looks frantically for the last page which seems to be missing) The answer is... (finally she looks up hopelessly and quietly mumbles) The answer is: I don’t know.” There is a shocked silence followed by loud guffaws and wild cheering, and the movie takes off with slamming rock music and partying.

My own reality bite came a few months before graduation when I

had an attack of premature arrogance. I noticed that *Reader’s Digest* was offering a free subscription to anyone who was graduating as valedictorian of their class. Although my English teacher scoffed at *Reader’s Digest*, I was



There were only twenty-five students in my class but I still wanted to be first, and I WANTED that free subscription to *Reader’s Digest*.



in These United States.”

I was practically on a first name basis with the principal—I worked in his office. And since I knew I scored higher than anybody else on my Iowa Basic Skills and my college entrance exams, (one of my jobs was to enter scores into student records) and except for one “C” in Home Ec—which I HATED because you had to SEW and which shouldn’t even be CONSIDERED part of your academic record and because I was forced to make a red wool suit which was so ugly not even a dead Marxist would want to wear it—I was still the best. But I

hadn’t considered that as a sophomore that vile little piece of work earned a permanent place in my GPA. So when I, having long ago put that humiliation behind me, bounced into the Principal’s office with the *Reader’s Digest* official form for him to sign, the superintendent also happened to be present. There was a pause after I asked for a signature while the two of them looked significantly at one another. Then in a pained voice the principal said, “Please sit down. Funny you should ask, but we have just totaled the GPA’s for the graduating class and I am very sorry to tell you Elsie Bridges ranks one tenth of a point higher than you. Technically you will not be valedictorian.” My face grew hot with shame and I tried to smile and pretend to be happy for her success even though she took bookkeeping and short-hand while I killed myself in chemistry and physics. It would have been easier if she hadn’t been my best friend. I left feeling like a fool and wanting to do something really violent like slam my locker door (whoa). There were only twenty-five students in my class but I still wanted to be first, and I WANTED that free subscription to *Reader’s Digest*.

It would have been good if I’d remembered the Shakespeare I was so proud to have read: “But masters, remember that I am an ass; though it be not written down, yet forget not that I am an ass” (Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*).

I know that today I would miss the more important things in life if I hadn’t been slapped down hard once in awhile. The sanctification of Christ is both painful and compassionate.

Feel His Pleasure

“David G. Myers in *Intuition: Its Powers and Perils* writes about the components of spiritual intelligence. One of the identifiers is ‘the ability to sanctify everyday experi-

ence. Spiritually intelligent persons have an ability to invest everyday activities, events, and relationships with a sense of the sacred or divine. They consider its implications for their understanding of self, others, nature, and life. For the spiritually intelligent person, work is seen as a calling, parenting as a sacred responsibility, marriage as having spiritual significance.' Myers writes the chapter from St. Andrews, Scotland, a short walk from the opening scene of *Chariots of Fire* where Eric Liddle reflects on the spiritual significance of running: 'When I run, I feel His pleasure.' [This is a quote of a quote from Martin Marty's publication *Context*, Vol. 35, No. 8.]

I like this thought very much and would only caution that we sometimes think of "intelligent" as applying only to the Harvard genius doing mentally acute sorts of things like cloning mules. On the contrary, spiritual intelligence can be found anywhere. From the person who may be sorting socks for a living to the one who is handicapped or sick or dying. This kind of spirituality is found more in how we live ordinary life. So. Because I, Margie, am Christ's—though I can't always be consciously thinking of it—there is the possibility of seeing each person, every small event as we drink coffee, answer the phone, look at the flowers, converse with others, as drenched by the Holy Spirit. I don't find God as often in esoteric knowledge or valedictory speeches as I do in the everyday small things. This never fails to move me because it is so counter-intuitive.

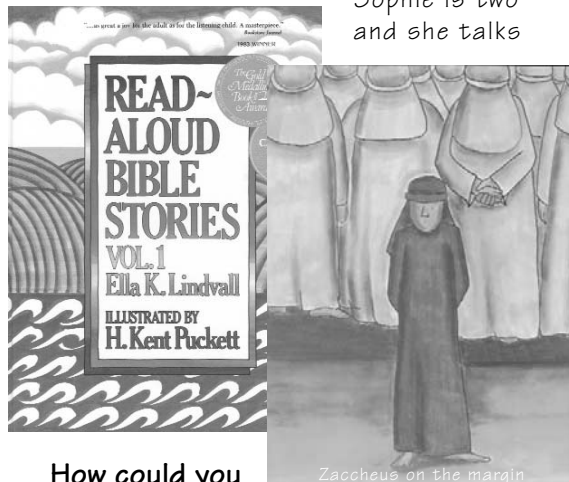
So here's a smattering of small things from our life over the past couple of months. None of it is extraordinary. Some of it is cliched just like a graduation speech, but all of it is common. Vulgar. (Remember the Latin mean-

ing of the word? That *The Vulgate* was called so because it was St. Jerome at the end of the fourth century who translated the Bible into Latin, the everyday common language of the Roman people?) This is where I feel the pleasure of God.

The Common

Sunday. Spent the morning service in the nursery. There is a little girl I like very much. Her name is Sophie.

Sophie is two and she talks



How could you ever hope to get a face-to-face with Jesus if you were anything but chosen, respectable, healthy and smart?

very well when she wants to—at a mere eighteen months she identified "deg-flant," (eggplant) but for the entire first hour today she did not say a word though I tried several times to trick her into a response. She played on, silently ignoring my questions. Then she began to bring me books one by one, motioning for me to read. She sat perfectly composed on my lap refusing to correct me when I called a dog a cat. At exactly 10:20 Sophie began chatting first to herself then to me. She found a tiny ladybug which she carefully carried in her cupped palms, warning me to "Be careful, it bites!"

One book we read was especially creative. It had stories of Jesus simply written and well illustrated.

Zaccheus who was too short to see Jesus. Bartimaeus who was blind. The ten men who were lepers. The children whose mothers were too naive to know he wouldn't want to touch them. The pictures captured Jesus' love for people who were marginalized. You would think that Jesus wouldn't have noticed them, as busy as he was and surrounded by the people he'd hand-picked to follow him, by the educated elite, by the healthy who could walk briskly in a crowd. How could you ever hope to get a face-to-face with him if you were anything but chosen, respectable, healthy and smart? What forever blazes in these stories is that Jesus went straight to the ones who called, to people not cool and with it, to those on the margins of life. The blind, short, maladjusted, non-contributors.

"Hasten to me, O God, I am poor and needy. O Lord, do not delay" (Psalm 70). That God himself should hear and come to the edge of the crowd encourages me to keep on calling.

Monday. Talked to Sember (daughter). She said she was playfully telling one of the twins in that sing songy voice we use when talking to babies, "Yes, yes. You have a grandma who loves you, too. Yes, you do!"

Manessah (5) overheard her: You mean, MY white-haired grandma?

Sember: Yes.

Manessah: No. No, they will have to get their OWN white-haired grandma and grandpa when they grow up.

It's been so long since anyone was jealous of me.

At three months Elisha and Kaiden are beginning to "talk" which is such completely arduous work for a baby. The effort requires concentrated waving of arms and legs, wiggling of body, and silent fish-like O's until they finally get out an ahhhooow and then they look wild, like *where did that come from?*

Sunday. In a Madison, WI, coffee shop with Marsena and Jeff (daughter and son-in-law). Their house is on the market. These are the first showings and we have to be out of the way. It is delightful work to help people you love. We all cleaned, polished, arranged flowers, and moved stuff to storage. The house looks great. It's small but charming. I'd buy it instantly. Hope someone else feels the same way.

Tomorrow Jeff starts his new job with Klein Tools in Skokie, IL. He waited for over a year to find this position.



We have all worried and wondered where God would take them. (Marsena can do her writing and editing work anywhere.) Now things are rightly falling into place according to God's timing and not our own. [Update: Their house sold in two weeks and they bought a home in Lake Zurich, IL, just north of Chicago.]

Saturday. Canceled. Our Colorado trip has been canceled. I was looking forward to it for lots of reasons. Who wouldn't want to go to a Rocky Mountain valley in the spring, surrounded by snow caps and be with a group of students who want to seriously study issues of faith and culture? It is just plain fun and instructive to be with college students. They help me love life and the calling God has given Denis and I through Ransom. I am sorry we won't see Greg and Mary Jane Grooms. On the other hand. What a bumper crop of free days with nothing on the calendar. Hah. How long will that last?

Sunday. This evening we went to "high tea" at L'Abri. Held in honor of Mrs. Schaeffer who's been in Rochester visiting for three weeks. She was famous for her special

Sunday afternoon teas. It wasn't something she set out to make famous, it just happened. On Sunday afternoons when students gathered, the day was different from all the rest of the week because they were free from regular work and study. The late afternoons and evenings became a time for tea, special finger food, and relaxed readings from the likes of P.G. Wodehouse, Jane Austin, and A.A. Milne. And times of prayer. When she lived in Rochester we were often invited to

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her New Year's Eve Tea when we would all stay until midnight to pray in the new year.

Sandy, with some good help from friends, master-minded this tea and worked to include all the things that Mrs. S. has made over the years. The table was loaded with long thin celery and carrot sticks, tiny sandwiches, rolled, tri-angled, doubled and filled with such things as curried egg salad, currants, ginger and cheese, cucumber and salmon. There were nuts and olives. Little cheese balls rolled in nuts. Bright cherry tomatoes and a weird special pickle from England which I always taste thinking, this year I will be grown up enough to like it, but I never do. There were Mrs. S's exquisite orange rolls arranged on a platter the size of a small Alp. Marshmallows dipped in melted



chocolate with a pecan set on top—a sort of delicacy appreciated by those who know what it is to live on a limited budget. It is strange to see people who you know would pass up a Hershey Kiss because it is cheap chocolate snarffing up these treats.

We all wonder, will this be the last time we see her? While here on earth, that is. She is 88 years old now. It is a precious thing to see her surrounded especially by women who know her well and whose affection is so obvious. Dorothy Prentice, Ann Woodard, Katie Mohler, Dawn Dahl, Sandy Oster—they sit comfortably with her, arms around her, holding her hand.

Monday. Got up slowly this morning. Couldn't get my body going. Took the time to catch up on some reading. Found this quote and thought of some hard times we've lived through with

surprising moments of sweetness in the midst, and prayed for good friends whose hearts are being wrung just now:

The life you are meant to find will wring your heart to the point of breaking and then douse you with buckets of joy when you are not

looking. It will exhaust you (you will fall into bed bone-weary), but find yourself somehow rejuvenated and nourished, your world opening wider, your eyes looking beyond what is right in front of them, discovering what is hidden. [Linford Detweiler of Over The Rhine, quoted in Paste Magazine 3-2002.]

Tuesday. We have new neighbors right across the street. Four young men are renting the main floor apartment. They seem pretty normal, I think. Yesterday I saw the screen door fly open and one of

them rush down the steps with a large bag of trash, fling it on the ground with his head turned aside, quickly tie it up, and holding it at arm's length, run for the trash can where he unloaded it with an overhead pitch. I recognize this. Perhaps a half gallon of milk left on the counter for five days? Dog piles? Ripened chicken bones?

That same night I saw one of them sitting on the porch while his roommate gave him a mohawk. They laughed at the pile of hair around their feet.

One of our friends calls me Miss Marple—Agatha Christie's snoopin' mystery solver. (*Thanks, Jon.*) But, seriously, it isn't my fault that the window over my kitchen sink faces the street. You'd have to be brain dead not to notice things once in awhile. Like last night they had a party. Sort of. We were having friends over too. We were grilling chicken and vegetables and playing Mexican train dominoes, which is really an excuse for us to exchange insults proving how much we like each other. Each time I came to the kitchen sink I could see the party across the street was also progressing, a side event being that one of the guys was getting tattoo-like illustrations drawn on his chest, back, and arms. They were still out on their porch when we moved from our back yard to the living room. I dropped off a stack of plates at the sink just as he, for no apparent reason, decided to moon the anonymous public. Anne and I both witnessed it. They saw us seeing them and laughed. We were grinning. I think tomorrow I am going over there to introduce myself and say that after sharing such an intimate moment, surely we must become friends. I will take them cookies. These days we must seize any opportunity to meet our neighbors.

Wednesday. I feel like I've been bungee jumping by my wrists. I ache. My fingernails are broken and I can't get all the dirt out from under

them. Disgusting. All for the sake of a little gardening, but I love what we did. It was worth it. Weeds are gone, for the moment, and we have flowers in pots and planters. They aren't blooming much yet, but they will, God willing and if I remember to water and fertilize them.

This morning I noticed one rock jasmine flower in my little potted rock garden. It sits on a single stem about 1 1/2 inches tall. The flower is



Since God has taken the time to create this small thing, I am certain he is pleased to have me admire it.

a cluster of seven blossoms tightly over-lapping one another. Each tiny flower has five petals—the kind of stylized daisy that elementary school girls draw. The entire flower is barely 3/8 inch across. They are a delicate shade of pinky-lilac with the tiniest yellow center where the petals meet. The yellow is not a center eye, but an arching change of color at the base of each petal; all together this forms the “eye.” The flower sits on a stiff stem above its base which is smaller than the flower itself. The plant is a minty dusty green, a sort of miniature bean bag chair with fuzzy ruffles. Since God has taken the time to create this small thing, I am certain he is pleased to have me admire it.

Tuesday. Traverse City, MI. On my way home from a visit to Kris and her family. I should have known it's possible for two women to talk for 48 hours straight, but it is still shocking. Perhaps that kind of total immersion is why we shared a his-

toric cooking moment. I was “helping” by making a pot of soup and when I asked her, “Is this the chicken broth you saved to put in the soup?” pointing to a pitcher of brownish liquid sitting on the counter which looked slightly unusual and didn't smell quite right, but she said yes. It was only as I fine tuned the spices that I detected an odd sweetness to the broth. Hmmm, I thought, vidalia onions are sweet, but not that sweet. Suddenly it dawned on Kris, I had used sweetened ice tea!

Friday. Have felt spiritually dry and sad these days. Am disappointed in self for things like—sin. Like how I can become hostile in a nano-second. And how I can waste time and gifts. That money I squandered on sandals. Which, okay, I needed, but I was in a hurry and bought some that give me blisters. Bad decision. I can't wear them. I need to delete Free Cell from my computer. What a stupid game. And there are other things...

Then I listened to David Eugene Edwards' “Blue Pail Fever” from *Woven Hand* (See *Critique #5-2003* for a review) four times in a row and realized something. I don't understand all of it. But I hear the lament. The deplorable human condition. Part of the song is so simple. Just a cry. A prayer: Speak to me. Speak. To me.

*It's a dry leaf that shivers on
the branch,
What matter if the wind cast it
down
with a ruthless hand.
Cause we remember always that
it took place forever,
Thy kingdom come in
Whosoever.
Like a voice in an empty house,
Breathe your breath
And Speak to me.*

And finally no words, but “hmmmm mmmm mmm. Speak through me.” And musically you hear the filling sound of the Holy Spirit, moving into

everything. Spreading. Healing.

This is about God who speaks Gospel into the grief of our common existence.

I find words to repent. I find enough beauty and joy in Christ to keep hope. Here and there a flower, a baby, a chocolate cake. I find the

God I love, or rather he has found me, and cares for me in all the small moments of my very ordinary human life. ✕

Ransom Notes

May

Colorado Trip. Canceled. Too many students canceled their reservations and in the end it was not financially possible for Probe to proceed with this project. We were disappointed and yet we know that even in these things God is sovereign. Our “free” days quickly filled. We had chances to spend time with a number of friends from out of town—one of them being Dawn Dahl, a worker from English L’Abri. We’ve always loved her. She is so guileless, I think that is the word. With an enormous love for God’s truth and mercy. Some people this nice are not people you want to know. But not Dawn. She is real. Her love for students is genuine and we have seen the sweetness of the unfolding of God’s calling in her life.

Extra Days

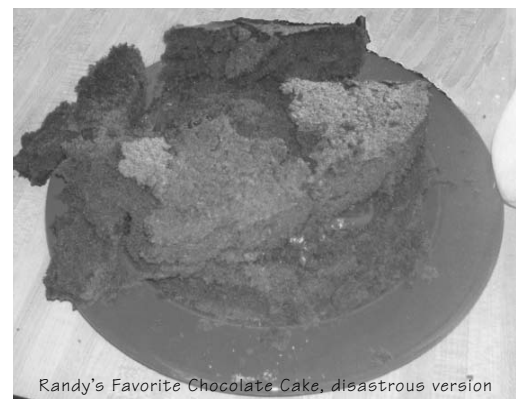
All our weeks have been filled with people around the edges. For dinner. For coffee. Some over night. People like Dawn where it is sheer joy to pray and talk about everything from post-modernity to hospitality. And others, as I mentioned above, whose hearts are being wrung by life. In ways that seem totally inadequate, we want to walk beside them.

I used many of the “extra” days in May and June to write hard on my manuscript. I am pleased to report that I am closer to being done. I think I have one more chapter to write and several to rewrite. I am so grateful (and can hardly believe) the encouragement and prayers I have received from many friends. In each chapter, I include a recipe as a side bar and in the chapter titled “Dogs of our Lives,” I used a chocolate cake recipe my mom made when we were kids. I was talking to her recently and she sent me the original recipe which she called “Randy’s Favorite Chocolate Cake” after my brother—which it was. His favorite. I thought I ought to test it out to make sure I got it right. So I tried it when we were at Marsena and Jeff’s. The recipe follows and if anyone would like to try it and give me feed back, I could use the help. When I made it, although it tasted great, it lacked a certain grace I remembered it having. Maybe that’s because I had to put it in layer pans and removing them made such a disaster (the picture hardly conveys) I finally just dumped the icing on top of the mess, stabbed it with four forks, and in one sitting we ate almost the whole thing. Which normally is very much against my better judgement. ✕

June

Denis has continued hard at work with his seminary classes and the publishing of *Critique*. Right now he is plowing through a course on church history. Because he had no idea what to expect as a returning student, he admits that he over studied for his last class. He received an A+ which had the odd effect of bestowing both confidence and a dose of reality. As in: “If I study this much for every course, I won’t be done until the year 2020 when senile dementia hits me.” (My words. Hah.)

Ransom’s office work has increased this summer as we look and pray for someone to fill in some of the bookkeeping and secretarial needs.



Randy’s Favorite Chocolate Cake, disastrous version

Randy's Favorite Chocolate Cake

1 cup boiling water
2 sq. unsweetened chocolate
1/2 cup butter
1 t. vanilla
1 3/4 cup brown sugar
2 eggs
1 3/4 cup flour
1 t. soda, 1/4 t. salt
1/2 c sour cream

In a small bowl, pour boiling water over chocolate. Stir to mix. Set aside. Cream butter & vanilla, add brown sugar, blend well. Add eggs one at a time and beat. Combine dry ingred. and add to mixture. Beat until smooth. Stir in sour cream and chocolate. Place in 9x5 greased loaf pan. Bake at 325 for 1 hour 15 min. or until a toothpick comes out clean.

Chocolate Fudge Icing

1 stick butter 3 T. cocoa
6 T. milk 1 t. vanilla
3 1/2 cups powdered sugar
1/2 cup chopped walnuts (optional)

Melt butter in a saucepan along with cocoa. Add milk and bring to boil. Remove from heat and beat in the powdered sugar and vanilla. Beat until smooth and add more sugar if necessary until it is of a spreading consistency. Stir in nuts. Spread on cake while slightly warm.

Family Notes

It's Coming

To our friends and family members who have sent us graduation, birth announcements, and wedding invitations: I want you to know I haven't forgotten you, Anna, David, Sandy, Rich Good, Stephanie O., Nathan, Elisabeth P. and any others I may have missed. I promise I will get to it. I am just waiting a bit until my ship comes in so I can send you a bigger better gift. That may happen at the killer garage sale I am planning this summer.

It's Changing

For years this part of *Notes* has been a way to keep in touch with many of our friends who've known our family and liked our kids. But now that our children have grown up, married, and have their own lives and families, it's beginning to feel weird to report on them. I am also aware of how many people on our mailing list now don't know them personally. Many have not even met Denis or me. Though we hope *Notes* helps bridge the impersonal nature of mailings. So maybe I will change this to "Home Notes." Then I can focus more on Denis (he'll love that), like I could tell you about how he hangs towel racks and other special repair tips. (My favorite: "Let the next owner worry about it.") This way I don't have to necessarily include other members of our family and yet I can still write anything I want of a personal nature. Well, almost. I have a managing editor (a daw-ter) who tries to keep me safe. ✖

It's Growing

Jerem and Micah (son and daughter-in-law) are going to meet their first baby next November. Micah has recovered from "tossing her cookies" as Jerem delicately put it and has planted a garden. Micah is from a large family and I wonder if she was thinking of them when she put in nine tomato plants, even though she does not like tomatoes, even when not pregnant. If everything they planted grows, I know where I am going in August.

Final Notes

On Getting Slapped

I've just read a memoir, *Expecting Adam* by Martha Beck. I highly recommend it. This book was one of those "buckets of joy" Detweiler talks about. It's going to make my gift list later this year, but I couldn't resist this quote about education, in particular a Harvard one. Not to be misleading—it's about getting an education in a much larger sense. As in how do you rationally explain giving up all your precious presuppositions and reorienting all you know because you've run squarely into the transcendent? And against everything you've projected for your future, and before he's even born, you've fallen in love with your Down Syndrome son whom everyone says get rid of? Anyway...

We did well academically and ended up going to Harvard over and over again, like addicts. We both applied to combined master's and Ph.D. programs before we'd even graduated from the college.

You might assume from all this that John and I found Harvard pleasant. Oh, how wrong you would be. Actually, I don't know if I ever met anyone at Harvard who found it pleasant. It seems to me (although I may well be projecting) that all the people there scurry anxiously from one achievement to another, casting wary glances over their shoulders, never quite sure that they've managed to throw failure off their scent. To me, being a student there was heady, exciting, even thrilling, but these sensations came laced with heavy doses of fear and misery. It was like having lunch with a brilliant, learned, witty celebrity who liked to lean across the table at unpredictable intervals and slap me in the mouth—hard. Was it interesting? Very. Stimulating? In more ways than one. Pleasant? I don't think so.

Morning Glories

Finally. Do this and you can bank off the beauty on miserable and dreary days. Grow Morning Glories in a pot. This kind of glory is easy to take in the morning, even for the preternaturally grouchy. It costs little. All you need from a nursery is:

- one packet morning glory seeds (blue are best)
- potting soil
- a pot, not too small, like about the size of a basketball
- a six foot bamboo pole

Soak 3-4 seeds overnight in a dish of water. Fill the pot with soil. Press the seeds into the soil about half an inch. Then poke the bamboo pole to the bottom. You can set this pot anywhere and in a few weeks the Glory climbs out of the pot and up the pole. You may need to weight the pot with a brick or two to keep the wind from tipping it after it gets started. About mid-summer the top of the pole has a halo of green with bright blossoms that open in the sun and close when it goes away. It is transcendent in its small way. Like finding a bird's nest with five blue eggs in your door wreath when you step out to get the mail. Exquisite.

That's it from Toad Hall.

Wishing you grace and glory (as much as is good for you),

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.

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