

# Notes from TOAD HALL

Issue #1 - 2004  
Still Winter



## **E**ating the Easter Bunny

You know, there's a reason why they call those free range, organic chicken breasts in the super market "Smart Brand." As opposed to raising and butchering them yourself? You have no idea how much smarter it is. We tried it for awhile, my husband and me. That was back when our thinking was crystalline, and we tried to convince everyone to become urban farmers and save the earth. In our back yard we were going to raise earthworms. I forget exactly why, but I think the worms were supposed to transform our hard New Mexican soil into loam and the sale of leftover writhing boxfulls were going

to fund our retirement or something. We actually did grow a big garden, raise bees, and breed rabbits, the French equivalent to chickens. I can't even begin to remember how I got my husband to agree to do this last thing. He is no carpenter, but somehow he managed to build three sturdy rabbit cages; I believe a friend helped him—it was a long time ago.

Through the want ads we bought a big white New Zealand buck and two does. One of the does was also a New Zealand white who cast huge litters of pure white bunnies. Our son, Jerem, must have been two years old when he set them all free in our backyard one afternoon. It looked like it had snowed in a Looney Tunes, as bunnies ran in drifts, joyfully leaping one another and kicking off the back wall.

The second doe was an unknown breed the color of burnished chestnut who produced dozens of babies with color combinations only God could think of. Pairing the white male with her hidden genes made bunnies of pure black, black and white, brown and white, siamese, and gray with delicate black points. We fell in love, forgetting that the end of this short food chain meant we were supposed to kill and eat them.

I do remember every detail of what it took to dispatch and cook them, including Marsena's suspicious question at the dinner table: "What is this?" And my quick sinful answer: "Fried chicken, it's just fried chicken, so eat it."

I won't recount our personal butchering details for you right now, but I did recently come across the following, which is so close to what we experienced, I can hear the sounds and smell the blood.

*The purveyor appeared with twelve live rabbits. "He knocked one out, slit its throat, pinned it to a board, skinned it, gutted it, the whole bit," Keller [star chef of The French Laundry in*

*Napa Valley] remembers. "Then he left." Alone in the grass behind the restaurant with eleven little bunnies, he lurched for the first victim. "Rabbits scream," Keller says. "And this one screamed really loud." Keller tried to kill it, but the rabbit struggled to get away. The rabbit nearly broke free, but Keller gripped it by the leg, and the leg snapped in his hand. Terrified*



**Most of us are so far from the family farm and rural life we have lost even secondhand experience of the cost of blood and butchering.**

*and now likely in great pain, the rabbit could no longer run, and Keller managed to kill it.*

*Thus did Keller learn how to butcher a rabbit, and it had been an unhappy experience... killing these rabbits had been so horrible for him, had so humbled him, he would not squander their lives. He determined to use all his powers as a cook to ensure that these were the best rabbits ever.*

[“Natural-Born Keller” by Michael Ruhlman, *Best Food Writing 2000*]

Most Americans are so far from the family farm and rural life we have lost even secondhand experience of the cost of blood and butchering. We mostly prefer it this way, to not think of it at all. We like to buy our meat sealed in plastic and perched on a white tray with a diaper un-

derneath to absorb offensive liquid. Some of us are lucky enough to get a tiny jolt of reality when the child we take to a petting zoo suddenly connects a silky feathered crowing rooster with that piece of lean white meat thawing on the counter for supper.

Last fall our five year old granddaughter went with Denis to a farm where he picked out our Thanksgiving turkey. Manessah swore she would never eat turkey again, ever. It's hard. But when the day came, she was won over by the rich golden smell and the juicy slices of breast meat on the platter.

### **Feasting With God**

Raising those rabbits and forcing ourselves to kill them had its special reward, which may be hard to believe. I don't think it's meant to be easy, but I get what it means to take the life of another living creature and eat it so you can live. I'm also grateful that God blessed the ritual of eating meat by doing such things as accepting an invitation from Abraham to stay for lunch.

*The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground...*

*"Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed." ...then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree...*

(Gen. 18)

What a strange historic day for a man napping in the shade.

The Scriptures teem with symbols and rituals meant to remind us of what it cost God to pay for our sins. This includes the slaying of animals for food, clothing, and sacrifice. From the beginning in the garden when God sent Adam and Eve on their way after giving them leather clothing, to the courtyard of the Jerusalem temple, something had to pay for what was wrong. For generations Israeli families slaughtered lambs, ate them, and waited until the Messiah came and did it for real, forever. It has been a bloody mess and we are the fault of it.

Paul reminds us of the fatal breaking of Christ's body: "and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes." (1 Cor 11:24-26)

Now in the church we *celebrate* the Lord's supper. To *celebrate* is to observe an event with ceremonies of festivity and rejoicing. To reach the point of celebration over Jesus death, it is first necessary to understand his suffering. I think this is what Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion* does best for us—helps us understand the outrageous cost.

### Loving Christ's Body

Before this huge media event, I grew tired of all the Christian hype, the interviews, emails, and reviews. A young friend commented before the movie was released: "I'm already so sick of hearing about this movie and how we need to use it as an evangelistic tool, and how can we get our neighbors to this and cor-

ner them about what they've seen and what they're going to do about it. I don't even know if I want to see it. What about just going and viewing it as a film, a piece of art that is meant to touch our own lives in a deep and real way?" He expressed my own discomfort over the endless Christian hoopla, even though my saying anything negative about using *The Passion* to bring lost sinners to Christ sounds heretical. Like I don't believe in the Virgin birth or something.

In fact, I can see non-Christians being suspicious of our motives if we suddenly become interested in knowing what *they* think about a movie. There have been plenty of movies recently which bring up the big questions of life. But if I suddenly take an interest in *movies*, and what you as my non-Christian neighbor *think of this one*, just now because it perfectly fits my agenda and can therefore drive our "discussion?" Isn't that a little disingenuous?

I value *The Passion* for its unblinking look at the physical suffering Jesus endured in the last hours of his life—the beating, the staggering to the place of execution, the drinking of life's poison, and the crashing of all his systems. That's what this movie does so well. Although I really do want to reach my



**For generations, Israeli families slaughtered lambs, ate them, and waited until the Messiah came and did it for real, forever.**

neighbor, the power of this movie may lie more in its ability to confront me with my tendency to make the cross just another bad day in the life of Jesus. Another day in which we have to butcher a gentle calf or the baby rabbits.

I may be in touch with what it costs an animal for me to live, but I can callously ignore what it cost Jesus to forgive me. I am filled with an enormous capacity to excuse my "little" infractions (see above lie I told Marsena). And furthermore, every time UPS delivers us another review copy of some new book I swell with envy. Yes, I think: Someone *else* has written *another* book? I am also quick to note how others have wronged me. Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian in Manhattan, says there is something wrong with our spiritual memory—we remember hundreds of times longer an insult or an unanswered prayer while our ability to remember something good is, oh, maybe thirty seconds. For example although it has been more than a month since we've received this message on our answering machine, I remember every word: "I'm calling with a request to be continued on the mailing list for *Critique*, but would not care to receive *Notes From Toad Hall*. So if you can continue to do the mailing for *Critique*, that's all I'm really



interested in.” Oh, yeah?

And toward Denis, who I love more than anyone in all the world I can be...well, here, from my journal: *Denis and I have had some marital snaps. I feel insulted by his pointed questions. I take it very personally when he peers at my computer screen and says, “What have you done?!” “I’VE DONE NOTHING AT ALL. BILL GATES DID IT,” I say. Though Denis swears no personal defamatory intent, I am certain he does. And off we go, snap, snap, snap. We are both maligned and affronted. One moment we’re so in love we can’t believe our luck and the next we’re ready to bite a head off. This*



**This love is what makes Communion such a celebration. That, and knowing the ugly things we’ve done weren’t able to keep Jesus dead after all.**

*depresses Denis. Like I’ve said, I am more callous, as my response is: This is merely life. I forgive you, you forgive me and now let’s cuddle like we always do. Okay?*

*This is why Jesus fell on the road to Calvary? This is why he had to ask, “My God, My God why have you forsaken me?” To pay for my stupid little sins? That’s what is so hard to get my mind around. That he should care enough to drink my poison. And that’s why Gibson’s artistic depiction of Christ’s suffering in those final hours remind*

me to cast my entire lot in with Christ, for how can we resist such love?

This love is what makes Communion such a celebration. That, and knowing the ugly things we’ve done weren’t able to keep Jesus dead after all. God raised him and, man, we should be dancing in the streets, if only we weren’t white Norwegian Presbyterians! ✕

## Ransom Notes

### Looking Back

**January 8-11, Toad Hall, Rochester.** At Ransom’s Annual Board of Directors Meeting, several things stood out as we reviewed the past year. With Denis taking classes toward a master’s in theology, it meant accepting fewer speaking invitations and we wondered whether our donors would stick with us through this process. We also launched a website which required financial support and a good deal of time to design and maintain (Marsena does this). We trusted and prayed that God would lead us through these things according to his timing if they were going to happen. We were all deeply thankful for God’s provision, taking it as a sign to move ahead—Denis continues in the Access program at Covenant Seminary, and each month the number of people using the website grows. Our board is a group of people we love and have confidence in; we could not minister without their guidance, support, and prayer.

**January 15-25, St. Louis.** Denis took a J-term seminary class. We both did a Friday evening Border’s lecture, and I also spoke to a woman’s group on campus. Denis was preoccupied with class from morning til night which left me free to spend time with individuals, file my nails, and watch the cooking channel. Right. I didn’t do the last two, much. I spent my hours answering letters, writing, and preparing lectures. I sound guilty and defensive, don’t I? In this case it is probably residual fundamentalism from which I occasionally need healing.

**February 2-3, Rochester L’Abri Conference.** Denis and I always consider it an honor to join L’Abri for this time. More than 700 attended this year. There was enormous diversity among speakers and topics which makes this a unique and rich conference. Each year we meet people who determine to make it an annual event. There were many, many highlights, and here are just a few:

Mardi Keyes, L’Abri worker from Southborough, gave a plenary on marriage that was excellent; we plan to eventually publish it in *Critique*. She gave a brief historical view of marriage, the effects of the enlightenment and romanticism, the problem of marriage as idolatry, and how to resist cultural cynicism.

Nancy Pearcey’s sessions on Christian worldview were clear and practical help for understanding the current split between

the rational and the subjective.

Richard Winters, professor from Covenant Seminary, did some excellent sessions on boredom, perfectionism, and anger.

Jozef Luptak, an internationally known cellist from Slovakia, did a concert that was stunning. We were deeply moved by his music. He is married to Katka, the daughter of our friends Boba & Milan Cical from Bratislava. It was delightful to see her and spend a bit of time with them.

Denis' plenary session on film covered the shift in worldview questions asked by succeeding generations. With several movie clips to draw from, he showed that, though there will always be questions about the meaning of life, the emphasis has generally shifted. Modernists wanted reasons and proofs for questions like the existence of God, truth, and evil. Post-moderns don't want rational proofs as much as they want meaningful relationships. In the end, their main question is: will anyone be there for me?

Denis, Marsena, and I each gave workshops on various aspects of popular culture and found much interest and need for thinking Christianly about them.

To order tapes, log onto [www.soundword.com](http://www.soundword.com) and click on "Conferences" to get to the L'Abri 2004 conference.

## Coming Up

**March 11-16, St. Louis.** Denis will host a film discussion for seminary students and guest lecture in a class.

**April 1, St. Paul, Border's Bookstore.** I am giving a lecture that explores the resurgence of tattooing in our culture. (I know. It's April Fool's Day. I plan to go ahead, anyway.)

**April 4, Farmington, MN.** Denis will preach at the PCA church in Farmington.

**April 15, Minneapolis Border's Bookstore.** Denis will give a lecture on the music of Radiohead.

**With Thanksgiving.** We are so grateful for those of you who pray for us. We know that as we speak to groups, as we write, and meet people, we represent Christ and the church. We are often mindful of how love and authenticity are so basic to our calling. And of how we ourselves are in constant need of growth—growth that comes through difficulties and challenges. So pray that we never function on autopilot, but that the Word of God will be sharp and alive in us because we have allowed it to pierce and shape us. I am grateful my health has been better the last few months. It has reawakened memories of what it was like to have energy for things as fundamental as going up and down the stairs. This makes me happy. I confess I'm a little anxious for summer—I don't know if it's weather or coincidence that makes summers more difficult.

**February 6, Lake Zurich, IL.** By the time everyone left (we also had house guests during the L'Abri conference) Denis and I were ready for some quiet time. We visited Marsena and Jeff where the most energetic thing I did was press "play" on the CD player while Denis studied for a course. Well, I did clean up another kitchen disaster which you'll see in Family Notes.

**February 22, St. Paul, MN.** Denis preached at Christ Community Church (ARC) and we led an afternoon film discussion of *Thirteen Conversations About One Thing*.

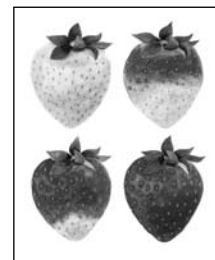
**February 27-29, Concord, NC.** Denis led a weekend conference for a PCA church.

**April 21-25, Calvin College, Festival of Faith & Writing.** I am attending. This year Frederick Buechner, Thomas Lynch, Lauren Winner, and Douglas Coupland are some of the writers I look forward to hearing.

**April 21-25, Mansfield, Ohio, Alliance for Renewal Churches.** Denis is the speaker at this annual national leadership conference.

**May 21-30, Camp Redcloud, CO.** Denis and I join Greg and Mary Jane Grooms and their college students from UT in Austin. In the midst of the beautiful Rockies, students come to rest from the tearing pace of life, to reflect on what it means to live in and winsomely engage our culture, and to take time for prayer and Bible study. We love to be with them, it sharpens and refines us. It helps expose us to the burning issues of students today. Pray we would be able to challenge and encourage them.

**Bonnie's Brochure.** You'll find the latest CCO card brochure included this issue. Bonnie is CCO's Director of Communications and these cards are all her designs. Profits go to support CCO's ministry. Her work is very worthy and unusual in the Christian greeting card industry. I recommend it.



**Remembering the Good Things.** Earlier I mentioned how we're inclined to remember bad things forever. In an effort to balance that, among the good things I do remember are encouraging letters like the following:

*I hesitate to write this note since I dread adding to anyone's pile of unanswered mail. PLEASE do not feel obligated to reply. I just want to thank you for the "Nearly Fall" issue of Notes From Toad Hall 2003. I loved reading about how God comforts you, the trip you missed, the plowing contest, the toilet seat, and the items about chocolate. Even your appeal for address updates was hilarious. Margie, I've never met you, but I love you. You are the reason we support Ransom—that movie stuff? Not relevant to my life. (Please don't tell Denis.) ~Connie from Georgia*

[Connie, I won't tell Denis. Thanks so much for everything and please don't hesitate to write.]

*Is it any wonder that my excitement at seeing Notes in my mailbox forced the postponement of dinner? Your writing is so down to earth, so real, so fun, and yet full of wisdom. Wow! I did take a little offense when you said "who would want to hug a tractor at the end of the day? Or offer a prayer of praise for the beauty of a Massey Ferguson?" I don't think I've ever hugged my little Austin-Healey Sprite after a good day of racing, but I have thanked God for the beauty of man and machine in action. And for the God-given creativity manifest in a beautiful machine doing just what it does so well." ~Scott from Colorado*

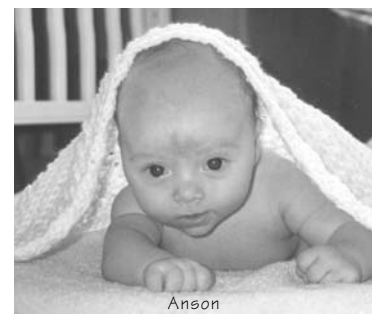
[Scott, I note you are a male which pleases me—I dislike writing things that are exclusively girly-girl. I'm working on my attitude toward engines and my ego which you have dangerously fed.]

A friend from Oregon sent me a letter merely addressed "Margie." No address, no zip code, no nothing. Just, "Margie." I haven't yet achieved the name recognition of Madonna, so her mailman had to return it the next day marked "insufficient address" which kinda hurt. Still, I'm flattered. ¶

## F Family Notes

In a recent issue of *Notes* I mentioned I was going to drop this section now that our children have homes of their own, but many people objected because they've known us for years or feel like they have. So I'll keep it after all and try to be sensitive to the family. The only one who doesn't get such preferential treatment is Denis. But I would never tell you anything about him I wouldn't be happy to repeat about myself. So let that be my standard. And I'll try not to be like the Amish woman, whose weekly column appears in our newspaper. She says things like: "It rained today and the children had to play inside." (Perhaps I misspeak and the reason for its popularity is the hunger people have for simple ordinary families where nothing more exciting happens than sitting down to a meal of corned beef hash and creamed corn.)

**Jerem and Micah.** Our son, Jerem, called the other day and they've bought a small deep fryer (scaled down version of the turkey-sized one that requires five gallons of oil and burns down your garage if left alone for a moment) and they now deep-fry anything that holds batter on the surface. Which reminds me, did you know fondue pots are back in fashion? We used to do this with a boiling pot of oil in the center of the table; we dipped everything in a tempura-like batter, from tender chunks of venison to broccoli, and then dipped them in various sauces. It was good. We gave it up along with trans, sat, and sub fats. Micah told me they have so much snow up there on the Canadian Border that Jerem put an ad in the paper for shoveling snow off roofs—in his spare time. Only once did he tie himself to the chimney because of the steep roof. He finds heights stressful enough that every time he fell asleep that night he fell off the roof. Anson has just passed three months and is going to have a head full of curly hair like his mom. Of course he is brilliant and cute.



**LaRoses.** In the La Rose branch of our family, the twins turned a year old February 8. They are identical in looks, but not in personality. Elisha, or Lieshey has begun talking. "All done," he says, and cheerfully throws his food on the floor. Kaiden, when finished eating, quietly rakes the remainders off his tray into a neat little pile on his lap.



Manessah will be six later this month. Recently when an adult pointed at the watermelon she was eating and asked what color it was, Manessah looked at her with disbelief and exclaimed, "You don't know your colors?" Shaun continues to find work as a muralist in the Twin Cities area. We don't say "feast or famine." More like they get a chance for a snack or two between bouts of famine.

And, much to everyone's surprise—or is it sympathy (?)—another La Rose is joining the family in July. Yes, the twins will be 16 months old by then. Sember is feeling much better with this pregnancy than with the last one. We are so thankful.



**Konkles.** After the Konkles moved to the Chicago area, they had trouble with the national moving company who misrepresented themselves, overcharged, and is now suing because Jeff is contesting the charges. Jeff calmly waits for summons to small claims court while Marsena nervously eats her mouse pad. Marsena has an agent for the novel she completed and is waiting for a publisher. She finds it strange and empowering to say: "My agent is working on it." They've found a church they love. Sometimes in life we get this, but not often, I don't think: a pastor who is able to wed orthodoxy, narrative, and cultural relevance into his sermons and thereby challenge hearts to follow Christ anywhere. Ewan Kennedy is pastor of Westminster Presbyterian in Elgin.

**Humility.** Last Saturday I paid good money for a lesson in this. I drove the car through an automatic wash at the Amoco station. These things are built with guides, flashing lights, and buzzers designed to help even the least intuitive, most illiterate person get through without damaging car or self. And yet I managed to drive too far forward so the machine began to apply a three inch layer of soap in the middle of the wind shield. Putting the car in reverse set off alarms, so although I could barely see, I decided to pull through and get another ticket. The attendant gave me another one, but he rolled his eyes. When I headed back to the car, there was a young man standing beside it looking in disbelief as the back half dripped pink and blue suds onto the ground. I waited for him to go away, but he just stood there shaking his head until at last I had to go get in. He pointed with raised eyebrows, and I told him the truth. "I'm crazy," I said, twirling my finger by my temple, "but I am working on it." The next time through I did okay.

Another disaster at Marsena's—I decided to make a batch of cookies and pulled out her KitchenAid to mix them. In all the years I've cooked, I've never owned one or even used one. I really enjoyed the smooth growling of the machine as it effortlessly blended butter, sugar and molasses. But when I added three cups of flour and accidentally hit "rocket fuel" it just as effortlessly threw all three cups in a perfect four foot radius. Here, as well, I did okay on the second time through. Still, this is not good, don't you think? ☹



# Final Notes

This is from a short story in the most recent issue of *Image Magazine*. Robert Olen Butler's works of fiction are a must around our house.

*"...that's one of the things I know about God, from hearing all the words. And from looking around me. This is a fierce neck of the woods, the planet earth. And God's a roughhouser all right. I ain't afraid to say it. We got to live in the world he's made for us. Every living thing is eating some other living thing every second of the day. It's just how it goes. I myself ate old Jeb just last week, who was as personable a rooster as you could find and who'd walk right up to me to say howdy whenever I come near. But times is lean and we had to eat him. Though often I had to hold it against Jeb, for in Proverbs chapter 27 it says, "He that blesseth his friend with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, it shall be counted a curse to him." In the midst of all the carnage you need to keep your voice down in the morning. That's the word of God.*

*["Up by Heart" by Robert Olen Butler, Image Mom: issue number?]*



In the midst of all the carnage we also remember this: That Christ was afflicted with our sorrow, actually cursed with it, and yet he's gathered us in an unspeakably tender way to heal our wounds and comfort our hearts. We have been redeemed.

That's it from Toad Hall.



Warmly,

*Margie*  
Margie Haack

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.

Marsena Konkle  
Managing Editor

Receive *Notes from Toad Hall* (quarterly) and *Critique* (a newsletter written nine times per year by my husband, Denis) by requesting to be added to Ransom's mailing list. Donors to Ransom Fellowship, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-deductible ministry, are added to the mailing list automatically.

Ransom Fellowship  
1150 West Center Street  
Rochester, MN 55902

e-mail: [margie@ransomfellowship.org](mailto:margie@ransomfellowship.org)

Order Books From:



Distinctive Books and Music

[www.heartsandmindsbooks.com](http://www.heartsandmindsbooks.com)  
[read@heartsandmindsbooks.com](mailto:read@heartsandmindsbooks.com)

234 East Main Street  
Dallastown, PA 17313  
(717) 246-3333

All books mentioned in *Notes from Toad Hall* may be ordered directly from Hearts and Minds. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to Ransom Fellowship.