

Notes from TOAD HALL

Issue #2 - 2005
Summer



Sunday Afternoon

“Are you from the Unitarian Church?”

A small, dark-haired woman drinking a soy latte and holding a copy of *Enlightenment* magazine smiled encouragingly at me. Others seated around the table at Dunn Bros Coffee shop stared at me and waited.

I'd only been there thirty seconds before I discerned this wouldn't be a discussion I controlled. I'd never been mistaken for a Unitarian. Did I look like a Unitarian? I wasn't wearing a batik jersey dress with

Kokopelli on the font.

The evening before I'd seen the movie *What The Bleep Do We Know?!* with our small group from church. It was a part of a local film festival. Although it doesn't work artistically, it brings up all the big questions about life and meaning. It asks them in your face and then gives you a set of postmodern answers. We stayed up late wondering how many of our neighbors and colleagues believed or acted on these ideas. And if they did, how we could engage them in conversation and communicate Christian beliefs to them.

Before we parted, someone mentioned that the next afternoon at Dunn Bros Coffee there was a public discussion on *What the Bleep* being sponsored by the film group. I decided to join them. Life can be way too sheltered in our climate-controlled Christian community; I needed a shot of live, uncensored non-Christians talking about life and ideas. It could be a St. Paul-ish Mars Hill spy-trip. I would listen, learn, and at the right moment, I could give a gorgeous presentation of the gospel.

Think Stephen Hawking on an Acid Trip

What The Bleep Do We Know?! is a movie about quantum mechanics, sort of. My brain contains a file titled Quantum Mechanics, but it's empty—except for a scrap of corrupted information about atoms unexpectedly leaving their assigned places, or a particular atom being in several places at once. (This is a feature every parent needs, but is, apparently, possessed only by children and atoms.) So, scientists tell us, if you deliberately focus on an atom and try to catch her doing

this trick she is standing still. And that is, like, just a tiny piece of a fascinating science with links to time, reality, origins, spirituality, and...truly, what the bleep do I know?

The movie is part documentary, part story, and part animation.

Amanda, played by Marlee Matlin, finds herself in a weird Alice-in-Wonderland experience when her daily, uninspired life literally begins to unravel, revealing the uncertain world of the quantum field hidden behind her normal, waking reality. Fourteen scientists and mystics are interviewed throughout the film and their ideas are woven



What the Bleep Do We Know?! is a movie about quantum mechanics—sort of.

together to emphasize the film's underlying concept of the interconnectedness of all things. They serve as a type of Greek chorus and introduce the Big Questions of Life as the story leads us down the "Rabbit Hole." Several of the experts mention there appears to be a "Silent Observer" behind the energies of the universe, but most agree they don't know for certain what makes the universe run. At the conclusion, one of the experts known as *Ramtha*, looks into the camera and tells us there is no way for humans to determine what is right or wrong, and that believing in a God who will judge or punish a person for what they have done is ridiculous, because everyone chooses their own path, their own reality. That, she says, is the beginning of wisdom.

Critics differed widely on the film's success. Peter Howell of the Toronto Star wrote: "The film with

the year's most unfortunate title also happens to be a candidate for the worst film of the year." Critic Susan Granger said: "Provocative movies like this open a world of knowledge and ideas, stimulating thinking and conversation."

What I didn't know that Sunday afternoon when I joined the film discussion was that this independent movie is the work of students of the channeler, JZ Knight, who calls herself *Ramtha*. *Ramtha* is a 35,000 year old wise man who appeared in Knight's kitchen on an afternoon in 1977. She's been channeling him ever since. Of the fourteen interviewees, a number either work for or teach in her *School of Enlightenment*. Others who don't work for her organization, as in the case of David Albert, professor and director of the Philosophical Foundations of Physics program at Columbia University, claim they were completely misrepresented in the movie. "It became clear to me they believe that ... by positive thinking we can alter the structure of the world around us. I spent a long time explaining why that isn't true, going into great detail. But in the movie, my views are turned around 180 degrees."

For that afternoon discussion, I hadn't yet done this research. But even if I knew all there was to know about quantum physics and Transcendental Meditation there's a limit to my capacity. However, my intellectual limitations aren't an excuse for never engaging with non-Christians unless it's in a controlled environment like a Bible study where there's no risk for me. It's more of a challenge to believe God is with me in a coffee shop when I'm missing my PhD, my research, and a brilliant mind.

I take heart from Jonathan, King Saul's son. When he was scouting a high-tech Philistine military out-post, he was out-gunned, out-manned, and in a suicidal position to attack. But he said to his attaché, basically; "With God, the odds on winning don't matter, so why don't

we do a little rock-climbing and see what happens?” I love his armor-bearer’s response: “I’m with you heart and soul!” No military strategist would have predicted the resulting disaster for the Philistines. That’s reality in every dimension, including quantum mechanics: God controls the universe. He’s also pleased to use people who aren’t power brokers in any way – which means I’m a player. The gospel’s power to save doesn’t depend on my comprehension of physics or neopaganism. I can show up with my heart and soul even when it’s a risky, blundering piece of rock-climbing.



Marlee Matlin as Amanda

Define God

There were nine of us – I was the lone stranger among them. (It was good to learn how it feels to be “The Visitor” to the Bible Study.) The only person I knew was a friend who quietly slipped in beside me about half-way through the discussion. She observed everything, so I can’t pretend to be the next Francis Schaeffer.

I wanted to remain anonymous, listen quietly, and scope out how hostile they’d be if they knew I was a Christian. I was barely seated with an Americano when, together, they focused on me: When did you see the movie? How did you hear about it? How many times have you seen it? What did you think? Did you like it?

I tried to evade answering with a modest: “I really want to hear what you guys think of the movie” – they totally ignored that – like they knew I was stalling. They insisted on knowing who I was.

I told them, “I saw the movie the first time last night with a group of friends from our church.” (nervously

adding) “We regularly get together to discuss movies, popular culture, and other things” (other things being the BIBLE which I didn’t say).

That prompted another chorus of questions: What did they think about it? Did they like it? Hey, are you from the Unitarian Church?

The last question was delivered with such anticipation and pre-approval, I felt a little ashamed dashing their hopes. I took a long noisy sip of coffee. No one had ever confused me with a Unitarian. I’ve noticed that Evangelicals generally despise Unitarians: “Why BOTHER,” they say? “Just join the Country Club or the Music Guild, but don’t PRETEND

I prudently admitted I hadn’t the slightest capacity for discussion molecular biology, quantum physics, hormone receptors, or any other philosophical explanations for the nature of existence.

to be religious.” At the same time I wondered; are we so isolated and insular that it’s preposterous for me to be a Christian and yet someone who takes questions of art and culture seriously?

Finally, I replied, “No. I’m a Presbyterian. Not from the big church, the little one over on 14th street... we thought the ideas in the movie were fascinating and talked for hours about how you know you know, how to define reality, and how to describe the soul.”

They looked extremely pleased with me, like I’d just given them

deep muscle massage for free. I was among pagans, but I could see they were interesting and smart. So with the next breath, I prudently admitted I hadn’t the slightest capacity for discussing molecular biology, quantum physics, hormone receptors, or any other philosophical explanations for the nature of existence.

Everyone assured me they weren’t “experts” either, then they talked about how much they loved the movie. And how at first the main character, Amanda, was afraid of the interconnected reality which existed on an atomic level. Was reality just the reaction of her hormones on her cell receptors? Was it some other mysterious energy which lay beyond her senses? Amanda was hoping to find answers before she cracked up. One of her most painful questions was why her husband was so unfaithful – beginning from the very day of their wedding. The film group thought his infidelity was the result of Amanda’s choices whether she recognized it or not. It was merely the path she had to travel to finally reach peace.

I choked a little and wondered if I needed to assert, “This makes no sense. Her husband was a jerk, he hurt her deeply because, label it whatever you want, we are moral creatures who instinctively recognize betrayal and injustice. There are absolutes. This is one of them: A groom doesn’t ever, EVER get to screw around on his wedding day. Or any other time, okay? So why are you making HER responsible for this pain?” Instead, I made myself very quiet, and so I wouldn’t roll my eyes, I stared down my nose into my coffee mug.

A thin man with an unruly mop of long, gray hair, his shoulder in a sling seemed to sense my conflict,



looked at me with rheumy eyes and offered this solution, “The only time I experience happiness and freedom from pain is when I meditate. I get into that zone where there is nothing. Where the mind is just blank. I do this every day.” He looked so sweet. There were nods of sympathy around the table.

The cheerful woman, the one holding *Enlightenment* magazine, (later she showed us advertisements for the movie with conferences based on it being held across the country) said, “You see?! He (the thin man) is creating his own reality! He has options! We all have choices that enable us to choose our paths in spite of pain or what others do to us. To do that you go ‘inner’ – inside yourself – where you find your own gods.”

At this point, some Christians would loudly declare Jesus Christ is LORD. Although that is my belief with every molecule of my heart, a micro-second’s reflection told me that wouldn’t convert them. In fact, they probably wouldn’t see the point. I would only succeed in alienating them.

Instead, I summoned courage and asked, “I’d like to understand what you mean by ‘gods.’ I think of God as a being outside myself.”

A lady in a purple sweater and white dandelion head told me, “Well, god is you. It’s your peptides and hormones. It’s a power inside you that causes you to do certain things.”

From the movie I remembered a bizarre animation of hormones pouring out of a large man’s body which made him stand over a table at a wedding reception uncontrollably stuffing food into his mouth until it dribbled down his front and bloated his belly. The idea that, on the one hand, we can’t help being controlled by hormones and yet have power

to stop them when they tempt us to do things which aren’t socially acceptable, seemed to arbitrarily place more value on certain behaviors when, in fact, there shouldn’t be a problem with whatever one’s hormones choose. Or with whatever happens. Which seemed inconsistent, but they didn’t notice. It made me a little crazy.



J. Z. Knight, a.k.a. Ramtha

The lady in purple continued, “You have the power to control your response on the receptors of each and every one of your cells. We HAVE options. We can choose our own path and we become whatever god we want to be.”

It was a good thing I didn’t think of a cynical response until the next day – I’d like to be god of passwords so I never have to tell some geek I forgot mine, and then be asked to tell the secret answer to my secret question which I also forgot.

Debbie, a young social worker at the end of table, said, “I liked the scientists, especially the one in front of the fireplace who explained that the brain doesn’t necessarily recognize reality. For the brain to see something, like, say, a clipper ship on the sea...well, it can’t see a clipper ship on the sea if it’s never seen one before, can it? What we see, what we know, is conditioned by culture and experience, so if we’ve never seen a ship before and let’s say we’re a Native American standing on the beach and Columbus is pulling into port, the ship doesn’t exist for the brain.”

I felt sad not to offer a more compelling argument, “But if you can’t see the ship because the brain has no categories for it, then how can we even conceive the question humans ask all the time – What

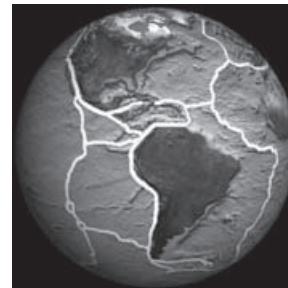
IS that? Do you think this means that reality can’t exist outside our own ability to perceive it? And if reality is only imagined, how would we explain the viruses brought by Columbus which killed so many Native Americans? Were they real or not?”

A man in flannel shirt and blue jeans had a point, “I’m a hunter [Wow. He was allowed to admit that in this group? I was intrigued.] and, once, years ago I took a friend into the woods. He’d never been hunting before. He couldn’t see anything. Couldn’t see game at all even though it was right in front of us! Only when I helped him, pointed to a deer, could he see it. His brain couldn’t see because, well, he hadn’t the experience. His eyes saw, but didn’t REALLY see because he had no categories in which to place it.

Someone responded, “And we can’t judge what’s right or what’s wrong for another person. It’s personal choice.”

Which seemed so random, I changed the subject: “So, who is the Silent Observer they talk about in the movie?”

Debbie answered: “The Silent Observer is what I call my soul.”



“So, we could have moved the tectonic plates and stopped the tsunami if enough of us meditated?” There were a lot of Yeses! around the table.

I’m not good at listening to it. My soul observes what I know and wants me to take a chance on what I don’t know, a chance for a better path. But I don’t make that choice because I’m comfortable with the misery I already know. And life has been pretty miserable lately.” (She began to cry, and the person next to her put a hand on her arm.)

“Although it’s only in a small way there’s a natural goodness in my soul, deep down—something all people have. In that goodness, I move toward healing and try to help others become aware of that goodness in them so they can be healed. In this way I have hope that the world too, will be healed.”

Moving Tectonic Plates

Here were people sincerely trying to make sense of a world of suffering, trying so hard to do what was right. Would they suddenly see the freedom hidden in the Gospel’s verdict if I told them, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God?” Would they understand that if, indeed, our path to salvation depends on our ability to think positive, meditate, control hormone receptors, listen to the soul, which you can never perfectly do, then we’re merely committing ourselves to a new law, a works-righteousness system which can never be kept? And that what we all need is a cosmic, divine, mysterious rescue from a perfect and powerful source outside ourselves? No. But you need to start somewhere. I relate to honesty and humility, perhaps they would, too.

I finally said, “I admire your virtue, Debbie, but to be honest? I’m ashamed because, my natural inclinations don’t move toward the Good at all. If the practice of Goodness is left to me, I’m ruined, and so is the world. Take the smallest, most insignificant thing – I’m naturally selfish and I channel (probably the wrong word to use in that group) anger, hate, impatience. I don’t think peptides and hormones entirely explain this inner motion toward evil. Just the other night I was so completely, disproportionately angry because this friend took the wrong way to our destination. It took all my power



not to yell and grab the steering wheel. I vowed never to be in a car with this person again unless I was driving – all because it made us two minutes late. So if we depend on me to improve humanity even the slightest – we’re doomed. God, help me.” And I brought both hands up and

touched my forehead with my fingers.

It looked like a total failure to connect because the cheerful woman triumphantly shouted, “You see?! You are unconsciously appealing to your inner god with that motion. You did THIS!” (She copied my hand movement.)

Everyone laughed and nodded having caught me, a

Christian, in a pagan motion indicating my “inner god” – not with my hands out-stretched to the heavens in supplication to God. I had no idea the gesture had a particular meaning to them.

Dismayed, I protested, “No, no, no! I do THAT too, on my knees, my hands up, crying help with all my heart to God in heaven.” I gestured, both hands in the air, palms up. Still, they laughed, and I did, too.

The cheerful woman concluded that the more of us who determine together to change, we really CAN change, ourselves, even the world.

“Think of the study,” she said, “done on violent crime in the D.C. area in 1993.

For two weeks 4,000 transcendental meditation experts meditated on peace, and the crime rate decreased by 18%.”

The thin man sounded hopeful: “So, we could have moved the tectonic plates, stopped the tsunami if enough of us meditated?” There were a lot of “Yeses!”

Then I heard a quiet voice. A tall woman (one of the organizers of the film festival) directly across from me who hadn’t spoken the entire time softly said, “Bullshit.” I clearly heard her, but others were asking, what did she say, what did she say?

She gently repeated it, bull (pause) shit. Equal weight on both words. It was a shock, a verbal tsunami. Everyone was silent for a minute. I began to softly laugh. Others joined in for other reasons, I suppose. The two hour discussion was over.

One of the group was a writer and invited me to get in touch with her. She wants to talk more about ideas of spirituality and mystery. But I’d definitely like to call the tall, one-word woman. Her summary was brilliant.

You Never Know

I need these encounters. My neighbors are real people battling pain, broken relationships, political tyranny, terrorism, and natural disasters. Their efforts to find peace disarmed my reluctance to listen to them, sitting there, as I did, without scripted answers. I understand more clearly their dead-end paths to salvation. No one wins heaven if in the end you are left on your own, to fight the war against evil within/without. You can invoke spiritual power all you want, but in the end humans always lose. Even as a Christian, I’m familiar with

this struggle.

I’ve lost many times. The perfect beauty of the Gospel is that God, in

One of the group was a writer and invited me to get in touch – she wants to talk about spirituality and mystery.

Christ, entirely gave himself to win that battle for us. That’s what I wanted to tell them, but sometimes you only get half a shot. Perhaps their next encounter will be with Jonathan, and the Philistines of their lives will fall left and right. I pray so. ☩

Ransom Notes

Looking Back

June 3-6 White Plains, NY. Denis spent a weekend leading a group from White Plains, NY. Most of them belong to a church plant of Redeemer Presbyterian in Manhattan. They “retreated” to Vermont for Bible study, a Flannery O’Connor short story, and two movies: *The Station Agent*

and *Run, Lola Run*. Discussions were so intense no one wanted to take breaks. After two days of non-stop interaction people were seeing culture in new ways. One man shared that he’d never understood how the music of his teenage children could reveal the deepest issues of their hearts. Weekends spent like this with people who are so eager help remind us – THIS is why we began Ransom Fellowship. It’s worth everything to hear someone say, “I see God’s glory in a new way.” Or, “I want to go home and ask my daughter to share her favorite CD with me.” One doesn’t even mind (as much) the travel delays – hours of sitting at the gate while the pilot says, “Thanks for your patience, we should be pushing back any minute now.”

April – May, Rochester, MN. Denis taught a series of Sunday School classes in our home church, Trinity Presbyterian, on Engaging the Culture as Christians. Each Sunday more people returned to discuss real life situations – the kind we rarely talk about even though we face them often enough to warrant thinking them through together.



Back Yard view from Toad Hall

Coming Up

Toad Hall will be busy hosting couples and singles on week-long sabbaticals this summer. We like to welcome friends to days of sleeping, eating, and doing nothing more strenuous than walking from the back porch to the kitchen for a coffee refill. We’re happy to fill their time with slow contemplation of life and godliness.

I’ve noticed how people become so accustomed to high speed they aren’t even aware of the toll it takes on their bodies, their relationships, or their walk with God. Please pray that they’ll find refreshment and rest from work, ministry, and difficult family situations.

We continue close mentoring relationships with younger Christians here in Rochester. That can involve spontaneous invitations to dinner, discussions over coffee, meeting for a movie, talking about it afterwards, and praying together in our living room. It’s never one-way. I find my heart deeply touched, my thinking challenged when I spend time with...well, for example a few weekends ago I spent a day with two young women. We drove to the Mississippi River, listening to their music, and talking all the while. I was really jerked alert when they switched the topic to masturbation. The widespread practice – was it a sin or not? Why or why not? What does the Bible teach? They were asking me as an older Christian. I admitted it’s one of those topics Christians barely admit exists, let alone talk about. So I blushed as we talked openly. If you’ve come across good resources addressing this issue please let me know.

This summer Denis will be working as much as possible on his seminary courses. As for me, between hosting visitors, family, and keeping house and flowers, I’ll be writing when I can.

My book manuscript is in Never-never Land. I’m still looking for an agent or publisher. The process requires arduous research, and I’m not used to rejections and near hits. One agent wrote: “I really loved your writing, but felt this lacked focus and narrative.” (Ouch.) When I was feeling most lowly, a publisher and friend wrote: I really, really, really enjoyed the book...it is lovely.” I’ve been babied and darlined by family and friends who’ve read the manuscript and loved it, now I’m thrown by long waits and inner arguments over its worth. At last, I’ve given it up to God, since it seems to have all the makings of an idol: pride, envy, greed. All the virtues I extol and claim we need as Christians sit, waiting to be activated in my office. They hover over my desk, and pop up with my email: patience, humility, perseverance, and trusting God with the loves of your life. All this. And it’s just a book, for pity sake! Don’t mistake me, I’m still working on it.

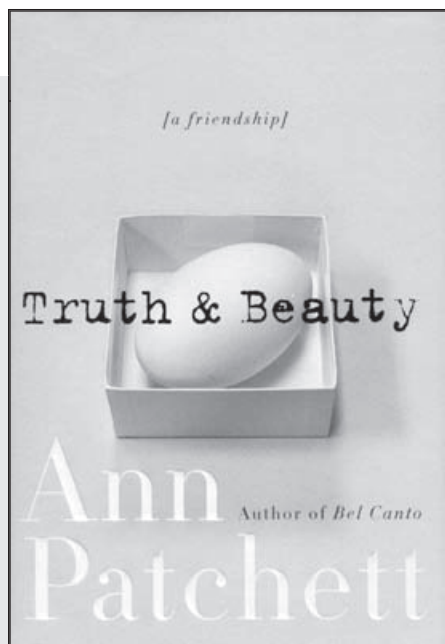
F Family Notes

Our biggest family news is that June 7 we added a new member to our family. Ever since I met Denis' Aunt Ruth from Massachusetts, I've felt like she was my aunt, too. We've always hoped that when the right time came she would come to live with us. It hasn't been easy to say good-bye to her little cape cod house where she's lived alone since 1968. On the other hand, being with family who love and care for her, giving up the care of house and property has its attractions, like not picking up the dog-doo yourself. She and Denis share the same sense of humor and smart talk, while I share her love for sheets dried in the sun and crosswords. We're in a period of adjustment as we figure out daily life together. Your prayers for us would be welcome.



Margie & Manessah

On the theme of rest: Our seven year old granddaughter Manessah is coming for a week's visit. She gets rest from three brothers age two and under and the mutual pleasure of our attention. In mid-July Micah, Jerem's wife is having another baby and Micah has this figured out: When I come to help, her sister Adley will play all day with Anson (18 months), I will hold the new baby, she will sleep, and Jerem will cook. I guess that means we'll be eating grilled venison steak for every meal. 🐾



A Summer Reading Suggestion

Truth & Beauty: A Friendship by Ann Patchett author of *Bel Canto*. A memoir of Ann's friendship with Lucy Grealy.

"On this point Lucy and I were completely united. We had written in college and graduate school and had our small successes, but we were writing to impress our friends, our teachers, possibly ourselves. Now writing meant something else entirely. Without writing, Lucy was just another patient in the surgical ward, waiting for her tissue expander to fill with the saline and stretch out her skin. Without writing, I was another waitress like all the other waitresses in Nashville who were waiting for their big publishing deal. They wrote songs. I wanted to write a novel. I was starting to see it was all pretty much the same thing. Lucy and I had ceased to be distinguishable from everyone else and every day the ground was getting softer, swallowing us up a little bit more. We had each come to realize that no one was going to save our lives, and that if we wanted to save them ourselves, we only had one skill that afforded us any hope at all. Writing is a job, a talent, but it's also the place to go in your head. It is the imaginary friend you drink your tea with in

the afternoon. In her hospital bed or in her lonesome room back at her flat, Lucy brought out the sentences she knew and twisted them into poems and chapters, the same way I stood in the kitchen every night at the end of my shift at Friday's and rolled 150 silverware packets, dreaming up characters with problems more beautiful and insurmountable than my own." 🐾

Final Notes

"It's No End Healthy"

Florence Allshorn, founder of St. Julian's community in England wrote in the early 1900's:

"Don't worry your head about theological problems. Read books with only half-a-dozen lines on a page, mostly sloppy. It will do you a world of good. Also, don't think about yourselves at all, I mean your moral self. Just



Jerem & Anson rest

be a pagan, loving the sky, and the sun, and the smell of things, and let yourself expand that way a bit. It's no end healthy... You'll be twice as effective and clear-sighted when you come home. Do you know I think one of the best things you can do on holiday is to ask nothing, want nothing, but just praise God for everything.

Always be praising Him – for the little sticky leaves, the rich somber greenness of the trees, all the kindness you get on a holiday. Just one long praise of little, beautiful things and forget that great, big, striving, blundering self of yours. Then come back to us clean and fresh and contagious, and let us, too, get a sight of the glory of God."

Most of us sorely need this admonishment. The frenetic pace of daily life can make the race for the Triple Crown look like a vacation. Contrary to my intuition which is – let me just do one more thing before I sit – many important things are not accomplished by the one who checks off every item on the to-do list. Relationships, rest, love-making are just a few of the things that require a much quieter, gentler pace. This summer I pray you enjoy some rest – intentional, contemplative rest. It's Biblical. It's commanded.

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.

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

John Hake
Layout Editor

Order Books From:



www.heartsandmindsbooks.com
read@heartsandmindsbooks.com

254 East Main Street
Dallastown, PA 17313
(717) 246-3331

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