A Dirty Old Man Stumbles On



John Cowart's 2007 Diary

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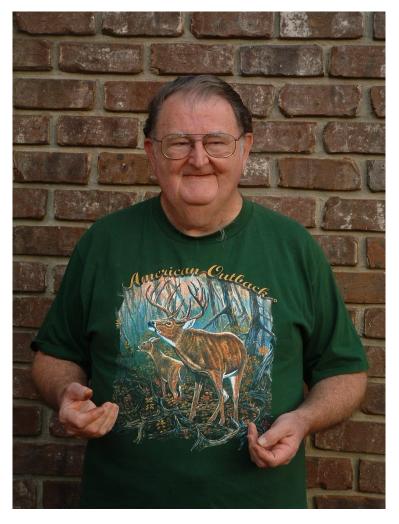


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JOHN COWART"S 2007 DIARY

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Monday, January 01, 2007 A Commandment Interrupted!

Yesterday afternoon Beauty and I intended to obey one of God's happy commandments — but we kept getting interrupted.

Darn!

Every time we'd begin to get started, somebody would knock at our door bringing us a belated Christmas present, wishing us well, or being a pest in some other way.

They'd no sooner go away than the phone would ring and somebody would wish us happy New Year or some such aggravating nonsense.

I need fewer friends!

The ones we already have prevented us from following the commandment. And at our age and present state of health that is annoying in the extreme.

So I cleaned the swimming pool and watched tv football all afternoon instead.

Bummer.

Oh, the commandment?

I refer to Proverbs 5:18-19.

You mean you don't know about that one?

Really, I think folks would be much happier if they read their Bibles more.

The commandment of God in Proverbs says:

"Rejoice with the wife of thy youth! Let her be to thee as a loving hind, a pleasant roe. Let her breasts satisfy thee at all times. Yea, be thou ravished with her love".

But sometimes it is difficult to follow the commands of God.

I think we need fewer friends.

Tuesday, January 02, 2007

An Explosive Start To The New Year

As soon as the calendar flipped at midnight from 2006 to 2007, then as soon as the sparks from the fireworks fade away, right that minute, the 2006 models go on sale to make way for the 2007 models.

Yesterday, Ginny and I went to the showroom first thing as soon as they opened to buy an "old" 2006 model at a greatly reduced price.

We are to take delivery by 3 o'clock today.

Whoot!

Yes, the delivery men will come to our house, tussle it through the living room, down the hall into our bedroom and up onto the frame. They will cart our old model away forever.

I'll miss it.

We bought it used back about 1985 and it served us well but Ginny has hankered for a brand new model for a long time, so we visited the showroom, stretched out on various test models and chose one.

I hate to confess being so behind times, but I had no idea that mattresses came in model years. To me one looks the same as another. They're indistinguishable — like modern cars. But the mattress salesman assures me that constant technological advances result in such improvements that each year calls for a new model.

I found no fault with our 1985 model. I would have kept it. But time marches on without me.

Anyhow, tonight we will sleep on the 2006 model mattress and we can trade it in on next year's model in only eleven months.

Life makes less and less sense to me as I get older.

Speaking of getting older...

I am going to write for another few minutes but this would be a good place for you to stop reading because my next subject is disturbing, unpleasant and embarrassing.

Walking across the grocery store parking lot yesterday I had an accident.

This sort of thing has not happened to me since I was a child. Abruptly, without warning, I explosively messed my own pants.

I don't know if this event is related to a flu bug, the prostate cancer, or just general old age, but it was humiliating, smelly and embarrassing.

I could have cried.

Shocked, I duck waddled back to our car and had to sit in stink with the windows rolled down as Ginny drove me back to the house.

Once home, I changed and washed my clothes and showered — and trembled a bit at such an vivid reminder of my decline and mortality.

If we don't die first, we get old and senile.

The theme of my blog says that I look for spiritual realities in everyday life. Well, I've told the reality, but what spiritual lesson can be drawn from such a disgusting incident?

I can't think of a one, not a single one.

No inspirational Bible verse springs to my mind.

No line of poetry.

The only thing I can think of is the punch line from a joke for those of us over 65 years old:

Never trust a fart!.

Wednesday, January 03, 2007

Fun In My World — Ancient and Modern

Tuesday Ginny returned to work downtown where one of her coworkers was mugged in the office parking lot and her purse snatched.

I spent the day in quite, peaceful reading, reflection, prayer and meditation — except for two troubled visitors, two delivery men, and a phone call warning me the cops are searching for one of my daughters.

Just a typical day at home for me.

My studies alternated between two books.

On one hand I'm reading a diary kept by Puritan Richard Rogers between 1586 and 1590; on the other hand, I'm studying a 445-page computer manual on how to work Google.

I don't understand either one.

In the Google manual, I'm up to the part about using asterisks as wildcard search terms.

In the Roger's Journal, I've reached the 1587 attack of the Spanish Armada, which, in terms of newsworthiness, was the 16th Century equivalent of Nine Eleven in our day.



But the Puritan preacher was a focused man. His diary concentrates on things that really matter, the state of the human soul in the light of eternity.

"By fearfull noise of warre and trouble in our lande I laboured to bringe myne heart to a more neere drawing of it to the deeper contempt of the worlde," Rogers said.

And that's all he had to say about the Armada!

His diary makes for difficult reading not only because of the antique spelling. His language is neither the lofty Elizabethan cadences of Shakespeare nor the majestic prose of the King James Bible, but he speaks in the common idiom of his day.

Not only that, but his thought patterns are so foreign to my way of thinking because here was a man intent on God to the exclusion of lesser things.

I am not such a man.

I envy his devotion.

"It is the work and occupation of a Christian," Rogers

said, "To learn to understande the lawes of god and to walk in his wayes, and thus that should be the chieftest thinge which should be looked after and from thing to thinge practized".

If you think his language is difficult to follow, you should try that Google manual! Gobbledygook and techno-jargon fills the pages.

For instance, Page Rank refers to which web site you see listed first, second, third, etc. when you search the web with Google; but the term PageRank has nothing to do with the web pages per se, it refers to a system of determining value developed by Mr. Larry Page, one of Google's founders, and his system factors in over 500 elements in order to put my website down around number 8,427 in the listings.

I'm tempted to scan in the Rogers Diary and publish it on the web or as a booklet on my storefront (www.bluefishbooks.info). The copyright is open and I think the rare work of this good and godly man ought to be preserved.

But the project would take a massive amount of work and would not make much business sense. I checked the library stamps in the back of the InterLibrary Loan copy I am reading and I see that this book was checked out on April 1, 1985 and returned the very next day; then it was checked out again on May 11^{th} , 1994. I am the third person to check the thing out.

Ever.

If you want to read a copy, the line forms on the right. No shoving, please.

I am reading the book for my own edification, to let this focused man's thoughts from long ago nudge me closer to Christ in my own life today.

If his diary can help me in that way, perhaps, in spite of the book's wild popularity, I should try to preserve his words on line to help some other struggling Christian in the future.

I hope my own diary entries may help somebody in that way.

Back in an October blog last year, I wrote:

You know, I've always written with a specific reader in mind. The reader I envision is a teen-aged boy who lives 50 to 75 years from now, and who stumbles across my journals in a dusty attic on a rainy day and begins to read these old musty papers.

Some stupid joke catches the kid's attention and he begins to read further. As he reads, he catches some glimpse of what it means for me to be a Christian. He sees a relatively unvarnished picture of one Christian guy's life, a life soaked in problems, temptations, discouragements, failures, and defeats — yet resounds with hope.

I dream that the kid in the attic will look at all the crap in what's-iz-name's diary and that this kid will see through it all and see that what I write about is real. I dream that he will see through me to the beauty of the living Christ and commit his life to Christ 100%, without reservation.

Hey, Kid! Here's a bumper sticker joke for you:

I Did Not Escape From The Insane Asylum — I've Got A Day Pass!

Deliverymen brought our new mattress yesterday.

Ginny and I got quite a laugh as we got ready for bed. Our old mattress, which we bought sometime back in the mid 1980s, sagged a good six or eight inches lower than this brand new one does.

So, when I sat down on the edge of the bed to take off my socks, I find I can no longer reach my feet!

What a surprise!

Ginny howled with laughter at my antics as I struggled to remove my socks.

I'm not fat at all.

But I am married to this cruel, cruel woman.

... Oh, the cop call thing, if any of my three daughters happens to read this blog, you might consider paying your speeding tickets.

Mom and Dad love you -- but we don't do bail.

Thursday, January 04, 2007 I Have Become A Shark!



Yesterday's blog posting mentioned that my recent reading alternates between two books, a 16th Century diary and a Google computer manual.

The diary of Richard Rogers, a Puritan minister in the time of the first Queen Elizabeth, resonates with many features of my own life. For instance, he's trying to write a book (Seven Treatises On The Christian Life) but he keeps getting interrupted by the affairs of daily life.

He bemoans the fact his own book shelves groan under the weight of good books which he had not gotten around to reading.

And one day when he was down he talks about writing his own diary then says, "Reading the writings of an other brother about his estat an houre and longer, I was moved to write and to bring my hart into a better frame..."

In other words, over 400 years ago, he was a blogger.

He got a lift by reading the daily diary of someone else whose writing resonated with his own heart.

Isn't that exactly what those of us who read other people's diaries, journals or blogs do?

We build each other up by sharing our common experiences.

Often in reading blogs or diaries I'll say, "Hey, I'm not the only one! I know exactly how he feels; I feel the same way. I've thought that way myself". When my son Donald introduced me to computers and helped me set up my website and blog and on-line book catalog, we realized that much of my content would be of a religious nature. That's a real part of me. So we resolved on a couple of guiding principles for my sites:

For instance I will never poke fun or ridicule anyone else's religion; my own faith carries enough material to be ridiculous all by itself.

I do not reveal anyone else's secrets. The only person who should be embarrassed by what I write is me.

I would try to be honest and show an unfiltered Christian life from the inside — not as it ought to be but as it is for one particular guy, me.

I hope that my testimony and writings will attract readers to commit themselves 100% to the Lord Christ because He is worthy.

And, since I believe that Christ redeems us purely by His grace, I will not carry any ads trying to sell anything.

The Scripture says, As ye have freely received, so freely give.

"By grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast".

The Prophet Isaiah called out, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

"Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labor for that which satisfieth not?... Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near... Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon"

We have nothing of value to trade to God.

He is not short of cash.

He is not a peddler.

He is Giver.

Since one of the biggest criticisms outsiders make

against Christians is money, and since I do not wish to put a stumbling block between any reader and God, I chose not to try to make money off either blog or website.

I'm even uncomfortable offering my books for sale in the on-line catalog but I try to keep that endeavor separate from my daily writings.

But...



See those little fish around the shark?

Those are remora, commonly called suckerfish.

Yesterday as I played around with the Google manual exploring advanced search features, I used my own web addresses to test things.

Imagine my shock when I discovered that some suckers have pirated my web address directing readers to ad sites hawking fake Rolex watches, home mortgages, jewelry, timeshare condos and all sorts of other sleazy deals to cheat people out of their money.

Immediately I called Donald who manages all the technical features of my site and he examined these suckers.

He explained that as my website has attracted more and more readers, some sleaze noticed and piggybacked his own site on my name so that Google searchers may arrive at his cheap ads for shoddy products.

Donald says that in Geek Speak, such people are called remoras.

He says I should be flattered that my site is popular

enough to be worth their attention.

He said that means I have become a shark.

He said that little sucker fish feeds off the crumbs I leave behind.

Not exactly.

I looked up *suckerfish* in the encyclopedia and here's what I discovered:

Remora (rem ara), any of the several species of warmwater fishes of the family Echeneidae, characterized by an oval sucking disk on the top of the head. With this apparatus (a modification of the dorsal fin) the remora, or suckerfish, attaches itself to sharks, In this way it travels without effort, feeding on scraps from the prey of these larger creatures.... Largest and most common remora is the shark remora, or sharksucker, which reaches 3 ft (90 cm) in length and attaches itself to sharks; it is found along the Atlantic coast N of Long Island in the summer. Remoras are classified in the phylum Chordata ...

The host they attach to for transport gains nothing from the relationship, but also loses little. The remora benefits by using the host as transport and protection and also feeds on materials dropped by the host. There is some controversy over whether a remora's diet is primarily leftover fragments, or actually the feces of the host.

There is no controversy in my mind about what they can eat.

Saturday, January 06, 2007 **JCSFWDEP**

Looking over the January blogs of many e-friends, I see that weight loss in the coming year concerns virtually everyone

Therefore I will here reveal the John Cowart Sure-Fire Weight Diet & Exercise Program to share with my friends who aspire to look like me.

My program diet consists of sitting with an open book, a cup of coffee and a dozen package of Krispy Kreme Donuts.

The exercise portion consists of turning pages, sipping

coffee and lifting donuts from the box.

With each donut you lift, the Krispy Kreme box weights less and less.

I intend to write a book, maybe even make a video of my program.

But the title, John Cowart's Sure-Fire Weight, Diet & Exrcise Program, is too long and it's just not catchy. And the initials, JCSFWDEP, don't spell anything.

I think I'll call my video, Flabs Of Steel.

Sunday, January 07, 2007

Second Thoughts — Second Thoughts Again

Although I've written a daily journal for 20+ years, tomorrow marks the second anniversary of keeping it as a blog on-line for other people to read.

I'd shoot off fireworks, release balloons, or something, but tomorrow I'm also scheduled for another biopsy.

Joy, oh joy! Be Still My Heart — (see Dec.13 thru 21^{st} , 2006, for the first one).

So I doubt if I'll feel up to posting at all tomorrow.

Therefore, to celebrate my second year of Blogging, here is a second posting of my entry for one year ago today and it was titled, appropriately enough, Second Thoughts:

January 7, 2006 — SECOND THOUGHTS

I'm having second thoughts about my Christianity.

Meeting a man covered with tattoos brought this about.

About a month ago I was over in Arlington to see a lady on business and she introduced me to her son who happened to be in the office. Blue and red tattoos snaked up both his arms and before we shook hands, before the guy said one word, in my mind I wrote him off as a sleaze.

Because some of the tattoos appeared to be amateurish, I thought he'd been in prison when he got them. I thought of him a worthless, no-account, vicious criminal.

But, no sooner than I had these thoughts judging the man, a second thought came to mind: Get real, John! Here is a child of God, a potential saint, a man who may

walk in obedience to Christ better than you do, John Cowart. You are judging on an impression with a bare minimum of information.

That second thought caught me up short.

Last Saturday as Ginny and I drove to WalMart, the driver of another car, full of people, crowded us because he was in the turn lane but wanted to drive straight ahead. My first thought – in fact I said most of it aloud – was: You son of a bitch! I hope you crash into that lamp pole and mangle your whole family. I'll stop and watch you bleed. And I'll spit in the puddle of blood as I drive past. And darn if I'll waste one of our cell phone minutes calling 911!

No sooner than I thought all this, I has a second thought: Why are you cursing that guy, John? Haven't you ever been stuck in the wrong lane yourself?

I saw a girl.

A well endowed girl.

A very well endowed girl.

My first thought was Any guesses?

But then comes a second thought: John Cowart. Why are you thinking like that? You have no evidence that she's a slut. And, no, those would not bounce so vigorously they'd splinter the headboard. What you're thinking says nothing about her; everything about you. Have you prayed about her problems, her hopes, her destination in life?

I watch the evening news and see more Americans killed in Iraq.

My first thought is: We ought to bring our soldiers home then nuke every town between Spain and Hawaii! No mater which way the wind is blowing, it won't drop radiation on anyone who means America well.

Then comes a second thought: Many of our soldiers in Iraq are dedicated Christians and by exposing the people to their lives and testimonies, they are influencing the people whose paths they cross toward the Kingdom of Christ. Perhaps, that is why God allows this otherwise senseless war.

I could go on and on - about Hurricane Katrina

victims, about foreigners, about politicians, about ... Well, you name it.

There's a pattern here.

My first thought is always hostile, bitter, negative, lustful, greedy, mean-spirited.

My second thought comes closer to being Christian.

In fact, my second thoughts define and identify my faith.

I am not the first Christian to entertain such duel thoughts. St. Paul wrote, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I can not do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is I do... I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind..."

There may be people out there who always put Jesus first in their thoughts and actions; but that state is beyond my experience.

Of all the things which race through my mind, Jesus is not always running in first place. He's not always even in second place. I confess that sometimes He's number 18 in a field of 30.

But I am a Christian; He is always in the running.

If my life were a tv talk show, on occasion I obey Him as though Jesus were the Director; at other times I treat Him as though He were only a guest celebrity putting in a spot appearance to raise my ratings.

What a shabby way to think.

St Paul once said, "What person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of that man? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God".

So we see thoughts of man on one hand, and thoughts of God on the other.

And His thoughts are higher than our thoughts, yet He knows the very thoughts and intents of our heart.

So here I stand with my first thoughts and my second thoughts.

Sometimes I act on one, and sometimes on the other.

And the Scripture teaches that a Christian's life involves bringing every thought captive to Christ.

Is it any wonder that I get befuddled?

I'm tempted to say with Miss Scarlet, "I'll think about that tomorrow".

In fact, I'm tempted to avoid thinking about such stuff at all.

But the spirit of a prophet is subject to the prophet. I chose which thought I act on.

I hardly ever sit down at my computer without my first thought being, Hey, I wonder if there are any new pictures on that porno site? What harm is there in seeing? Then comes a second thought, How about browsing cartoons instead? Or maybe you should work on that manuscript. Or maybe write a blog posting Both my first and second thoughts hang before me; But I choose where to click.

My second thoughts – and how I act on them – reveal my heart.

OK. Those are my thoughts on the matter, but what about God's thoughts? What do His thoughts reveal?

One Scripture comes to my mind, a paraphrase of Jeremiah 29:11:

I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, they are thoughts for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

God Almighty has let us in on His own thoughts. And I think that's great.

I think that's really great.

Tuesday, January 09, 2007 I Collect Women's Underwear

I collect women's panties, bras, teddies, slips and other such garments.

At the moment eight large black plastic leaf bags filled with such dainties stuff the trunk of our car.

No. I am not a pervert — at least, not that sort of pervert.

The reason I collect such items of female apparel is to deliver them to poor people at a local rescue mission. Actually, I don't collect the stuff; it's just that friends, family and neighbors bring it to our house so that we can deliver it to the mission.

I'm not sure why they don't deliver it to a mission themselves. This puzzles me but it has gone on this way for years. In fact last week one guy drove within two blocks of the mission on his way to bring the donations to our house so we could deliver it.

Go figure.

A lot of people in their after-Christmas clean up have sorted through their closets culling out old clothing to make room for new stuff, and they bring the castoffs to our house for us to take to the mission.

I use the term "the mission" loosely because Ginny and I have worked with a bunch of various missions to the poor over the years, so we use the term collectively; we take the stuff to whichever mission the Spirit dictates (meaning whichever one is most convenient for us on a given day).

Once, about five years ago, such a practice got me into an embarrassing situation (See John's Great Brassier Hunt)

The poor are always with you and are always a pain in the ass!

That's not Scripture, but it's the way I feel.

Anyhow, please do not mail me your panties (fun as that may be); instead take them to your own local mission. This is important because, while many generous people donate sweaters, coats, pants, shirts and kids' outfits, every mission I've ever worked with has a shortage of underwear and socks.

Those items are always in short supply and will always be appreciated.

Please be sure the elastic is not stretched; Jesus deserves the best we can give His poor through us.

Occasionally, Ginny will buy new packages of socks and underwear on sale in various sizes for men, women and children to donate to the mission. She feels this is an Now, concerning my doctor's visit yesterday:

Our doctor spent a little more than two hours with us. Most of that time he spent filling out paperwork and just hanging around with us (I think he enjoys our company for some reason). He advises that we gather a lot of information first before reaching a final decision about my prostate cancer and other such potential problems.

He chose not to do the biopsies on my chest and shoulder himself. Instead he referred me to a dermatologist.

And to a neurologist.

And to a radiologist.

And to an oncologist.

And to a pharmacist.

And to a urologist.

And, of course, to the medical group's resident numismatist.

We'll see a lot of that last guy on the list!

All that was yesterday. Then, a few minutes ago as I was typing this, the office nurse phoned saying I should also go to an oral surgeon.

To get a mouthwash prescription!

I'm afraid I was quite rude to the young lady.

But yesterday our doctor waxed poetic about one thing. In a few days he and his wife leave for Africa. Each year they sacrifice his American practice for a couple of months to serve without pay in some third world country.

The thought of practicing hands-on medicine without paperwork, insurance companies, paperwork, referrals, paperwork, appointments, paperwork, records, or paperwork — it all makes the man giddy!

He won't have to fiddle with minor complaints like mine but be able to practice real medicine among people who are seriously sick and he can make a lifesaving difference among people who have no access to any doctor otherwise.

I introduced him to the idea of keeping a blog while

over there and the idea thrilled him. He intends to check the idea out with expedition leaders and if he gets approval, I'll post a link. He may not be able to do this. Because of world conditions such service may require a low profile and publicity may prove dangerous. I'll keep you posted.

Anyhow, my own situation is one of fact finding and information gathering over a couple of months before I decide among various treatment options — if I chose any.

I think of Psalm 71, sometimes called, *An Old Man's Prayer*; part of it says:

O God, thou hast taught me from my youth: and hitherto have I declared thy wondrous works.

Now also, when I am old and gray-headed,

O God, forsake me not;

until I have showed thy strength unto this generation,

and thy power to everyone that is to come!

——Psalm 71:17-18

At the moment Ginny and I classify our medical situation as what she terms JADN — Just Another Damn Nuisance!

Meanwhile, I plan to return to thinking about quality of life issues, things really important to me.

Right now that means returning to work on those two exciting 17th Century Puritan diaries I've been studying. I hope to scan them into my computer and publish them soon.

And, of course, I have to do something about all those women's panties in the trunk of my car.

Wednesday, January 10, 2007

Past & Future -- With Noodles

First, before I begin this posting, let's all bow out heads and close our eyes to observe a moment of silence:

Momofuku Ando died last Friday in Osaka, Japan.

He was 96.

Our world is diminished.



Mr. Ando invented instant ramen noodles. He was inspired to create the cheap, salty treat by food scarcity in postwar Japan.

"I happened to pass this area and saw a line 20, 30 meters long in front of a dimly lit stall from which clouds of steam were steadily rising," he wrote. "People dressed in shabby

clothes shivered in the cold while waiting for their turn. The person who was with me said they were lined up for a bowl of ramen.

"I realized that people were willing to wait patiently just for a bowl of ramen," he said.

He took that vision home with him and, using a secondhand noodle-making machine and a large wok, Mr. Ando sprinkled soup on the noodles with a watering can, then kneaded and loosened them by hand after letting them partly dry.

"This allowed the noodles to soak up the soup on the outer layer," he wrote. "I then dried the noodles so they would keep longer and could be easily prepared with boiling water."

The company he founded, Nissin Food Products, now produces 16 flavors of Top Ramen and Cup Noodles. Last year, 46.3 billion packs and cups were sold around the world.

In July, 2005, astronauts carried packets of Mr. Ando's ramen noodles into space aboard the Discovery space shuttle on their twelve day mission.

Without Mr. Ando's invention, my family might well have starved back when we were poor.

I owe him a debt.

Yes, in the past we were once dirt poor, but the Lord (and Mr. Ando's noodles) pulled us through.

But my past doesn't count for much.

As my e-friend Darlene Schachts said in her blog this

morning, "It doesn't really matter where I've been, or what I've done, it's past. The past that *does* matter is what Christ has done for me".

Yesterday my scanner buzzed and zipped and whirred as I scanned in 85 pages, about half, of those 17th Century Puritan diaries I've mentioned before.

I realize there is virtually no commercial market for this work, but when did that ever stop me from fiddling with manuscripts, my own or other people's? I do this work because I love it. There are worse reasons to labor.

Another profitless project:

The librarian at Argyle Branch Library, (7973 S Old Middleburg Road, Jacksonville, FL, 32222, Phone Number: (904) 573-3164) invited me to give a lecture on an overview of Jacksonville history at 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday, January 16th.

If any of you blog readers in the Jacksonville area would like to attend, I'll be happy to see you there.

Here is a photo of me speaking at such a lecture last year:



Another exciting thing ahead:

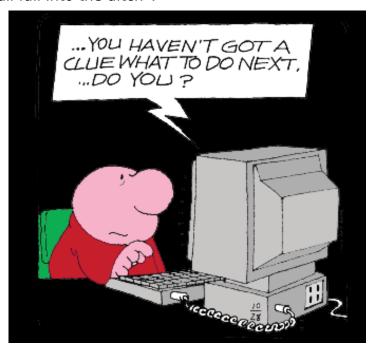
Next week my youngest son, Donald, and I plan to help my friend Barbara set up her computer and establish a blog. Barbara is a retired religion editor and won many national writing awards for her weekly "Along The Way" column which tracked her deep personal devotion and prayer life amid horrendous problems.

I'll let everyone know when she gets on line...

Maybe.

Thing is, Barbara often calls me for computer advice.

The Scripture that applies here is "... And they both shall fall into the ditch".



Friday, January 12, 2007

Light is come into the world, but...

Yesterday Beauty had a hard time getting to work; when she arrived, she found that police had sealed the main entrance with crime tape, so she had to go in a side gate to park.

A coworker who had arrived an hour earlier had discovered the body of a murdered man in front of the office building and called the police.

Ginny's new office building lies in what has historically been a high crime slum area for many years. The administration built the new facility there as part of a government effort to restore the neighborhood. Just before Christmas one of Ginny's coworkers was mugged and robbed in the parking lot. This happened after the security guard had walked the lady to her car. But instead of driving away, after the guard left, she got out of her car again to get something from her trunk. That's when the robber knocked her down, grabbed her purse, then raced away on a bicycle.

Police have not released any more information about the murder at Ginny's office yet.

Last night's tv news said there were six shootings in Jacksonville yesterday

Yesterday afternoon a distraught woman from a nearby home pounded on my door asking if I had seen anyone near her house.

My computer desk faces a window overlooking the street but her house is not in my line of sight.

While she'd been out to a doctor's appointment, someone had broken into her home.

She was frantic over the damage.

They stole a stereo, her sewing machine, and some other items.

They also trashed her place overturning furniture, smashing dishes and mirrors, etc.

Most disturbing, the intruders ripped the clothes from her closets, piled them in the floor, and set a flaming candle in the circle of cloth. That way, when the candle burned down low enough, it would have ignited the cloth and set her house afire long after they left the scene and were far away.

Fortunately she arrived back home after the intruder left but before the candle scorched the clothing.

Her find upset her.

She ran to another neighbor's house and the two of them came to me even before they called the police.

But I had neither seen nor heard a thing.

I offered to call the police for her but she did not want them called yet. She hesitated. She seemed reluctant, dazed and stunned as she walked down our driveway. "He did it," she said.

"I know he did it." she said.

"We broke up," she said.

"The Father Sent The Son To Be The Savior Of The World" ——I John 4:14

"This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil," —— John 3:19

Saturday, January 13, 2007

Lord God Of The Tedious

Zip. Zip. Whirr. Whirr. Flash. Flash. Zip. Zip. Whirr. Whirr. Flash. Flash. Zip. Zip. Whirr...

Friday, and the past couple of days, I spent scanning over 300 pages of those 17th Century puritan diaries I've mentioned before.

One page at a time.

Zip. Zip. Whirr. Whirr. Flash — with an occasional BUZZ!

My scanner times each pass with calculated precision. so that it gives me no time to do anything between a Zip and a Whirr. I can't light my pipe, nor run to the bathroom, nor think a thought before it's time to press the next button or flip to the next page.

Rote. Monotonous. Tedious. Routine work.

Then each page must be checked because I'm working from an edition printed in 1933 with many footnotes in tiny agate font and the scanner's optical character recognition feature insists that an R in the original text is really a B, or maybe a K.

Besides that, while the puritan diarists may have been godly men, they could spell worth diddle squat! Maybe that why I feel such an affinity for them.

The repetitive motions of scanning text hurts my back, neck and arms. My eyes blur. My back aches. My mind wanders.

Who cares whether this job is done right or not? Who is likely to read this stuff?

Why am I doing this?

Don't I have more urgent things to do?

Doesn't God have any better use for my talents?

Maybe not.

Beauty says that at least this job keeps me off the streets.

She says that may well be the Divine purpose for the whole project.

During smoke breaks I got to thinking about how often in Scripture God calls people doing rote, routine things.

Moses was minding his own business tending sheep when that Burning Bush appeared. So was David when the call came to him. Gideon's mind was set on getting the harvest thrashed when the angel appeared out of the blue. Mathew had his nose stuck in his accounting books when Jesus called him. .Peter, James and John mended nets with no thought of God at all when Jesus said, "Follow me".

Often I feel disappointed that God does not allow me to do great things; He keeps me saddled with the low, tedious, routine, mundane. His kingdom is not made up of great people only. He is also Lord of us insignificant ones.

I've often wondered about "The Will Of God" for my life, and when I do, the thought always comes to me, "Do the obvious".

Do the routine duty right before your eyes.

If you can't change the world, change the baby!

As Jeremiah the prophet said to Baruch, an ambitious young man who aspired to be a prophet, "Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek *them* not".

God already has a replacement in mind to fill Billy Graham's shoes. Understudies for Mother Teresa and Oprah are in the wings. Stephen King is already in place as God's choice for a best selling writer.

According to an apocryphal writing (No. I do not place much stock at all in such things) Jesus once said, "When you hew the firewood, I am there. When you draw water from the well, I am with you. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in the midst of them".:

Brother Lawrence, a 17th Century monk, said that we are to do little things just for the love of God, that God does not count the greatness of a task so much as the love with which we do it.

When I sat down to write this blog post, I yearned to write my opinions about the Iraq war and President Bush's speech the other night. I've had a bug in my ass about this issue for weeks. Nobody I hear on tv or radio voices the same opinion I hold.

But who needs another unfounded opinion about the war?

That is not my place.

There will always be wars and rumors of wars — but the end is not yet.

At the moment I have no special duty to advise the president on how things should be handled internationally (Although I don't think I could do much worse than the advisors he already has).

No. My duty this moment is to make sure that's really a B or a K instead of an R.

Why?

Because Jesus is Lord — even of the tedious.

Sunday, January 14, 2007

Google Me Success; Google Me Failure: Google Me Shame; Google Me Mercy

A disturbing telephone call yesterday afternoon upset me terribly.

The woman sounded perky.

Perky!

At 4 in the afternoon! Perky.

All I wanted to do was watch football on tv.

The perky woman's suggestion appalled me utterly.

I am not the sort of man who would do something like that.

Ever!

When she told me what she wanted, a sense of shame washed over me.

I felt as though I were a tiny little roach on a flat tabletop and someone turned a big bowl of pudding upside down right over top of me. I choked and struggled in the cloying stuff.

That perky woman's words dredged up every sin, and failure and faux pas and stupid blunder and omission and fault I've ever committed. Memories I've strived to forget for years.

Tattered dreams. Fizzled potentials. Frustrated ambitions. A failed first marriage. Alienated people. — all this sludge surfaced in my mind and overwhelmed me.

Why would this perky woman do this to me?

I haven't ever bothered her.

Oh, I know I should have expected a call from her or some of her associates.

A couple of months ago they send me a postcard. Then they mailed a brochure. Then a dunning letter.

Pestering me. Intimidating me. Shaming me.

Why! I did nothing to antagonize her and her friends.

Why should these people want to belittle me, shame me, make me feel like belly-crawling under the bed to hide. They want to remind me of my every failure. They want to rub my face in my lack of success. They want to ridicule my appearance. Snicker at my facial deformity. Make fun of my fat. Spotlight my failure. Nod knowingly at my poverty...

Yes, you guessed it — this perky, pesky woman tried to intimidate me into attending the 50^{th} Reunion of my high school class.

Her call actually nauseated me. Gorge rose in my throat. My hands trembled when I put down the phone.

Ginny thought I was having an attack of some kind.

I was.

I was having an attack of shame.

The thought of attending a dinner/dance with all those shining, brilliant, successful, charming people overwhelmed me with shameful memories and a realization of what a failure I have been in life. What a damn looser I am.

I did not need to be reminded.

I'm almost coping with this stuff now, but the perky phone call knocked the props out from under me.

Later, when I could breathe again, Ginny and I drove up to Georgie's where I consoled my sudden onset of depression with barbeque.

Holding hands across the table we talked about the meaning of the words *success* and *failure*, *winner* and *looser*, *shame* and *mercy*.

When we got back home, I pulled out my dictionary and looked up the word *Success* — "a favorable or desired outcome; the attainment of wealth, eminence or influence".

I have attained no wealth.

I have attained no eminence, nobody wants to kiss my ring. Heck, I don't even own a ring.

And as for influence, just ask my kids about how influential I am.

I strike out on all three criteria.

Flipping through my desk dictionary while balancing it on my knee, I suddenly remembered an easier way to look up definitions: Google.

A few days ago I mentioned studying a computer manual on how to use Google.

To find the definition of any word, simply type the word *define* in the Google search box followed by a *colon* and the **word you want**; then hit *Enter*. Instantly the definition of that word appears on your computer screen.

For instance, **define:** success + Enter brings up "a state of prosperity or fame;

Define: winner + Enter brings up, "an achiever: a person with a record of successes".

Define: failure + Enter brings up, "Failure in general refers to the state or condition of not meeting a desirable or intended objective. It may be viewed as the opposite of success.

You can do this with people's names too.

For instance, **define: Polycarp +enter** brings up "Greek bishop of Smyrna who refused to recant his Christian faith and was burned to death by pagans (circa 69-155)".

Define: John Quincy Adams + Enter brings up "John Quincy Adams (July 11, 1767 - February 23, 1848) was the sixth (1825-1829) President of the United States. He was the son of President John Adams and First Lady Abigail Smith".

Define: Ringo + enter brings up all sorts of information about the famous Beatle as well as about the First Chief Justice of the Arkansas Supreme Court.

Isn't it handy to know that?

About Google I mean.

When I tried my own name with this Google search function the reply came back, "No definitions were found for **john w. cowart**."

I suppose it only works for successful winners.

So I tried the word **shame** and the computer replied, "Shame: a painful emotion resulting from an awareness of inadequacy or guilt".

Yes.

That's what I feel.

That's it exactly.

Now here's where this train of thought gets tricky. As a Christian, I believe that the mercy of God overrules my sins, faux pas, mistakes, shortcomings, blunders, and whatever else has me beat. I believe that God's mercy shown to us by the death and resurrection of Jesus makes unworthy people like me accepted in the beloved.

"Hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us," Paul wrote.

" For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly," he said.

"But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us".

I really do believe that.

I believe that, but I feel like crap anyhow.

I feel as though every goof I've ever made still hang over me, that my sins are engraved in stone, that my lack of success in life condemns me, that my sense of failure is what counts...

I suppose this dichotomy between my true belief and my true feeling make me some kind of emotional hypocrite.

Then I Googled define: mercy + enter ...

Guess what I found.

It's worth checking out for yourself...

But I still have no intention of attending that 50th reunion!....

A sinking, lurking thought arises in the far corner of my mind:

Maybe this is not about me.

Not about me at all.

Maybe the Lord God wants me to attend this function, not to celebrate my triumphs and status, but as a live demonstration of what the love and mercy of God can to do an absolute looser.

Maybe there's some other poor bastard there who feels about his life like I do about mine.

Maybe the perky woman's voice was the voice of God calling me to service.

NAW!

Couldn't be!

Could it?

I need to mull this over a bit more.

Dear Lord, please, please, please, if I do have to go to this thing, please let them allow smoking. Amen.

Monday, January 15, 2007

Our History Road Trip

Sunday, Beauty and I skipped church (they were having a guest speaker we did not wish to hear) and spent the morning dabbling in our garden.

She repotted flowers and filled birdfeeders.

I splashed around in the pool dipping out leaves and cleaning up artifacts to demonstrate for my "Overview of Jacksonville History" speech on Tuesday (see my January 10th blog posting). Although I've given this same talk several times before, I still get nervous about it.

I plan to use computer links and rusty historical artifacts to illustrate the talk (an 1842 penny, a Civil War sword, a shotgun, a World War I artillery shell, an Indian arrowhead, etc.)

Last month, the librarian at Argyle Branch Library invited me to give a lecture on an overview of Jacksonville history on Tuesday, January 16th.

Since Ginny and I had never been to that section of the city before, we decided to drive out there beforehand to see where this library is located in advance before we needed to be there at a specific time.

Glad we did!

There are several ways to get there. None of them easy.

If you plan to attend, print up a Map-Quest map or something of the sort and leave home extra early because this place is at the opposite end of the world. Even with maps, it was really hard for us to find!

We took the scenic route.

We drove out Lenox Avenue past all signs of civilization till the name of the road changes to Old Middleburg Road. Out there the landscape changes and houses sit, not on lots, but on acreage. We drove past barns and horse farms and huge chicken coops. We viewed vast tracks of swampland and thick forest and piney woods.

Watch out for deer along the roadway.

If you ever need to dispose of a body in Jacksonville, this is the place.

It was a delightful drive and we enjoyed talking, holding hands, and seeing the scenery scroll past. We looked for a restaurant for lunch but never found one open.

Right as we got to the library — a huge, ultra-modern, state-of-the-art, basilica-like brick structure near the intersection with Argyle Forest Blvd. — the scene abruptly changed.

Trees plowed under.

Top soil scraped away down to bare clay.

Florida woods strip-mined raw to make way for shopping malls and ticky-tacky housing developments.

Just what Jacksonville needs most — another store.

And instant slums, just add people.

Heart-breaking.

Oh well, this too is history.

Besides, God did not make this world to last forever.

The only thing down here that lasts forever is people.

Wednesday, January 17, 2007

A Rambling Reminisce About Public Speaking (Pure Self Aggrandizement)

In college 45 years ago I enrolled in a public speaking class and my first assignment was to read a selection from *Caesar's Commentary On The Gallic Wars*, a selection about how to capture sleeping elephants.

It went well.

When time came for my final exam speech, word got out and many students skipped other classes and gathered in the public speaking room to hear my talk. They filled every chair and stood lined up around the classroom walls; those who could not get into the room clustered in the courtyard outside and some actually hung through open windows to hear me speak on the topic Judgment Day And Telephone Calls.

Heady stuff.

Flattering.

Ego building.

Over the years I've been invited to speaking engagements many times. Once I was asked to conduct a funeral. Members of the extended family belonged to several widely divergent religious denominations and

could not agree on which real preacher should be asked conduct the service; they compromised by asking me.

Why?

"John," the caller said, "We know you go to church and all that, but you don't seem very religious so we thought we'd ask you".

What a nice compliment.

The deceased was quite elderly so for the eulogy I used a *World Almanac* to outline events which had happened during her lifetime: so many Presidents, first automobile, first electric lights, first bridge across the St; John's river, etc.

For the religious portion of the funeral service, I just talked about Jesus, His Resurrection, and His love for us.

One odd thing: the funeral director, who did not know the deceased at all, broke down in tears and had to leave the gravesite. Either he was tender-hearted for all his clients, or something in the message touched a nerve.

I don't really know.

For many years I taught Bible lessons at a dirt-floor mission for down and out street people. These folks had little interest in Bible, they'd heard it all. Many times. So, to capture their interest, I developed various gimmicks and show-and-tell displays to illustrate the lessons. Each talk was a one-off because seldom would the same person be at a lesson more than a time or two.

Once the pastor of a society church came to visit our home while I was preparing a gimmick for a talk at the mission; the visual intrigued him and he asked me to fill in for him in teaching the adult Bible class at his church.

That ended up with my teaching the same lesson twice each week for about eight years, once to the guys at the mission and once to the people at the society church.

Regardless of social status, we all need the love of Christ equally so I taught the same lesson both places.

Not to name-drop, but people in the church class included a retired football player who wore his Superbowl Ring, several physicians, attorneys, architects, an art collector, an FBI agent, a socialite who started a home

prayer meeting with her five maids, a judge, and other folks of that caliber.

Here's something odd:

I am known for my store of refined, tasteful jokes geared to the taste of refined, cultured people... but whenever I'd start to tell a joke, both the folks at the mission and the society church would groan before I even got started good.

Puzzling that.

One adjustment I made between the mission lessons and the church lessons was that for the church folks, I assigned homework.

Yes, I actually expect people in my classes to learn.

The novelty of doing Bible homework captured the fancy of the class. They had a blast. And once when one couple went to Paris for a second honeymoon, they made a trans-Atlantic phone call to get their homework assignment for the class they missed!

That blew my mind.

Yes, I always get a kick out of public speaking.

I hog the spotlight.

Puffs me up.

Another funny thing happened once at the church:

The area Bishop came for his annual visitation, a ceremony with all the pomp and circumstance of full processional with regalia and clouds of incense.

Before the scheduled super-service, the Bishop attended the Bible class. That morning the discussion grew lively and the class ran long.

I said, "I have one final point to make, but we're out of time".

The Bishop said, "No, I'm interested. Go ahead and finish the lesson. I'm pretty sure they won't start the service without me".

Broke me up.

One thing that troubles me about my speaking and teaching is that I tend to rely more on my gimmicks than I do on the Spirit of God. I tend to speak from natural ability

rather than from God's power.

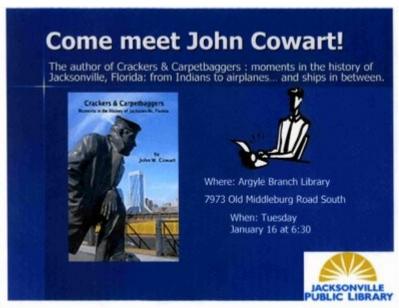
Public speaking scares me terribly and I use those gimmicks as a crutch instead of relaxing and allowing God to control. In fact, for the most part I memorize my talks beforehand because I'm so afraid of screwing up in front of people.

My December 25th blog posting last year (see archives) mentions the greatest honor I've ever been paid as a speaker.

Anyhow, yesterday I spent rehearsing my history lecture at Argyle. I practiced reading excerpts from sources. I cleaned the artifacts to display. I practiced burning tea bags for the pyrotechnic demonstration on the Great Fire Of Jacksonville. I shaved. I packed the briefcases to go. I reviewed internet sites to illustrate my talk on the library's wall-sized giant computer screen.

Ginny took off work an hour early so we could be at the library early enough to set up the displays (We'd already made a practice run Sunday to locate the place, a 35-mile round trip).

The library advertised the event on line and on a theater-like moving marquee . They tacked up several of these neat posters to attract people:



Not one single person came.

Not one.

Oddly enough this came as no big surprise nor disappointment because from the initial invitation a couple of months ago and right up through all the preparations, both Ginny and I have felt a subtle check in our spirit about this event as though we knew it was not going to happen.

Nevertheless we prepared as though it would just in case it did.

Does that make sense?

We'd have saved a lot of energy if we'd paid more attention to that feeling which may, or may not, have been generated by the Spirit.

But the time was not wasted. Ginny and I enjoyed a delightful chat with Ms B., the head librarian. We discussed the future of printed books in a computer oriented society, and the challenges she meets as head of a library in a booming population center.

Afterwards Ginny and I drove to an IHOP restaurant for supper. We lounged in a window booth watching a lightening storm. We sipped delicious coffee and talked for an hour or two. We've more or less decided that health, energy and time constraints indicate that we should forgo extra activities like this history talk in the future.

Thus endeth my speaking career in a blaze of mediocrity.

When we came out of the restaurant, two frisky stray cats scampered around on top of our car batting the radio antenna and we laughed at their antics.

Then we drove home to watch videos we'd checked out of the library.

It was a beautiful evening.

Thursday, January 18, 2007

My Favorite Kind Of Day

Wet.

Cold.

Gray.

Windy.

Cloudy.

Overcast.

Drizzling rain.

A perfect day to hunker down sipping coffee and reading a murder mystery. So that's what I did all day.

Friday, January 19, 2007

A Happy, Exciting Day In This Writer's Life

Thursday brought happiness and excitement into my usual dull drab existence.

I spent the whole day formatting those two 17th Century puritan diaries I mentioned earlier this month.

Talk about fun!

This kind of work puts me in my element. I relish it. I worked with scores of footnotes in tiny agate type. Since I am reformatting the pages, each footnote needed to be moved, renumbered and correlated.

Ran across a note from February $1^{\rm st}$, 1596, in which Samuel Ward, one of the translators of the King James Bible, said, "Oh the grievous sinnes in Trinity Colledg, which had a woman which was carried from chamber to chamber on the night tyme. My adulterous dream that night!"

Oh those wild and crazy puritans!

Seems like I'm not the only Christian to be a dirty old man at heart.

I really love what I'm doing.

Such fun!

I'm elated.

This is a gift from God.

King Solomon said, "There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labor. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God...

"I perceive that *there is* nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that *is* his portion".

Isn't that great!

Thinking of a different King:

Please don't tell Stephen King about the books I'm preparing; I wouldn't want the poor guy to loose sleep in worry about getting bumped off the Times Best Seller list by these diaries. Assure him that I'm not trying to compete for his position. Well, actually, I am. Let the better man win! I just hope he enjoys his work as much as I enjoy mine.

Saturday, January 20, 2007

Reason # 387 To Buy My Books:



Sunday, January 21, 2007

Snippets Of Conversation, Legacy Labels & A Request For Advice

In the 38 years we have been married, Ginny & I have only had one conversation.

It's run for 38 years so far and still going strong.

Here are a few snippets from yesterday's session:

My feet swell up during the day every day, so midafternoon I generally change shoes. That's an everyday occurrence.

But this morning I noticed that my left hand had swollen also.

First time that's happened.

I pointed it out to Ginny who said, "You're getting old, John. Now the wrong part of you swells up".

We laughed ourselves silly.

All I can say to that is, May the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son, And Holy Spirit, rest upon the head of the man who invented Viagra.

Macular degeneration dims my eyes and degenerative arthritis pains my right hip joint continually.

Ginny says that means I'm a total degenerate from one end to the other.

The macular degeneration creates a tiny blind spot in my vision which I notice most when reading signboards along the highway.

Because I see the two ends of a word on a signboard, my own mind supplies the middle letters.

Makes for some interesting reading.

For instance there is a sign we pass often near an upscale community featuring many medical facilities. I always read that sign as saying, "Riverside Poultry Clinic"

I know it is there and yet I always wonder what a chicken veterinarian is doing in that upscale neighborhood.

The sign actually says "Riverside Podiatry Clinic"! I know it's a foot doctor, yet I always question what a chicken clinic is doing in such an upscale neighborhood.

This morning I saw a billboard for an organization helping troubled girls. The organization, which I'd never heard of before, is called "Boost Up"

Naturally my mind filled in the blind spot.

It may say a lot about my mind, but I read the sign about this girls' organization as saying, "Boobs Up".

Besides swelling and sight problems, neither Beauty nor I hear as well as we used to hear.

Before our drive out to do errands, we discussed whether or not to take bread scraps by the park to feed to the ducks. We decided to wait for a warmer day, but that conversation must have hung in the back of my mind.

At the railroad crossing, a fast moving train delayed

Ginny said, "It's moving so fast, it's raising dust".

"What," I asked?

"That train is moving so fast it's raising dust," she said.

Puzzled as could be, I looked all around for the flock, expecting to see a whirl of wings and wondering how a train could be raising ducks???

"Pay Attention! This is foreplay".

"That doesn't even rank as three-play".

Over a two-hour breakfast, Beauty revealed that Friday her office administration sent around a snide, demeaning e-mail to all employees requiring that a sign be posed on their computers whenever on break.

I composed a sign for her.

My sign reads:

I'm On Break.
Please Don't Screw Anything Else
Up While I'm Gone.
And No, Don't Come Looking For
Me; It Can Wait 15 Minutes!
I'll Correct Whatever Mistakes You
Managed To Make When I Get
Back.



Ginny won't post my sign.

Instead, she applied for a job with another agency the same day that e-mail appeared in her inbox. If she gets the new job, I advised her to paper the walls she leave behind with scores and scores of awards, efficiency reports and her many commendation letters. That snide, demeaning e-mail is a childish display from a manager who should just have guts enough to fire offenders instead of sending blanket e-mails insulting everyone in the whole department.

When we returned home and put on our robes to relax for the evening, we checked our snail mail. As usual the postman had delivered a number of appeals letters from various charities wanting us to send money.

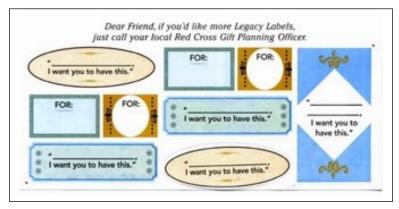
As usual, the charities enclosed gimmicks (calendars, mailing labels, gift cards, etc.) designed to guilt recipients into donating. One week we actually got 17 of these appeals. Organized charities need a lot of cash to be able to pay their directors \$400,000 a year to care for the poor.

It makes little sense to me for us to give money to someone who earns more than we do. We prefer to donate directly to those who have less.

Anyhow, one of these appeals gimmicks specifically targets us old people.

It is a set of Legacy Labels:

Never heard of those before?



You are supposed to stick these labels on the back of furniture and such so that as soon as you die, your relatives can cart things off without much of a squabble over who was supposed to get what.

What a great idea!

These labels are self-sticking.

While Ginny fiddled with other mail, I pealed off this one label, went in the back room, and applied it:



When I came back and flipped open my robe to show her, she just about fell out of her chair laughing.

She said the Red Cross did not intend for their labels to be used that way.

On a more serious note:

Susan, an e-friend whose blog I have followed for months, asked for helpful advice in her January 20th posting (right after her birthday/Disney photos).

Her soldier husband serves us all in Iraq protecting us, while she serves us all by coping at home with their two lovely children.

Ginny and I spent some time discussing her post and praying. We sent her a comment, but we're not satisfied that we said the right things. Please drop in on Susan's blog and give her your input, comments and prayers.

This is a brave couple to be admired.

Susan's blog address is http://colorsofsusan.blogspot.com/

Monday, January 22, 2007

Rooting For The Blue & White... Or For The White & Blue

Sunday Ginny and I thrilled to the early football game in which the Chicago Bears won over the New Orleans Saints.

Two excellent teams — both deserving Superbowl contenders.

Then we prepared to watch the second playoff game.

We draped a blanket over the sofa to snuggle under. We broke out the tv trays. We ordered carry out bar-b-que sandwiches and fries. We popped open cans of soda. We checked the tv schedule and changed to the channel showing the last playoff game.

Imagine our surprise to see only one huge team on the field — 22 players dressed in blue and white uniforms with white helmets.

No. Wait a second. There do seem to be two opposing teams. If you look closely, one team wears silver helmets that just look white. Oh, I get it. One team has blue pants and white shirts while the other team dressed in blue pants and white shirts... No. Some shirts are white and some are blue — except when there was a fumble and then all legs looked blue and white... or maybe it was white and blue.

Phooey on it.

Who needs such stupid hassle.

Doesn't somebody in tv land ever think about how a game will look on an actual tv set?

We watched the jumble for ten or fifteen minutes then clicked off the tv and read murder mysteries all evening.

On Superbowl Sunday, I'm rooting for the Bears...

Assuming I can tell which team is the Bears.

Tuesday, January 23, 2007 Along The Way

Last week my youngest son Donald and I drove to the retirement home where Donald set up internet access and helped set up a blog for our friend Barbara..

Please visit her brand new site at http://alongthewaybybw.blogspot.com/ and welcome her to the wonderful world of blogging.

About 25 years ago Barbara, a newspaper editor, read an article I wrote about family worship. She asked if she could join us for one of our after-supper worship sessions. From that moment on, she has been our whole family's closest friend.



She's now retired from the newspaper but during her career there she edited a magazine for teenagers, covered both hard news and features, edited the religion magazine and wrote a weekly column called *Along The Way*.

Her work won many prestigious local and national awards. The hallway into the newsroom was covered with plaques awarded to her.

Her Along The Way columns drew their strength

and their popularity from her deep personal devotion to Christ and from her honesty in revealing her personal struggles along the way to her goal of walking with Him.

Barbara has lead many retreats and conferences for women and her presentations resonate with people who struggle with their own crosses and tragedies and hunger for a deeper Christian walk along the way.

Over the years she has inspired me, Ginny and our children with her life and insights into living with God in our day to day life.

Of course, like all other Christians (except, of course for me) Barbara has her blind spots.

One of them involves her lack of taste in fine art.

Oh, I know that she listens to Mozart and attends opera. Pictures of Monet's water lilies and sketches by Rim Brant, DiVenchi DaVinchi DeVenche Michelangelo, or one of those other foreign guys decorate her apartment walls.

But her taste in art just falls short.

Poor lady.

Case in point; once I saw this exquisite statue which I bought Barbara for one Christmas thinking she would treasure it.

She didn't.

The following year, she wrapped it in Santa paper and gave it back to me.

Knowing that this had to be an artistic oversight, the following year Ginny and I re-boxed the statue and returned it to Barbara again.

Then a dear friend of Barbara's got married to a prominent and prosperous jeweler. Knowing that the happy couple appreciated fine art, Barbara gave them the stature as a wedding present.

It overwhelmed them.

Knowing that the security system in their beachfront estate would not keep such an art treasure safe, when they got back from their honeymoon in Paris or Jamaica or wherever, the bride returned the statue to Barbara.

But Barbara just does not have good taste when it comes to fine art.

She gave the stature back to me saying that she did not think it fit her décor.

Some people lack refinement.

I proudly display the stature on the pool deck in my garden

Here, for your envy, is a photo:



Anyhow, even though she has no taste in art (or friends), please visit her new blog, Along The Way, anyhow.

Wednesday, January 24, 2007 Regretted Flippancy

Not 15 minutes after I uploaded that flippant blog post yesterday Barbara called.

No, she had not read what I said; she called from her daughter's hospital room because of a crisis.

We went out to lunch at Silver Star, a favorite Chinese restaurant, and as we drove Barbara told me the situation. Mary, her grown daughter has been undergoing radiation and chemotherapy for lung cancer.

The treatments appeared to be successful, but the other day Mary suffered an episode resembling a stroke. Her doctor determined that her cancer has metastasized forming a large tumor in her brain.

Brain surgery is scheduled for tomorrow.

We'll see what happens.

I wonder if I should give the gift of a colorful piece of art for Mary's bedside table to brighten her hospital room?

I know just the thing...

On second thought, maybe that's not such a good idea.

Friday, January 26, 2007 Packrat or Treasures Old & New

First, an update: I called Barbara last night and she says Mary survived Thursday's brain surgery and appears to be doing well.

"Dad, do you have any old Egyptian-looking things; I need some things like that for a library display"?

"Well, I just happen to have a four-foot tall obelisk and a tee shirt with hieroglyphic text on it. I've got a First Century Egyptian oil lamp around here somewhere; I'll have to look in a box for that. How soon do you need this stuff"?

All the time people call me asking for odd things.

In the past couple of months different folks have asked to borrow:

An extension ladder, swimming pool shock, six hand puppets, chairs, folding table, a copy of *Dark Night Of The Soul*, charcoal grill, car jack, shirt with a pumpkin on the chest, a shovel, an ax, a shrimp net, eight forks, a cat carrier, and twenty "extra" dollars.

They call me for stuff because they know I'm a pack rat.

I keep things.

I hold on to things.

I preserve odd things thinking I'm going to have a use for them someday.

Need a bird nest? A snakeskin? A model of an Assyrian chariot? A bust of Jax London or Homer or Shakespeare or the Emperor Hadrian? A dog skull? A statue of a naked lady? A World War I artillery shell? A model of the *Titanic*? A box full of assorted hats? Owl pellets? A mummified rat?

I've got it.

I accumulate things.

So it was no surprise when my daughter called wanting "Old Egyptian-looking stuff". She knew I'd be likely to have something or the other like that on hand.

Ginny says we live in a museum.

I say the place has a certain ambience.

Jesus said, "Every scribe that is instructed unto the kingdom of Heaven is like unto a man that is a householder who bringeth forth out of his treasure things old and new".

There's the rub.

I feel that all I've been doing recently is dredging up old things, stuff dead as Tut. Rehashed ideas. I'm saying things I've said before again and again. Then repeating myself.

Nothing fresh or new or exciting.

My vision of the Lord God, high and lifted up, has faded till I'm relying on memory of visions past.

But memories of inspiring times in the past grow stale in the problems and challenges of the present.

Oh, I see wherein I'm stagnant. Every scribe instructed... brings out treasures.

I get so tied up thinking about what great wisdom I have to offer other people, poor souls, that I neglect being instructed of God for myself.

If a Bible verse means nothing to me, why should I pass it on to somebody else?

The Word is, "John Cowart, Seek Ye First..."

Monday, January 29, 2007 The Silver Chair & Plain ol' Paper Clips

Friday night after dinning out, Ginny and I watched a video movie, *The Silver Chair*; it is the BBC production of an episode in C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles Of Narnia*.

Saturday morning after breakfast at Denny's, we stood for a long time in the restaurant parking lot smoking and talking about how Lewis's allegory related to our own Christian life.

Incidentally, once you're grown up enough to read children's books again, I think the Narnia books are the most helpful things I've ever read. I highly recommend them.

In The Silver Chair, the great lion, Aslan calls two

young people from our world to his. He gives them four rules or signs to follow and assigns them the task of rescuing a lost prince. The kids undergo all sorts of adventures among marshwiggles and giants. They discover their task has implications far beyond just rescuing the enchanted prince. The fate of a world hinges on their actions.

As we stood in the Denny's parking lot, Beauty and I discussed how Lewis' worldview in this story relates to us.

It doesn't.

Neither one of us is aware of any calling to do any particular thing.

Here's a summary of our conversation:

Christ has given us no clear-cut task to perform. No giant to outwit. No witch to slay. No lost prince to rescue.

Our Christian life would be much easier if we had such a specific commission.

Now, I'll grant that there are Christians who feel compelled to get a certain job done. Their experience is beyond mine.

I'm not aware of God calling me to zero in on any particular task.

For Ginny and me, the Christian life is much harder than that. Our life involves a relationship more than a task. What Christ said to us is not, "Get this job done" but rather, "Follow me".

We feel as though we are spear carriers in the great opera. We provide background while the stars of the show perform. We'd stand in the role of Mr. & Mrs. Beaver in the Lion, Witch & Wardrobe, first of the Chronicles Of Narnia books. We chop wood, sew blankets, cook meals and dwell in our own snug, cozy little lodge waiting till we hear that Aslan is on the move, then we may be called upon to do some little something to move things along.

We're just generic brand Christians.

Maybe like religious WD-40, our purpose is just to lubricate so things go smoother for working parts.

A pair of hawks circled high above the Denny's parking lot as we talked.

We observed three elements in our Christian life:

First, the Lord God calls us to **be** a certain type of person.

"Be ye holy for I am holy," He said.

We are to be honest. Forgiving. Sober. Transparent. Compassionate. Grateful. Chaste. Decent. Thankful. Helpful. (St. Paul's letters contain whole laundry lists of things we are to be).

Yet, we find it is much easier to *do* than to *be*. Frantic religious activity gives us a sense superiority and purpose. Keeps us from thinking. Hides us from God.

We feel uncomfortable in the presence of holiness and mask our dis-ease by religious busy work.

Yet, Jesus also does call us to **do** certain things.

We are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner, care for the sick, comfort the feebleminded, bear one another's burdens, goody-goody stuff like that.

Curious thing:

Jesus once told the disciples, "He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father".

We see this prophecy fulfilled daily.

In a single year a modern physician heals more sick people than Jesus did in his whole earthly lifetime. Any ophthalmologist brings sight to more blind people. Any tv evangelist preaches the Gospel to more listeners. At the soup kitchen I used to help out in, the cooks fed way more than 5,000 hungry people each month year in and year out.

But we are so accustomed to such ordinary miracles that we take them for granted.

So Beauty and I feel that while doing stuff does play an important part in the Christian life, it's role is over emphasized.

Jesus said we should do such stuff in secret anyhow.

Don't make a big deal out of it.

Do good then go away.

So, we observed that our life elements consist of being, doing, and, most importantly, following.

For us, that last one is where the faith hits the fan.

We live in as material, physical beings in a physical, material world and try to follow a supernatural Person without having a clear cut idea of what specifically He wants of us here and now, or where He is leading.

That's tough on one level, easy on another.

Sometimes He leads us into brutal battle. No doubt about it, following Jesus can get you killed, maimed or, at best, humiliated. He tells us what to do but not the consequences of what will happen when we do it.

Jesus is sneaky that way.

When the kids in the movie freed the insane prince from his bonds, they could not be sure if he would attack them or befriend them. Their assignment was to free him whichever.

In one sense following Jesus leads us to where He is. The straight and narrow path leads beside still waters and green pastures to Heaven.

And, while Ginny and I are not aware of a specific task to accomplish, we do know there is a solid goal ahead — and that is **not** a place in Heaven!

The apostle John said, "Beloved, now are we the children of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is".

The goal of the Christian life is nothing less than to become Christ-like!

St. Paul says that is the eternal purpose of the whole shebang!

"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to *his* purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate *to be* conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren".

Why do I think this is an easy thing?

Because when we hang around Jesus, He sort of rubs

off on us.

Like stroking a knife blade against a magnet, the blade is still a blade, it still cuts, but it becomes magnetized. A hammer heads still pounds nails but its internal alignment polarizes with that of the loadstone.

Following Christ works something like that. You are still yourself, but some internal alignment changes — you start to become Christ-like.

And this stroking and re-alignment is a life-long process till suddenly, in our last day, "When He shall appear, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is".

Isn't it more than a bit presumptuous to think that we shall someday become godly?

Yes, it is.

But that's what God says He intends for us.

Maybe a knife blade or a hammer makes too strong an analogy. Think instead of a paperclip. It too can become magnetized and lift up other paper clips along with it.

The lowly paperclip does nothing of itself. The master magnet does the whole transforming thing. The paper clip has nothing to boast about. It is the recipient of this transforming magnetic grace — as are we.

Anyhow, I think that while few of us are called upon to rescue princes, we are all called upon to one day become princes. Princesses. A Royal Priesthood.

Yes, ordinary folks like you and me — Holy unto the Lord.

"For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. They are plans for good and not for evil. To give you a future and a hope".

That's cool.

In church Sunday the pastor, as he does each week, called for anyone celebrating a birthday to come forward and the congregation all prays a blessing for them.

Two ladies went forward. I assumed they were both my age or perhaps a little younger. Turns out they were

mother and daughter.

The mother, who acted more lively and alert than I do, said she turned 94 last week!

Makes me feel old already.

Oh, the other movie we watched over the weekend was *The Terminator*. Great movie, but it didn't generate as much theological speculation for us.

Although the concept of a relentless, inexorable evil being out to destroy you and everything you love at all costs may merit some thought.

Tuesday, January 30, 2007 Moving Green Things

TV weathermen forecast that Monday night the temperature here in north Florida would drop to 24 degrees, the coldest in several years.

Guess where midnight found me?

Outside in my robe and slippers moving Beauty's tender plants into our house.

Now I know why she married me. To move outside green things in.

All plants eat dirt!

Barbara's daughter is home from the hospital after the brain surgery. The family marveled that the operation only took three hours.

My mission in life is to spread joy, light and cheer to the downtrodden and desolate so I sent Mary a message of comfort and consolation:

"The surgery would have taken longer if you had a bigger brain".

Wednesday, January 31, 2007

Interruptions, Delays, Intrusions & Disruptions — Mostly Self-Made

Yesterday my telephone rang only once and no one visited at all.

Thus, without interruptions, I formatted 49 whole pages of those 16^{th} Century Puritan diaries I'm editing.

That the sort of Super Hero writer I can be when not distracted by life.

Yesterday also, I read the blog of <u>Pete</u>, my e-friend in Great Britain. He had his whole evening planned when a pressing chore disrupted his intentions.

Boy! Can I identify with that!

My interruptions get interrupted.

But, how about this: my sneaky mind often seeks out those interruptions.

As a freelance writer for 25+ years, I subscribe to the axiom that the chief business of a writer is to avoid writing.

One of my favorite cartoons shows two sophisticated women in a coffee shop where one is telling the other, "I once got married to avoid writing".

For 25+ years, first thing every morning, I write the previous day's activities or thoughts and such in my journal (recently this blog). That practice serves as a springboard into the writing of the day. At least in recording my pervious day, I'm writing about something I know rather than something I have to think about and organize.

This practice tricks my brain into continuing to write the day's work.

Unless I'm interrupted.

These interruptions can be internal or external.

For instance, yesterday I delayed my own writing by reading other people's blogs. I followed a link to State Of Grace and browsed through 35 happy pages of her photo gallery looking at pictures of her super-cute dog, Malcolm.

Now, I do not know this lady nor her dog, but I welcomed the chance to view her site (really neat stuff, worth a visit) and I relished avoiding my own work.

I'm to blame for my own internal interruptions.

But other times, other people interrupt my planned work schedule.

My family, friends and neighbors know that I work at home and since I am only a writer and obviously at home doing nothing, I'm always available for a phone call or a visit. John can always pull his nose out of that book or get away from that computer to look for a run-away dog, or listen to a lover's spat, or engage in idle gossip, answer a question, or pontificate about a problem.

These people who call or come by are external interruptions to my plans.

And, of course, I believe that the External Source of these interruptions is God.

Once I attended a business seminar and heard a successful pastor explain how to avoid "Time-Wasters", i.e. people who interrupted the more important things on his desk.

He advised tactics such as using a phone answering machine to screen out the riffraff:

Thus my phone message ought to say:

"You have reached John's Answering Machine designed to screen out riffraff. If you are riff, please press one. If you are raff, press two. All others, please hang up now".

Another thing the efficient pastor suggested was to stand when an uninvited visitor arrives and to keep standing and moving toward the door to subliminally suggest to them that they should leave. —Now!

How discourteous!

And, of course, you should teach your secretary to flub off time-wasters by referring them to somebody less important than you are so they can waste that guy's time instead of yours.

I found this preacher's suggestions appalling.

An abomination.

Something a yankee might suggest.

Now I must admit that the techniques the pastor promoted worked for him; he had built one of the largest congregations in the Southeast. Thousands of people benefited from his sermons each week.

And a Scriptural precedent for such focus as he advocated does exist:

When Nehemiah was rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem for the Jews, Sanballat, leader of the local pre-Arab militia,

called for him to come down off the wall for a ceasefire truce and an important Mideast peace conference.

But Nehemiah replied, "I am doing a great work, so I can not come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it and come down to you"?

The preacher got his mega-church built. Nehemiah got his wall built. Neither brooked interruptions to their great work.

But I am neither priest nor prophet.

On a shallow level, in theory at least, I want my time and life to be 100 percent at the disposal of Jesus Christ — does He deserve anything less?.

Notice that I say, "On a shallow level in theory" because in actuality I'm as greedy, grasping, cruel, self-centered, lustful, depraved and willful as Attila the Hun or any other sinner you'd care to name.

But, even being the hybrid half and half sort of Christian that I am, I believe the Time-Wasters God allows to cross my path deserve my attention.

Maybe that's why I get so little of substance done (Blaming it on Jesus sounds like a good excuse to me).

I attempt to avoid Time-Wasters by getting out of bed and getting to work early; I normally rise at 4 a.m. But even that does not always work; I've had visitors call that early hour. "We saw your light on and knew you were up so..."

So I attempt to be accessible —— within strict limits.

For instance, once when my youngest daughter was in crisis, a neighbor with tears streaming down his face knocked at my door saying, "Mr. Cowart, can you tell me how to be saved"?

For a rabid fundamentalist Christian like me such a question sparks!

Nevertheless I replied, "Yes I can, but not today. Come back tomorrow and I'll help you".

You mean my daughter's well-being outranked this man's eternal soul salvation?

Yes.

I may well be wrong but I think my response was

covered by St. Paul when he said, "If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel".

Another limit that our children, friends and neighbors all know is that Ginny comes first with me. I may or may not be able to help others but God has appointed me the honor of being her husband she comes first. To me, that's part of being at the disposal of my God.

"Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church," the Scripture says.

She entertains that same mindset and holds me in that same regard.

I suspect the reason she treats me like a king is that I try to treat her like a queen.

Makes for an interesting marriage.

We've noticed that good things can unbalance, disrupt and throw us off track as easily as bad things or even indifferent things.

Maybe that's why God ignores my prayers about winning Lotto.

Maybe He thinks that having \$19,000,000 to spend would interrupt my work.

I disagree.

But this posting is getting way too long and those $16^{\rm th}$ Century diaries await my attention... unless I can think of something else to do this morning.

I'm looking for an out to avoid writing.

Thursday, February 01, 2007 **Yesterday's Words**

Myne woorcke creepeth a head veary hoverly.

Yes it does.

Wednesday I only got six pages edited and formatted.

What? You didn't catch that first sentence?

It's is perfectly clear 16th Century English; it says, " My work creeps ahead very slowly".

But it says that in the style of the English language used in the diaries of Richard Rogers and Samuel Ward, two puritans of the Elizabethan era. Ward was one of the translators of the King James Bible.

Back on December 28, 2006, "We Are Party People" and on January 3, 2007, "Fun In My World" (see my blog archives in the sidebar) I wrote blog postings about my work on these diaries.

Working with photocopies of a 1933 transcript, I am trying to turn the diaries into readable English for today's readers.

What fun!

So many words have changed spelling since 1587 that as I entered these diaries in Word on my computer, Clippie, that little talking paperclip man on the Help menu, pops out and says, "There are too many spelling and grammatical errors in Rogers.doc to continue displaying them. To check the spelling and grammar of this document, chose Spelling and Grammar from the TOOLS menu".

Thus, Word refuses to underline misspellings in red.

So I have to change them myself. One at a time.

Words like: godes, inioy, whi, thei, maryed, thinck, and lookeinge.

Which mean: God's, enjoy, why, they, married, think, and looking.

Yes, words do change.

Even today.

Why, when a young lady offered to show me her bling, I got all excited till I found out she was showing nothing but a stupid charm bracelet!

So I am updating Ward's and Rogers' Elizabethan language as best I can.

I hope to make these diaries readable for people today because they show each writer's walk with Christ; therefore, they help me in my own walk.

Few books help me more than the diaries, journals (and blogs) of other Christians. And when I read my own diaries from years past, they help me live my life today a little better.

Seeing where I've been helps me see where I'm

going.

Richard Rogers enjoyed that same experience

On September 2, 1587, Rogers read some of his own past journal entries and said:

And lookeinge backe, I acknowledge that my course hath been farre unbeseeminge one who hath so longe geven name to the gospel Oh what had become of me if God had put me to my plundge in many trials as he might have done? For I had been utterly unable to have stood. Would it might please the lord to geve me cause of greater reioiceinge hereafter, and that I may keepe in this harty and sensible feeleinge of care, watch fulness and vew of mine estatee that I might nether covertly desire to inioy that liberty which I could not soundly approve to my conscience in pleasure and profits. ... For my mind hath been all the daye longue with the lorde.

In my blog archives (on the sidebar) for January 3, 2006, "I Owe A Debt To Dracula", I wrote about how I've kept a daily journal for 25+ years and what my diary means to me in daily life.

That's why I'm slugging through these ancient papers to make them available to modern readers. We are all in the same boat.

My mind is going!

Each morning I pack Ginny's lunch for her to take to work. This morning I realized that I'd packed the last breakfast bun and would need more to finish out the week.

I called my daughter Jennifer and asked her to drive me to the grocery store for some breakfast buns.

While I was in Publix, I bought a few extra things since I was already there, essentials like carrots and ice cream.

Paid \$25 for two sacks of groceries.

Got home and found I had forgot to buy any breakfast buns. Not a one. And that's the only reason I'd gone to the store in the first place.

I need to get my mind out of the 16^{th} Century and into this one.

Saturday, February 03, 2007 A Tornado, Beer, Books & Super Bowl

Thursday Blogger appeared to be out altogether.

I could not read anyone else's blog nor could they read mine so I left Wednesday's post up for an extra day while I went out to lunch with my friend Wes.

Thursday evening weather alerts placed Jacksonville was under a severe weather watch and about 3 a.m. a tornado touched down about 70 miles south of us killing at least 19 people, snapping trees, overturning cars, and shredding over 800 homes right down to the foundations.



Friday I checked our refrigerator for beer to drink during the Super Bowl football game on Sunday.

Yes, it's still there.

Last year, for the 2006 Super Bowl, Ginny and I bought a six pack of beer. We drank two during that game, then we drank another two on the Fourth Of July, and we still have two left for tomorrow's game.

Yes, even thought we are rabid religious fanatics, we are not teetotalers.

Perhaps I set a poor example for others in my drinking habits. I have seen many fine people devastated, degraded and destroyed by drink.

A tornado could not have done a better job on them.

I've told many a fine person at the mission, "Either

you control the bottle or it controls you".

But Jesus saves us from whatever has us licked, so drinking is not the real problem.

He said:

"There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man....Do ye not perceive, that whatsoever thing from without entereth into the man, *it* cannot defile him; because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught, purging all meats?...

"That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all these evil things come from within, and defile the man."

I've heard too many people use liquor or drugs as an excuse for their behavior; "I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't been drunk".

Nonsense.

Alcohol works just like castor oil.

It doesn't put anything into the heart, it just makes what's already there easier to come out.

I see nothing wrong with drinking in moderation, a little wine for thy stomach's sake; but if you've ever found yourself hugging a commode, that may be a hint to look up your local AA meeting in the phone book.

Many Christians here in the South feel that any taste of alcohol is anathema. They won't touch the stuff.

And while I respect their view, I don't subscribe to it myself.

Therefore, for those who look forward to enjoying tomorrow's Super Bowl game without the lubrication of beer, I refer to this happy website:

http://www.breweryhistory.com/Defunct/DefunctIndex.





These English pub signs come from the website of the Brewery History Society. It's a place where people from all over Great Britain have gone out taking photos of quaint beer and pub signs, some of which date back to 1666. They post hundreds of such photos on the site. These move from the realm of advertising into the realm of art and I found them delightful. The site is well worth a visit.

Speaking of advertising: Look for an ad for my books during Super Bowl. Commercials during the game only cost \$2,600,000.00 for a 30 second spot.

I did not have quite enough to buy a full 30 seconds so I bribed a guy with a six-pack and he engraved a link to my bookstore front, www.bluefishbooks.info , on the hoof of one of those big horses pulling a beer cart.

Every time you see one of those horses in a commercial, look at the hooves to see if you spot my name and think about buying one of my books.

Or not.

I hope you enjoy the game.

Sunday, February 04, 2007 **Typos?**

A couple of months ago I started drinking soup directly from the bowl.

When I tried to use a spoon, I sloshed soup all down the front of me.

That's when I first noticed my hands shaking.

It's gotten progressively worse and my primary care physician tested me for the possible onset of Parkinson's, then he set up an appointment for me with a neurologist tomorrow morning.

Just what I need!

Oh well, in youth or old age, our times are in God's hands and we live in the light of His mercy both daily and eternally.

Odd. But no where in the Scripture does Jesus ever cure anyone of old age.

In fact just after He rose from the dead, Jesus told Peter, "When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry *thee* whither thou wouldest not."

John's Gospel adds that Jesus said this, "Signifying by what death Peter should glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He saith unto him, Follow me".

On the down side of my shakes, I hit the wrong keys on my computer much more often making many more typos than I used to.

On the upside, now I can blame all my mistakes and misspellings on the tremor in my hands instead of on being ignorant of how to spell words.

I may know something about why I quiver by next Tuesday.

Be sure to read my Saturday Blog posting from yesterday and watch for my commercial on the foot of that big horse pulling the beer wagon during Super Bowl tonight.

Millions and millions and millions of tv viewers will see my ad and buy my books by the ton. I'm going to be rich beyond my wildest dreams of avarice — Well, almost.

I'm so excited my hands are shaking!

Monday, February 05, 2007

My Super Bowl Commercial

Did you see my Super Bowl ad?

No?

I didn't either.

So right after the game I called the NFL commissioner and demanded an explanation.

Commercials during the only game \$2,600,000.00 for a 30 second spot. But I was at least \$60,000.00 short of being able to buy a full 30 second ad. So I bribed this guy with a six-pack. He promised to link my bookstore engrave а to front. www.bluefishbooks.info , on the hoof of one of those big horses pulling a beer cart so millions and millions of viewers would buy my books this morning..

The guy I bribed with a six-pack swears he did write www.bluefgishbooks.info on the horse's hoof with a permanent marker.

But it seems that the big horse with my ad on it's hoof stepped in something left behind by one of the horses harnessed in the front of the line; thus obliterating my ad.

Guess I won't be selling millions of my books after all.

Wrong football team won too.

Phooy!

Wait till next year!

This morning I'm off to see the neurologist. Goody. Goody. I'm really uptight about this because I loath being touched!

Tuesday, February 06, 2007 **Testings**

Yesterday, the neurologist, Dr. Trout (whom I'll name that after the famous Kilgore Trout, hero of so many Kurt Vonnegut novels) tested me to no end.

On one hand, his tests eliminated the possibility of Parkinson's being my problem.

That's good to know.

On the other hand, Dr. Trout's tests proved conclusively that I need more three more sessions of testings.



I find this prospect grueling because of my aphenphosmphobia. Please look in my blog archives for December 11th to 14th, 2006, to read about how much I love being touched!

Don't worry, I have no intention of turning this journal into a catalogue of my aches and pains unless such things directly relate to my real life but I will just mention medical stuff whenever it's pertinent.

Like, I get to go to an oncologist tomorrow for still more tests.

I have no doubt that every single person who reads this blog (there were over 9,000 readers in January) is undergoing some kind of trial, testing, aggravation or problem right now, today.

As the Patriarch Job observed, "Man that is born of woman is few of days and full of troubles".

Medical tests are not the only kind that beset us.

Being tested is the common lot of man.

But, I hate being tested!

By teachers, by physicians or by God Almighty, I hate being tested. For instance, I cringe at even the thought of being touched.

No wonder my blood pressure always reads high; this stranger comes at me, grabs my arm and locks me into a cuff, then latches onto my wrist while she tightens that cuff.

Can't fool me.

I've read about those women who handcuff men before they bring out the riding crop, clothespins, and black leather outfits.

Of course my blood pressure shoots up!

But enough of such nonsense! My brain knows perfectly well that that nurse means me no harm; it's my own feelings that are out of whack. So I steel myself to undergo whatever tests are necessary. I just told Dr. Trout about my aversion to being touched and cooperated fully as he handled my arms and legs.

And when he applied a tuning fork to my feet, I hardly shuddered at all.

But on the other hand (yes, I know that's three hands) getting these medical tests got me to thinking about how the Scripture often mentions testing as being part of life.

Which brings up the question of why God, who is omniscient, tests people?

Doesn't He, who knows all, know how the test will turn out?

Why does He test us, send us trials and tribulations?

The Apostle James said, "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing *this*, that the trying of your faith worketh patience".

Note: in the Elizabethan English of the King James Bible the word *temptation* is often used in the sense of *test* or *trial* or *trouble*

In Peter's first letter, speaking of salvation, he said,

"Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ".

Why would these apostles think of testing as resulting in joy?

If God does not need proof of our tinsel strength, then why does He stretch us to the breaking point? Test us till we don't think we can stand it another second?

I think an answer may be found in another ancient book. In Deuteronomy, one of the books Moses wrote, he said:

Thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart ..., He humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, ... that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live

The test is not for God.

The test is for us.

The tests we go through does not show God naything He did not already know. The test shows us what we are made of. What we can endure. How much God loves and supports us. It proves to us the endless measure of His grace.

I see the situation as being like a swim coach who tests his players to their utter limit then at the end slaps them on the back and says, "There! I knew you could do it! Good job! Well done, thou good and faithful servant!"

No wonder the apostles, who saw things a bit clearer than I do, viewed testing as a portent of approaching joy.

So, we are to endure the vicissitudes of fate and testing with patience because, although we cringe and want to avoid this day's test, our tests portend great things ahead.

As St. Paul said, "Present your bodies a living sacrifice ... that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable,

and perfect will of God".

Good. Acceptable. Perfect.

But in spite of all that good stuff, this morning I sit here at my computer apprehensive, working myself into an unreasonable tizzy about being touched, wondering what delights that oncologist has in store for me tomorrow.

I sort of wish he'd win Lotto or something and cancel all his appointments.

Wednesday, February 07, 2007 Today's Tests, History and Riddles:

Know why they nail down the lid on a coffin?

To keep the doctors from administering any more tests!

Today I'm off to the lab for blood work, then to see the oncologist who will undoubtedly order more tests!

Yes they may prolong my life but who wants to live longer if you have to spend the whole extended time in a doctor's waiting room?

Oh well, that's my cross to bear for today. I shouldn't bitch about it; there are people in that waiting room carrying much heaver ones then I do.

Tuesday my daughter Eve treated me to a fun lunch at the Silver Star Chinese Restaurant.

Since my Super Bowl commercial flopped, Eve helped me research (actually she did the whole thing) a more reasonable marketing plan

Eve is librarian at a local branch library where she's instituted a Riddle Of The Day program for patrons as they check out at the circulation desk. So she and I exchanged happy riddles over Foo Young:

Q: What do you call a cow with no legs?

A: Ground beef.

Q: How do you introduce a hamburger?

A: Meet Patty.

Q: Where do you find a dog with no legs?

A: Right where you left him.

Q: How Do Crazy People Go Through The Forest?

A: They Take The Psycho Path

Q: How Do You Get Holy Water?

A: You Boil The Hell Out Of It.?

Q:? What Do You Call a Boomerang That Doesn't Come Back?

A: A Stick

Q:? What Do You Get When You Cross a Snowman With a Vampire?

A: Frostbite

And finally, for the amusement of those readers who anxiously await publication of my 16th Century Puritan diaries:

Q:? Why Did The Pants Of The Pilgrim Fathers Always Fall Down?

A: Because They Wore Their Belt Buckles On Their Hats.

Thank you for your applause. You're welcome. If I never make it as a writer, I'll launch my new career as a stand-up comedian.

In the evening I enjoyed a phone conversation with historian Kevin Hooper, author of *The Early History Of Clay County: A Wilderness That Could Be Tamed* published by History Press. He gave me invaluable advise and suggestions about writing and publishing history books.

Later, Beauty and I watched an absorbing video on the life and times of Queen Elizabeth I. That whets my appetite to get back to work on those Puritan diaries.

One word in those diaries I have to watch for all the time is the word *then*.

Sometimes that word means the same as it does today, as in the sentence: "I went to Wal-Mart, then to have all my teeth pulled".

Other times the word *then* means *than*, as in the sentence, "I have more *than* ten books".

Stumbling over then used as than or then confused me until I realized that in everyday Elizabethan English,

the diarists often spelled things just as they pronounced them. And if I say the sentence I'm editing out loud, the meaning in context becomes clear because as I listen to what I actually say, I find that I pronounce the word the same way the diarists did!

Unless in print, or spoken by someone who enunciates clearly, practically everyone here in the South today says, "I have more then ten books".

Yes, we Crackers pronounce many words just as the Elizabethan Puritans did.

That fascinates me.

I'm having such fun with this project.

Maybe I can call in sick to the oncologist so I can stay home and work.

Thursday, February 08, 2007 Off To See The Wizard

Removing his finger, the oncologist (whom I will call Dr. Oz after the wizard) said, "It's terrible to be growing old, isn't it"?

"Not at all," I said. "I'm having a wonderful time now, and every day takes me a step closer to Home".

As he gave my prostate cancer a thorough exam, Dr. Oz explained a number of possible treatment options and we eliminated three of them for various reasons.

I am not a handsome man but I'd really make one hell of an ugly woman.

This is an exciting time of life with all sorts of possibilities ahead, though I do get weary of all the doctors' visits. Each of four specialists treats only one small part of my anatomy and sends me to another specialist to treat another part. Looks to me like the only medical professional who deals with the entire human body is the mortician.

Dr. Oz referred me to yet another specialist who will look at other "suspicious areas" on my body. I need to make another appointment for more medical ping-pong with me as the ball.

One thing makes me leery. A sign in one doctor's office read, "If you are hear for lab work..."

No that is not one of my typos; the sign said, *If you are hear...*

Maybe I'm a stickler for detail, but these are the same folks who want to cut on my one and only. I'd feel better if someone in that office read their own stuff.

Be that as it may, I feel fine.

I'm in no pain. (Except, of course for my arthritis pain which is chronic, constant, continual and incurable, but I just endure that. Have for years.)

I'm dealing with my own resistance to change.

And amid all the medical options and possibilities available, I try to keep one criteria in mind, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do"?

None of the other stuff really matters....

Or, as Superman said to his oncologist, "You want to stuff kryptonite up my WHAT!"

Last night as Beauty and I talked over all this stuff, she said, "Love, no matter what comes of all this, we'll face it and handle it together".

See why I love her so much?

Friday, February 09, 2007 Good People

Yes. I'm late posting. I'm sorry. Ginny & I watched a movie last night and slept late till 5:30 and have not posted a blog yet. I've already had a phone call asking if I'm ok and why I haven't posted. Here it is; I'm writing quick and won't even read back over it to edit. Thanks for your patience. I'll try to have something up before 6:30 tomorrow. There's no need to call.

—— John

Thursday I enjoyed breakfast at Dave's Diner with my friend Barbara, the retired newspaper editor who started her first blog just a few weeks ago.

For almost three hours we talked about writing, following Christ, her adventures in the retirement home, and her daughter's recent brain surgery.

Barbara has taken a really old lady under her wing. The lady may be delusional and has told tales about strange men making improper suggestions to her in the laundry room. Until recently the home staff wondered if she might be making these encounters up; but the other day the old lady called the office to complain and when a staff member checked, there was indeed a non-resident man in the laundry room. He denied making any off color remarks to the lady, but they banded him from the facility.

Just in case.

Barbara, who often uses an aluminum walker to get around, makes sure the old lady gets to meals and various errands. She takes some of the lady's tales and complaints with a grain of salt, but cares for her as best she can without being entrapped in the guilt trips the lady tries to lay on her adult children.

Barbara also goes up nearly every evening to the assisted living unit to spoon feed an old man whose stroke prevents him for lifting his hands. And she is committed to driving her daughter five days a week for the next month for radiation therapy.

Barbara's example of hand's-on Christian service as well as her spiritual insights interests me.

Not enough to undertake such service myself, you understand, but it interests me.

For the past few weeks I've heard a sound from inside the walls of our home. It sounds like a helicopter was landing in our hall and got trapped between the walls, engine roaring, rotors striking metal, louder and louder each day.

Then it stopped.

So did all heat in our home.

Yes, a fan-thingy inside our central heat and air unit gave up the ghost so we have been without heat for a while. No great hardship here in Florida; Ginny and I just cuddled under a blanket to watch tv in the evenings.

We had to wait for a payday to roll around before I could even think about calling repairman.

But payday approaches so I asked my neighbor, Rex, for the phone number of the guy who worked on our heater/air conditioner a couple of years ago.

Turns out the A/C guy is in jail.

Rex came over himself to look at our helicopter in the wall. He removed panels, unbolted machinery, disconnected electric lines, and removed the massive, heavy blower fan mechanism.

The thing resembles a huge wheel that a hamster might run on, but inside the wheel sits a large electric engine instead of a furry animal. Rex found that vibration had sheared off two of the mounting brackets holding this engine.

He disconnected the brackets to use as templates, ran up to his shop with them, and welded parts to manufacture new brackets. (Have I mentioned that Rex is a skilled craftsman?). In 30 minutes, he returned with the new brackets and reversed the whole process of bolting, reconnecting, rewiring, testing and reinstalling our furnace.

We again have heat!

Silent heat

Rex thinks nothing of accomplishing what appear to me as mechanical wonders.

I admire his skill at such things; leaves me in awe.

But there's something else I admire about him more.

His hands-on care for his family. When his mother grew so old she needed nursing care, Rex visited her daily in the nursing home to bathe her. And he brought her home to his house practically every weekend.

When his wife's sister became incapacitated and could not care for her children, Rex adopted her three-year-old son and raises the boy as his own.

When his wife's mother grew old enough that it was unwise for her to live alone, guess who took her into their home?

Rex and his wife not only do all that for their own people but they watch out for Ginny and me and do us all sorts of service and kindnesses. And they do such things without making me feel like a useless object of charity.

And I've seen them do the same sort of thing for other folks in our neighborhood. But you'd never guess that

they do such things unless you watch closely because they make no show or display of their kindnesses.

See why I admire Rex and his wife so much?



Yesterday's news brought word of the tragic death here in Florida of Anna Nicole Smith, a young woman who was famous for being famous.

Google News this morning offered 2,079 articles about her life. I read several and I'm impressed by the *Washington Post* article by Philip Kennicott.

Back in my blog for Feb. 25, 2006, I posted a photo of her without knowing who she was; the photo had run by mistake with a newspaper article about the discovery of

a fossil mammal. Alert blog readers quickly told me who the lady in the photo was. I don't think I'd ever heard of her before.

Oh, my comment on the fossil article's illustration: "Yep. That's A Mammal Alright!"

In 1992, Playboy magazine featured a photo of her on the cover. In 1994,



she married 89-year-old oil tycoon J Howard Marshall II, whose wealth was estimated to be 550 million dollars.

In every article I've read on the matter, Mr. Marshall appears to have been very happy with the marriage.

Marshall died in 1995 and people related to a former marriage of his disputed the widow's right to inherit his estate. Some claimants claimed that the old man could not have an erection so the marriage was never consummated (I wonder how they know that?). The photos I've seen of her, makes me think the old man may have been highly motivated. She also said their marriage was consummated.

But, who knows? Perhaps the union was like that of King David and Abishag (First Kings 1:1-4) Who knows and whose business is it?

After Marshall's death, a legal battle ensued although his will specifically named her as beneficiary. A federal court award his widow \$474 million in a settlement which was later overturned as many attorneys and claimants scrambled for her money.

Last September she gave birth to a daughter. Her 20year-old son from a former marriage died in her hospital room while visiting her and the new baby.

Several guys claim to have taken advantage of Anna Nicole Smith so that they can claim to be the baby's father – and, of course, claim her cash.

The legal maneuvering looks to last for many years.

During her life she was the butt of jokes about golddiggers and dumb blonds and bimbos. Predators of all sorts appear to have victimized the lady. Tragedy dogged her.

Poor child. At least now she's Home and can expect from the Lord Jesus the same mercy as is available to any of the rest of us.

Her death saddens me.

I think the world has lost more than it realizes.

Saturday, February 10, 2007 Just For Fun

I want to take a few days off blogging to reorganize my thoughts. God willing, I'll post again on Feb. 15th. Meanwhile, I hope you get a kick out of the following.

As I waited to get in to see a doctor last week for some odd reason I was reminded of a fiction short story I wrote years ago. I stuck the manuscript in a file drawer somewhere and I can't find it now. But I'll try to re-create the story here just for the anguish — and for the fun.

In The Waiting Room

The eye exam machine flickered as George brightened the screen by mistakenly twisting the wrong knob.

The old man with his face pressed into the scope flinched at the flash.

Old coot shouldn't be driving anyhow, George thought.

He failed the old codger without a qualm.

"Go to Hell," the old man snapped when George stamped REJECTED on his application.

"Not me," George snickered, "I'm Civil Service."

People in the A to E line shuffled forward listlessly. D through L milled around in place. M through S applicants squeezed up against the puke-green wall. T to Z and Late-Renewals sagged against the table holding Drive Safety pamphlets.

Time for a break.

Let 'em wait.

George called over Cindy, Max and Laverne and the four of them strolled into the breakroom/kitchenette behind the Authorized Personnel Only door at the back of the State Driver's License Bureau.

That left two counter windows open.

That's plenty, George thought.

No hurry about a coffee break. Where else could customers go anyhow. They'd wait. They certainly wouldn't drive away without a license. No hurry at all.

George sipped a second cup while regaling Cindy, Max and Laverne, the new girl, with that joke about the cripple and the blind girl. Just before he reached the punch line, the room exploded.

A gas line linked to the propane tank outside the break room wall ruptured killing George, Cindy, Max and Laverne instantly.

None of the driver's license applicants or any of the other clerks were injured.

George woke up on a hard plastic seat with a fat woman crowding him on his right. A metal bar linked the seat tight against the next seats in the row where Max, Cindy and Laverne sat pressed thigh to thigh. It seemed as though hundreds and hundreds of other people milled about in the room.

Standing room only.

The place smelled musty.

Too many people herded together for too long

On a far wall, a big red sign proclaimed:

NO SMOKING!

Below that in smaller print it said

NO FOOD OR DRINK ALLOWED.

Another sign announced:

OPEN 24 HOURS FOR YOUR CONVIENCE. OVER 600 SERVICE WINDOWS TO SERVE YOU CLIMATE CONTROLLED DO NOT ADJUST THERMOSTAT

A black speaker mounted high on the wall squawked something unintelligible. People in the crowd surged toward the six hundred sixty six counter windows at the front of the room.

Standing on tiptoe, straining to look over the sea of heads, George could see a long row of counter windows, each one made of opaque bullet-proof glass with a tiny awkward hole for speaking through set so that people would have to bend low to hear the seated clerk.

All but seven of the counter windows sported signs saying:

CLOSED USE NEXT WINDOW.

The loud speaker squawked again in a blare of static.

"What did it say? What did it say?" the people asked each other.

The mass of people swayed, some left, some right, pushing to get at the few open windows.

"Get in line! Get in line! Line forms on the right," yelled a uniformed armed guard.

Cindy tugged the guard's sleeve asking, "What happened? Where are we"?

"You're not allowed to touch official personnel," the guard snarled pointing to a huge sign above massive double doors at the end of the room. It said:

ABANDON HOPE ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE.

"Get off your butts and get in line," the guard shouted. "You need to be processed before you can go in there. Line forms on the right".

George got separated from the others as he pushed toward the right hand wall to join the long line of people there. The line snaked around tarnished brass stanchions draped with frayed green-velvet ropes.

George's feet and the backs of his legs ached by the time the line inched to the window. He reached a place marked by a strip of yellow tape on the dirty floor and a sign which said, *Stand Behind Line Till Called*.

A voice yelled next as a fat woman slouched away from the window.

As George leaned forward to peek through that little, low hole in the glass, the shade dropped and a voice boomed, "Closed for lunch. Use next window".

The line scrambled toward the next window pushing and shoving. George ended up pressed all the way back, two-thirds further away from the window than when he'd started. "Damn, but I need a bathroom," he muttered.

"You'll loose your place in line," said a baggy man a head of him.

"Would you hold my place" George asked.

"That's not allowed," the man said. "Against the regulations to save places. No places saved down here. I worked an airport counter for 20 years before my heart attack and I know about regulations".

George couldn't wait. He broke out of line and shoved his way across the room to a red door. A sign on the door said:

RESTROOMS ARE FOR OFFICE PERSONNEL ONLY

A keypad lock sealed the door.

George returned to the end of line.

George finally reached Window 478. The clerk behind that low hole in the glass said, "Where are your admittance papers. You have to go to Window 12 to get your papers. Next!"

George fought his way through the press of people to the line at Window 12. "Need to have a Picture ID," the voice behind the glass said. "No papers issued without a photo ID. Next!"

George lifted his tie to show his photo ID. He always clipped it to the point of his tie to embarrass any whining customer who wanted to know his name bad enough to stare at his crotch.

"Expired," said the voice behind the window. "Go to Window 411".

Looking around, George noticed that just about everyone in the crowd wore an official ID of one sort or another:

AOL. Student Advisor. Food Stamp Councilor. AT&T. Social Services. Hospital Admissions. Tag Agency. Cable Network. City Finance. Department Of Motor Vehicles. Registrar. U.S. Postal Service. Network Administrator. HUD Inspector. Service Manager. Homeland Security. Loan Officer. Building Maintence. LAPD. Event Staff. Human Resources. City Transit Authority. IRS. ... the array of ID badges seemed limitless.

Not everybody in the crowd but nearly all of them wore an ID badge.

The crowd edged away from one barefoot guy who

seemed to have lost it. He wore a swimsuit and a muscle shirt with LIFEGUARD stenciled on the chest. He kept lifting a whistle attached to a lanyard around his neck, blowing it, and yelling, "Everybody Out! Everybody out of the pool"!

Avoiding that nutcase, George elbowed his way across the room to Window 411.

CLOSED FOR LUNCH, GO TO WINDOW 295, the sign there said.

The clerk at Window 295 told George to pick up his application from the counter at the back of the room "Where you should agot it when youse first came in".

George picked up the 18 page application and got in line at Window 93.

The clerk there sighed, "These papers must be filled out COMPLETELY. You haven't filled in your grandmother's Social Security Number. Can't get in without all the proper paperwork being filled out. Next!".

"My grandmother's Social Security number!" George shouted. "How am I supposed to know that".

"Computers at the self-service counter" the clerk said. "Look it up, fill out the forms COMPLETELY, then take it to Window 19".

George stood in the self-service line. He finally made it to the computer station. "System Error 550... error code bX-vjhbsj ... Enter password and click here to contact Blogger Support", the screen blinked.

Eventually George found Grandma's Social Security number.

He wrote it on the form.

When he got there, the clerk at Window 19 was on coffee break.

And the line of dead service personnel inched forward from window to window to window.

But the big double doors at the end of the room never once swung open.

Never once.

For all Eternity, neither George nor a single one of the others in the Waiting Room ever made it into Hell.

"With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured unto you again"
—— Matthew 7:2

Thursday, February 15, 2007 John Cowart: Human Monorail

First, before anything else I wish to declare categorically that I am NOT the father of Anna Nicole's baby!

Honest, we didn't even shake hands.

However, my D.N.A. is as good as those other guys' so I deserve the money as much as they do. You know, of course that the initials D.N.A. stand for Dumb Nonsense Assertion — and I can assert as well as the other contenders for the lady's millions. But I'm more generous than they are, they can keep the baby to raise; I just want the cash.

Enough of that.

Well, I promised I'd resume blogging today, so I'm back.... Sort of.

With all the doctors' appointments the past few weeks, my work went off the track. And since I only have one track to work with, I stopped blogging to catch up on publishing deadlines.

I mean I really focused on this stuff.

Here's a sample of the sort of material I'm working with so you can see why I need to focus:



OF IVDGES.

Ow I will goe forward with the reft of the text that re-Vet.8.

maineth, from the eight verfe in the fewords: [and be went thence to Penuel] and so forth, as they are to be read before the last Sermon. Here we may see another discouragement and repulse that Gedeen sustained by the men of Penuel: for he being with his soludiers faint and weary, was denied bread not only by the of Succoth, as wee have seene, but by the men

of Penuel alfo, as appeareth in this verfe. For to them he went in the faintnes and wearines of himfelf and his fouldiers, and had the repulfe; whereby
he might eafily haue been tempted, and brought to thinke and feare, that
Gold did not approue of his journey, but did fet himfelfe againfhim. Por lo Note
we are wont to conclude by the ill fucceffe we have even in good attempts,
effectially when the lets be foreible, many and divers, and one in the necke
of another: as Inter afficients were, when among hard meffages brought
to him of other calamities that were befalse, him, this was one that the fire

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The 52. Sermon upon

things inomenime many goe for constancy to our define, history, and expeditation and that in duties which God requires that on will have no be done of was he were now with vs. Jour against vs.you as if her would croftle vs its them for purpose. Our dutie here it us lookes what go do bids vs doe, as the man God fent from I bud through history do god do do the view of the paper of the for do that you had been been do that the cafe is not alway alike, when lock difficulties held 19 s. 1 se former in way more cleanedy fee castle, when lock difficulties held 19 s. 1 se former in way more cleanedy fee castle thereof, then at other. For it may beet the families and the cafe is not alway alike, when lock difficulties held 19 s. 1 se former in way more cleanedy fee castle thereof, then at other. For it may beet the families and it is a good to the castle in hand, and do eit is a good manner: in both linds it may fall out, that I hath many difficulties person in hand, and does it is a good manner: in both linds it may fall out, that hath many difficulties more first fish and patience by for croffing him: And in Albah many difficulties more firm yield, what manner is the them of the them, White the may not the Lord tire his faith and patience by for croffing him: And in Albah the done a good thing in a bad manner, to the end the may call hisself to a more due examination of hisselfe, and amone that which was amid or he take in hand fach holy during it was God will that the cleare T will hould light againt a Brainner to the end the way and the rebet to a more due examination of hisselfe, and amone that which was amid or he take in hand fach holy during it was God will that the cleare T will perfuse the the the difficulties of the control of th

....

You see why I'm anxious to finish this work before the next Harry Potter book comes out. I foresee throngs of people sleeping on the pavement outside book stores

overnight so they can buy copies of my book first thing once it becomes available. I see them fighting and shoving, elbowing their way to the front of the line, trampling the weak underfoot...

Well, maybe not.

But come that great and terrible Day of The Lord, it may prove wise for us to have read something of a spiritual nature such as a Puritan diary. I recommend the Diary Of David Brainerd, edited by Jonathan Edwards.

Brainerd (1718-1747)was a missionary to the American Indians of the 18th Century; he endured incredible hardship to show the love of Christ to the Indians and died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-nine. His life verse was John 7:37 "In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink".

Brainerd's diary is the one that turned me on to early puritan writings, especially their diaries.

While the writings of the early Puritans involve intense introspection, they also reveal a vision of the love, majesty, beauty and holiness of God. Such a vision often enraptured the writers giving them a sweet spirit.

No, I'm not a puritan or even anything close, but reading such stuff really inspires me.

But, there's a problem:

Since I'm not only mono-minded but slow on my single track, there have been times when it's taken me as much as six hours to write a single blog entry.

Something has to give.

The 16th Century Puritan, Richard Rogers, whose diary I'm formatted, was once asked why he lead such a focused, precise life. "Because I serve a precise God," he said.

I think it important to convey his ideas and devotion as well as I'm able, and that requires my full attention.

Bottom line:

I need more time to work. I plan to avoid blogging for another week to continue playing catch up with the Rogers diary. Now don't be alarmed.

If you can't live without a Rabid Fun Blog fix, you can always browse in my archives... or even better than that, you can go to my On Line Book Catalogue and buy a copy of *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad*. That's my 2005 journal in chronological format suitable for reading in bed, bus or bathroom.

That book is being considered for the 2007 Blooker Prize. Judges will announce the finalists next month. Among many fine contenders for the prize, it's my D.N.A. that my book ought to win.

Oh, someone e-mailed me about Valentine's Day — Ginny and I pay no attention; we feel it is an artificial holiday promoted by commercial merchants. We love eachother as much two weeks ago as we did yesterday.

We don't eat black-eyed peas and gopher meat on Groundhog Day either.

Back to thoughts on blogging: Maybe I should keep up with my family's blogs better. Although my daughter Eve and I had lunch together the other day and breakfast with the family Sunday, I did not know she was planning to get married till I read about it on her blog.

Dad is the last to know.

Speaking of breakfast: something I found appalling happened while Ginny and I ate breakfast one day when she was off:

Two businessmen occupied the next booth. As they ate, they wheeled and dealed and fielded many cell phone calls.

Come time to go, the two men performed the usual ritual dance over who would pay the check. They eventually agreed that one would pay for breakfast, the other would leave a tip for the waitress.

Guy One paid the tab. With a flourish and great show, Guy Two placed two five dollar bills under the salt shaker so his buddy could not fail to notice.

They shook hands.

Guy One left the restaurant.

Guy Two picked up the two five dollar bills and put

them back in his wallet.

He put two single dollar bills on the table for the waitress.

Sorry, no-account bastard. — Yes, I'm being judgmental.

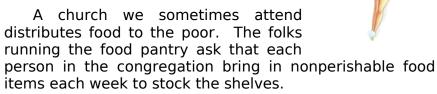
Maybe I've been reading too much of that Puritan stuff — or not enough of it.

Anyhow, God willing I can catch up one my work and come back to blogging by the middle of next week....

If I get sidetracked, I'll let you know.

Friday, February 16, 2007 Whatever Happened To Tinkerbell?

Yes, I said I would not post again till next week, but I didn't get up till 4:45 this morning and since I've already lost so much of my morning ...



Wednesday, when Ginny went to the grocery store, she bought several jars of Peter Pan Peanut Butter to give at this church.

Thursday morning when I read Google news, I saw the USDA recalled poisoned Peter Pan Peanut Butter with the code 2111 stamped on the lid.

Something contaminated this peanut butter causing hundreds of people to get sick and maybe even a few to die.

For those who don't know, peanut butter is made by dumping shelled boiled peanuts into this big vat where happy barefoot peasants stomp the seeds into paste which is too think to drink...

No. No, that can't be right — I have no idea how peanut butter is made!

I think they put the peanuts into a vat to boil, then into a masher and crunch them into paste which you spread on bread with jelly.

Or maybe they just use a blender..

Peanut butter is a vital ingredient in Nutty Buddy Bars, a health food bar which I snack on all the time. This could be a crisis.

I checked the jars Ginny had bought..

Sure enough, the code 2111 was imprinted there on each lid.

I looked closely at this one jar.

There, pressed against the inside of the glass, was this tiny gossamer wing.

Whatever happened to Tinkerbell?

Anyhow, when Ginny got up, I told her about the salmonella scare and that she could not poison poor people.

That's just not Christian.

She had to take the offending peanut butter back to the store.

She complained about having to make another trip to the store.

I told her that she would not have to make this extra trip if she'd bought steak for the poor in the first place.

Saturday, February 17, 2007 Just A Quick Note Of Thanks

I relish indications of God's goodness to us.

Late yesterday afternoon someone called me asking to borrow \$50 to keep from being arrested and going to jail for writing a bad check that needed to be covered.

Although I have to do it sometimes, turning down a request for help from a person in need pains me. I did not have \$50.

But I told the caller that I'd talk the matter over with Ginny when she got home to see if we could scrape together the needed money. I said I would call to let the criminal know in an hour.

As Ginny parked the car and came into the house, she checked our mailbox. There was an unexpected royalty check for my book sales last quarter! We went from being broke to having cash enough to lend in 15 minutes.

The Lord's timing in practical matters delights me.

During my prayer time Wednesday morning I ran across an odd Scripture in Deuteronomy where God promises Israel, "Thou shalt lend unto many... and thou shalt not borrow".

I'm tickled to recognize when esoteric religious notions move beyond the academic into my practical daily life.

The majesty and graciousness and mercy of our Lord sometimes overwhelms me. He is indeed sweeter than honey, more to be desired than gold. He reveals daily marvels if we'd just recognize them.

I feel grateful.

On the down side of yesterday, the heater fan broke again. I think the shaft in the motor is bent because I did not take care of the problem when it first began making that helicopter in the wall noise.

Apparently God doesn't do neglected rotor shafts.

That problem will have to wait for a couple of paydays before we save up enough cash to afford repairs (I've presumed too much on Rex's good will already).

And the tv weather guy says to expect recordbreaking cold tonight and for the next couple of days.

Oh well, back when we were poor, we lived without heat before. Good excuse to snuggle under the blankets together for the weekend.

Richard Rogers, that 16th Century puritan whose diary I'm editing, wrote his whole body of work in chambers heated only by firewood, so I suppose I can continue editing his work in an insulated house in Florida.

The way the work is going pleases me so much! The Lord has granted me the signal honor of thoroughly enjoying the work I do.

Phooey on Miller or Bud or whichever beer company has the advertising slogan, my motto is — The Christian Life: It doesn't Get Any Better Than This!

Thanks be to God.

Thursday, February 22, 2007 Tasers Work

Here in North Florida people who go to school board meetings debate the use of tasers by school resource officers.

Tasers are Star Trek style ray guns which deliver powerful electric shocks.

School resources officers (which we never needed when I was in highschool) are cops who have offended the administration—maybe they didn't sell their quota of Policeman's Ball tickets— and as punishment are assigned to keep order in area highschools.

They deserve hazardous duty pay.

Whether or not they are allowed to tase criminal students instead of shooting them outright, generates debate.

Personally, I think anyone who keeps students who want to learn from learning should be shot and their bodies run up the flagpole in the courtyard.

Ok. Ok. Maybe it should only happen at the second offence.

I take this stance because Monday I was subjected to a taser attack.

No. A policeman did not zap me.

It was a medical professional.

See, I visited a doctor because my hands have begun to tremble. So naturally, he ordered tests on my feet.

This latest medical theory derives from that old spiritual:

De foot bone 'connected to the anklebone,
De ankle bone connected to the shin bone,...
De shin bone connected to de leg bone
De leg bone connected to the tail bone...

And so on up to my hand bone....

So, the technician connected electrodes to my thighs, shins and points south then zapped me with this taser which was connected to a computer which showed pain spikes on a vivid blue screen.

If she scores 24,000 points or more, she wins a trip to the Bahamas.

When I was in highschool, we did this same sort of electricial test to make the leg of a dead frog jerk and jump.

Fortunately, this test proved what friends and family have observed for years: that I'm a numb ass.

Even when Mr. Spock ordered, "Jim, set the Phasers on stun". I would often feel nothing.

This means that if I were still in highschool, the kiddy cops would definitely have to shoot me with a Glock instead of a taser.

Actually, this test was not so bad.

Even the part when they gave up on the taser and used knitting needles filed to a blunt point to probe to see if there are actually bones inside my legs.

Afterwards I thanked the nurse technician and the doctor for their efforts to help me. Essentially they did for me the same sort of service Jesus did for His friends when He washed their feet just before He died for us all.

The nurse remarked that her work was a lot like an auto mechanic's as he might do a diagnostic test on your car.

I disagreed.

No auto mechanic has to replace a fan belt while the engine is running.

Doctors and nurses do not get to shut the machine (that's me) down while they make repairs.

Of course my test proved inconclusive.

Maybe the one next month...

Meanwhile, my hands still tremble.

For me, the worse part of the ordeal was being touched by these strangers. My skin crawls. I cringe when touched. I'm not a touchy feely person. Being pawed causes me mental and physical anguish. And during this hour+ nerve damage test people touched me a lot.

In fact, that part of the test upset me so that I came home and slept for over 24 hours.

Of course after all this trauma, I felt the need of some spiritual encouragement.

Did I read the Book of Ecclesiastes or Thessalonians? No.

I picked up a copy of Dave Barry Is From Mars & Venus.

I read it through at one sitting.

After that reading, I feel uplifted and my soul doth magnify the Lord!

In spite of having been zapped by the taser..

Friday, February 23, 2007

F2f... or She Doesn't Know What She Missed

I met this girl on the internet.

This teenaged girl.

This teenaged girl in a local high school..

I tried to set up a face to face meeting.

No. I'm not some pervert — not that particular kind of pervert anyhow.

This young lady and I exchanged blog comments and e-mails a time or two because we both collect the same things.

You know how it is about collections.

If you own one of something, anything — say a stuffed kangaroo carrying an umbrella — then you own one.

If you own two of them — say a stuffed kangaroo carrying a green umbrella and one carrying a pink umbrella — then you own a pair.

But, if you happen to own three, then, come Christmas or birthday or whatever, you are marked as a collector and your children, friends and neighbors all know just what gift to give you: another stuffed kangaroo.

You'll display them on the mantle above the fireplace. Your knickknack shelves groan under their weight. Cute stuffed kangaroos clog your closets. There will be boxes of the varmints under your bed. In the attic. In the guest bedroom. And you can never again park your car in the garage for fear of crushing a kangaroo.

And you can't get rid of the things.

On every visit Aunt Peg will ask, "Where is that cute kangaroo with the lavender umbrella that I sent you"?

And you'd better be able to produce the thing or you will hurt Aunt Peg's feelings and she'll leave her oil well to Cousin Phillip, the creep.

Am I getting a little off the topic here?

OK. So I met this teenage girl on line. We exchanged blog comments about our respective collections. I began my collection back when I was a Boy Scout so I have collected this item for close to 50 years; The young lady began her collection about five years ago, but already she has some prize examples. She is serious about her hobby and gives every indication on her website of wanting to continue it for the rest of her life.

Now, Ginny and I have come to a point in our life where we want to divest our home of clutter. I have stopped buying more doodads to add to my collection; she gave away some of her grotesque ceramic cats.

No single item in my collection is of great value. You could not take any one thing to *Antiques Roadshow* and garner thousands of dollars. It all comes under the heading of ephemera and is of no monetary value except to another person bitten by the same collector's quirk.

At various times I have asked each of my children, but not a one of them shows the slightest interest in my collection; it just doesn't strike their fancy. Someday when they have to clean out the house, I suppose my collection will end up in the dumpster.

No great loss.

My collection has given me pleasure and it does not have to do anything more than that.

But I hate to see it go to waste.

So I decided that I would give the whole 50 year's accumulation to this teenage girl I'd encountered on line. No charge. No strings attached. The collection has given me pleasure, I'd like to think it will continue to give pleasure.

So I tried to set up a face to face meeting with this girl AND HER PARENTS — got that? AND HER PARENTS — at a

well publicized public meeting where I was a guest speaker. My wife would also be there and we'd determine if indeed this girl seemed serious about continuing as a collector. And, if so, we'd make arrangements with her dad about getting a truck and giving her the entire collection.

The girl did not show.

I do not know why.

Maybe she had homework. Or maybe a football game. Or maybe she watched *Dancing With the Stars* or MTV that night.

She and her folks did not come to the meeting.

Perhaps, with all the publicity you read about stalkers and perverts on the internet, she and her parents were leery of meeting.

When my son Donald first gave me a computer he issued a caveat:

The Internet, where the men are men, And the women are men, And the children are FBI agents!

So, you do know that if you ever plan to meet f2f (that's computer jargon for face to face) someone you only know on line, that you should only meet in a public place (Police Headquarters works) and let someone in your family know when and where and what time you will be back in touch and it doesn't hurt to have a cell phone and call your contact midway through the meeting with a license tag number or something of the sort.

Anyhow, the girl and her parents did not show up and I'm making other arrangements about the disposal of my collection.

She'll never know what she missed.

This is really no big deal.

As Ginny says whenever I buy another addition to my collection at a yard sale or thrift store, "One man's trash is another man's trash".

But, I do have a point in all this rambling.

I've heard it said that half of success is simply being there when it happens, that the prize goes to the guy who shows up.

The Lord God has gone to great pains (literally) to set up a face to face meeting with each one of us.

He intends to do us good. Incredible good. The Scripture says, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him".

Yet we are leery.

We avoid Him.

We do not believe.

We've heard tale of cults and isms and religious kooks. We hear so much of these warnings — and they are real — that we refuse to listen to the voice in our own heart.

The one that says, "Taste and see that the Lord is good".

After the fall of Adam and Eve, the Lord God walked in the Garden in the cool of the evening and called, "Adam, where are you?"

That's the first thing God said about sin.

And He has been searching for man ever since. But we, like Adam, hide in the bushes.

I think the secret to life, salvation and godliness is simply to stop hiding. To let God find us. To show up at that Face to face meeting He's been inviting us to all our lives.

In spite of all the rumors we've heard about a Predator God who will do awful things to us and turn us into religious fanatics, we need to come out of hiding and trust the One who calls us.

Oh, and it doesn't bother Him at all to meet us in either a private or a public place or for us to let other people know that we intend to meet Him. He even encourages us to let everyone know how the meeting turned out.

But, if we don't show up...

PS: please do not mail me any stuffed kangaroos. I have plenty. Honest.

And, for Heaven's sake, no more of those gruesomely cute kitten statues for Ginny. We're trying to divest here.

Saturday, February 24, 2007 The Pain Of Winter Past

Friday's temperature rose to near 80 degrees here in Jacksonville and, for the first time in months, I did yard work.

I edged. I raked. I chopped. I mowed. I mulched....

I bent. I stretched. I stooped. I lifted. I climbed. I pulled. I pushed...

For the first time in months.

This morning my muscles ache. My shoulders ache. My back aches. My arms ache. My thighs ache... I'm having to use my cane to merely walk.

Dumb me!

Dumb, Dumb, Dumb,

I should not have tried Spring cleaning all at once after a winter of inactivity. This morning I suffer the pain of Winter past.

On the up side, I counted 34 robins and doves following the path of my lawnmower as I worked. They hopped along snapping up bugs suddenly exposed as the grass and leaf cover disappeared.

Smart birds.

Oh but I'm stiff and sore!

Sunday, February 25, 2007

A Marriage Made In Heaven -- with a moose head

Today the Florida Lotto Jackpot stands at \$11,000,000.

I mention that fact because marriages, even a 38-year one like ours, are fragile.

Especially when you're married to a left-handed, wrong-headed woman like the one I'm married to.

Consider the case of my moose head.

Saturday morning Ginny and I enjoyed a 2-hour- chat over a leisurely breakfast at Dave's Dinner. Our conversation ranged world-wide in scope and then moved beyond this world to the Hereafter.

She said the only thing that bothers her about the prospect of Heaven is that Jesus said, "In the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven". (Whatever that means).

As we sipped coffee we both stated that we love being married to eachother and that we're sure that whatever Jesus meant, it is something good, something beyond our imagining.

I assured her that the first thing I plan to do in the resurrection is to feel around underneath my white robe to check out what's there! (With this earthly prostate cancer thing still in the decision stage, you can understand my concern).

We discussed how we think we'll each feel if one of us dies first which is likely, baring a car crash or house fire or something of the sort when we're together that would send us both Home at the same time.

We had a great time discussing these things at leisure as we also talked about upcoming local elections, fake fur, Food Stamps, Iraq, dog care, our garden, motorcycles, and how we will spend our Lotto winnings — the jackpot is up to eleven million this week.

We love to be together and talk with eachother.

After breakfast we drove around doing normal Saturday errands: the bank, the hardware store, the library, the grocery, the tire place, etc...

As we drove down one residential street, I saw it!



A MOOSE HEAD.

A stuffed moose head!

At a yard sale as we drove past.

That woman I'm married to was driving and I urged her to turn back and circle the block so I could buy the moose head.

Our home does not have a moose head.

She kept on driving!

Can you believe that?

The one chance I've ever had in my whole life to get my very own moose head and she refused to stop the car!

I mean the walls of our home (at least her share of them) display these doctor's waiting room pictures of kittens and dirt-eating plants with flowers, and photos of our kids (as if we're likely to forget what they look like) and insipid stuff like that.

Whereas the walls I decorate display tasteful object d'art — like the shark hook, the African spear, Miss April 1996, and a 1588 Map Of London. And that graffiti I wrote about last year, The Ugliest Picture In The World.

But we lack a Moose Head.

I feel deprived!

We discussed buying the moose head.

She gets custody of the children.

"Just where in our house would you put a moose

head? Those antlers must spread eight feet wide," she said.

Well, I just happen to have a perfect place for it.

Yes, indeed.

I'll have to move the shower curtain rod over a foot or two, but I can make room for my own moose head!

Well, we haven't remained happily incompatible for 38 years without learning how to compromise.

That means she finally agreed with me... with one stipulation:

I get to buy my own Stuffed Moose Head ... with the money I win as soon as I hit the Lotto jackpot.

And if I don't win Lotto?

I'll bet all those mansions in Heaven will have moose heads on the wall!

Tuesday, February 27, 2007

Latest News About My Moose Head, Oscars, Jesus, & A Drowning Lizard.

Breaking News: I did not win the \$11,000,000; I do not get a moose head.

In other news:

Ginny may know who the winners were, but about six or eight hours into the Oscar show I fell asleep in front of the television.

I missed all the biggies.

So I don't know who won what at the Oscars.

The last award I recall was for something called sound mixing or cinematography or something like that and there were four winners but I didn't catch their names.

Sorry guys. I know you are the best in the world at whatever it is you do, but I can't honestly say that I even know what cinematography is. Something to do with cameras, I guess.

I do know that there were a lot of low-cut gowns on the stage.

Those, as a keen Oscar observer, I did notice.

But I'm afraid I can't name the young ladies wearing

(mostly) those gowns.

There's so much I don't know.

That doesn't bother me too much.

In 18 months I doubt if anyone reading this blog will be able to name five of the biggest Oscar winners without looking names up on-line.

Fame flees.

What ranks as "big news" this morning is a Trivia Pursuit question a few months from now.

Such is the way of the world.

Can you name five of last year's Nobel Prize winners? How about Pulitzer Prize winners? Such important news escapes us.

Speaking of important news, I read in the newspaper yesterday, before dozing off in front of the tv, that Jesus Christ has appeared in Florida, just south of where I live and that he's encouraging truly faithful people to get special tattoos on their forearms and give him 40% of their income.

I didn't know Jesus did that.

But, get this:

Even more bizarre, this morning's radio news announced that some movie-maker is promoting a film about how archaeologists in Jerusalem are supposed to have uncovered a tomb filled with ossuaries containing the bones of Jesus Christ —along with the bones of his wife, his mother, his brother, and several of his children.

An ossuary is a bone box, often carved out of white limestone. After the meat rotted away, often ancient peoples would gather a dead man's bones and keep them in such a decorated box.

This startling "new". discovery is old hat; a Google image search for *ossuary* brings up over 5,000 pictures.

In fact, archaeologists have discovered about 800 different ossuaries in the Near East over the years.

Jesus knew all about ossuaries.

He compared them with hypocrites:

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" He

said. "For ye are like unto whited sepulchers which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity".

Turns out that this tomb in today's news was uncovered back in 1980 during the construction of an apartment building but no one paid much attention at the time, in fact they managed to lose one of the ten ossuaries originally uncovered.

But then this guy decided to shoot a made-for-tv movie about the startling "new" discovery which he says will not shake the faith of millions but will generate a few bucks for his film company.

(Although it would make for great box office draw, the movie guy does not claim to have Anna Nicole's body in his "new" tomb too; her body is still tied up in south Florida courts near where that living Jesus hangs out).

Check your local listings.

I doubt if I'll bother to watch: No low-cut gowns on starlets promised in that tv special.

Sometimes what passes for "news" wearies me.

All this stuff is old hat.

Where's the "news" in such events?

Jesus Himself talked about such stuff 2,000 years ago.

"Take heed that no man deceive you," He said, "For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all *these things* must come to pass, but the end is not yet....

"Many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold....

"If any man shall say unto you, Lo, here *is* Christ, or there; believe *it* not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if *it were* possible, they shall deceive the very elect.

"Behold, I have told you before.

"Wherefore if they shall say unto you, 'Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth. Behold, *he is* in the secret chambers': believe *it* not".

See what I mean? Jesus knew that "discoveries" and claimants would abound, and He cautioned us not to get confused when they do. Whether such claimants appear in south Florida or Jerusalem or even Hollywood, we are not to be surprised.

When Christ returns, we won't see it on tv or read about it in the newspaper. No. We will, each one of us, be eyewitnesses.

"For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be... Then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory".

Jesus said that no one, not even angels, knows the day or the hour when this will happen. Therefore we are to be ready.

The Bible does not say a great deal about dogs. But in my own mind, I compare the return of Christ with a happy dog. The dog leaps up and shakes and quivers and runs in circles and pees on the floor at the sight of the Owner coming home.

In my mind, that dog is the whole creation which until now watches to hear the Owner's car in the drive. It will go nuts with joy at His appearing again. This is what we've been waiting for all our lives!

We'll sake off worldly things like a wet dog shaking off rain drops... This is what is commonly referred to as the end of the world...

And good riddance!

Jesus is Back. Boy! O Boy! O Boy! Wow!

Doesn't matter whether we're still alive or already dead:

As St. Paul said, "For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be

Lord both of the dead and living".

In another place Paul said, "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord".

See how I come up with my happy dog imagery?

We'll shake off the soggy things and sticky burrs that mat our fur and leap to meet Him shaking for pure joy.

Well, maybe not everyone.

Some may try to cower and slink away from His bright presence. But the thought of that is unbearable, isn't it? What a loss. What a tragic loss.

How did I get from falling asleep at the Oscars to our final glorious awakening at the end of the world?

Oh, I remember; I got off on non-news stories about live and dead Christs being found here and there.

I get carried away sometimes.

Now, for the important news of my own day:

I rescued a drowning lizard this morning.

I saw this dumb reptile jump into the water bowl we keep filled on the ground for the raccoons to keep them from tearing apart our garden fountain for a drink.

Once in the bowl the lizard could not climb out because the bowl is porcelain and the sides too slick. He kept flopping back in and swimming around and around the rim — the very picture of a futile life.... (Actually, it was kind of cool to watch him struggle. Kind of like having my own mini-gator right there by my chair).

But, moved by my heart of Christian compassion, I broke off a stick and angled it in from the side of the bowl so he could finally climb out and dry off.

His antics were more fun than watching the Oscars.

Wednesday, February 28, 2007 A Stoic I'm Not!

Yesterday I went to lunch with my friend Barbara but

we could not find the restaurant at first.

We knew the place we usually go each week planned to move. We saw the sign at the new location but the place was locked tight. Turns out they had moved the sign without moving the restaurant.

Confusing.

After lunch we drove back to my house to sit in the garden and talk about a tragic—but all too common — development at a local church: pastor fired for "inappropriate behavior with an adult female church member".

The local media announces the situation with an undercurrent of glee because the guy was an outspoken advocate of morality. (I think Barbara intends to write about our conversation soon, so I'll leave this topic for now).

My world turned a bit topsy-turvy last night.

Just as Ginny got home from work, one of our daughters called informing us that she quit her job and dropped out of school. She's broke and needs to move by the first of March.

That's like tomorrow.

Say, in the next 24 hours.

I do not know how —or even if — we can help. Or whether we should.

Gave us something besides sex to talk about for the evening.

Our Mom & Dad instincts urge us to rush in as rescuers; our common sense cautions us to say to her, "That sounds like a real problem. What are you going to do about it"?

We want to know what role drugs play in this sudden crisis.

Hard to know how we can help her best.

My work editing the 16th Century Diary of Puritan Richard Rogers sailed right along... until February 21st.

That was the day I underwent a medical test on my feet to see why my hands have started shaking. There was actually nothing to the test.

Nevertheless, the experience took the wind out of my sails and I haven't done a useful lick of work on that manuscript since.



It was not the test, per se, that took the wind from my sails but the experience of being touched. I think I have mentioned my aversion to touch a time or two or ten before in this blog. Being touched upsets me.

Generates a panic attack.

Leaves me dead in the water.

I'm just a big baby.

The reason I mention this yet again is that this morning I'm scheduled for yet another medical exam. This time by a dermatologist who will check every inch of my skin to examine what another doctor termed "suspicious spots" which may or may not be skin cancers but which he thinks merit biopsies.

Oh Goody!

None of this medical stuff appears to be lifethreatening for a long way down the road; it all still lies in the realm of gathering information so I can decide about future radiation treatments — or not.

The possibility of more cancer does not upset me; the possibility of being touched does. The anticipation of it bumps me into a four-alarm hissy fit.

I find this prospect so upsetting that Ginny is taking off work today to go with me and hold my hand through

today's ordeal.

Looks as though in the future I'm going to get plenty of opportunity to exercise my God-given right to whine!

Thursday, March 01, 2007 **Skin Flick**



After weeks of psyching my self up in anticipation and apprehension, the above photo shows how I felt going into the dermatologist's office for my first such visit ever on Wednesday morning— but it wasn't that way at all!

Dr. Bay (I'll call him that because he reminds me of a hunky lifeguard from the old tv series *Bay Watch*) proved to be a courteous, efficient young man who obviously knew what he was doing as he flicked chunks of flesh off my hide for the biopsies.

This guy is good.

Flick.

Flick.

Flick!

You wouldn't want to go up against him in a street fight with switchblades.

He also froze a bunch of other "suspicious spots" on my skin with his can of Raid or whatever it is he uses.

The tool he used to flick off flesh interested me; it looks like half a safety razor blade which he flexed to conform to the contours of my anatomy. I wish I'd had such a tool back when I was building model clipper ships; it would work great for cutting rigging.

First thing when Ginny and I went back into the exam room, I told his assistant about my strong aversion to being touched (aphenphosphobia). She prepped me with that in mind and forewarned Dr. Bay that he had a nutcase on his hands.

But you'd have been proud of me.

I didn't shriek or start or scream or climb the walls hardly at all.

Well, ok; I did cringe and shutter a bit now and then.

There have been a rare few times when a stranger, say a waiter or waitress in a restaurant, unexpectedly touched me that my body reacted by stopping breathing. Inevitably when that happens, the stranger will notice my distress and, in an act of helpful kindness, begin to pat me on the back!

I feel ridiculous. But in normal day to day life, this quirk of mine presents no problem because, unless you're a football player, people just do not go around touching other people. So my irrational reaction hardly ever comes into play.

Problem is, that over the past two months I've seen more physicians and nurses whose duty it was to touch me, than I'd seen in the previous 67 years. Thanks be to God I've enjoy fine health.

One thing I do when subjected to horrible medical procedures which generate panic in me (such as having my blood pressure checked or having my temperature taken) is to envision a happy peaceful place and move my mind out of the exam room to that place.

Yesterday in the dermatologist's office, at first I focused on a museum-quality watercolor on the wall of the exam room, really a cut above the usual K-Mart art-by-the-pound stuff I've been seeing in other waiting rooms recently.

Then I calmed my mind by envisioning the most beautiful place I've ever been in my life:



The place I most frequently imagine is Ichetucknee Springs, a freshwater spring system an hour's drive from Jacksonville. When I was a Boy Scout, long before Ichetucknee became a state park, my troop camped there often.

In the exam room I felt the crystal coolness of the



spring. I watched wisps of mist dance above the spring run at dawn. I tasted the purity of the springhead. I heard the call of loons, the croak of frogs, and the grunt of gators. I remembered diving for mastodon bones and Paleo-Indian spearheads on the sandy bottom.

When I think of Heaven, Ichetucknee is what comes to my mind.

Then somebody

touches me and I jerk back to the first photo in this posting!

No, seriously, Dr. Bay and his assistant, even though they do dozens of such procedures every day, recognized that this was a first for me and helped me in every way possible. Biopsy results will be known in about two weeks.

Afterwards, Ginny helped me dress and walked me to the checkout counter.

That's where the shakes caught up with me. I turned to jello and started quivering so violently that the counter clerk urged me to sit down until I assure her that this is normal for me after being touched.

Why is it that in doctors' offices and hospitals where you need it most, smoking is not allowed?

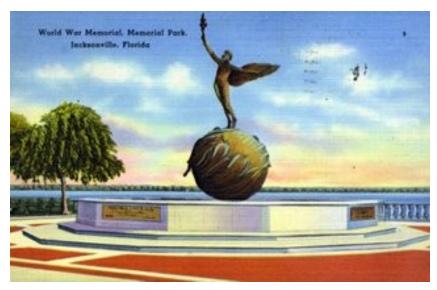
Let me emphasize that for any normal person skin biopsies are no more traumatic than shaving. No pain. No discomfort. Don't hesitate to have it done if you need one. You could go have it done on your lunch hour and be back at your desk in no time..... Unless you're an utter spineless wimp like me.

You know, I've heard other Christians gush about how Christ gives them peace of mind. That's a big selling point in evangelism.

That's beyond my experience.

The best I can say is that the Lord helps me function at my current level of anxiety. And that gets me through.

Fortunately Dr. Bay's office lies near one of Jacksonville's most beautiful parks where a World War I memorial soars above the river. Ginny lead me there to recompose myself after I'd decomposed so badly at the check out counter.



A flock of pelicans fished for finger mullet just offshore. We watched joggers and jigglers trot past on the Riverwalk, and dog walkers stroll, and squirrels chatter among the acorns. She held my hand and assured me that I'd done ok.

We drove up to Whiteway Delicatessen for a delicious high cholesterol breakfast of sausage, eggs and home fries (It's insane to try healthy food just after a doctor's visit!).

At one point Beauty said — at least I thought I heard her say, "Do you want peace of mind?"

Puzzled, I asked her what she meant.

The second time, I heard her aright.

She said, "Do you want a piece of mine" offering me a slice of her toast.

Means the same thing.

Friday, March 02, 2007 A Tiny Hint Of What She's Like:

Violent storms in the area prohibited me from blog posting this morning. Weather alerts,. tornado watches, and lightening strikes inundated radio and tv news. As the storm swept the South about 20 people died in weather related incidents including eight students when a high school collapsed in Alabama yesterday afternoon and five kids killed when wind blew their school bus off a bridge in

Atlanta this morning.

Locally, trees falling on moving cars caused two traffic accidents. Our Main Street Bridge closed because of one of many other accidents in town.

I unplugged the computer because of lightening dangers; don't trust made-in-China surge protectors.

Beauty, of course, drove to work anyhow.

Even though traffic reports two crashes on route she normally travels.

Me, I slept in.

But she's dedicated.



Yesterday one of her former bosses from three years ago who now works for an altogether different agency called Ginny for information on how to use a computer system. No one in the new (better paying) office understood the system, but the boss hazarded a guess that Ginny would know.

She did.

During a slack time, Ginny disconnected, re-worked, organized and re-connected the rat's next of computer wires, chains, cables, cords and strands of barbed-wire installed by technical support experts between her desk and the wall.

As she battled the tangle. her phone rang.

A wrong number... sort of.

It seems the caller was trying to reach a county school board office for information about getting help with an autistic child.

Beauty's office is in no way related to the school system but she looked up the right phone number for the distraught mother.

As Ginny navigated through the consumer-friendly listings of government agencies in the helpful Sanskrit phone directory, the woman began talking.

The troubled, tearful woman unloaded her fears and frustrations, her wariness and pain, her despair and hopelessness as Ginny listened and comforted her.

As the conversation closed, the wrong-number caller said she thought that God must have been operating the telephone switch board which connected her to Ginny's number.

I suspect so too.

Just got this e-mail from her a minute ago:

John, Imagine! I saw this when I went outside for a morning smoke! It was sitting on the fence next to the smoking area and kept watch on me as I slowly approached. That darn thing was sitting with its back to me and turned its head 180 degrees to keep watch on me..



A Coopers Hawk

Saturday, March 03, 2007 Wise Words To A Hero Wantabe:

Along with everything else that went on in my life last week, a number of people whose actions are landing them in serious trouble crossed my path.

When that happens, I'm inclined to jump in and help.

My friend Wes says not to.

My desire to be a rescuer is just a natural inclination. It may include a modicum of Christian compassion, or a bit of fellow-feeling for our common humanity, or the memory of how people have helped me when I got myself in trouble.

I think, more than anything else, my training as a Boy Scout when I was young plays a huge part in my wanting to rescue people from the troubles they have gotten themselves into.

I want people to think well of me as trustworthy, loyal, friendly, courteous, kind...

But Friday after breakfast with my friend Wes, he pointed out that I have a Super Hero image of my own self imprinted on my own mind.

I want to be the brave guy running out of the burning building clutching the wide-eyed child who'd been playing with matches in the closet. I want to be the hero dragging the idiot who skated on thin ice back to safety. I want to carry the bikini girl in my strong, tanned, muscular arms out of the undertow when she swam in over her head.



Yes, I play the role of Superman, Spiderman and Batman combined in my own mental movies.

I cast myself as a Super Hero.

I want to be needed.

Envied.

Admired.

Worshiped...

Whoa There Nelly!

Worshiped?

Yes, that is the right word. I want to play the role of God.

Notice that virtually none of my motivations to help have anything to do with the people in trouble. It's all about me. It's all about self aggrandizement.

In other words my desire to be a hero and to help troubled people can be rooted in black ugly sin masquerading as a petty virtue.

Not a pretty picture.

Not only that, but my desire to be The Helper, The Rescuer, The Super Hero gets in the way of what God is doing in the troubled person's life. He loves them more than I do and I can short-circuit God's correction and cure for that person.

Wes explained the dynamics of how this works in two ways:

"John, you need to back off. Interference with the natural consequences of a person's socially irresponsible behavior confirms that person in a course of self destruction. Actions have consequences. When you negate those consequences, the person continues deeper and deeper in the behavior that generated those consequences in the first place. Until that person's actions result in a level of personal discomfort, no change will occur; she will continue to do more and more of the same thing because that's in her comfort zone and that's the easiest, most familiar thing to do. She'll have no reason to change".

But I objected saying how much I want to help.

So Wes worded his wise words more succinctly:

"When He is correcting someone, don't get between God's paddle and the sinner's ass".

Sunday, March 04, 2007 Jesus Rose Or Rotted

This was originally posted about 5:30 this morning but for some reason the server has been down all day. You'd have to rush to make the booksale now!

--jwc

Tonight cable tv will air a movie about Jesus directed by James Cameron, the same director who gave us such great films as *Terminator*, about a killer robot out to zap this pregnant girl; *Aliens*, about a tapeworm that gnaws its way out of people's guts; and *Titanic*, about the sinking of the great ocean liner.

Many people are expected to watch the *Tomb of Jesus*, a movie which advances the theory that Jesus rotted after His death and His bones were buried in a box.

Not having cable, I won't be able to see this film, but I have *Terminator* on video tape, so I might watch that instead.

I suppose I could go over to Donald & Helen's house to watch tv. They have cable. But I don't want to disturb them. Yesterday Helen's blog announced that they have decided to have a baby (a second grandchild for us) so they have more interesting things to do than watch either *Tomb* or *Terminator*.

Therefore, not having seen this tomb film, I can't objectively judge its quality.

However, common sense dictates that either Jesus Christ rose from death or He rotted in the dirt.

For people who wish to examine the issue, I'd suggest that for every hour they spend watching this new movie, they also spend an equal hour reading the last few chapters of any one of the four Gospels.

Keep an open mind and see which account rings true.

The movie company offers a glossy website with many ads, sales features, film clips, credentials, disclaimers, trailers, photos, and scads of links; the site address is http://www.jesusfamilytomb.com/movie overview.html

On the other hand, the four Gospels are not polished Hollywood productions. They resemble four photo albums or scrapbooks filled with snapshots taken of the same event from four different angles (like four guys taking photos of the same family picnic from four different places in the yard).

The hype generated by the Cameron movie gives

folks a good chance to think for themselves about whether Jesus rose or rotted.

Our Destitution Solution:

Ginny & I resolved some important financial issues yesterday.

Thursday the stock exchange in Singapore faltered sending shockwaves to London and New York as stocks plummeted.

We don't own any stock but we know what broke feels like.

Medical bills mount.

Gasoline prices skyrocket.

Our homeowner's insurance has increased.

We can't afford to fix the central heat and air.

The pantry reminds us of Old Mother Hubbard.

Our youngest daughter needs college tuition money.

We can't afford all these expenses! What should we do?

Yesterday we confronted the issue of destitution squarely and took action:

We withdrew everything possible from the bank's ATM.

And we went to the Friends Of The Library Book Sale where over a hundred thousand used books go for about \$2 a volume. We wandered the display tables for hours sacking up vital books we can not live without. Books on history. Books on travel. Bird books. Gardening books. Novels. Biographies.

Our car trunk runneth over.

To us this splurge represents fiscal responsibility.

You have to keep your financial priorities straight.

Spend money only on essentials...

Then come home to gloat over all these new used books.

Incidentally, for readers in the Jacksonville area, the

giant sale is still going on today from noon till 6 p.m. For readers elsewhere, to locate various library book sales in your area, check out http://www.booksalefinder.com/ then click on your state.

There are worse ways you can spend money.

Monday, March 05, 2007

A Question Of Color — And A Cheap Date

With Spring in the air, Ginny decided to buy new towels for our bathroom.

That's understandable; our present towels fray around the edges.

With Spring in the air, various retail merchants decided to sell new towels.

In case you didn't know it, towels are strips of cloth. Preferably rough, absorbent cloth used to dry off wet human bodies. If a towel is on the floor soggy for some reason, you can always grab a pillowcase or a tee-shirt out of the cupboard; it will serve the same purpose.

Wet bodies are not all that picky.

Dogs just shake water off.

No big deal.

Except that Ginny wanted towels to match the color of our bathroom walls, which I think are either green or blue. No, they're green... I'm sure they are green.

Just a second. I'll go check.

Yep. They are green.

So Ginny browses through a bunch of store catalogues to pick out her towels — green ones.

Now, these are real stores, not some vendor stand at a flea market.

But do these reputable merchants tell you what color towels they sell?

Not a chance.

At least they don't tell <u>me</u> what color the towels are.

One store tries to pedal towels that are — and I quote from the catalog — Celadon, Atlantic, Plum, Cornsilk, Ink, Slate, Dusty, Sienna, Spice, Poppy, Mocha, or Clay.

Another store offers towels colored: Ballet, Iris, Cornflower, Sachet, or Mellon.

That's nice but what color are the towels?

Still another sells towels that are advertised as being: Limo, Coastal, Sterling, Sandstone, Sage, Reseda, Aragon, Willow, Partridge, Haze, Imperial, Smoked, or Ketchup.

Oh, Ketchup! I know ketchup. Those would be red. Wouldn't they?

Not according to the catalogue photo. If I'm looking at the right one, it's brown.

Another store sells towels colored — again, I quote — Atlas, Royal, Tavira, Medina, Giverny, Satire or Siren.

Does anyone on earth know what color these towels are?

Phooey on it!

Since green towels apparently no longer exist, I plan to keep drying off on my tee-shirt.

It's gray.

Used to be white, but now it's gray.

Definitely gray.

On a happier note, for some reason Sunday afternoon Ginny and I got to talking about that time way back in the Dark Ages of almost 40 years ago when we first began dating. This was up in the Washington, D.C. area.

Just for kicks, we decided to look on-line to see if any of the places where we dated still exist.

Some do.

For instance, 40 years ago we played spelunker in Camel's Den, Crabtree, and Sand Cave. Yes, in those days we were slim enough and spry enough to explore the caves of Maryland.

I really knew how to show a girl a good time.

I also took her to the Library Of Congress and to Rock Creek Park.

You'll notice that none of those places I took her cost a penny to go to (I was master of the cheap date); but we did date at a few restaurants. So yesterday we Google searched to see if any of those restaurants are still around after 40 years.

One place we remember fondly was sold to become an off track betting pallor.

Another place we tried to look up but we neither one could remember what the name of the place was or how to spell it. Something Italian, I think..

But, Hey, we found one.

Once I took her to Mrs. K's Toll House in Silver Spring, Maryland. It snowed like a moose that night. Most roads were closed. When we got to Mrs. K's we turned out to be the only couple in the place. We sat at a window table overlooking a snow-covered garden fountain. A fireplace blazed nearby. The waitresses, with no other customers to serve, decorated the lovely room for Christmas. Beauty and I held hands across the table and her eyes glistened as she gazed at me. Ginny wore her royal blue dress (memorably form-fitting) with the matching dangly blue-crystal earrings. I wore a suit. I ordered roast duck in orange sauce with some French name. We can't remember what she ordered.

On-line we found that Mrs. K's Toll House still exists. The website address is http://www.mrsks.com/

The pictures on that site show the garden in Spring.

But we remember winter. The fire. Christmas decorations. Deep snow. Deep blue dress. Deeper blue, glistening, adoring eyes.

Another place we remember going to for one date was O'Donnell's Seafood Restaurant at it's original location at 13th & F Streets where it stood for over 150 years. I don't know how it is now, but back when Beauty and I were dating, this was where the President, cabinet members, senators, and Supreme Court Justices went for seafood.

It was not a place for a cheap date!

We went there once.

I wanted to impress her.

O'Donnell's still exists and still serves the rum buns we remember from our single visit 40 years ago. But the restaurant is now in a new location. Their web address is http://www.odonnellsrestaurants.com/site/index.html .

As we indulged ourselves in these happy memories, Ginny remarked, "Yes, when we were dating, you took me to O'Donnell's. Once we were married, it's been MacDonald's ever since".

Maybe so.

But across any table, even now, we still hold hands.

And her blue eyes still glisten.

Tuesday, March 06, 2007 Monday Disappeared

My friend Barbara just began keeping a blog in January. Her site is well worth visiting, especially the post she wrote for February 16, *Silence In The Exam*.

That post looks at why God remains silent when we go through tough times, when we feel we need Him most.

A pertinent subject for today.

Over the weekend the husband of one of Barbara's friends died tragically and abruptly.

His funeral was held Monday at a large metropolitan church. He was renowned in the community and many mourners, friends, business associates and media dignitaries attended the service.

Because handicapped parking came at a premium, my friend Barbara, who has to get around with the aid of an aluminum walker, asked me to drive her to the door, drop her, bring her car back to my house, then come pick her up again after the funeral.

While I was doing this, my daughter Jennifer came over to my house to use my computer and visit. We talked a long time about various things going on in her life.

Between driving Barbara to the funeral and visiting with Jennifer, my Monday disappeared into the ether.

PS: Only days left till March 17th and since in the past I have received a fair number of e-mails from teachers and folks who are preparing lessons or presentations, here is an advance link to

an article I wrote a few years ago about St. Patrick Of Ireland. The article quotes often from the only book Patrick ever wrote, a book which greatly influences my own devotion.

This article means a lot to me because of the circumstances of the writing which I explain in a note about the death of my father and the birth of my youngest daughter at the end.

Wednesday, March 07, 2007 An Echo Across The Centuries

On January 13, 1588, Richard Rogers, a Puritan minister, wrote in his diary:

I have been veary unprofitable the most part of it, and, in respect of the times of late, litle good doinge at my booke, or yet my studying day for... wandringes and more unsetling of my minde then I have felt these many dayes. In deed no deepe falleinge into any noisome evil... yet if I had not in time espied, and found it out, and cut of the course of it, much unsetlednes with aunswerable frute had undoubtedly followed. I was also inclineing to much peevish frowardnes, more then of late. It had been too much if I had been constrained to have set downe this... but this which I have noted is much more lamentable. And thus I may see what stayed-nes of grace there is in me, the best trial that I had of that thinge this longue time... And the next morning, rising late because of weariness, I began this wretchedness about me this day, as I have said

My own blog posting for today echoes his diary entry for that long ago day. I too am doing little good at my book because of wanderings and unsettling of my mind. Who needs falling deep into noisome evil when plain old laziness and daydreaming serves just as well to short circuit your work?

I too feel a little inclined toward peevishness.

And yet I too see that there is staidness of God's grace in my life.

See why I love this guy?

He resonates with me.

I got six pages of his diary edited yesterday. It makes me happy to be back at my work.



On a sad note: yesterday a 6.3 earthquake killed more than 70 people in Indonesia and mangled hundreds of others. The earthquake generated panic as people remembered the killer tsunami that wiped out thousands last year.

I feel an affinity for the people of Indonesia, the most populous Moslem country on earth, because last year a publishing company there translated my

little book on prayer into their national language. I feel really honored that they would do so.

I also feel that I should pray for the peace and prosperity of that troubled nation more than I do. I write more about prayer than I do it.

Thursday, March 08, 2007 Family Conference (A Parenthesis)

Sorry I'm late posting again this morning.

Today, for the third time this week, my server balked at letting me (or anyone else) visit my website or blog. This is getting personal. I think that server hates me.

Or, perhaps it's that the devil strangles my site so that a waiting world is denied my daily words of wisdom... Or, maybe God blocks the site because He thinks I talk too much. He'd rather I live for Christ instead of just babble about Him.

However, in God's own good time my server will reappear and I'll be able to post again. I usually get up between 3 and 4 a.m. and I like to have each day's entry on the net before 6 a.m. whenever that's possible.

The server is not the only thing disrupting my important (to nobody on earth but me) work of editing that 16th Century Puritan diary.

Yesterday morning my youngest daughter showed up at the door in tears. Her tale of woe included a bounced check, a dispute with her landlord, and a frustrating, fruitless job search — quite a load for a young woman to carry.

I held her on my lap for a while and let her cry on my shoulder. That's what dads are for. We spent the morning revamping her resume before she went off for a job interview. Then I took her out for comfort food and let her crash on the sofa for a nap while I arranged a family conference tonight.

We gathered at Donald and Helen's house where Helen served the seven of us a scrumptious impromptu dinner on a moment's notice.

My middle daughter, Eve, bubbled with an account of her business conference in California (she just flew in again last night). She stayed with Uncle Ricky and Aunt Dot while there and they attended the Chinese New Year Parade in San Francisco. They took her to see giant redwoods, a whale migrating just offshore, sea otters feeding, and an art exhibit featuring original Escher engravings. She claims to have tended to some business for her employer there also (but you wouldn't think so to hear her talk about the tourist charms Ricky & Dot took her to).

She said that as her plane was on the tarmac at the airport, she watched from her window seat as a mechanic worked on the wing. He was trying to attach some loose fixture and could not bolt it down. So he took out a roll of duct tape, ripped off several strips and patched whatever it was. When several passengers who saw this repair expressed dismay, the pilot came on the intercom and assured everyone that such repairs to an airplane wing with duct tape are routine.

Feel reassured about flying now?

At our family conference, around a blazing fire in the backyard firepit we put our heads together to discuss the wounded one's (actually we've all been wounded one way or another in this) situation and came up with the beginnings of a plan which may set her on her feet. Much of it depends on her. But these items ranged from a new hairdo to spiritual guidance.

While we all ventilated our feelings (we try to maintain a crap-free zone in our homes and say what we think and feel freely) yet we all tried to be supportive. For her there is now the prospect of help packing, free storage for her furniture and possibly a rent-free

apartment for a short time.

Few things in life please me more than seeing these wonderful people who are my family dealing with problems in harmony (more or less) even as they tease unmercifully and bicker about the red, orange or green stickers in their "Death Wish" lists (that's stuff of mine they each one want when I die). This sticker discussion has been going on for years at virtually every family gathering and it generates lots of laughter every time.

Needless to say, today I did not get done a single page from the 16th Century. Too busy living in this one with people who are likely to live well on into the 21st.

The world is a better place because of them.

It's been a good day.

A really good day.

Friday, March 09, 2007 Conversation

Yesterday I spent my whole day talking with people.

When I went up to pay my breakfast bill at the restaurant, the pretty girl acting as cashier hushed whatever she was saying to the guy ahead of me. She walked around the counter and whispered in his ear.

As that customer left laughing, she and I lightly bantered back and forth as we have for a couple of years worth of mornings.

I teased her that she never whispers in my ear.

"No, I couldn't, Mr. Cowart" she said. "It was a dirty joke and I couldn't tell that to you. You're too respectable".

Story of my life.

Pretty girls have always found me too respectable.

Darn!

Anyhow, that was my first conversation of the day.

My daughter in law came over early and we spend a couple of hours talking about flowers, furniture, family, and future events.

She and my youngest son got married just before Thanksgiving last year and she has blended into our

family so well that she seems to have always been part of the group. But apart from group activities, I have not actually known her. This was the first time she and I have ever sat down and enjoyed a one on one conversation.

I'm impressed.

Donald has won a prize.

Later in the afternoon I talked at length with a guy across the street about neighborhood stuff like trash pickup, kids on bicycles in the street, and issues affecting property values. Now that winter is over, he and his wife are thinking of selling their home here in Florida and moving to Michigan.

Amid the above conversations, my youngest daughter came back from a promising job interview and we enjoyed talking for an hour or so before she headed back to Gainesville.

We talked about dictionary definitions and Bible passages as they apply to life.

This morning I looked up the word conversation in my dictionary; I find its meanings include: to live; to keep company with; as well as an oral exchange of sentiments, observations, opinions or ideas.

It interested me to find that the word *conversation* is also a fencing term referring to the back and forth play of sword blades in a match.

Immediately I thought of sharpening a carving knife at Thanksgiving dinner — know how you take that sharpening iron out of the drawer and whet it back and forth on the carving knife blade to get a keen edge?

That's one picture the Bible uses about *conversation*. King Solomon said, "As iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend".

The interplay of words and ideas in a conversation sharpens us both.

The things we talk about defines our relationships.

For instance, one intriguing Bible passage says, "Evil communications corrupt good manners" — I have no idea exactly what that means but I think it relates to the things we talk about.

But it appears that usually the Scripture writers use the word *conversation* in the sense of overall life-style, not just words we say.

When St. Peter talked about the popping of our last balloon, he said:

"But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.

"Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all **holy conversation** and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat"?

So. I've spent my whole day talking, whetting my soul against the souls of other people, other ideas, other outlooks. And this has brought me to the place where I need to mesh my talking words with living my whole lifestyle.

St. Paul encouraged the people in the city of Phillipi: "Only let your **conversation** be as it becometh the gospel of Christ... that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; and in nothing terrified by your adversaries.... For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake".

Good for Paul.

Nevertheless, being a dirty old man at heart, all day I've wondered about that joke the pretty girl whispered in that other customer's ear.

Sunday, March 11, 2007 Will The Real 4 a.m. Please Stand Up

The time changed at 2 a.m. this morning.

I missed it because last night I fell asleep in my chair in front of the tv and slept late.

Usually I get up between 3 and 4 a.m. but when I woke this morning the clock read 5 a.m. That means I'd slept two hours later than usual; but the tv weather guy

said we were supposed to lose an hour's sleep last night.

So I wonder if the time moved back, when I really did wake up, was it really at 4 a.m. or 5 a.m. or maybe really at 3 a.m.?

I give up!

In a few minutes I'm going back to bed and when I get up next I'll solve the time problem — I'll just ask Ginny what time it is.

Tomorrow the judges for the 2007 Blooker Award will announce the finalists. I view this event with anticipation and apprehension.

The 2007 award is for books published in 2006, but they must be based on blogs, and the book I entered features my 2005 blog???

The heck with what time it is — I get confused about what year!!!

I feel that I was presumptuous even to enter my book, A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad, in competition with dozens of fine writers.

My writing has never won a prize...

No. That's not right. One of my magazine articles did get a 4th place award for being an inspirational piece once. But I didn't enter it, it was selected at random be a panel of magazine editors and I knew nothing about the contest till after it was all over.

But with this Blooker thing I suspect that I've made a fool of myself by putting my work forward for their consideration... Remember the old tv Gong Show?

Oh Well, our times are in His hands.

We'll see what happens.

Tomorrow.... Sometime.

Monday, March 12, 2007

A Romantic Family Interlude

How to organize the telling of this defeats me.

Where to start?

Where to start?

First, I suppose I should say that my oldest daughter drives an SUV. A huge one.

Three weeks ago she went to a tree sale and picked up a small redbud tree for me to plant in our front yard. She planned to deliver it to our house the same day but something came up, so she didn't.

Now, my middle daughter (I have three sons and three daughters, all grown) recently traveled to California for a business conference and just returned a few days ago.

Older daughter had again said that she'd bring my tree over two weekends ago but something came up, and she didn't.

Middle daughter called a family conference at a Chinese restaurant yesterday. She'd brought presents for each of us from her trip and she wanted to show us slides of the redwood trees, etc.

Oldest daughter (are you following this) had again said that she'd deliver my redbud tree last Wednesday but something came up. And she didn't.

Now, my Middle daughter's boyfriend is Mark, a transplanted yankee but a nice guy nonetheless. He, poor fellow, grew up with only one brother (I think) so he is not accustomed to the dynamics of a large rowdy family group.

OK. When eight of us gathered in the parking lot of the Chinese restaurant, Mark and Eve (middle daughter) announced their engagement! She showed off the lovely ring he gave her. They plan to marry within a year. They intend for the wedding to be held aboard a cruise ship with the Captain presiding.

How romantic.

We hugged and kissed and shook hands and patted Mark on the back and teased the happy couple. Maggie, our newly acquired granddaughter, presented them with intricate red paper hearts she had cut out (she studies some form of oriental paper cutting similar to origami).

Then we all went inside to eat and celebrate.

At the table they asked me to say a blessing and I gave thanks for the happy couple's joy and love. I couldn't remember well enough to quote it exactly, but I tried to say an old prayer called A Blessing On Families:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who settest the solitary in families; We commend to thy continual care the homes in which thy people dwell. Put far from them, we beseech thee, every root of bitterness, the desire of vain-glory, and the pride of life. Fill them with faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness. Knit together in constant affection those who, in holy wedlock, have been made one flesh; turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to the fathers; and so enkindle fervent charity among us all, that we be evermore kindly affectioned with brotherly love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chow down time. Like locus in a grain field, we consumed sweet & sour chicken, egg rolls, and sushi (them — Not me!).

Table talk centered around the normal soap-opera stuff of Oldest daughter, and the recent troubles of youngest daughter, and the cruise ship, and the honeymoon in the Caribbean. And wedding arrangements and origami and internet metatags and fertility doctors and yard work and ...

And I mentioned my redbud tree.

Whereupon, oldest daughter slapped her forehead and said she had forgotten about it being in the back of her SUV.

No one else seemed surprised, but Mark exclaimed incredulously, "You forgot that you've been driving around for three weeks with a tree in the back of your car!"

Whereupon, my beautiful wife, the mother of all this brood, said, "Mark, welcome to the Cowart family".

My book, A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad, went bad. It did <u>not</u> make the grade as a finalist for the 2007 Blooker Prize.

A couple of hours after I posted today's entry, we received a phone call telling us that Ginny's father died suddenly this morning. I plan to take a week or so off blogging to travel with her to the funeral and such. Please check back in now and then because I'm not sure if I'll be

able to post while we are on the road. Thanks. -- john

Wednesday, March 21, 2007 We're Back — More or Less

Yesterday afternoon Ginny and I returned from her father's funeral in Maryland. It was a grueling trip physically, mentally and emotionally. We intend to crash for a couple of days to recuperate.

I intend to post a critique of what went on tomorrow but for now I'm too exhausted to think...

Oh, I had not had time to check before we left but I did call the doctor when we got in yesterday and my three latest biopsies tested benign so it looks as though we're only dealing with one cancer and this nerve thing (which has been acting up all week). I'm scheduled to see two more doctors next week. After that I should have enough information to begin making decisions.

The biggest two events on our trip was seeing and hearing a flight of wild geese and seeing a russet towhee, a bird we'd never seen before.

Oh yes, the other biggie was somewhere about a thousand miles from home, I discovered that the car we'd borrowed for the trip has a newfangled gadget.

At some restaurant somewhere I pulled in to park between two cars and this alarm started blaring. I thought I must have bumped one of these parked cars. But the people sitting in the cars on each side of me looked at me like I was crazy because this alarm kept going and going and I just sat there looking at them wondering why they did not shut the thing off.

How was I to know that Donald's car had a panic button alarm?

Nobody told me.

I locked the thing and started to walk away leaving the noise behind when Ginny realized that it was our car making the noise.

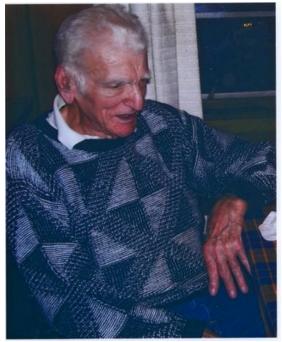
She dug the driver's handbook out of the glove compartment and read up on how to shut the thing off...

So I did.

"Hey," I said, "That sort of thing could happen to anybody".

"It could happen to anybody," she said, "But it always does happen to you".

Thursday, March 22, 2007 **Ginny's Dad**



Jack Worthington, 1921-2007

Ginny's dad intimidated me.

He excelled at anything he set his hand to do.

Jack Worthington was a white-haired giant standing about six foot four. He and Alva would have celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary in June. They were the parents of five sons and two daughters.



Jack & Alva Worthington last year

Although he never finished college, as a young man Jack scored a 98 on a Civil Service exam and went to work for the Navy Department in Washington, D.C., where he helped defend America by developing naval ordinance. Over the years he earned Civil Service super-grade status.

Jack was an orphan and spent his childhood in extreme want. As a man he reacted to the poverty of his youth by accumulating every sort of possession and by treasuring the things he accumulated.

For instance in the side yard of the home he build with his own hands (he taught himself carpentry, wiring, plumbing, stone masonry, etc, to build it) he kept two boats, a van, a motorcycle, a huge model train layout, and a vast collection of geological specimens.

He developed a vast array of interests which he followed with enthusiasm. His watercolor paintings won awards. His photographic darkroom contained extensive equipment. His garden took top honors again and again. He brewed excellent beer and bottled his own fine port wine. He amassed an extensive library.

But his main interest was people.

For years Jack was a Boy Scout leader, district scout commissioner, and served on the Eagle Scout Review Board. He helped found a neighborhood association, a geology club, a garden club, and a bird watching group. He built top-notch exhibits for an area museum, collected fossils, taught exercise classes for seniors on a tv show, worked on archaeological digs, supported Democratic causes, organized dances, sponsored Elderhostel events, designed and planted a neighborhood butterfly garden, and was involved in no telling what all else.

He lived to be 86 years old.

On Monday, March 12th, after a full day's activities (I think he was planning the Spring garden) Jack died in bed beside his wife without making a sound or moving a muscle.



Vicious weather struck the night of his memorial service at Faith United Methodist Church, Accokeek, Maryland. Bitter cold. Snow. Sleet. Roads closed. Traffic accidents everywhere as cars slid off the highways.

Yet, so many people attended Jack's service there was standing room only in the church. Whites, blacks, American Indians, Philippines, old people, Boy Scouts in uniform, teenagers, family — all assembled to honor this man.

I met one couple at the service who said they'd only met Jack a month before when he helped them in some home garden project and he impressed them so much that they just had to attend his service. Besides the two pastors of the church, other speakers included someone from the garden club, the geology group, the neighborhood association, the state museum. An Eagle Scout, a former White House aide, and several of Jack's sons also spoke.

Earlier that afternoon I was surprised when Alva indicated that she'd like me to say something also. I sat down at the crowded kitchen table and amid normal family turmoil wrote up a few of my memories of this man who intimidated me so.



The Worthington Family in the late 1970s (There are a lot more now.)

Here is what I said at the service:

Hello, my name is John Cowart. I'm Jack & Alva's son-in-law. I'm Ginny's husband and marrying into this wonderful family was the best thing that ever happened to me.

In case you haven't noticed, Jack Worthington collected things.

He was a child of the Depression when the universal credo was "If you don't have it in hand, you're not likely to get it".

I understand that.

I collect things too.

In fact when we go to a yard sale and I want to buy something, Ginny says, "One man's trash is another man's trash".

But Jack accumulated more things than I'll ever be able to.

And he held on to what he had.

Once when I was writing a project I needed information about a certain type of bomb used in Viet Nam. It contained fleas used to locate concentrations of the enemy. I needed to know what one looked like so I called Jack.

As soon as I said what I needed, he started telling me about it's size, weight and color markings and the serial numbers on the casing...

"You can remember all that!" I said.

"No," he replied, "I've got one right here beside the telephone on the stairwell".

"What!" exclaimed Alva who was listening on the extension.

"Don't worry," Jack said, "It's been defused".

Another thing I remember about Jack:

As you may know, he frowned on smoking. When I'd visit he insisted that I stay 50 yards from the house to smoke my pipe; so I set up a lawn chair at the end of the drive where I could go to smoke. And early in the mornings (I usually wake up at 4 a.m.) I'd sneak out of the house and down to the end of the drive to smoke my pipe, pray, and think life over.

No sneaking out of the house with Jack around. He'd hear the door squeak and come down to the end of the drive to sit and talk with me.

Since at that time he and I were the only two men with children in the family, we often talked about the challenges of being a dad.

It's the hardest job on earth.

Jack said that having a family is like having a bowling alley installed in your brain!

Many men can't take it. They sire children and leave. There's not a dad alive who hasn't been tempted that way.

Jack said that a Dad has two duties:

One duty is to make his children happy.

He told me about giving his kids wheelbarrow rides and about constructing this pulley on a cable between a tree on top of the hill and a tree on the bottom — Nothing OSHA would approve but the kids loved to zoom down that dangerous ride.

Jack said the other duty of a dad is to make his children

unhappy — to guide them away from mistakes we ourselves have made.

I remember that back before cell phones, Jack had this radiotelephone thing installed between his house and the car. When one of the guys (I won't embarrass anyone by saying which one) was out late on a date, Jack would grab his radio base phone, yell, "Breaker! Breaker!" and demand a return time, demand that the girl be returned home, ask what road they were driving on, and all that stuff.

Boy! I'm glad he didn't have that damn thing when Ginny and I were dating!

Anyhow, some people would say that such behavior was controlling, aggravating, frustrating, being an old fuddy-duddy.

We dads call such behavior — love.

So, the one thing I'd like all of you to remember — if you forget everything else I've said here tonight remember this.

No matter who your father was, no matter what he was like, no matter how hard it was for him to say it — Remember this — Daddy loves you.

Sunday, March 25, 2007 On Being A Christian Without Thinking

For the past ten or twelve days Ginny and I have been traveling or recuperating from our trip for her father's funeral so I have hardly made a note in my supposed daily journal.

I'm almost back.

A few random observations occur to me:

First, I realize that for the past two weeks I have hardly thought of God. Other than a few sentence prayers, no thought of Jesus has crossed my mind.

That's cool.

It shows the importance of daily walking with Him so that when a crisis strikes, He carries us through without our straining to be religious. He controls from the background without conscious effort on our part.

The just shall live by faith ...

and all that jazz.

Even when the only thing we can see are those thousands of white lines down the center of the highway,

He keeps us in His mind and that's the important thing.

Another thing I've realized is that when news came of Jack's sudden death, I did not even pray about what to do. My knee jerk reaction was to immediately begin preparations for the trip. I didn't pray about it or think about it or consider options or do any of the mental things I usually do when faced with a decision.

I began packing, borrowing a car, scraping together money, securing our house, rescheduling appointments.

Sometimes God guides us simply by making us aware of the right thing to do, letting us react. Agonizing in prayer over a decision or action is not always necessary.

I suppose if I had thought this out before hand, we may not have gone. We did have other responsibilities here in Florida. We did not have the cash to make a sudden unplanned trip. We have health considerations — all factors I would have considered if I had considered anything.

But I didn't.

I just got things ready to go and we went.

Blind albino salamanders dwell in deep sunless caves. When you take one from its cave and expose it to sunlight, it shrivels, dries out, and dies.

I feel like that salamander when I contact Ginny's family.

My feelings of shyness and inferiority well up inside me and all my hang-ups magnify themselves — my discomfort at being touched, my aversion to eating in public, my general unease at being around successful people, my awareness of being a failure.

Besides Jack himself (see my previous post) all the others in Ginny's family are extremely successful, wealthy, decisive, competent individuals.

Ginny's sister is a retired teacher. One brother is an aviation electronics expert; another is a physician; another is an attorney; two are computer consultants; one, an accomplished musician — and here all I am is a dabbler at writing, one step removed from the welfare line.

I do not do well when removed from my cave.

New environments scare me.

I feel ashamed.

But none of this was about me.

I swallowed my discomfort and did what I could for Ginny and her mother and the others as best I could.

Another thing I observed is that I made some bad, or at least questionable, decisions related to this trip to Maryland.

Topping that list is that even though my two older sons live in the area, I made no effort to contact them. Just system overload. We only had three days to stay and I chose to limit my contact. Once, the thought crossed my mind to contact Sweetie and her husband (She produces Shakespearian plays in Accokeek; I follow her blog) but I felt the time constraints too keenly to contact anybody.

Another observation: our kids here in Florida are troopers!

They came together immediately and without question to help their mother and me make this trip.

Patricia became our house sitter feeding the fish and Fancy bird, letting Rex in to repair our air conditioner, and landing a job of her own while we were gone. Donald and Helen loaned us their car and cash to make the trip, helped settle Patricia, and minded my website. Eve and lennifer traveled with us. Jennifer drove the whole way there in a day and a half (It took me and Ginny three full days to drive back by ourselves). She assumed a professional stance as a registered nurse and cared for her grandmother's bandages and a host of such medical details. Eve keeps in contact with the extended family so she assumed the role of hostess remembering which wife goes with which brother and the names of children and dogs. She and Jennifer cooked for 8 to 18 people for every meal. (Because of times schedules Eve and lennifer came back separately from Ginny and me).. It was all an inspiring effort of support on the part of the kids. I'm impressed.

Two more observations:

One: Even in crisis situations, normal life goes on uninterrupted. Even with our traveling away bills remain to be paid, grass still needs mowing, sick people visited, furniture moved and dogs rescued (long story). Life swirls ahead. Ginny and I had been parked in our drive for less than <u>five minutes</u> on our return before three different neighbors rushed over with three different personal problems that needed attention.

Two: Important things are not as important as they seem. To drive to Maryland meant my abandoning my work on those 16th Century Puritan diaries that were so important to me... Anybody miss those?

They faded to insignificance — at least for a time.

Maybe I can resume work on them next week.

Before we left on this road trip, my three most recent biopsies occupied my mind to a certain extent but there was no way I could learn the results while we were gone. But during the trip I just did not have time to mull over such things. (The day we returned I called the lab and learned that those three were benign).

That means I only have one cancer and this nerve thing that gives me the shakes to deal with at the moment. (Thank God the shakes did not bother me much during the trip).

I'm scheduled to see the oncologist and neurologist next week... I have a great joke about the nerve thing but it is unsuitable for younger, more tender, readers so I'll not tell it here — yet.

(I'll save it at least till after I've seen the neurologist).

I suppose my bottom line in all these observations is that faith is what's left when we're too busy, too flustered, to enmeshed in daily life to give Christ a thought.

The good news is that He holds us in mind, even when we neglect Him.

Thanks be to God.

Tuesday, March 27, 2007 **Quivering**

Now that the kiddies have all gone to bed, I can tell that joke I mentioned yesterday.

I first heard this joke over 50 years ago, back when I was a Boy Scout. It shows how Scouting promotes the moral stability of the young. It came to mind a couple of months ago when tremors began to make my hands and

right leg quiver uncontrollably at various times.

Yesterday Ginny and I visited Dr. Trout, the neurologist who examined me to determine the cause of my shaking. After weeks of tests and anticipation we expected to learn the cause of this quivering. Then we waited for two hours in his office because somehow between his office and the lab, a distance of maybe 50 feet, my test results got lost.

What a boost to my confidence.

Anyhow, after calling here and there to find my lab results, Dr. Trout still does not know what causes these tremors. He eliminated some possibilities such as Parkinson's and syphilis (I could have told him that) and guesses that perhaps a Vitamin B12 deficiency causes my trouble. I'll be taking that stuff for a couple of months to see what happens.

But tomorrow we go visit the oncologist and I'm supposed to tell him my decision about which treatment option I choose to deal with the prostate cancer.

But, enough medical stuff.

This morning, for the first time ever, the Webalizer counter for my site shows that over 10, 000 readers have visited this blog in a single month.

Wow

Thank you. I'm overwhelmed by your interest. I hope you find it worthwhile.

I know. I know. I haven't got to the joke yet. And that's the only reason anyone reads this stuff:

There was this baker who owned his own shop.

He hired a counter girl who always came to work wearing a short skirt, a very short skirt.

Now she was a short girl and to reach the baked goods on the upper shelves, she had to climb a ladder.

Soon all the young men who came into the shop realized that the baker kept raisin bread on the very top shelf where the young lady couldn't reach it without going up the ladder and putting on an impressive floor show.

Raisin bread became the bakery's top seller as the girl ran up and down that ladder all day.

One morning as she was up there getting a loaf of raisin bread for another customer, an elderly gentleman came in the door of the shop. The girl looked over her shoulder and said, "Well, is it raisin for you too, Pops"?

"No," the old guy said, "But it's a-quivering".

Remember, you read it here first.

Oh, here's a photo of one of the dogs we rescued last week:



An acquaintance moved from a house with a yard to a condo apartment complex where dogs are not allowed. This boxer and an even larger dog were going to be turned over to the dog catcher and gassed. With much tugging and pulling (these are the two most powerful animals I've ever encountered) my daughter-in-law and I found a new home for each of them.

These dogs are really just too beautiful to be gassed for being an inconvenience.

Ginny says the same is true about me in spite of my jokes and my quivering.

Wednesday, March 28, 2007 No Photos!

Hair grows on my head.

Hair grows on my chest.

More hair grows on my back.

On my forearms, upper arms, thighs and calves — hair grows all over me.

When I was younger I grew a beard long enough to tuck under my belt. I have forgotten why I grew it, or why I later shaved it off. Just one of those things you do when you're young, I suppose.

Now, I shave every day, usually about 4 in the afternoon because Ginny gets home from work about 5 and I want to look fresh and nice for her. Nobody cares what I look like during the rest of the day.

I mention all this about hair because this morning I'm scheduled to consult with Dr. Oz, the oncologist, and make my choice of one among the five options he's given me to deal with my prostate cancer.

One of these options involves external beam therapy or targeted radiation. Unlike the kryptonite pellets which are inserted internally during brachytherapy, a targeted radiation treatment involves shooting a radioactive ray into me hoping to zap the cancer cells from the outside.

I'm sure the oncologist would explain it differently, but the mental picture I get is one of cancer cells as fire ants in an ant hill.

As long as you leave the fire ants alone, they go about their tiny ant business eating whatever is closest to the ant hill. If you poke the ant hill with a stick, they swarm all over, biting everything in sight.

I picture cancer cells as being like those ants.

If you attack the nest and kill every single ant alive, then you have nothing to worry about. But, if you miss killing a few, then they go off mad, biting and unhappy to build several new colonies in other, more hospitable, places.

The oncologist assures me that his ray gun technology is so advanced, so modern, so accurate, and so precise that in five to nine weeks of daily treatments, he's almost positive he can zap every single fire ant crawling between my legs.

Hummm.

I wonder.

If you think my ant hill analogy and mental picture is ridiculous, how about this one:

Unlike the massive general radiation chemotherapy of former days, this targeted radiation treatment will not cause all of my hair to fall out.

The oncologist assures me that I won't need a baseball cap.

No.

I would still have hair on my head, on my back, on my chest, on my arms and legs — all over my body except...

The ray gun technology would cause my hair to fall out only in my exact target area. That specific area would be utterly defoliated and left barren.

When Ginny and I got to talking about this possibility we conjured up a certain mental picture.

We laughed and laughed and laughed.

This is one of the few aspects of cancer to strike us as funny.

Even now I'm not sure which option I will chose. The Scripture assures us that God will guide us beside the still waters.

Even when I screw up and make a dumb choice, even then, the prophet Isaiah said, "Thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left".

I'm confident that whichever thing I finally chose, it will be the right one no mater what it eventually leads to, good or bad, green pastures or the valley of the shadow.

Makes no difference in the long run.

Both ways eventually lead Home.

The only really important thing is Who I walk with.

Nothing else counts.

However, I will make this one promise:

If I do chose the targeted radiation option, I promise not to post any photos on my blog.

Friday, March 30, 2007

How One Guy Seeks God's Will (in a very, very long post)

It's all good news, but after today I intend to stop writing about medical stuff for a while; nobody needs to know about my every ache, pain and complaint.

However, I wonder if it might be helpful for me to go though the process of how I came to my decision about how to handle my prostrate cancer yesterday.

Batten down for a long posting

I've been going through this process for over five months now.

Bottom line is that after asking the oncologist two final questions yesterday, one about the meaning of some numbers in the biopsy report and one about insurance coverage, I chose not to treat the cancer at all, to adopt the Watchful Waiting stance as the disease runs its course.

Medically this means going in for more testing every few months to spot when the cancer becomes more aggressive Then revaluating what, if anything, to do next.

So this blog post will trace how I looked for God's will and arrived at my decision to engage in watchful waiting instead of one of the many other treatments available to me.

But first let me announce that the tremors that trouble me disappeared within hours of my taking 5,000 mg of vitamin B12!

That amazes me.

(Dr. Trout — I give my doctors fictitious names related to literarily characters the physicians remind me of. Thus Dr. Trout is named for the character in Kurt Vonnegut's novels; Dr. Woody, my primary care doctor, relates to Woody Woodpecker in the cartoon; Dr. Bay, the dermatologist, reminds me of a lifeguard on Bay Watch; Dr. Oz, the oncologist, is the mighty Wizard of Oz; and, of course, you can guess that Dr. P. is my urologist.)

Anyhow, Dr. Trout, the neurologist, had not wanted me to take this vitamin before in case the B12 might mask some other cause of the tremors, but once he prescribed the stuff, it acted immediately. I hope it lasts.

Now, all the typos I make, I can't blame on my shaking hands.

They are all mine.

Deciding how to deal with my cancer is a more complicated story:

Years ago a mainstream religious publisher asked me to write a book for college students about How To Find The Will Of God. I chose a clever working title: *If God Leads Me Then Why Do I Run In Circles?*

I studied Scripture and biographies. I interviewed politicians and policemen and preachers. I reviewed my own diaries from 20 years past. I made a couple of hundred pages of extensive notes...

Then I gave up.

I have no idea how God leads us today.

Yes. Yes. I know the standard answer to the question: that you should pray and read Scripture and consult godly advisors and follow your heart and arrive at a sense of peace, etc. etc.

Yet, personally I found the glib Four-Easy-Steps process usually presented for learning God's will in a specific situation, such as buying a car, or choosing a college roommate, or deciding whether to marry Mary, Betty or Fefe La Boom — This process just did not satisfy me.

Yet, in deciding how to deal with my cancer, I found that I considered many of these same steps I found unsatisfying.

So, having confessed that I have no idea of how to find God's will, then let me go through how I'm going about seeking Him in my own particular situation concerning my cancer.

This process may help you in your own decision making, but remember that this is just an outline of what one lone confused Christian tried. It may help you, or it may not.

When Dr. P, the urologist, first told me I have cancer, he acted more upset than Ginny or I did. We tend to

regard this as just another damn nuisance. He presented us with five or six options to chose from and we had to learn an entirely new vocabulary. For instance, I'd never heard the word brachytherapy before in my life.

Maybe it was a mental block related to denial, but I could never remember the right words the medical people used. I just labeled the radiation pellets they proposed to stick up my ass as *kryptonite* and let it go at that.

I did learn the term DRE (Digital Rectal Exam). Boy, did I ever learn that one!

Anyhow, Ginny and I first considered several factors:

My cultural background. Being of North Florida Cracker heritage, I tend to think you only go to a doctor as an absolute last resort when you are in a terminal condition and that a hospital is a place people go to die, a place where you get septic flesh-eating bacteria if you have to go in there to get a simple chainsaw wound bandaged. Never go to a hospital because you're not likely to walk out alive.

Intellectually, I know this view is only partially true, but my gut feeling is that the only way you should ever see a doctor is if the ambulance carries you to the hospital while you're unconscious and can't escape.

My Cringing At Being Touched. I've written about this several times before in the past couple of months (for instance see "Skin Flick" on March 1^{st}).

Our Sex Life. Ginny and I have only been rehearsing sex for 39 years and we're really getting the hang of it. With that much foreplay leading up to our next encounter we feel we're getting good at it. We do not want to gamble on anything messing that up for us and every prostate cancer treatment carries that possibility.

Ginny's Health. She controls her diabetes very well — so far. But the day is almost sure to come when it turns bad nasty on us and I want to be around to give her the hands on care she might need.

My Macular Degeneration. Dr. Lamb, the ophthalmologist, tells me that if I live long enough, I'm almost sure to go blind. That does not give me much incentive to stretch things out; it's sort of like choosing between the Lady or the Tiger.

My Hardheaded Resistance To Change. I lead a very happy life. I love my work. I enjoy my grown kids. I adore my wife. I own a Lotto ticket that may make me a millionaire. I don't want anything to change. And here God drops this prostate cancer thing on my head... actually on the other end of me, but you get what I mean. I do not want anything to change. I am a happy man. But being hardheaded and resisting the change God sends is dumb. I know better than that.

My fear Of Death. Am I a Christian believing in eternal life?

Yes.

Am I scared of dying?

Darn Tooting!

Shouldn't a Christian exercise faith in Christ and approach death without fear?

Maybe so. But I'm scared anyhow.

As I see it we are souls God has grafted into physical bodies. He engineered things to give us a fear of death for a perfectly good reason — to keep us from doing stupid things, like say hang gliding or motorcycle riding or fooling with Don Vito Corleone's wife.

One amusing passage of Scripture portrays the Apostle Paul aboard a ship in a wicked bad storm. As apostles were wont to do, Paul stood up and gave a speech:

"Sirs, be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of any man's life among you, but of the ship. For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am and whom I serve, saying, 'Fear not, Paul..." Wherefore, Sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God..."

Quite a declaration of faith in God.

But then the ship sank.

And they that could swim cast themselves into the sea and paddled for land, And the rest, some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship, some hugging barrels or hatch covers or whatever, struggled and treaded water and thrashed and splashed and struggled to get to land — and there was the fearless Paul, a Christian par excellent, dog paddling holding onto a board

just like the pagan sailors.

In the face of death, our physical bodies react by clinging to life tooth and claw, clinging to any board, barrel or broken mast we can cling to. That's the way God made us. So, yes I believe in Jesus, and no, I don't want to die anymore than He did.

Anyhow, those are some of the factors bounding around in my brain as I began to seek God's will about how to handle this cancer.

First, I said, "Damn, what a nuisance".

I had other plans.

Then, of course, I prayed.

I prayed two prayers:

I prayed, "Lord, what will You have me to do"?

In essence, that is the only question worth bothering with. Anything else is froth and through all this believe me, I've churned up a lot of froth.

Then I prayed like the old lady in the Stephen King movie, *The Stand*. In her crisis, she prayed, "Lord, if it be possible, please let this cup pass from me. That's the same thing Your own Son asked in the garden; but, I 'spect I'll get the same answer He did"!

Then, I investigated whether or not this cancer has spread beyond my prostate already. That's why I steeled my self to be examined by Dr. Trout, Dr. Lamb, Dr. Oz, Dr. Woody, Dr. Bay, and Dr. P.

The other biopsies of suspicious areas turned out benign.

So I began eliminating options.

Dr. P indicated that surgery would be most likely to permanently cancel our sex life. Cross that one off the list.

Then there was chemical castration (sounds nicer when they call it hormone therapy). Here in Florida prisons do that to rapists and child molesters. Besides, this treatment not only kills the cancer cells, it would also cause my breasts to grow so large that with a blond wig, I could pass for Anna Nicole Smith.

Not really.

I'm not a handsome man, but I'd make one hell of an ugly woman.

Cross that one off.

And Dr. Oz discovered that because of scar tissue inside me from surgery years ago, I am not a candidate for one of the most promising cancer treatments, the kryptonite thing of radiation implant pellets (I forgot what they really call it).

Possible treatment options began to narrow down.

The Scripture says that "For by wise counsel thou shalt make thy war: and in a multitude of counselors there is safety."

Naturally I sought out wise counselors.

I talked with my family; they gave me their unwavering support whatever treatment I would chose.

I talked with my father-in-law, who died last week. He said, "Cut it out! Cut the damn thing out. Don't wait a minute, not another day. Cut it out".

Jack was always so shy and retiring about offering advice.

I talked with my eldest daughter, a registered nurse; she assured me that she would undertake my care should I become bedridden or anything like that.

I talked with a friend, a nurse at the world-famous Mayo Clinic, who actually gives hands on care to terminal prostate cancer patients in an intensive care unit. There I got a vivid description of how this cancer metastasizes to seek out bone marrow especially in the pelvis and spine where the cancer cells creates an agonizing amount of pain that is very difficult to control.

And I talked with a friend who urged me to drink green tea with red clover, a sure-fire cure for cancer.

I also read *Dr. Peter Scardino's Prostate Book*. Dr. Scardino (his real name) is chairman of the urology department at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. His book thoroughly explains the pros and cons, history and projected future or each possible treatment. I highly recommend it.

Speaking of reading, as a Christian, I naturally turned

to the Scripture to see what the Bible says about my prostate cancer predicament.

Not a word.

The closest thing I found was in Deuteronomy 23 where any man who is "wounded in the stones or hath his privy member cut off" is excluded from being a priest.

Isn't that helpful?

However, I found a great deal of general comfort in God's promises such as:

Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him,
And He shall direct thy paths.

And I learned that the word *comfort* is derived from two Latin words: cum forte which mean "with strength". God does not make things easy for me, He helps me meet them with strength.

But, as I floundered around in all these factors, worries, words of counsel, hopes, fears, aggravations and frustrations, as I tried to decide which option to choose, as I felt scared of making a fatal error, a wrong choice — one thought from God's Word helps me more than any other.

It's found in Psalm 37:

The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord And He delighteth in his way.

Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: For the Lord upholdeth him with His hand.

The same idea is found in Isaiah:

Even when I screw up and make a dumb choice, even then, the prophet Isaiah said, "Thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, 'This is the way, walk ye in it,' when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left".

My role in all this is to try to be a good man and be open to God's correction.

For me that's trickier than it sounds.

Remember the old proverb: "In his own eyes, no man is an asshole".

Er, in case you're wondering, that's not from the Bible

but I think it true nonetheless.

So...

Can I say dogmatically that I have found the will of God?

Not necessarily.

I'm suspicious of such dogmatic declarations.

Can I say with cautious confidence that God is leading me?

Yes, I can. I am at His disposal whichever way this cancer thing goes. He deserves nothing less.

Instead of going through all these mental gymnastics, would I have made just as good a decision by simply flipping a coin?

I don't doubt it for a moment.

Even a flipped coin lands in the Hand of God:

As the Scripture says: "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord".

Ginny finds decision making much easier than I do. She is much more confident of the Lord's mercy and grace. She's an intensely practical Christian. In such a matter she simply asks, "What's best for us, for now?" and goes with that.

Anyhow, I have chosen to not treat the cancer at all for now, to engage in the watchful waiting technique subject to close observation and periodic tests.

And after having thought all this through for months, I feel relieved to have made a decision, any decision.

I feel joy.

I feel peace.

I feel like a bowl of ice cream.

Now, do I want chocolate or vanilla or strawberry?

What were those decision-making steps again?

Saturday, March 31, 2007 **Guess Who?**

Guess who, only yesterday, boasted that he intended to stop writing blog postings about medical stuff for the next few months? Guess who helped rescue two large dogs back on March 27th?

Guess who — out of the kindness of his heart and the dumbness of his head — volunteered to clean up the dog yard yesterday?

Guess who avoided stepping in dog shit but instead stepped on a board with a long rusty nail which penetrated his shoe and punctured his foot?

Guess who hobbled home to soak his bleeding foot in bleach water?

Guess who had to go to Dr. Woody's office for an unscheduled visit?

Guess who needed a tetanus shot?

Guess who hobbled out of Dr. Woody's office to the parking lot?

Guess who felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to find Dr. Woody himself had chased him down outside to bring him back into the office for an extra precautionary x-ray?

Guess who has to take three different antibiotics, Sulfameth/trimethoprim, Amox-Clav, and Avelox?

Guess who Dr. Woody said may have to go the emergency room this weekend if the foot shows signs of infection?

Guess who is thinking about that Scripture which says, "Boast not thyself of tomorrow, for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth"?

Guess who is grateful for the excellent care he's received from so many medical people recently?

Guess who feels like a bumbling idiot, ridiculous and embarrassed this morning?

Sunday, April 01, 2007 April Fools' Day In Bibleland

Saturday while Ginny washed outside windows, I soaked my wounded foot in Epsom Salts and watched her.

I love watching her.

I was sitting in a rocker in the garden, nodding off now and then, when I got to wondering about April Fool's Day.

I called her away from her task and asked her to bring out a couple of reference books so I could learn some stuff.

While no scholar is positive how All Fools Day got started, some speculate that it began with the Emperor Constantine who lived way back when even if you owned a castle you still couldn't find anything good on tv so you hired a professional comedian, a clown or fool whose sole job was to amuse you.

One day Constantine overheard his fool say, "I could run this empire better that the Emperor does! I could straighten out this mess in one day".

"O yeah," said the Emperor, "You just try it. We'll switch places for a single day and you'll see how hard it is to be Emperor".

That day fell on April First.

The fool, who was no fool, knew he'd have to go back to his old job; he wisely issued silly orders, ridiculous edicts and foolish directives for his day on the throne.

Ever since then April 1st is celebrated as a day when fools rule with all kinds of tricks.

I looked up the word **fool** in my dictionary and I find the word means, "a person lacking in judgment, a harmless deranged person, one without common powers of understanding, a person who is gullible, a chump".

Why, I wondered does the Bible use the word **Fool** so often? Is God saying people are chumps?

This idea merited some reflection (I could see Ginny's reflection in the back porch window as she tried to scurry a lizard out of the house).

Thinking about the Bible's use of the word *fool* and being a dirty-minded old man, I naturally remembered this old joke:

This preacher expounded on the parable about the ten wise and foolish virgins, bridesmaids at the late-night party. Five of the girls brought extra oil for their lamps, five didn't. As the hours passed the foolish ones fell asleep and let their lamps burn out while the wise girls stayed awake till the groom arrived.

As the preacher concluded his sermon, he challenged

the congregation saying, "Do you want to have oil in your lamp? Do you want to stay alert? Do you want to stay awake with the wise virgins? Or do you want to sleep with the foolish virgins"?

Thank you. Thank you. No applause is necessary.(Nor likely).

Off the top of my head I recalled one of my favorite Bible verses: the Prophet Isaiah describes a highway in the desert called the Way of Holiness, and the prophet says, "The wayfaring man, though he be a fool, shall not err therein".

I take that to mean that we can never be too common, too dumb, too gullible, too much of a chump to find our way to God.

Salvation is not just for Mensa.

Jesus said, "Whosoever will may come".

I pondered some other half-remembered Scriptures about fools and I looked a couple of them up in my concordance.

St. Paul said, "We are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men. We *are* fools for Christ's sake".

That has a ring to it.

Chumps For Christ!

Gullible For Jesus!

I've been told that only ignorant, gullible, deluded, deranged, chumps and fools believe in Christ.

If so, we stand in good company.

The guys who crucified Him thought Jesus was a chump.

Paul said, "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish, foolishness; but unto us which are saved, it is the power of God... but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men".

Therefore, whosoever will may come.

Are we fools to believe that evil exists? That in the battle between Good and evil we live pinned down under hostile fire in enemy occupied territory? That God came to the world He created to destroy the works of the devil? That He died on the cross to save us and that, dead as a doornail, the Living God rose to life again? That He's just that powerful? That even now, He helps us struggle across no-man's land towards Home?

I have to admit that believing such stuff looks on the surface like something a gullible fool would be chump enough to fall for; after all living for Jesus costs us ... well, it costs us nothing.

Whosoever will may come.

Surely there must be something more to it that that; it has to be more complicated, more complex. Surely, our life and death struggle can't be compassed in such a simplistic view..

Or can it?

Christians are chump enough, gullible enough, fool enough, not to see a downside to this. That's why Paul said that stuff he did, "We are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men. We *are* fools for Christ's sake".

But not every fool mentioned in the Bible is the Fool For Christ kind that Paul talks about.

There are plenty of the other kind.

For instance:

I remember that when I was about ten years old visiting the farm, my ancient great-grandfather who sat usually on the porch in the sun sleeping with an open Bible on his lap, he drew me aside one day, sat me down in the porch swing and handed me his Bible open to the book of Proverbs. He made me read aloud chapters five through eight — chapters about how STRANGE WOMEN lure young men called fools, "void of understanding" into her house and she drapes her bed with perfumed sheets and her husband is out of town and "with her much fair speech she caused him to yield and he goeth after her straightway as an ox goeth to the slaughter or as a fool to the correction of the stocks; till a dart strike through his liver".

Wow!

That's one mean woman.

The old man asked me if I understood what I'd just read.

Being ten years old and not wanting to appear a fool in the old man's eyes, I said, "Sure, Grandpa" although I had no idea what a strange woman looked like and I wondered how you could tell a strange woman from the other kind.

Are there any other kind?

Every woman I've ever met is strange.

So Grandpa's lesson from Proverbs was a wash for me.

But yesterday I looked up several of King Solomon's Proverbs having to do with fools. There are lots of them but here are a few gems:

- "Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise and he that shutteth his lips is esteemed a man of understanding".
 - "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes."
- "Let a bear robbed of her whelps meet a man, rather than a fool in his folly".
- "As a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly. Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? There is more hope for a fool than for him".
- "A wise man feareth and departeth from evil: but the fool rageth and is confident".

Utt Oh.

Here's a Bible passage that says I've been writing way too long again:

Wise King Solomon also said, "The lips of a fool will swallow up himself. The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness and the end of his talk is mischievous madness. A fool is also full of words".

Ok.

I can take a hint.

I'll quit writing now... but I'm having such fun with

this...

Say, if a Bible verse related to fools or foolishness crosses your mind (there are hundreds of them), or if you remember some joke, or if you know a pithy saying — how about telling about it in the comment section of this post?

I'm interested.

And another thing, I have a question: Why is it that — other than those five foolish virgins in Jesus' parable — every fool mentioned in the Bible is male?

Got any ideas about that?

Happy April Fool's Day!

Wednesday, April 04, 2007 In For A Soaking

All day Saturday, Sunday, Monday, & Tuesday:

I sat.

I read.

I soaked my wounded foot.

Then, yesterday afternoon, ignoring my own painful affliction in order to better serve faithful blog readers, I updated the JOKE SECTION of my main website at www.cowart.info

As a man of discretion and refinement, I only include jokes that will appeal to cultured readers with the most discriminating taste in humor (unlike my wife).

Here's a sample joke that my wounded foot brought to mind:



The head doctor is doing the morning rounds in the teaching hospital with his students in tow. He pauses before a patient and says, "This man limps because his fibula and tibia are badly arched. Bernie, what would you do in a case like this?"

Bernie said, "Yeah, well, um...Yes, I think I'd limp too." Here's another, reputed to be an old Irish prayer:

May God bless those who love us. And for those who don't love us, may God turn their hearts.

And for those whose hearts cannot be turned, May God turn their ankles So that we may know them by their limping.

When Ginny read over my previous post (for April Fool's Day) and a few of my excellent fine updated jokes, she said I ought to go soak my head instead of my foot.

Thursday, April 05, 2007 My Very Own Diplomystus: A Fish Story

I found a bone in our back yard when I was a boy, about six or seven.

I took it to my father who told me that it was a fossil; he said it might be a dinosaur bone.

Actually, it may have been a chicken bone and Daddy was just provoking my imagination by saying I'd found a dinosaur bone. I discovered later that no dinosaurs lived here in Florida. How was I to know what kind of bone it was?

Anyhow the find excited me to no end. I read everything I could find about dinosaurs and fossils and geology.

Later as a Boy Scout, I tramped through phosphate pits looking for Carcharodon Megalodon's giant shark teeth; I explored Florida caves finding stone sand dollars and petrified wood in the limestone walls; I dove in Ichetucknee Spring bringing up pieces of mastodon bones. I chiseled crinoids out of rock on a West Virginia mountain top, and I touched fern imprints on chunks of Pennsylvania coal.

One odd place I visited fossil hunting — at low tide I waded along the Calvert Cliffs on Chesapeake Bay where erosion exposes a massive fossil bed. You can find the bones of prehistoric camels and dolphins, cattle and seals, all buried together in one place. What in the world do you suppose could sweep such a diverse collection of mammals into the same giant grave?

At one time, my boyhood pipe dream (literally, I began smoking my pipe when I was 12) was to become a paleontologist. And, in one of my geology books I saw a photo that intrigued me — a fossil fish embedded in stone.

Wow!

What a find!

Isn't that neat?

But I never found a fossil fish in rocks accessible here in Florida.

I have coveted a fossil fish of my own for the past 50+ years...

Jack, my father-in-law who died last month, was an avid amateur geologist and co-founder of a geological society in Maryland. He owned an extensive collection of fossils including some cool coprolites which he loved to show off.

Yesterday afternoon my daughter Jennifer came over bringing me a gift from Jack's rock society meeting:



I'm thrilled!

It's a Diplomystus, an Eocene Era fish from the Green River Formation in Wyoming. According a fact sheet, "Diplomystus was a midsized predator preying on smaller fish and insects. Its upturned mouth indicates it was primarily a surface feeder".

According to the fact sheet, some scientists believe my fossil fish is 40 million years old while others think it is 60 million years old. Quite a difference.

Not being a paleontologist, I can't settle the dispute about the age of my Diplomystus; however, Mama said that the only way to tell if fish is old is to smell it.

So I sniffed my fossil.

Smells fine to me.

So I doubt if this fish is all that old.

Anyhow, my daughter thought I was crazy when I stripped off my red tee shirt, draped it over the rock laying on my scanner's glass table. I wanted a red background to showcase my first ever fish fossil!

Yes, I scanned the actual rock fossil into my computer.

I'm using it as a desktop background right now.

(Right click on any photo, click "Save As" and put the file in "My Pictures" then when you click on desktop properties, chose the photo you want as a wallpaper).

After all these years I finally own a fossil fish!

I'm tickled pink!

I understand that some people believe that frozen water once covered the land creating an Ice Age rather than believe that liquid water covered the same land as in the biblical Flood of Noah. Either way, ice or liquid, the phenomena did not do the creatures living at the time much good.

I wouldn't bother arguing with anybody about it but, for what its worth, I'm a Flood man myself.

But I'm a Flood man with a fish.

A fossil fish.

And I'm tickled pink.

Yesterday, I also returned to work on those 16th century Puritan diaries (between bouts of soaking my foot) but more about those in some later blog posting.

For right now I'm going to rock in my rocker, smoke my pipe, and admire my wonderful, beautiful, new old fish.

Thanks be to God!

Friday, April 06, 2007

Wisdom & God's Will In Business Decisions, A Bittersweet Memory, & A Happy Easter Picture

Back on Friday, March 30th, I wrote a long post about seeking God's will concerning some medical stuff; this past week, I've used the same principles mentioned in that post to make two business decisions.

Recently two different companies approached me about publishing two of my local history books; *Letters From Stacy* and *Crackers & Carpetbaggers* (both available through my on-line catalog at www.bluefishbooks.info).

I prayed for wisdom asking: "Lord, what would You have me to do"?

I looked at Scripture: "Of the making of many books, there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh".

I consulted wise people: Ginny, Donald, Helen, and especially Eve.

I gathered information: Checked both companies with Better Business Bureau, Looked at their products, Checked on both in Library of Congress listings, Looked both up in *Publishers Weekly* and *Books In Print*, Talked with an author published by one of the companies, Read a sample contract, etc.

I listened to my own heart (deceitful above all things).

I reasoned about "What's best for us for now"?

And I decided to continue following my own business plan and not go with either company.

This process is mind-numbing.

As Ginny and I talked about these specific business decisions and about wisdom in general, she told me:

Knowledge is knowing that this is a one-way street: Wisdom is looking both ways before you cross it!

Yesterday was Maundy Thursday, a church holiday which commemorates the traditional day of Jesus' arrest.

Our family did not observe the day this year as we have in the past.

Our granddaughter had this school event so some of the gang went to that. Patricia and Eve had to work. Jennifer was busy too. And Ginny and I felt too exhausted to attend either school event, church services, or to observe our own long-standing family custom.

Somehow or another God will manage to get along without us this year.

But I missed doing our little ceremonial thing.

It's a bittersweet feeling.

Even now, Ginny and I almost always have family devotions, a Bible reading and prayer time after supper. But on Maundy Thursday when the kids were living at home, we'd focused on the events associated with the Last Supper. I'd would re-tell the Passion story with various visual aids. We'd celebrate a family communion.

And I'd wash the feet of my wife and my children.

Then they'd wash my feet and eachother's.

Inevitably this solemn ceremony would turn into a sort of religious family water park with lots of foot-tickling, banter, splashing, and joke telling (Which disciple wore pantyhose?).

As Jesus said at the Last Supper, "If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet... If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them".

But, we did none of those things this year.

Maybe I'm turning into a religious formalist...

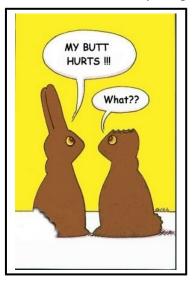
But I miss doing them.

I intend to take a break from this blog over the weekend so I thought it my duty to end today's post with some profound observation about Easter.

I come up with nothing.

Not a thought I haven't already said in previous posts.

Therefore instead, although I can't remember where I found it on the net, I'll share this inspiring picture:



Saturday, April 07, 2007 500 Naked Women & Me

Yes, I know I said I would not post today. But...

Friday morning I had just begun work when an error message flashed on my computer screen informing me that I was out of virtual memory.

That message defined the rest of my day.

OK. I scanned my computer for viruses. I ran Spybot and Ad-Aware. I rebooted the system. I cut off the power, let it sit for half an hour, then plugged the cord back in.

Still out of virtue memory... (No, that's not a typo).

You see, never once have I turned on my computer without being tempted to visit some porno site to see what the naked ladies are up to today. Sometimes I resist that temptation; sometimes I don't.

So when the usual computer re-start things failed to work, I decided to clear my picture files.

I deleted over 500 naked women.

Looks to me as though if you erase a file, then that would free up the space that file had been taking up — Right?

Apparently not.

The error message remained.

I called my son Donald, a computer network administrator. He and Helen and Ginny all got together after they got off work to doctor my computer.

Ginny said that pubic hair from all those women must be tangled in my operating system.

Everybody laughed at me.

Donald increased my virtual page files and defragmented my hard drive.

That helped.

Helen says we need to install an external hard drive (As I understand it, that's sort of like an electronic colostomy bag that hangs on the side of my central processing unit to hold all the crap I write).

Now, I have an observation about all this:

First is sin.

Yes, I am a Christian; and yes, I am a sinner.

The two fit hand-in-glove.

And, yes I do struggle against my temptations; and yes, I have virtually no power over them because of the water balloon principle.

My heart resembles a balloon filled with squishy sins; when I push it in one place, it bulges out another.

When I resist viewing naked internet women, then sure as anything, I'll begin to resent somebody's actions. When I push in resentment, greed bulges out on the other side. When I beat my greed back down, then envy emerges. Fight envy, and there I am back to lust again.

And, here's the kicker:

When I exercise my great strength of will and don't look at the naked internet women, when I conquer resentment, when I stifle greed, when I defeat envy —— Then the worse sin in the bag swells up like a giant yellow pustule.

I feel self-righteous.

While keeping all this corruption inside me, I still want to appear to be a good guy. I want other people to think well of me. So in pride I strap on my good-guy mask and fake it.

Such hypocrisy is the sin Jesus condemned most.

The last state of the man is worse than the first.

See why a Savior is needed?

Once, long years ago, a college professor told me that I have a weak Armenian, Amillennial, Antinomian view of sin and salvation. I think he was saying that I'd never make it as a theologian because I'm wrong.

There.

I've warned you

As I see it, Saint Paul struggled with sin in a similar battle. He said, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would, I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.... I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me".

He went on to say, "I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death"?

See why a Savior is needed?

The Christmas angel proclaimed, "And thou shalt call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins".

Paul said, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners".

Thus, Christ suffered on the cross for us, the Just for the unjust that He might bring us to God. Because the love of God is shown toward us in that while we were yet sinners. Christ died for us.

So, here's John Cowart living day after day like a bug stuck on flypaper, nailed down hand and foot by sin as surely as one of those sinners crucified on each side of Jesus. No amount of wiggle or twist or maneuver or scam will get me free. Death is certain and gruesome. All I can do is call out, "Lord Jesus, remember me when Thou cometh into thy kingdom".

And like that one guy on a cross beside Jesus, I can thank God for His mercy.

Or not.

On a different note:

Remember yesterday how I wrote about seeking God's will in making a business decision?

One of the Scriptures I kept in mind was the Proverb, "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not to thy own understanding..."

Last night Donald and Helen announced they are considering a new business venture that would change the whole direction of my writing career.

They have never even given a hint, not an inkling, that this idea was in the works till last night.

I didn't have a clue.

If, I had gone with either one of the companies I was thinking about, I would have torpedoed my own part in their exciting plans.

So, while on the surface it looks as though I made an irrational decision, maybe, just maybe, much good will come of that decision.

Christian life is not just for then and there, way back when; but it's here and now, today.

I'm impressed with what may possibly be God's guidance.

We're all excited at the prospects.

We'll see what happens.

Thanks be to God.

Tuesday, April 10, 2007

A Bad Weekend For Pussycats

No humor in my post today.

Nothing uplifting.

Only tragedy — Tragedy for cats.

Mrs. Morris died suddenly on Saturday.

My son Donald and his wife wrote poignant tributes to this cat in their blogs. Donald's blog is at http://www.rdex.net/blog/ Helen's blog, along with photos of Mrs. Morris, is at http://www.elemental.name/pai/. Their blog entries show that Mrs. Morris was a well-loved cat (and the photos prove that she was in no danger of starving).



The tragedy really upset Donald and Helen.

Mrs. Morris was not the only cat to die over Easter weekend.



Early Saturday morning fire broke out at the Jacksonville Humane Society. The facility sheltered over 200 cats and dogs at the time — plus a few exotic animals, rabbits, parrots .ferrets, etc.

Over 70 Jacksonville firefighters responded to the alarm.

When the roof of the building collapsed, four firemen were injured; one remains hospitalized with serious burns.

The firefighters risked their lives to save as many animals as possible; yet more than 70 cats and many dogs burned to death still locked in their cages.

Adding to the tragedy was the fact that some animals, once rescued, became so frightened by the smoke, flames, noise, and confusion, they sought safest in the most familiar place of safety they knew — they ran back to their cages inside the burning buildings.

Because the fire destroyed Humane Society offices and records, no one is sure how many animals died in the blaze. And because of the location of the flames, practically all the cats housed by the society died. More dogs were saved than cats because the dog kennels were located toward the back of the building.

Since the fire, many citizens of Jacksonville have put in to adopt animals from temporary shelters and have contributed large amounts of cash for the care of the animals and for the rebuilding of the Humane Society.

But sometimes cash and caring is not enough:

Last night our daughter came home from Gainesville upset about one of her kittens, a stray that's taken up around her apartment building.

As Patricia was leaving for work at her new job, as she walked to her car, she noticed the kitten had passed out on her balcony. The cat lay in such a way that rain poured from the roof overhand onto its head but it was in such sad shape that it could not move out of the rain.

Patricia gathered the cat up and wrapped it in a blanket.

The cat showed its gratitude by pissing on her new work outfit.

Patricia asked her neighbor, Greg, to watch over the cat as she drove away trying to avoid being late on this, her 6^{th} day on her new job.

She and Greg, who both have a lot of experience with cats, think that this kitten is showing symptoms of feline leukemia.

The prognosis is not good.

I am not exactly a cat person, but my heart aches for people whose pets enliven their lives so much. And I'm at a loss as to how to comfort them.

The only thought that occurs to me is that in the Kingdom of God, where the lion will lay down with the lamb, perhaps the lion is not the only cat on the scene, I could not prove it by Scripture, but I imagine the Lord has room for other, smaller, cats too.

Nevertheless, it's been a bad weekend for cats.

Thursday, April 12, 2007
Wednesday I Twitted Myself Thus:

No visitors.

No phone calls.

I spent Wednesday in uninterrupted work!

Got 67 pages edited.

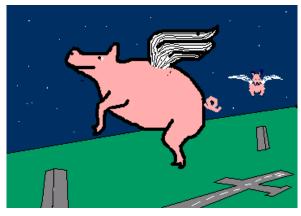
And I feel wonderful about that. With God's help, I hope to have this manuscript ready to go to the printer for a proof copy by Friday.

Of, course, I'd hoped to have reached this step two months ago. But as they say, "Life is what happens while you're making other plans".

I'm preparing an updated edition of the diary of Richard Rogers, a 16th Century English Puritan, because I find his diary so inspiring and helpful in my own daily life.

Back on January 3rd and 4th my posts tell about how this work got started and why I'm so excited about it. (There's a picture of Rogers there too).

If, God willing, I can get in another two days uninterrupted work this week, I'll feel like I'm in Hog Heaven!



Rogers felt the same way about his work.

On August 4, 1587. Rogers wrote, "I cannot yet settle my self to my study, but through unfitness of mind, weakness of body, and partly discontinuing of diligence thereat, I am held back. And I am in every kind of study so behind hand, more than I was some years agone, that I am much discouraged".

A month later he said, "Sometime by unfitness and journeying my study is intermitted, and, except in place thereof my mind be well taken up some other way, even that is cause sufficient for hindering my purpose in proceeding. For I am exceedingly cast down when my study is hindered".

And on October 30, 1587, he wrote, "My study, as time hath suffered, hath not been unpleasant to me nor much neglected, save that I have been much abroad in good company and visiting the sick. Once in this while, I see mine untoward heart to my study; it appeared so gross to me that I twitted myself thus..."

I know what he means.



I feel a sense of loss.

Humanist author Kurt Vonnegut died yesterday at the age of 84.

He wrote 19 novels, many of them best-sellers, as well as dozens of short stories, essays and plays.

Among his works were

Slaughterhouse Five, Cat's Cradle, Galapagos, Breakfast of Champions, and Deadeye Dick.

My favorite among his many quips is: "The only reason God put us on this earth — and don't let anybody ever tell you different — is to fart around".

Another is: "A purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved".

Mr. Vonnegut and I viewed Jesus in quite different lights. While I'm convinced that Jesus Christ is Lord, God come in the flesh, Mr. Vonnegut was a humanist who did not believe in God.

He once said, "What does "A.D." signify? That commemorates an inmate of this lunatic asylum we call Earth who was nailed to a wooden cross by a bunch of other inmates. With him still conscious, they hammered spikes through his wrists and insteps, and into the wood. Then they set the cross upright, so he dangled up there where even the shortest person in the crowd could see him writhing this way and that. Can you imagine people doing such a thing to a person"?

On another occasion Vonnegut said, "We had a memorial service for Isaac Asimov a few years back, and I spoke and said at one point, "Isaac is up in heaven now." It was the funniest thing I could have said to an audience of humanists. I rolled them in the aisles. It was several minutes before order could be restored. And if I should ever die, God forbid, I hope you will say, "Kurt is up in heaven now." That's my favorite joke".

I feel a sense of loss.

He made me laugh.

He made me think.

Friday, April 13, 2007 Titanic Anniversary



Tomorrow marks the 95th anniversary of the sinking of the *Titanic*.

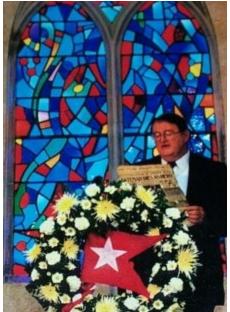
On April 14, 1912 at 11:45 p.m., an iceberg grazed the side of the *Titanic*; soon afterward the ship sank.

At least 1,502 people died in the shipwreck.

Among the dead was Dr. Robert J. Bateman of Jacksonville, founder of a local rescue mission. He was the only Floridian on board the ship.

A letter from a prostitute had led the minister to be aboard the Titanic.

Years ago I became interested in Dr. Bateman's rescue mission work because I dabbled around the edges of such work serving in soup kitchens and such. I began researching Bateman's Central City Mission as one of the earliest of such charities in my home town. This began even before I learned about his dying aboard the *Titanic*.



For several years I was asked to be a speaker at local memorial services for *Titanic* victims

Here's a photo of me speaking at such a service with the flag of the White Star Line displayed in the floral wreath:

Here's one from another year's service held at Dr. Bateman's grave (Yes, his body is buried here in Jacksonville):



Something really odd happened during the speech in that second photo:

All four local tv network news programs and the local newspaper covered the event. At one point I looked up and realized that one of the tv reporters was crying.

I can't be sure why.

Perhaps it was sympathy for the shipwreck victims. Perhaps, dust got in his eye. Or perhaps God's spirit touched the man's heart in some way during the service

The thrust of my speech about Dr. Bateman emphasized how the love of Christ motivated this physician to give up his medical practice and give his life trying to establish a home for "wayward women" enslaved in whorehouses in the notorious Jacksonville Tenderloin where customers could rent girls as young as 8 years old..

I wrote a couple of magazine articles about Dr. Bateman's ministry and heroic death (Yes, newspapers of the day hailed him as a hero and credited him with several rescues of fellow passengers on the Titanic).

If you would like to read what I wrote, click on http://www.cowart.info/Monthly%20Features/Titanic %204%20web/Bateman%204%20web.htm

The tale of Jacksonville's Titanic Hero is one chapter from my book *Strangers On The Earth: A Collective Biography of People Whose Faith Got Them Into Trouble*. (www.bluefishbooks.info).

To conclude my talk at Dr. Bateman's graveside, even though the crowd and I were miles from the ocean, I thought it appropriate to read a section of the service, For A Burial At Sea.

Seldom have I done anything to warrant tv news coverage, so I relished my brief brush with fame. But that same night, I spend cleaning toilets because back then I worked as a night janitor to support my family and my writing habit.

Nevertheless, tv and newspaper fame did not elude me altogether.

The next morning in the Winn Dixie grocery store, as I stood in the checkout line, the tinny-bopper cashier recognized me.

Excited, she called over another young woman and introduced me saying, "This here's that old guy from the tv. He was on the *Titanic* and sank it".

I saw no reason to correct her.

Tuesday, April 17, 2007 Organizing My Life & Time:

Over the weekend Ginny voiced a serious accusation against me.

No, not that one.

Something else entirely.

On Friday, our daughter, who had been sleeping on our sofa for the week while apartment hunting, moved in with her sister for a while. So, on Sunday afternoon, Ginny and I held an intense and uninterrupted conversation for close to six hours.

Mostly we talked about the direction our life has moved in recently and where, God willing, we'd like it to go in the next five years — assuming God gives us life and strength that long.

Or, our winning Lotto, whichever comes first.

After talking long and hard about these things, we decided to organize and write down a specific but tentative plan to reach various specific goals.

We believe Christians should plan, but hold those

plans loosely.

Future plans are always written on air.

Funny how two different people approach reaching the same goal.

Women are strange.

I organized my list according to the tools needed to get the job done. Thus, since we want to paint the house, I wrote that project up in terms of replacing some boards on the deck, pressure washing, etc. My first step would be to buy a Skill Saw.

My list did not satisfy Ginny.

She conjured up a computer thing called an Excel Spread Sheet and entered the same goals I had, but organized according to each room in the house. In her system, we'd begin by replacing the squeaky ceiling fan in our bedroom, work down to buying a blue bedspread, then removing the boxes of books under the bed, and finally replacing the carpet. —— Then she repeated such a process with each room in the house.

For each area she set up spreadsheet columns for estimated costs, needed materials, and timetable.

Amazing, how her mind works.

I plan from the outside in; she plans from the inside out.

But so much of accomplishing a goal from either prospect hinges on two things, time and attention.

That's where her damning accusation came in.

"Love," she said, "You let other people dictate the course of our life".

She said I react to the needs and problems of other



people as soon as I see them. It's a knee jerk thing with me.

For instance, when Felony, the bull dog belonging to a neighbor, faced being delivered up to the dog catcher. I devoted enormous time and energy, worry and aggravation, to save a dog that does not belong to me. For a week, caring for that dog controlled my life. (Incidentally, Felony died this weekend in spite of all our efforts to save her).

Now, Ginny is the most charitable woman I've ever known. She's accomplished amazing feats of giving and caring for others.

Both Ginny and I take seriously that Bible verse that says, "Whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth".

But entirely aside from that, I like to feel useful. When I see someone dealing with a problem, my Boy Scout training kicks in, I want to jump in and help. To do the job right. To take charge. Be the rescuer, the super hero.



All well and good... but I do this to the neglect of my own soul, my own wife, my own family, my own house. My own business.

"Love," Ginny said, "You let other people dictate the course of our life. You need to learn to mind your own business".

She wants me to concentrate more on my personal duties rather than be distracted by other people's problems.

Following her advice is so hard for me.

Why is it that I can see how to solve other people's problems so much easier than my own?

Your life is so much easier for me to run than my own.

The Scripture says that we are to help others, even our enemy, get his ox out of a ditch; at the same time God warns us about being a busybody in other men's affairs.

I err on the busybody side of that spreadsheet.

And, as the Scripture says — Even the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.

Yesterday, Bubba, an elderly neighbor, came by my house to talk. Some drunk relative of his had thrown a brick through his window and he needed some glass replaced.

I can do that!

Nο

No, I can't.

I have specific duties of my own that demand to be priorities for my day; I would have to neglect these in order to go down and fix Bubba's window.

Instead of doing the job myself, I helped him call a glazier (he can't see well enough to read a phone book or dial). It will cost him money he can ill afford...

I try to tell myself that his window is not my problem.

But, today, I feel guilty as hell.

Wednesday, April 18, 2007

I Think I Don't Know The People I Think I Know

Years ago I became friends with Betty, a tiny, bent, white-haired old woman who had served as a WAC (Women's Auxiliary Corps) during World War II.

She and I each owned off-brand, long out of date computers which used ink ribbons in the printers. Apparently we were the only two people in Jacksonville to

still own these computers.

A salesman in a computer supply store realized that we were both seeking new ribbons (which were no longer being manufactured) and he put us two strangers in touch with each other. She visited my home to discuss our cussed computers and we became friends.

We'd call each other on the phone and meet every few weeks to exchange garden tips and plants. And every once in a while we'd go out for lunch.

This went on for several years.

One day as we worked to replace the rubber band in her computer that spun some kind of drive wheel (yes, these computers ran on a real rubber band between gears), lunch time came, I asked her if she liked Chinese food, and we drove to one of my favorite Chinese restaurants.

We walked in.

The manager greeted me.

Betty said something to him.

He said something to her in return.

They began an intense prolonged conversation in Mandarin Chinese.

Even though I'd know Betty for years, I had no idea that she spoke fluent Chinese. Later she explained that as a WAC during the war, she'd been an interrupter. She spoke a number of Chinese dialects as well as many European languages.

I thought I knew Betty.

But I didn't.

She had depths I never imagined.

Then there was my friend Randy. I've known him for over 30 years. One day as we sat talking, he began fiddling with a sheet of notebook paper. He folded it this way and that way until a dragon with flapping wings took shape in his hands.

Turns out that Randy is a master of origami, the oriental art of paper folding, but it had never come up in our conversations.

I thought I knew him, I knew his wife, I knew his daughter, but I did not know this important element of his make-up. His skill at origami was a revelation to me.

Another such revelation awaited me two days ago.

This time it concerned my youngest daughter, Patricia.

Monday I'd talked with my neighbor, Bubba, the old man whose window was smashed by the brick-throwing drunk. I'd listened to his troubles for about half an hour when Patricia drove up, coming to raid our refrigerator.

As soon as she walked in the room, she began counseling Bubba. She drew him out mirroring the things he said. She pointed out his projections. She reinforced positive statements — she employed advanced counseling techniques as though she were a trained counselor.

I sat back silent and amazed watching the dynamics as this amazing young woman, whom I thought I knew, comforted and counseled the old man.

He'd come to my door down hearted and discouraged, distraught over the recent death of his wife. He left appearing to be uplifted and feeling better, with hope in his heart.

I had no idea Patricia had such skills.

I thought she was a flake.

She said she's never taken a course in counseling, yet she exhibited a natural compassion and ability that astounded me.

I discovered that I did not know my own daughter.

I've seen this sort of phenomena with others of my own children also. For instance, I knew that Fred, my oldest son, was an experienced traffic surveyor having worked for the same company for over 30 years. But when we visited his home a few years ago, I discovered that he is a master gourmet chef and has outfitted his kitchen like something out of the Starship *Enterprise*.

I found I did not know the man, my own son.

And I knew that Johnny, my second son, is a skilled computer consultant, but on his last visit here, he

revealed that he had to get back to Maryland on a certain date because he was a finalist in a ballroom dancing competition.

I never knew that he could dance at all.

I do not know the people I think I know,

Then, of course, there's Jesus.

Were someone to ask me, "Do you know the Lord"? I'd probably say, yes.

But my knowledge of Christ is so superficial that He constantly surprises me with new revelations about facets of His character and person that I'd never guessed at before.

I know a few hazy facts picked up here and there: Born in a manger with a drummer boy and a red-nosed reindeer standing by with some kings and shepherds; said not to hit back when you get hit; walked on water; brewed wine from water; got killed on Easter; great teacher; dressed in either white robes or a camel-skin coat and ate locus bugs, wild honey and chocolate-covered eggs, — the sort of hodgepodge information and misinformation that everybody knows.

In one sense we all think we know all about Jesus.

Really?

We have five sources of information to base our knowledge on: the four, independently written historical accounts called Gospels, and our personal experience.

The Gospels are not biographies of Jesus. All four devote a third or more of their length into portraying a single week in His life.

Instead of biographies, I suspect it's more accurate to think of them as verbal photo albums. They resemble a collection of snapshots taken by four different guys at the same event with four different cameras snapping pictures from different angles.

Thus Luke and Matthew start their albums with baby pictures which the other two guys didn't get. I can imagine the four Gospel writers sitting around comparing their photos saying, "Here's the one I got of Jesus walking on water"... "Say, I got one of Him raising Lazarus from the grave, you three missed that one"... "Yeah, but I got

one of the Transfiguration on the mountain, and you didn't"... "Say, there are two angels in your snapshot, one was out of the picture when I took my picture."

The Gospels are not comprehensive but they tell us what we need to know; The Apostle John said, "There are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written".

Why did these men go around recording the doings of Jesus?

John explained, "Many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name".

In the area of personal experience, the Scripture says there is a light that lightens every person coming into this world. We catch distant flashes of that light and move toward it — or away from it. "Men loved darkness because their deeds were evil".

Seem to me that we react to the revelations God gives us in one of three ways:

We may be indifferent, going about our business ignoring the mighty God as unimportant, trivial. We stick Him on a back shelf and chose not to think much about Him one way or the other.

We may be repulsed. When St. Peter caught a glimpse of the glory of Christ, he fell down saying, "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man". Of course Peter came around later. Paul felt revulsion to Jesus at first also; then he met Jesus on the Damascus Road. I think revulsion is a more hopeful response to God than indifference.

Or, we may join with angels and archangels and all the company of Heaven worshiping Jesus and coming to appreciate His beauty and counting Him worthy.

When it comes to personal experience, we each chose our own way.

Yesterday I got to thinking along these lines as I sat in the garden taking a smoke break from my editing work. I began to reflect that I hardly know Jesus at all because He is so much greater than I can comprehend.

Once, when Fred was a tiny boy he memorized a Bible verse for his Sunday School class. It was the Psalm which says, "Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised and his understanding is infinite".

I asked Freddy if he knew the meaning of the word infinite?

"Sure," he said with a five-year-old's confidence, "It means that God has got all the jelly that you've got bread for".

I remembered that incident as I sat in the garden contemplating the Virginia Tech shootings, the bomb-killed and mangled young people in the Iraq war, traffic accident victims, disease, the drudgery and office frustrations many workers endure day in day out, the general everyday horrors and despair of unhappy marriages...and such evils go on and on and on.

Let's face it, if the universe ever needs an enema, this world where we live is where they'll plug it in.

Yet God left the purity of His holy dwelling place to come down among us, right here where we live. He was not afraid to get dirty in rescuing us.

Yes, I marveled that in the midst of all the debris of this falling world, the love of God still shows through. That we catch vague glimpses of His beauty and majesty in the turmoil around us. That He comes to us as the still small voice amid the clamor.

I marvel that even with the falling world as bad as it can be and getting worse, we still see sights of love around us. Everyday people who do acts of kindness. Some husbands and wives who truly love each other. Children and parents who love. Bad guys who take in stray kittens. People who donate hard-earned cash to charities. Acts of unselfish love abound.

All this love has some Source.

Where there is love, there is a Lover.

I marvel that even as evil men nailed His hands to the cross, at the same time He was upholding the entire universe by the word of His power in those same hands, for in Him dwells the fullness of the godhead bodily.

Such love for us.

Such incredible love.

Do we know Him?

No.

But we're beginning to.

We all have that chance.

Isn't that wonderful? Utterly wonderful!

Two historical notes:

A pall of thick smoke hangs over Jacksonville as four massive wildfires burn just north of us across the Georgia border. Sixteen months of drought conditions, no sign of rain in the forecast, and high winds spread the flames over thousands of acres. Updrafts of intense heat create tornados of fire in the forests and dry swamps. Whole towns have been evacuated because firefighters have not been able to curtail the spreading flames.

Of course, a guy down the street picked Tuesday to build bonfires in his yard to burn leaves so that smoke, sparks and burning particles from his fire float in the air and blow across our yard.

I spoke to him about the burn ban which is in effect but he thought that smoke from the Georgia forest fires made a perfect mask for his own illegal burning.

He continued to pile dry leaves on his two fires.

I felt reluctant to hassle the guy because life is hard enough for him, but his actions threatened our home as burning particles landed in the wooded area behind my house. So I prayed about it then called the fire marshal's office to report and let them put out his fires, speak to the guy, and possibly issue him a citation.

The other things in today's news is that Monday Cho Seung-Hui, a student at Virginia Tech college in Blacksburg, Virginia, went on a shooting rampage killing 32 fellow students and wounding more than 20 others before turning the gun on himself.

I culled these comments from news articles of interviews with student survivors:

"He was always really, really quiet and kind of weird, keeping to himself all the time. Just anti-social, didn't talk to anybody. I tried to make conversation with him in August or so and he would just give one word answers and not try and carry on the conversation."

"I didn't know what (Cho's father) did for a living. But they lived a poor life."

"Cho ate his meals alone in the dining hall and shunned attempts at friendship".

"Never saw him with any friends".

"Everybody thought he was just strange. Never in a million years could they imagine him to be the kind of person who would kill 32 other people and himself in a three-hour spasm of violence on campus".

"He was my roommate,, but I didn't know him that well, though."

Friday, April 20, 2007 That Puritan Is Off My Chest

Thursday I dressed in chic black swim trunks with a red racing stripe and my special writing tee shirt. Because I am a grossly fat robust gentleman, my shirt is so large that it takes two passes of the computer scanner to capture the whole picture on my chest:





No. I'm not superstitious and this is not a lucky shirt.

It's just that the mystic charm of the picture on my chest strikes my fancy.

Nothing magic about it.

I just like it.

It's my custom to wear this particular shirt on the day I finally send a manuscript off to the printer for my proof copy. That's what I did at 3:30 Thursday afternoon with the 16th Century Richard Rogers Diary ms that I've been editing for all these months.

It's done.

Thanks be to God!

I'm glad to get this writing project off my chest so I can move on to my next one. Yes, another two editing projects await in my Work Pending file.

Shouldn't say this about a book I hope to sell, but I'm sick of Richard Rogers!

Too spiritually helpful and up-beat for me to get my heart into.

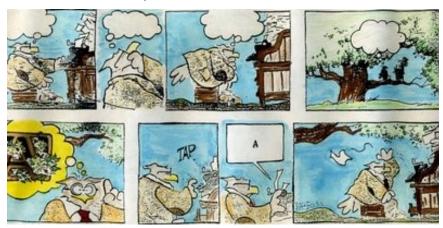
The title of the 140 page book is Seeking A Settled Heart: The 16th Century Diary Of Puritan Richard Rogers. In a week or ten days my proof copy will come back all bound and shiny from the printer. I expect it to look like this:



I always expect my work to come back looking something like that.

But I'm a realist.

I know all too well the truth illustrated in the old cartoon that hangs framed on my office wall, it features that famous writer, the owl Shoe:



I know exactly how Mr. Shoe feels.

Vision meeting reality disappoints.

However, another writer, Ms J.K. Rowling, had better watch out; my Puritan Richard Rogers book will become

available before her next wimpy Harry Potter book hits the stores.

Do you think my book will sell as well as Ms Rowling's books do?

No?

Well, neither do I.

But I'm pleased with it anyhow.

Glad to get it off my chest!

Saturday, April 21, 2007

Wheels: Does God Like Me Better Than He Likes You?

I hesitate to write about this.

It's not my intention to upset, belittle, or aggravate anyone as one of my recent diary entries did.

I do not want to cause anyone else to sin, to be filled with lust, coveting and envy, or to harbor resentment in their hearts.

I do not want to trouble the mind of anyone reading my blog, but the fact of the matter is that God likes me better than He likes you.

I can prove it.

Today Ginny and I plan to shop for a new car.

We think God has enabled us to do this.

Back when we were poor, we lived in actual, physical want, lacking many basic necessities of life. We lived with hunger. Back then when I'd go to church and hear some brother testify about how God was prospering him and providing means for him to do this or that, I'd hate the bastard.

And I'd worry that if owning physical goodies were a sign of God's favor and blessing, and there I stood without bus fare to make it home, then that meant God liked that guy — but did not like me.

I hear tv preachers say that sort of thing all the time, "The King's Children Always Travel First Class," they say. "Give and it SHALL be given unto you", they say. "Send me a donation of cash as seed money and god will prosper you with wealth," they say, as they flash diamond

rings and Rolex watches (which they did not purchase via a special on-line e-mail offer).

God gives goodies, is the insidious message of heresy and liars.

God does not give goodies — He gives crosses.

Jesus, the Son of God, did not own the boat He preached from. He walked everywhere or borrowed a donkey. He ate meals cooked in someone else's kitchen. He slept as a guest in someone else's home. The cross He died on was not his own, it was the property of the Roman government. And He was buried in a borrowed tomb — which He returned to the owner in good condition, hardly used, after three days.

Yet the Scripture teaches that He was owner of all creation, King of kings, Lord of lords, the bright and morning star, all the cattle on a thousand hills.

Christ is no pauper.

He set aside His wealth for a reason.

So, what of His followers?

Is it true that the godly get more goodies?

BULL!

The night Ginny and I had to walk miles and miles after midnight to get home with her as swoll-up pregnant as Mary on a Christmas card, God loved us just as much then as He does today when we are going car shopping.

When we had to gather up beer cans under the stadium in the pre-dawn hours so we could cash them in to buy milk and cereal for the kid's breakfast that same morning...

When I dropped my last quarter in the world into the payphone to call about that job only to get an answering machine...

When I used a pair of pliers to pull my own tooth because I could not afford a dentist...

When I gave my son the guitar he longed for but did not have money to buy the strings for it and saw the disappointment cloud his face...

When all the kids dashed home excited and waving packets of their school photos, but I could not afford to

buy any of them...

Although I could hardly realize it at the time, but the Lord Christ was with me in those days as much as He is today as I shop for a new car.

I hope, I really hope that Ginny and I never face such hard times again, but if we do, I look for Christ to stay just as present with us as He is today. As He was back in our former days of HUD housing and food stamps.

Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever.

Anyone who thinks good stuff equals the presence of God has not understood the Book of Job. Things are peripheral. God gives us what we need — or withholds the things we think we need — for one reason only: to draw us into fellowship with Himself.

If the godly get more goodies, then by that reasoning, Bill Gates must be the most godly man on earth! Whether he is or not, I have no idea; maybe he is; but, if so, it is not because of his wealth. He is wealthy and prospers because those factors give his particular soul the best chance to know Christ better.

The poor, barefoot tribesman who owns nothing more than a loincloth and a sharp stick to grub roots with, lives in his state of poverty for that same reason: because those factors give his particular soul the best chance to know Christ better.

I am where I am, here between Bill and the tribesman, so that I can come to know Christ better. Although I must confess that I like being able to car shop better than I did walking without bus fare.

Fear not! God does not like me better than you because He's letting me shop for a new car today.

Maybe He's just sick of hearing me complain about our old car.

Sunday, April 22, 2007

Wheels II: Yesterday's Post Reconsidered

After sweltering for seven hours Saturday under the blazing Florida sun as we roamed aimlessly among hundreds and hundreds of glaringly shiny new cars with no shade in sight; after car shopping all day with this lady who comparison shops in the grocery store and takes 20

minutes to decide on which can of beans to buy — and after NOT having actually bought a car yet — I wish to retract yesterday's post.

Maybe God is not the one who likes me and wants to see me buy a new car!

Monday, April 23, 2007 My Coming Week In The Garden:

Sunday Ginny and I recuperated from car shopping. That project will continue this week.

More importantly we discussed my next career move.

This involved a slight disagreement:

She thinks I should move on to the top A-1 priority on my list of writing projects; I feel I want to clear my desktop of two B-list projects so I can devote full, uninterrupted time to that A-1 project afterwards.

We agreed that since I've been working so intensely on the Richard Rogers diary that, God willing, for most of the coming week I should spend working on outside Spring cleaning and heavy-duty gardening — uprooting and transplanting some large azaleas and shrubs, cleaning rain gutters, either tearing down or repairing the bridge on the jungle path, planting more cedar trees along the back fence line — chores designed to get myself away from writing for a week between one book and the next.

I'd forgotten, as I always do, the rubber band effect of completing a manuscript; once the tension of that final push to finish is gone, I pretty much collapse... You know, like when you take the last final exam in a college course how the surge of exhaustion hits. After all these years, I should remember that that happens at the conclusion of every book, but I always forget and think I'm stronger than I really am.

Some lessons God has to teach me again and again.

Tuesday, April 24, 2007 I Pulled More Than Roots

Yesterday I said I planed to garden all this week.

HA!

What I spent Monday doing could better be described as lumberjacking than gardening.

When we moved to this home a dozen years ago, two shrubs thrived in the front yard. Mature, well-established, big, tall, deep, deep-rooted shrubs.

For God only knows what reason (I can't remember why we did such a foolish thing myself) Sunday Ginny and I decided to uproot these shrubs, remove them, and reconfigure our front flower bed.

Actually, she decided that she wanted me to uproot the shrubs.

Now, not that I'm bitter about this but Monday, I chopped. I dug, I pushed. I pulled. I strained.

Each shrub held fast.

They have roots.

These roots intertwine with those of a large oak tree, as well as with the roots from a bunch of vines, shrimp plant roots, pipes from the Municipal Sewer System, Mexican heather roots, rose bush roots, bromeliad roots, underground trans-continental cables, salvia roots, firecracker aloe roots, concrete laced with steel rebar from the Jurassic Era, azalea roots, and just plain weed roots.

I dug more to expose the deep roots of the shrubs.

I swung my ax fruitlessly.

I panted.

I faded.

The roots clung to the foundations of our house.

The shrubs stayed defiantly triumphant .

I hate to ask for help.

But when dealing with roots, sometimes it's necessary to admit you can't do it yourself and call upon a higher power for help.

That's what I did.

I called my daughter to come over with her four-wheel drive truck. I bound the roots with a hefty tow-chain, the kind used to pull tractor-trailers out of a ditch.

I hooked the chain to her trailer hitch.

The truck tires gripped.

Then slipped.

The truck slewed sideways.

The roots held fast.

Twice the chain shackles broke.

Three times I rigged the chain again.

The truck dug in.

Wheels spun.

The roots loosened.

The bush came partially out of the ground. A friend and I got down in the hole and chopped thicker tap roots. The truck moved again. The bush broke free. The truck drug it across the front yard to the curb for the trashmen to collect.

In doing all this, for some reason I thought of a halfremembered Bible verse where the Apostle warns us:

"Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled".

Until I looked it up this evening, all I could remember of that passage was the phrase, "root of bitterness".

I find that in my own soul, bitterness puts down deep roots. I find that bitterness springs up in me faster than kudzu or monsoon bamboo. A word, a real or imagined slight, even a facial expression — and there bitterness sprouts again from roots deeper than the World Tree of Norse mythology, roots deeper and more painful than an aching wisdom tooth.

But, as I said earlier, "When dealing with roots, sometimes it's necessary to admit you can't do it yourself and call upon a higher power for help".

With bitterness, chains, shackles, and a four-wheel drive truck prove too weak to uproot it.

Bitterness gets rooted in the heart.

Nothing less than the blood of Jesus withers that root.

I believe that.

Sometimes.

Wish prayer worked on the other kind of roots too.

But I pulled more than roots today.

It's not advisable to sit in front of a computer for months on end then jump right into stump pulling with no exercise in between. Therein lies madness.

Tonight, I'm so sore that combing my hair hurts!

On the up side of Monday:

Working outside today, for the first time in my life I saw a pair of rode-breasted grosbeaks in our yard. These colorful birds are not native to Florida, but Jacksonville lies in their Spring migration flight path. I crept into the house and brought out our new digital camera to snap these two photos.

I'm thrilled.





Thursday, April 26, 2007 Thoughts On Roots and Thorns

First, many thanks to Donald both for posting for me Wednesday and for fixing my severed telephone cord.

Two observations I made about roots while gardening this week:

First, Did you know that an underground telephone cord looks exactly like a root? That's why I cut my cord in two places removing a six-foot section of it and shutting down my own internet access.

Could happen to anybody. Right?

Second, if you see roots move, they are a snake.

We scared each other then went our separate ways.

Now, on to today's diary entry:



Tuesday a friend who watched me garden asked, "Why in the world do you plant sticker bushes right under your windows"?

I explained that my intention is to make it easier for a burglar to rob his house that to rob mine

Alarm systems only begin to work after a thief has broken in; my intention is to discourage anyone from even approaching our windows. I plant wicked thorn bushes around every window. One of my favorite plants for home security is the bougainvillea vine. The photo above, from a home around the corner, shows the lovely decorative flowers. The photo below shows the tiny delicate thorns protecting our windows silhouetted against my thick glove:



Bougainvillea vines bite.

Here is a photo of my arm after transplanting one vine while wearing thick rubberized protective gloves:



And I knew about the thorns and wore protective gloves.

If a determined thief claws past those things, I doubt if the other elements of our security system would stop him. But the whole idea is to encourage him to rob someplace else instead of our house.

While I worked I remembered a joke (it has nothing to do with anything else in this journal entry) I haven't thought of since I was a Boy Scout:

This drunk is walking through a cemetery and falls into an open grave ready for a funeral the next day.

He yells for help but no one answers.

He leaps and jumps and tries to climb out but the grave is too deep and the sides too steep. So he curls up at one end of the grave and goes to sleep thinking somebody will come by in the morning to help him out.

A couple of hours later after the bars close, another drunk takes the same shortcut through the cemetery and falls into the other end of the same open grave.

He yells and leaps and jumps and tries to climb the sides.

His activity wakes the first man who walks up behind him, taps him on the shoulder and says, "Hey, Buddy. Give it up. You can't jump out of this grave".

But he did.

My friend Wes came over to take me to lunch. We talked about personal concerns for ourselves and various people we care about. And we also had a long talk about the last chapter of John's Gospel about things Jesus said after He rose from the grave. Wes, who has a legal turn of mind, pointed out that this passage meets all the criteria as a legal document which would stand up in a courtroom today.

After he left, I got to thinking more about thorns and my Spring garden work again.

The Bible says, "And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there He put the man whom He had formed...And the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it".

Considering the work I've done in our little garden the past couple of days and considering all the work that still needs doing, to me this Bible passage proves conclusively that God knew from the word Go, that the work of dressing and keeping a garden is a never ending task!

Why else did He create man?

Kidding aside, thorns are just one physical effect of sin.

God told Adam, "Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee..."

I think it odd that this effect is "for thy sake".

Taken one way the phrase seems to mean "because of you"; in another sense, the phrase seems to mean "for your benefit".

And that makes no sense to me — especially after my day among the thorns.

What possible benefit can there be to us in thorns?

Of course the Lord Jesus is well acquainted with thorns.

We crowned Him with them.

That was also for our sake.

But anyhow, gardening is rough, back-breaking physical work!

And I'm not used to it.

In fact, if the rest of my body were as stiff as my calves, thighs, shoulders, arms, back and neck, then the Viagra company would go out of business.

Saturday, April 28, 2007 Happy Gifts

Yesterday, at her office someone gave Ginny this gift:



The note card said that the flowers were to say Thank You for a kindness Ginny had done to someone. The gift of flowers surprised and delighted my wife because she certainly did not expect anything of the sort.

And no, I'm not the one to send her the flowers; it was one of her many other admirers.

Unexpected gifts are a delight.

Last week the snail mail postman delivered an unsigned card to my house. No return address was on the envelope. The card contained \$50 cash. I have no idea who sent it to me. Or why. It came right out of the blue.

Not knowing any other donor, I can only thank God for this happy gift.

That's the way it should be.

Jesus said that when we give to the poor, we are to give in secret not blowing a trumpet to attract attention to our alms and acts of charity. In fact He said we are to give without even letting our left hand know what our right hand is doing.

That way only God gets the credit and praise.

Besides, when we give in secret, nobody else will ever know just how little we give compared to what we keep for ourselves and we won't have to be ashamed at our parsimony.

Actually, I go the Lord one better in the giving and living department, Ginny says that most of the time my right hand does not know what my own right hand is doing.

But people always assume that I am more generous than I am.

So I don't feel comfortable talking about how much Ginny and I give, just about what we receive.

Nevertheless, I will say this:

The Bible teaches certain criteria about people we are to give money to and last week I ran across a whole bunch of such folks who met these criteria all on the same day, so I gave each one of them a little dribble of money, and in order to give to some of them I had to go to a great deal of trouble and aggravation.

The poor are always with you and are always a pain in the butt.

Anyhow, when Ginny and I shared our experiences at the end of that day, she laughed at my troubles and said, "It would have been a whole lot easier, Love, if you had just stood at the end of our driveway and handed cash to the driver of every car as it passed"!

What brings the subject of anonymous giving up for me is that last night someone (who remains unknown) gave Patricia (one of my daughters who has been going through a bad patch recently) a gift of \$600.

No strings attached. No conditions to be met.

No person to thank but God.

Patricia said, "I am flabbergasted! Nothing like this has ever happened to me before".

First she hugged herself.

Then she giggled.

Then she cried.

Thanksgiving welled up inside her and she had no one to turn it toward except the Lord God Almighty, the Giver of every good and perfect gift.

As I watched the dynamics of unknown giver and

thankful recipient play out in my own living room, as a bystander I felt a sense of awe and thankfulness myself.

Watching Patricia, I felt like crying too.

We are each and every one on the receiving end of God's continual lavish giving.

Each day brings new mercies which we, me included, often tend to view as commonplace. Ordinary miracles. Our right and due.

How boorish.

St. Paul said, "By grace are ye saved through faith; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast".

And what is the only reasonable way to respond to a gift?

He gives because He loves.

"For God so loved the world that He gave..."

What can we say but, "Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift"!

I continue to do yard work and haunt the mail box waiting for my proof copy of the Rogers Diary to correct before starting writing my next book.

Ginny and I saw a yellowthroat at the bird feeder yesterday. This tiny bird has an olive back with a yellow breast and head with a black mask. A beautiful creature. I wish I could have snapped a photo.

Just visited the blog of my e-friend Amrita in India; Thursday she describes wedding customs and gifts in her country. Fascinating.

Sunday, April 29, 2007 A Magnificent Day!

Saturday Ginny, Patricia, (our grown, youngest daughter, who is staying with us this week while hunting a new home) and I overhauled the jungle path at the foot of our garden. Over the winter we had not worked this area of the yard at all and thick tangles of vine and undergrowth had nearly blocked the path.

Again I vowed, as I do every year, to never let this

happen again.

Upkeep is important.

Things do not stay in order without continual care.

Must be some spiritual lesson here but I keep missing it.

The three of us chopped Kudzu, smilax, wisteria, and creeper vines. We weed-whacked and raked and removed fallen branches to clear the path to the bridge over the hole.

Had to restring the cord in the trimmer four times and weed-bits so caked my body that I looked like the wild Green Man of Celtic legend.

New neighbors moved in next door as we worked but I was too busy to do more than give them a friendly wave of greeting. Plenty of time to get to know them in the future.

"Why did you build a bridge over this big hole in the ground?", Patricia asked. "Why not just fill in the hole"?

She was off to college and out in the world back when I build that bridge.

My black lab, Sheba, our dog which lived with us for 17 years, had dug that hole. The old dog loved to lay in her hole in the cool ground on hot summer days. That was the only hole she ever dug in our yard and she'd made it a good one. A huge, deep hole.

A huge fallen oak tree lays along one side of the bridge, a vine-covered fence on the other. Overhanging camphor limbs and wisteria vines create a charming tunnel, or covered-bridge effect. Some garden statues, small child's table set up for fairies to dine, and some old toys nestled in odd nooks lend a mystic air to that area of the jungle path.

And back ten years ago, rather than disturb my favorite dog's snuggle place, instead of filling in her hole in the middle of the path, I gathered scrap lumber and build a bridge, about 20-feet in length, over it.

Dog lovers are crazy.

And even though Sheba has been dead for years, I have no intention of filling in her hole. I feel that would be

some sort of betrayal.

No rational reason for this feeling.

But that's the way I feel.

So Sheba's hole stays.

I'll build a new bridge when this one gets too rickety.

So, the three of us worked like crazy re-potting flowers, mulching leaves, weeding flower beds, mowing grass, throwing out vast amounts of clippings and debris.

It would have taken me weeks to get all this done by myself.

In the late afternoon the postman delivered the proof copy of the Richard Rogers Diary from t he printer.

The book looks magnificent!

I gloated.

Modesty means having an honest opinion of yourself. Not a low opinion, nor an exalted opinion, but an honest opinion. I think I would have admired and pleasured in this book even if somebody else had done it.

So, before beginning to proofread, I preened over it. Looking for mistakes and imperfections comes tomorrow. Time enough for that.

Today, I relished in the look and feel of this new ancient book.

I'm pleased with the book and with myself for my part in producing it and I present it to the Lord Christ as a thing that I treasure and I hope He takes pleasure in His part in making it possible.

After working from dawn to dusk, we were too filthy and covered with plant clippings to go inside the house; but Donald and Helen came by bring a huge feast of Chinese carry-out. (Helen, a graphic artist, designed the book cover for the Rogers Diary).

We set up a table outside in the twilight. Ginny covered it with her best tablecloth and decorated it with a crystal candelabra to blend with the cartons of food and paper plates.

We feasted and talked long into the night as the moon rose bathing the yard in white glow.

As a for-the-hell-of-it gift, Donald & Helen brought us a set of underwater lights for the swimming pool. Makes our pool look like a flying saucer had landed in the depths, like in that movie *Cocoon*. We all got in the pool and lounged talking in the twilight and admiring these strange lights.

Donald and Helen had spent the day doing yard work at their new home and refurbishing a bathroom from toilet seat to ceiling fan. They also replaced a back door and planned other improvements.

So we all talked about home improvements, computers, Patricia's hunt for an apartment of her own (she's been couching around with us and siblings for a week at a time — inconvenient for everybody but we all think she's worth the trouble). We talked about car shopping, our granddaughter's band camp, the Bible story of Ehud and Eglon, the fat king of Moab, bougainvillea vines, blogs, and a computer 3-D animated rendering program that Donald is working on.

Once a loud train passed on nearby tracks and we all enjoyed a spastic train-dance — all that is except Ginny who'd taken out her hearing aids when she got in the pool and who did not hear the approaching train. She thought the rest of us had gone insane when we started to dance in the moonlight.

Some women do marry beneath them.

By the end of the evening we all felt tired out of our gourds but too content, satisfied, and happy to want to quit. We engaged in a group hug and all reluctantly winded to our appointed places.

Now a lot of work remains to be done in our garden but thanks to the heavy work of this day, it looks manageable. And this evening's spontaneous garden party in beautiful surroundings proves that all the work is worthwhile.

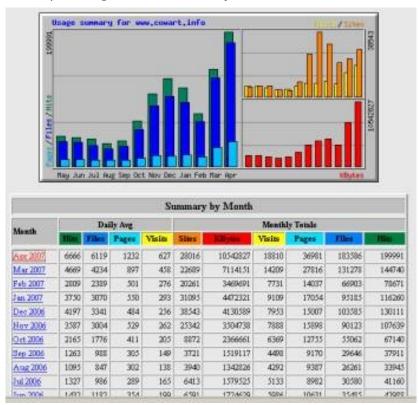
Thanks be to God.

Tuesday, May 01, 2007
It Pays To Read The Fine Print!

Monday, I read fine print all day.

Reading fine print played an important role in three fun areas of life for Ginny and me — in April's Webalizer

stats for my website, in a 16th Century Puritan diary, and in our spending a fortune to buy a new car.



By reading the fine print in the Webalizer counter software, I see that as of yesterday this website has attracted 18,810 readers from 111 different countries ranging from India to Iceland to Iraq during the month of April.

Wow!

Doesn't anybody read the newspaper any more?

Thank you all for visiting my site.

I'm honored by your attention.

I pray you find the stuff you read here is worthwhile and makes your life easier.

Yesterday, I started correcting the proof pages of the diary of Richard Rogers, a Puritan minister during the reign of Queen Elizabeth — the original one. You know, the one with the hair.

Talk about fine print!

Here's a photocopy of a page from one of Rogers' sermons:



Actually the printer's proof copy of the book turned out beautiful!

And much, much easier to read.

I'm so pleased with the look and feel of this book.

It needs fewer corrections than any of my previous books. After 30 years as a writer I think I'm beginning to get the hang of it.

God willing, I hope to have this work published on line by the end of this week — unless those massive forest fires in Georgia burn this far south. Already the fire covers 128 square miles to the north of us and a fine drift of ash powders Jacksonville while smoky haze obscures the skyline. In our 16-Month drought, even the Florida sand feels like talcum powder, my garden plants droop, and the whole area is a tender box.

The third area where fine print defined my day —

Beauty and I finally bought that new car I've been writing about since April 17th.

My diary entries around that time tell how we prayed for God's guidance in this project.

A lady in Australia helped us in buying this car. Val, a retired down-under librarian, gave me some advice in the comment section for my blog posts for April 21st and 22nd, and we followed her advice.

Glad we did!.

Through our credit union we contacted Matt, an auto advisor. His help proved invaluable in locating the car that met all the criteria Ginny and I had agreed on at a price we can almost afford — assuming of course that someone will buy one or two of our children first.

We went to Duval Honda where the sales team of Justine, Bill, Irma and Eric acted disgustingly youthful and enthusiastic about cars. These people act as though they really love cars; they act as though they'd stand around talking about cars even if they were not selling them. And they treated us like royalty. You'd think we were the most important customers ever to walk onto their lot.

And patient!

You can't believe how patient these people were with Beauty and me who are definitely not car people. I mean, it goes; it stops, it hauls things — that's about the extent of our car knowledge. But these young folks spent hours explaining everything to us. Eric and Justine even took off the spare tire and showed me how to change it.

Then came the fine print.

Remember that photocopy of Richard Rogers' 16th Century sermon I showed you above? Actually that's not a sermon — it's an automobile contract from the year 1615.

Must be.

It looks just like one of the 20 or 30 pieces of paper Beauty and I signed at the Honda dealership yesterday. The only difference was that the print on yesterday's papers was smaller.

Now, we owe more on this car than we do on our house mortgage.

And look what I found on someone's desk at the dealership:



No, that's not a real million dollar bill.

I can tell.

The paper feels stiffer than the ones I carry in my wallet.

I asked if that money was the monthly payment some previous buyer had left on the desk — but it wasn't.

I asked if I could handle it.

It was mine to keep.

And when I looked at the verso — I found even more fine print to read:



Can't read the fine print around the edges?

Here's a transcript:

The Million Dollar Question: Will you go to Heaven? Here's a quick test. Have you ever told a lie, stolen anything, or used God's name in vain? Jesus said, "Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Have you looked

with lust? Will you be guilty on Judgment Day? If you have done those things, God sees you as a lying, thieving, blasphemous, adultery-at-heart. The Bible warns that if you are guilty you will end up in Hell. That's not God's will. He sent His Son to suffer and die on the cross for you. Jesus took your punishment upon Himself: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life". Then He rose from the dead and defeated death. Please repent (turn from sin) today and trust in Jesus, and God will grant you everlasting life..."

How about that?

I think this odd little tract proves that it always pays to read the fine print.

Wednesday, May 02, 2007 **Telephone Sins**

Tuesday I fell into black vile sin, a sin I'd like to blame on the telephone.

No. Not that kind of sin.

Just what kind of guy do you think I am?

Well, you're right, but that was not my trouble this time. I did not call a phone sex line. I never have...

Although once many years ago, a young lady did call me to tell me about how she...

Well, never mind.

That was her business.

My present black vile sin, although it involved the telephone, was something else altogether.

To start with, I did not sleep well.

That's no excuse, but it is a mitigating circumstance. It's no excuse because I hardly ever sleep well, so that can not be blamed on this day's sin.

I got up at 4 a.m., posted my daily journal entry, and got ready to go off with someone. But my ride forgot to pick me up.

That put me out of sorts.

Another person called telling me a promise made was to be put off a few more days.

That made me grumpier.

I began work editing the 16th Century Diary of Richard Rogers; I began to find I'd made more mistakes that I thought I had. Serious mistakes that effect the meaning of the text. The temptation arose to ignore the textual problems. I started thinking that hardly anyone on earth cares about this book enough to notice my mistakes.

That embittered me more.

As I worked, Rogers' words began to speak to me.

I realized that this man who struggled to live a Christian life almost 500 years ago dealt with the same sort of problems I'm dealing with today.

For instance, on December 22, 1587, he wrote in his diary, "I began, by little and little, to feel the vehemency of my zeal and of my heavenly affection to slack... I could not easily recover my self and so went unfit many hours... I was sometimes dumpish and too heavy".

That could be my own whole blog post today.

Then the telephone rang six or eight times back to back to back.

And with each call I grew more and more bitter and resentful and snappish.

Aggravations with the new car. Auto insurance. Missed appointments. Broken promises. Two people who had asked my advice called to announce that they were ignoring it. A call making me realize that a few weeks ago I gave away something I'll need tomorrow. Missing keys. More time off work...

As the calls mounted, I achieved a spiritual plateau of divine tranquility and inner peace — more commonly described as "I don't give a damn anymore".

Now, the phone calls did not cause me to sin.

Please understand that.

The black bitterness, anger and resentment rose out of my own soul.

Looks as though after a man has been a Christian for almost 50 years, he'd outgrow being snared by petty bits of nastiness. But apparently this particular dirty old man has grown worse. Rogers would know how I feel.

On August 18, 1587, Rogers said, "We may observe by experience that even the most zealous people do somewhat, in time, decline and wax remiss in caring for the matters of God. No prayer may be more meet and right for a good Christian than this — that God would keep us in our old age from the corruptions of time and of the world".

So much for growing in grace as I grow in age.

All my life I've been a sour old man in training.

And you know what the worst part is?

I expected so much better of myself.

But today I snapped and snarled and complained and whined and murmured and muttered under my breath because deep down I believe the universe ought to be run solely to my liking.

Things ought to go the way I want!

Deep down, I think I should be God.

And when things happen which point out that I'm not God, then I grow inordinately frustrated and peevish and temper-tamtrum-prone.

And I sulk.

How pitiful.

As Rogers said 500 years before me, "I mislike my self".

And I like to picture myself as one of the world's good guys!

Isn't that ludicrous?

Again, Rodgers could have written my journal entry today when he said, "I could not bestow much tyme at my study, yet I continue to rise in mornings about 5, and spend time either in my study room, or thinking about my heart and the bettering of my life by writing in this dairy".

Yet this man so grounded in his own reality of frustration could also say, "This is myne heart's desire that I may make godliness, I mean one part or the other of it, to be my delight through my whole life".

Like me, Rogers ponders how and why a Christian

man falls so easily into bitterness, resentment and sin.

Perhaps God is schooling me, testing me so I'll realize what I'm really made of. And naturally I can expected to be tested more as I get older; the hardest, most comprehensive tests always come near the end of the course.

I suspect that God grants my requests for material things then takes the joy out of those very things so that I will not get hung up on the material. He has something better in mind.

I also suspect that God allows me to fall so often so that I will realize that it is only His hand that <u>ever</u> holds me up; it is never my own strength.

God is capable of dropping me as easily as He might drop a brick.

And unless He holds me up in the hollow of His hand every moment of my life...

You see, this brick named John Cowart thinks it has wings of its own.

Butterfly wings.

Watch me fly!

Wheee!

Like the Puritan preacher of so long ago, I need to reflect on and pray the words of Psalm 51, a psalm which King David wrote in his old age:

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.

Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy Holy Spirit from me.

Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free Spirit

Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners

Thursday, May 03, 2007 A Diamond Is For ... Ten Years

After spreading light, peace, joy and good will in my blog post yesterday, I have little to say today — Mostly because yesterday I did not one thing but sit at my desk and edit copy for that 16^{th} Century Puritan Diary.

So, I got to wondering about the past.

I know that on May 3rd in 1901, the Great Fire burned Jacksonville down, but I wasn't there. I've just heard about it and wrote about it in my fire department history book..

So I got to wondering what I was doing myself ten years ago today.

I pulled some of my old journals down out of the closet and found that ten years ago this week, I was buying a diamond.

Here's my journal entry for...

Thursday, May 1, 1997:

Enjoyed lunch with my friend Barbara at Lucky Dragon.

Afterwards, a lady in Avondale told us about a jewelers, Nicholaas Alexander Ltd. This is a showroom for custom-made diamonds and gold trinkets. Carol, the young woman there, spent about 30 minutes telling us about how to go about ordering a necklace for my daughter Eve, who wants a diamond as a graduation present.

I was not about to make such an important decision without consulting Ginny so as soon as she got off work, we visited the showroom. Even though it was after closing time, Carol spent about 45 minutes going over the order with Ginny and me -- all this for a \$200 diamond when the cheapest other diamond I saw there cost \$1,300!

Friday, May 2, 1997:

Spent the day pittering around the house cleaning up for Donald and Pandora's visit -- need not have bothered. They brought in loads of laundry from college and spread it all over the living room.

As soon as Gin got off work, we rushed to Nicholaas Alexander Ltd. to pick up Eve's diamond -- a ten point, round cut stone. Again Carol spent about 45 minutes <u>after closing time</u> to educate us about fine jewelry.

She brought out charts and showed us the four Cs of diamonds: Carat, Color, Clarity and Cut.

She had hand-picked Eve's diamond from those available and set it in a white gold mounting herself.

It happened that her boss happened by to see why there was still someone in the store after closing hours. I told him about Carol's service to us and what an asset she is to his business:

Why just tell the employee that you're pleased when you can tell the boss in her presence and thus not only make her feel good but improve her standing in the eyes of the boss?

If Elizabeth Taylor had gone in this store to buy a diamond tiara to wear to the Oscars, she would not be treated a bit better than Ginny and I were!

I have told several other people about how pleased we are also -- especially since the first jewelry store we checked out, Underwood's, treated us like tramps off the street and actually had a guard stand over me while I looked at the display cases and the sales lady acted like I was something she blew out of her nose.

Guess where I plan to buy my next diamond?

Gin and I will celebrate out 30th anniversary in November ... Humm.

Saturday, May 3, 1997:

Eve graduated from college this morning!

I am very pleased with her accomplishment. Gin and I treated her and 12 others, family and friends, to lunch at Blue Boy's. Donald & Pandora, Jennifer and Pat, Marcy and her mother and sister, several other young people I don't know and a host of well-wishers, including Eve's friend Chris, who drove down from Maryland just for her Graduation.

Only Patricia was not there though she was invited.

I gave out the hats Aunt Hazel made for everybody in imitation of MY HAT and the kids hooted over them!

Eve added a lace veil to hers...

Afterwards Gin & I collapsed at home and I prepared to teach the Adult Bible Class Sunday School lesson for tomorrow by cutting out flannel-graph figures related to Gideon and Judges.

Sunday, May 4, 1997:

Didn't use the flannel-graph lesson I'd prepared.

Instead, this morning about 5 a.m. I awoke thinking of a Cub Scout trick involving taking a sheet of notebook paper and cutting a hole in it big enough for a man to walk through.

Since the lesson was about faith, I used this demonstration (I had everybody cut one out for themselves and step through it) to show that faith is not believing an impossible thing, but believing a trustworthy Person.

Over the ten years since those diary entries, Eve went on to earn a scholarship to study in London then returned to the U.S. to earn her Master's degree. She is now a head librarian and engaged to marry an attorney.

Friday, May 04, 2007

Seeking A Settled Heart:

The 16th Century Diary Of Puritan Richard Rogers

Yester-night (that's Puritan talk I've absorbed while working on this manuscript) Ginny could hardly rouse me for supper and I went straight back to sleep afterwards.

Yes, as soon as I shut my computer down yester-day (more Puritan talk) I fell asleep in my chair and slept for twelve hours straight.

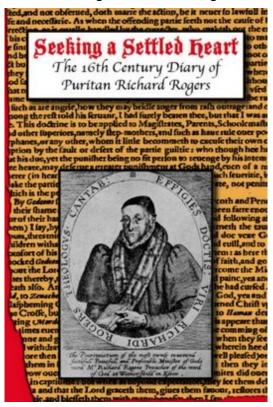
Why did I so unwind and collapse?

Because I finally put the finishing touches on my edition of the book I've been working on for months.

Yes, my burst of enthusiasm means that Seek A Settled Mind: The 16th Century Diary Of Puritan Richard Rogers is now published!

Thanks be to God!

Yestermorning (see how it works?) Helen, a graphic artist, designed the cover for me. She came over and worked with me to include this book in my on-line book catalog for Bluefish Books. More samples of her work can be seen at http://www.elemental.name/ Here's a photo of the book cover she designed for the Rogers Diary:



Notice that classy red border in the cover background? Here's the secret of graphic art: That's really my old red tee shirt draped over the torn ancient page on the computer scanner glass. Who says I'm not high-tech?

Richard Rogers, a Puritan minister in the time of the first Queen Elizabeth, lived between 1550 and 1618; his extant diary covers from February 28, 1587 to August 26, 1590. This present text (yes, I did check out copyright compliance and permissions) is based on materials transcribed by Dr. Marshall Mason Knappen. in 1933.

When I first encountered the Diary Of Richard Rogers, the man's search for God moved me to seek the Lord myself with more intensity and less pretense. The diary of this good and godly man inspired me in my own spiritual walk. That's what spiritual diaries are supposed to do.

Yet, as I read for my own inspiration, the antique language interrupted my flow of thought and obscured the meaning. Therefore, to make this spiritual classic available to other readers who also seek a settled heart, I edited the text with a goal in mind — ease of reading for modern people.

Throughout his diary, Rogers speaks of being "settled" or "unsettled". He constantly seeks to have a settled heart, by that he means a heart focused on God, a mind relishing the majesty of the Almighty and enjoying the thought of His presence.

To Rogers, focus on the Beauty of the Creator rather than on the drab affairs of life and lesser things leads to peace of mind.

Yet he was not abstract. He sponsored a boarding school in his home, raised funds to buy armor for the English soldiers fighting off the invasion of the Spanish Armada, comforted suicidal people, survived church politics, and lived under the daily threat of arrest.

He lived fully in this world while focusing his mind on the glories of the next.

He speaks to my condition.

I smiled at his frustration as he tried to he tried to write books while constantly being interrupted by "strange visitations" (visits by uninvited callers) and as he drew up a list of pros and cons about the possibility of a second marriage, and as he fumed about price increases.

He lived in a real world while seeking a settled heart on the things of God.

This may not be a book readers would want to take to the beach this soommer (that's Puritan talk for Summer); it's not for relaxing. But it is a book for pondering as we also seek a settled heart amid busy lives.

Rogers diary resonates with the ideas of the Prophet Isaiah when he said, "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, Whose mind is stayed on Thee; Because he trusteth in Thee. Trust ye in the Lord forever".

One other thing: Remember that new car Ginny and I bought Monday? Well, I've been so busy finishing the

Rogers Diary that I have not even sat in the car except for the ride home from the dealer.

But I'll get to ride in it to-day (more old Puritan talk). Ginny's driving me to the doctor's for him to do another prostate exam and take another look at my prostate cancer.

Now, if that doesn't focus my mind, nothing will!

Wednesday, May 09, 2007 Higher Mathematics

So, Ginny and I were standing in this grocery store parking lot discussing bottles of soda pop when one of us (You can guess which one) asked, "How many ounces in a liter"?

The other one said, "33.8. Why"?

"I'm trying to figure out whether to buy the big bottle or the small bottle. The small bottle is 16 ounces but I'm wondering if there's more in the big bottle".

"What does the label say"?

"It doesn't say how many ounces; it just gives that metric crap and I can't figure it out. Now they want us to learn kilometers, and millipedes, and liters, and grams and all that foreign stuff. Why should we learn their stupid system? Why can't they learn real measurements. They sure learned how to count American money fast enough! Why should I have to ..."

"You're beginning to rant. What is it you're trying to figure out".?

"Well, if there are 33 ounces in one liter, then there are 66 ounces in two but I don't want that much. So I'm trying to figure out how much is half of a two liter bottle".

"You want to know how to figure out what's half of a two liter bottle"?

"Yes".

"Half of two liters is — one liter".

"Oh....Oh, I never was any good at that metric stuff".

There's a reason I remembered this conversation from about three years ago — I'll come back to it in a bit.

But first I want to show a few photos of Sail

Jacksonville, the Tall Ship exhibit Ginny and I visited during our long weekend.

I'd planned to post a section in my blog Photo Gallery but I could not get into the site. I thought it was because I may have forgotten the password but it seems that I've forgotten the User Name too. So I'll never be able to get into my photo site again. — Ever.

Anyhow, last weekend Jacksonville hosted a display of sailing schooners along with speed boats, tug boats, fire boats, shrimp boats, yachts, police boats, motorboats, set skis and a bunch of other sea going craft.

Here is a boat I planed to buy for Ginny. I even had her name painted on the bow:



But alas, my latest book did not sell well enough last week to keep up the payments. I'll have to let the boat go back to the dealer.



On his deathbed, father when my with charged me taking care of mv mother, he compared her to an old-time sailing ship from the davs before thev invented navigation.

She blunders all over the ocean getting becalmed, blasting away with cannon, always alert for shoals, rocks and reefs, seeing pirates in every stranger — but eventually she gets to the right port, he said.

Sailors from all over the world navigated their way to Jacksonville for the nautical event this weekend. Some readers may recognize the flag:

Notice how hazy the air over the St. Johns River is in my photographs. That is not sea fog but smoke from the forest fires about 70 miles away in Georgia. Those fires have burned out of control for over three weeks now. The tv news no longer talks about how many acres of forest have burned; now they talk about how many square miles (148 so far).

We've had no appreciable rain in 16 months and working in my yard makes it seems as though the plants are growing in talcum powder. Just can't get enough water on them.



Oh that *men* would praise the Lord *for* his goodness,

and for his wonderful works to the children of men!

And let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving,

and declare his works with rejoicing. They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; these see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep. For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind,

which lifteth up the waves thereof.

They mount up to the heaven,
they go down again to the depths:
Their soul is melted because of trouble.

They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken

man,

and are at their wit's

end.

Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble,

and he bringeth them out of their distresses.

He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad because they be quiet;

so he bringeth them unto their desired haven.



Apparently there is a difference between nautical miles and real miles and between miles per hour, like in a car, and knots, which measures the speed of a boat or ship or watercraft or yacht (according to sailors the names

used of a sea going vessel are not interchangeable).

The names of the people on a boat are also different and describe their job on the boat....

Sometimes.

For instance, on the waterfront I saw this young lady from one of the boats. She sported a taut — Well, let's just say her bowsprits projected far ahead of her stern — and she was wearing a tee shirt emblazoned with the words: CREW MISTRESS.

I did not know that was an official shipboard job.

And apparently it's not.

I even saw guys wearing that same tee shirt.

Never can tell about sailors, I thought.

But, it turned out that these folks wore the shirts to identify themselves as crewmembers serving aboard a schooner named MISTRESS.

Here's a photo of their boat:

Pretty boat.

But I think they need to come up with a new tee shirt design.

Some guys might get the wrong idea.

Oh well, unto the pure, all things are pure; everybody else thinks like I do.



Here I'd like to write a smooth transition from the boat show back to Higher Mathematics, but I can't think of how to do that. So here's an abrupt change back to where I started from:

Last night's devotions got me to thinking about math. After supper as Ginny and I prayed together, she read that Bible passage in Mark's Gospel about the time Jesus feed 4,000 people.

I'd never noticed it before, but the story starts with Jesus saying, "I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now been with me three days and have nothing to eat".

Duh!

If He had compassion on His hungry followers, why did

He wait three days before feeding them?

Looks like God does miracle stuff on His own schedule.

But Mark says the apostles found seven loves of bread and a few small fishes. Jesus blessed the food and gave out 4,000 servings. After the meal, the apostles picked up seven baskets of leftovers.

Now compare that incident to the same sort of miracle just two chapters earlier in Mark. There, when Jesus saw the hungry multitude and felt compassion, He "began to teach them".

Again, no immediate food for the hungry.

He began to teach them first.

Then, the Apostles came up with five loaves of bread (slices of pieta bread?) and two fish.

This time there were 5,000 people present.

This time they took up 12 baskets of leftovers.

To me these two incidents indicate the divine origin of the Gospels. If I were writing a fiction account, I'd build up to bigger and bigger dramatic effects. Start small, build readers' expectations, then top the small with an even bigger miracle. But Mark tells things as they actually happened: first 5,000 people then 4,000 people — a thousand fewer people just two chapters later.

Either that's true or it's not well-organized writing, and I suspect Mark is a good writer. His book has stayed a best seller for a long time.

So, let me see if I've got the math straight:

5,000 people + two fish + 5 loaves of bread = 12 baskets of leftovers.

4,000 people + a few small fish + 7 loaves of bread = 7 baskets of leftovers.

Is that right?

Oh, I left out one (1) compassionate Jesus — He's the common denominator for everything.

He's the one who counts.

Do you know what He would have done if ten thousand people had shown up?

He'd simply double the recipe.

Friday, May 11, 2007 Bridge Construction

Bridge construction ties up traffic all over Jacksonville this week, but not at my house.

Lanes of the Matthews Bridge are closed while workers repair the steel grate in the center span; The Dame's Point Bridge is being painted, closing lanes. Massive traffic jams result from these two projects. But traffic over the bridge at my house will flow smoothly after today.

Yes, while I've been taking a week off between books, I've been refurbishing the bridge over Sheba's hole on the jungle path.

Sheba was our black lab who lived with us for 17 years.

She dug a huge hole to lie in way back in a far corner of the garden and to keep from disturbing her refuge, I built a rustic arched bridge over the hole.

Sheba been dead about four years now.

The wood timbers of the arch bridge decayed so much that last year I had to rope off Sheba's bridge and put up a MEN WORKING sign to steer people off the bridge onto a side path.

To fill in Sheba's hole would betray her memory. So this week, I tore down the old rotten arched bridge and replaced it with a simple raised wooden boardwalk.

The new construction is not as elegant (in my eyes) as the old bridge, but it opens that section of the path again.

I'm not the only family member to be rebuilding things. Donald The Geek is rendering stuff to make comic books featuring scantily clad anorexic Barbie Dolls and drooling space aliens. He has also restored the E-Mail Devotional portion of his website so that the free minimessages by Charles Haddon Spurgeon are available again.

Spurgeon (1834-1892) was widely called the Prince Of Preachers by Christians of all sorts. His works are still widely read and his books outsell anything I've ever written.

Each morning when I read a snippet of his devotional, I find that he often thinks and says things I wish I'd thought and was able to say.

Here's this morning's sample:

"The only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

– Iohn 1:14

Christ is divine to me, if He be human to all the world beside.

He has done that for me which none but a God could do.

He has subdued my stubborn will, melted a heart of adamant, opened gates of brass, and snapped bars of iron. He hath turned for me my mourning into laughter, and my desolation into joy; He hath led my captivity captive, and made my heart rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory. Let others think as they will of Him, to me He must be the only begotten of the Father: blessed be His name.

And He is full of grace . Ah! Had He not been, I should never have been saved. He drew me when I struggled to escape from His grace; and when at last I came all trembling like a condemned culprit to His mercyseat He said, 'Thy sins which are many are all forgiven thee: be of good cheer.'

And He is full of truth . True have His promises been, not one has failed. I bear witness that never servant had such a master as I have: never brother such a kinsman as He has been to me; never spouse such a husband as Christ has been to my soul; never sinner a better Savior; never mourner a better comforter than Christ hath been to my spirit. I want none beside Him.

In life He is my life, and in death He shall be the death of death; in poverty Christ is my riches; in sickness He makes my bed; in darkness He is my star, and in brightness He is my sun...

Jesus is to me all grace and no wrath.

All truth and no falsehood.

And of truth and grace He is full, infinitely full.

And all that without a single space alien eating the

Barbie doll.

If you're interested in receiving Spurgeon's free daily devotions (with no charge, no tracking cookies, no ads, no nothing) Check out Donald's site at http://www.rdex.net/devotions/ to subscribe.

In other news:

I fielded three crisis calls during the night while I was trying to watch a horror movie I'd heard about but never seen before.

One call was about money.

The other two, more thorny.

Apparently, my daughter Jennifer encountered Pat, her ex, for the first time since they broke up in hurt, accusations, and turmoil.

A chance encounter?

Result of stalking?

Who knows?

But both called me to tell their side of it.

In my duel rolls as father and friend, I've heard different accounts of their real-life horror/drama (to me) story again and again for years.

Jennifer responded to the encounter exactly as her counselors had advised in such a case; Pat assured me that no stalking was involved, just a chance meeting outside Jennifer's apartment.

As each justified their own actions, I was trying to watch a tape of *The Blair Witch Project*, but to listen to the drama of each phone call, I turned the sound off and tried to followed the storyline of the movie by closed captioning.

Who says I have no sympathy and a father and a friend?

Crude, rustic bridges of scrap wood, I can build; building bridges between hurt people in pain, that's a job only Christ can do.

He alone is Prince of Peace.

Oh, by the way, that movie really looses something when there's no sound.

Saturday, May 12, 2007 Down & Discouraged



External events and internal weariness accumulated to make me down and discouraged recently.

The bridge construction project called for more energy than I thought it would and the end result looks shoddy.

Sales of my books this quarter make me wonder if the game is worth the candle.

This morning someone who called asking my advice said I was stupid and lacked judgment when I gave it.

Financial worries plague.

More hassles have developed at Ginny's work.

A web hosting site I depend on is changing format. They announced yesterday that "mandatory migration" begins next week. That's a forced transfer to another wizard host/site/thing. "Mandatory Migration" — I visualize the Trail Of Tears, or the Bataan Death March.

Is this a good time to cash in my chips and admit that I've been a damn fool for even trying to "get above my raisin"? (as Mama used to say).

Someone is talking about subpoenaing my telephone records to support a law suit which I think is foolish if not frivolous. (And no, I'm not involved in any legal way).

Ginny and I have to go back to the car dealership today (still don't have an extra key to the thing).

Forgot to take my B-12 pill yesterday and my hands started shaking again.

And besides all those external things I've reached that point again (where I normally dwell) of feeling that my life has been a waste of time, pissing against the wind.

What does the Scripture say in such a case? "When my spirit is overwhelmed within me, then the Lord will bear me up".

This is certainly a time for me to walk by faith and not by sight because I don't see a damn thing good ahead in any of these matters.

And people who know nothing about it say that Christians take the easy way out, that religion is the opiate of the people, that we avoid reality. — poor bastards don't have a clue.

Oh well, somebody or the other said, "The joy of the Lord shall be my strength" maybe that's why I don't have any strength or joy at the moment.

"Father, if it be possible, let this cup..."

Oh, the graphic I chose to illustrate the start of this post is Honore Daumier's 1856 oil on canvas painting titled *Hauler of a Boat*.

I'm the guy inside the boat.



Sunday, May 13, 2007 Hallelujah! It's A Honda!

Saturday Ginny and I (along with about 25 other people) attended a new car owner's clinic at Duval Honda where we bought our new car.

Three things struck me about this meeting:

(1). Other car buyers seem much smarter than I am.

As the new customers asked questions, they constantly quoted *Consumer Reports*, *Car Facts*, and a bunch of other information sources they'd checked before buying their cars.

I observed that car dealerships are competing for a much better informed clientele than in previous generations.

Me, I checked the spare tire and jack (once bought a car without realizing they were missing) and decided that blue is a pretty color for our new car.

(2). The people working for the dealership really BELIEVE in their product. I've been in revivalist meetings where the speakers displayed less fervor than these salesmen, customer service reps, and parts guys.

To me, it's a bit scary to see people care so much about a brand of machine. After all one brand of car is pretty much the same as the next, isn't it? These Honda folks would burn me at the stake if I'd voiced that opinion in their meeting.

And here I thought Gator or Bulldog fans were fanatics.

(3). A minor defect in our new car bugs me inordinately. For that kind of money, I expected it to be perfect.

Ginny points out that considering the clunkers we've driven over the years -- cars I spent more time under than in -- the defect is not worth mentioning.

She says the defect is not in her new car, but in her old husband.

As my granddad used to say, "There's some folks would complain if you was to hang them with a brand new rope".

Monday, May 14, 2007 Mothers' Day Madness

Sunday, more than a dozen children and friends gathered at Donald & Helen's home to celebrate a Mother's Day Feast with kabobs, salads and pot luck stuff. Ginny was not the only mother present at the affair but she raked in a barrel full of loot from adoring children haunted by guilt.

She wore her **Just A Wild And Crazy Mom** tee shirt and placed her roses in a matching vase:



I cut out paper dolls to present an object lesson about faith. To define *faith*, I looked the word up in Google to find that definitions include:

Faith is a 1981 record album by British alternative rock band The Cure.

Faith was also a 1995 album released by Bad Boy Records.

And Faith is a fictional character played by Eliza Dushku on the tv series *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*.

One Bible writer defines *faith* as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen".

That sounds like double-talk to me.

When I was a kid, some teacher said that if you

believe something hard enough, then it will happen.

What nonsense.

I decided to believe God would give me a pony. I strained to believe this, to have faith.

No pony.

Teacher said that God did not answer because I did not have enough faith.

Bull!

What God does or does not do, hardly depends on whether I believe Him or not. He is not dependent on man but he always does what He says He will do.

Jesus Christ is reliable.

I count 15 times in the New Testament where Jesus told someone, "Your faith has made you whole". In virtually every instance, Jesus had said something first to which the person responded.

One blogger I read recently (sorry, I can't remember who you are but I remember what you said)...

This blogger said, "Faith is not believing something you know is impossible, but believing Someone you know is trustworthy".

That was the main point of my devotional talk to my family for Mother's Day — that faith is not straining to believing something you know good and well is nonsense, but believing a Person you know is trustworthy.

And Jesus Christ is trustworthy.

No one more so.

This morning I'm back to work editing another 16th Century diary (apparently I'm a masochist). This time I'm editing for modern readers the diary of Samuel Ward, one of the translators of the King James Bible.

This ancient diary has got to sell better than the last three I edited... Doesn't it?

I've heard that Albert Einstein said, "Insanity is to keep doing what you've been doing and to expect different results".

Say, did Einstein keep a diary he'd want edited?

Tuesday, May 15, 2007 Darlene Asked For 8 Things About Me

Yesterday my e-friend Darlene Schacht (at http://www.christianwomenonline.net/index2.htm) tagged me for a meme; I'm to tell eight things about myself.

Normally I'd ignore such a project. But since it's Darlene who asked, I can't resist.

Darlene is a Canadian lady author and editor. She was one of the first people to ever comment on my blog. She became responsible for most of the computer search engines locating my site when she promoted a photograph of me entitled "Pool Boy Wearing Black Socks". My site has drawn more hits from that search string than any other. — Thanks Darlene.

Darlene is a deeply devoted Christian who founded an electronic magazine for Christian Women. Her magazine is called *Christian Online Women* (**COW** for short) or something like that. Lots and lots of women read her magazine and share their faith through it...

Oops. I was a little off with that name. It's called *Christian Women Online* (**CWO**) for short).

Sorry. My mistake.

What can you expect from a pool boy wearing black socks?

Be sure to check out Darlene's magazine — which is not COW but CWO

Here are the eight Meme items for Darlene:

- (1.) My ambition as a youth was to become an archaeologist. I spent the happiest days of my youth excavating an Indian burial mound with a local archaeological society.
- (2.) One of the happiest days of my life, I spent with my mother-in-law in a corn field. She took me along to excavate a 16th Century site in Maryland where the English settlers had abandoned a house abruptly (perhaps because of Indian attack or an epidemic which killed the whole family immediately). We uncovered silver shoe buckles, a mortar and pestle, intact kitchenware, etc. under the supervision of a state archaeologist. Wow!
 - (3.) Reading Dracula as a boy inspired me to begin

keeping a daily journal and I've kept one off and on for over 30 years. Three years ago my son Donald encouraged me to keep my journal on line as a blog. I published my 2005 journal under the title A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad (available at www.bluefishbooks.info). The cover photo shows me in my pool boy outfit with black socks.

- (4.) Recently a young lady asked me about my sex life. She expressed amazement that a 67-year-old man would only have had sex with two women, my first wife and my present one, in his entire life. (Not virtue, lack of opportunity) She said that was really bizarre. And here I thought I was more or less normal.
- (5.) I am a Christian believing that the whole world, especially me, was in such bad shape that God Himself came down to rescue us. Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, taught the ignorant. We nailed him to a cross to torture Him to death for our sins. But as Lord of Life, He conquered death and rose from the tomb. He will come again in glory and judge the earth. In the meantime, He'd kinda like for us to behave ourselves.
- (6.) Whenever I mention looking at naked ladies on the internet, my blog readers fuss at me. But my besetting sin, the one that bothers me the most, is stealing. Anytime I go anywhere I look for things to steal. I don't often actually take things but it's always a temptation for me, one I struggle with practically every day.
- (7.) My parents thought reading was a waste of time. "Johnny, get your nose out of that book and do something useful" is a phrase I heard a million times as I was growing up.

Both parents are dead now.

I've been a free-lance writer for over 30 years now and portions of my works has been translated into as many as eleven foreign languages circulating all over the globe. I've published ten books. and I'm working on three others....

Considering my career financially, I realize that my parents were right all along.



(8.) My proudest

accomplishment in life was to build a model sailing ship inside a beer bottle. I use a photo of my working on that ship as the avatar for my blog postings:

(9) In 1971, NASA gave me a pin and a letter of commendation for my contribution to the space program. All I did was to stay awake driving for 72 hours without sleep. One of my kids took the pin to school for show & tell and lost it! The letter is in a box somewhere.

And, speaking of the space program, my father was a molder and crafted some parts for the lunar lander, that little golf-cart thing astronauts drove around on the moon and left up there. Some castings my daddy made are still on the surface of the moon. .

(10) Ten?

Yes, ten!

I said that I'm a writer and I get carried away. This has to be the last thing:

I tell the best, most cultured, refined, elegant jokes of anyone in the whole world.

Want to hear one?

Oh...:(

No one else does either.

Wednesday, May 16, 2007 Moving Experience

Tuesday I helped one of my daughters move to a new home.

Took three trips with Nissan and trailer but we got her moved.

Last time I helped one of the kids move, I swore it would be the last time. I'm getting too old to lift sofas, and tables and boxes of books (Heavens! But our family accumulates books!) Heavy books!

Going up and down the few stairs in the new house just about killed me. When I was younger I could move furniture all day, load the truck, drive 500 miles that night, and unload it all the next day.

No more. I'm finding my limitations. Again, I'm swearing that this was my last move. Think so?

New home.

New life.

Same old problems.

Just down the street from her new home a morning glory vine climbs a telephone pole and bursts into beauty high above the heads of anyone passing by. I think God creates some beauties just for His own pleasure and that we glimpse them now and then only by chance. I wish I'd had my camera along to photograph the flowers, but I didn't.

One striking fact about Bible history is how often God had people move. Everything from the Exodus to Paul's missionary journeys. All the time, God is shuffling people around. He does not seem to want us to get too comfortable entrenched in one spot. And often He uses persecution of one sort or another to prod us into moving.

I think that's a bad thing.

Apparently, He doesn't.

We want to stay with the familiar; God presses us on toward the new.

Jonah didn't want to go anywhere; God did one whale of a job in moving him.

The parting of the Red Sea makes for great movie

footage, but I think the most astounding move in Scripture was when King Herod decided to kill all the babies in Bethlehem.

One night an angel told Joseph to take Mary and the young child and move to Egypt.

Note: the angel did not tell this to Mary. So Joseph had to wake her and say, "Honey, pack everything. We're moving to Egypt. Pack the diaper bag, the port-a-crib, the bottle warmer, the blankie, the nappies, the car seat, the stuffed bear, all that gold, frankincense, and myrrh those guys left along with all the other baby gifts — I'm quitting my job and we're moving to Egypt. Tonight."

They got up and moved that same night.

And she did not brain him.

Now that's what I call a miracle!

All over north Florida, even as I write, hundreds of families are being forced to move abruptly in mandatory evacuations ahead of the wild fires that have been burning for three weeks now. Wind picks up flaming debris and floats it miles ahead of the main fire to settle in new fuel sources setting them aflame too.

People's homes are one of those fuel sources.

New fires break out daily — 287 of them, last I heard. The main fire has consumed over 300 square miles and no sign of rain is in the forecast.

Within minutes of flaming debris falling from the sky, people must flee with everything they value. Cars and cows and cats and children and wedding pictures and blankets and bottles of water — all else they've worked all their lives to accumulate may well be consumed by the flames.

We need to enjoy our possessions, but hold them lightly.

Last week the server host for my online book catalog announced a forced move of computer sites beginning this week.

I don't want to move my site!!!

I don't want to move anything!!!

I don't ever want to move again — but then God

sends this whale...

OK, Lord, if You insist.

Thursday, May 17, 2007 Inspiration For Digging Ditches

Wednesday I continued to edit the diary of Samuel Ward (1577-1639). He was one of the translators of the King James Bible which was published in 1611....

Who's interested in such stuff?

I don't know why I bother.

I often feel as though I'd do just as well playing golf, or collecting odd beer bottles, or digging ditches as I do writing.

For over 25 years I have felt this way, discouraged and down, but I've kept on writing and making just enough sales to subsist and give me hope of better days.

Often I've thought that my family would have been better off if I'd taken a job as a counterman at a fast food place and devoted the same amount of time and energy to that job as I have to writing books.

At my age maybe even now I could get a job as a greeter at Wal-Mart perched on a stool at the door and saying, "Young Lady, turn around and go back home and put on some decent clothes. You can't come in here dressed like that".

Well, maybe being a Wal-Mart greeter is not my calling.

I'm too old to dig ditches; but I'd make a great geriatric bag boy at the grocery store...

Yesterday also, I received a royalty check for my first quarter book sales... Pathetic. Makes no business sense to keep on doing what I do.

A few years ago I sold foreign translation rights in a Third World Country to my book on prayer; that publisher paid me ten dollars (\$10) for what represented a couple of year's work in my life.

What man with any business sense at all would agree to a deal like that? Makes no sense.

I really don't know why I bother.

But bother I do.

And here (besides plain old vanity) is one of the reasons:

Yesterday I received one of those e-mail devotions by Charles Spurgeon, a 19th Century preacher in London, from my son's free devotional site at http://www.rdex.net/

Spurgeon mentions a Bible verse I'd never noticed before.

It talks about digging ditches.

Three kings attacked the land of Moab. Their armies got bogged down in a desert with no water in sight. Men and horses were perishing for lack of water. Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, sent for the Prophet Elisha and a musician.

And as the music played, this message came from the Lord:

"Make this valley full of ditches. For thus saith the Lord, Ye shall not see wind, neither shall ye see rain; yet that valley shall be filled with water, that ye may drink, both ye and your cattle and your beasts. And this is but a light thing in the sight of the Lord".

The army dug dry ditches in the dusty desert.

No wind came.

No cloud formed.

No rain showered down.

Yet the next morning, those ditches were filled with drinking water. The armies of three kings were saved. They went on to defeat Moab.

Spurgeon said, "Here was a case of human helplessness — not a drop of water could all the valiant men procure from the skies or find in the wells of earth. Thus often the people of the Lord are at their wits' end; they see the vanity of the creature, and learn experimentally where their help is to be found. Still the people were to make a believing preparation for the divine blessing — they were to dig the trenches in which the precious liquid would be held".

So, here I am writing stuff hardly anyone reads. Writing books no body buys. Typing on air. Digging

ditches in the desert without a cloud in sight.

Futile effort?

On some shallow level I do try to honor the name of Christ in my work; but honestly I can't remember the last time anyone said they'd been drawn to Christ because of my witness. Wasted energy? The game not worth the candle?

Spurgeon said we must by varied agencies, efforts and prayers make ourselves ready to be blessed. We must dig ditches in the desert to hold the cool water God will send.

His job is to supply the life-giving water; my job is to dig the ditches in the desert for Him to fill.

In his own day Spurgeon was called the Prince of Preachers. He said, "In a silent and mysterious manner the pools were filled. The Lord has His own sovereign modes of action: He is not tied to manner and time as we are, but doeth as He pleases among the sons of men. It is ours thankfully to receive from Him, and not to dictate to Him".



I'm reminded of an old hymn in which God says:

I will pour water on him who is thirsty, I will pour floods upon the dry ground. Open your heart to the gift I am bringing, While ye are seeking me, I will be found.

Meanwhile, here's John Cowart.

Digging another ditch.

Roll up your pant's legs!

Must gonna be a flood — Someday.

Friday, May 18, 2007 One Way

No.

Relax.

This is not a religious tract.

You see, when I awaken about 3 o'clock each morning, I stumble bleary-eyed out of the bedroom, click on the table lamp, drink a glass of juice, perk a pot of coffee, then sit down at my computer to begin my day's work of writing great literature and potentially best-selling books.

Lately, I've had trouble seeing my work.

No surprise there.

That early in the morning, as I said, I'm bleary-eyed.

Besides that, I have age related macular degeneration and my sight gradually fades.

Besides that, I'm dim.

Just plain not bright.

Three or four weeks ago when I clicked on that table lamp, the room did not brighten as much as it used too. Oh well, I figured, Just one of the vicissitudes of life and growing older.

Then, about two weeks ago, I clicked on the lamp, and things grew dimmer still. Maybe I should see the eye doctor (can't spell ophthalmologist), I thought.

Thursday morning when Beauty got up a tad early (she usually sleeps till 6 a.m. — it's daylight by then), she came out and found me hunched over my books squinting at ancient print.

"Why are you working like that? Why is it so dark in here?" she asked.

She soon explained that the table lamp has this three-

way bulb — 50 watts, 100 watts, and 150 watts.

You see where this is going?

Apparently, four weeks ago, one element, the 150 one, burned out; thus making the lamp a two-way lamp.

I didn't notice. Oh, I knew things were not as bright as they used to be, but I paid scant attention.

Then two weeks ago, another filament, the 100 watt one, burned out, making the lamp only one-way.

Again, I didn't really notice.

It just didn't register with me that my light was fading.

Had been for a long time.

Beauty changed the light bulb in my one way lamp and brightened my world again. In lots of ways, she always does that.

Thing is, this loss of light had happened so gradually and over such a long period of time, that it never dawned on me that the light I had was growing dimmer and dimmer and dimmer.

There may be a spiritual lesson here... but I don't see what it is.

Remember I've said earlier this week that the Evil Wizard of the host server for my on-line book catalog is forcing me to move to a new format?

"A Mandatory Migration," the Evil Wizard called it.

"Nothing to it. I'll help you. I have this magic template," he cackled.

Notice, that I'm the guy so high-tech that I can't master a three-way table lamp.

Now, imagine me trying to move ten book listings from one format to another beneath the malevolent curse of the Evil Wizard's mandatory migrating template.

I called in professional help, my friend and daughterin-law, Helen — who is a graphic artist and web designer. She got everything moved and designed a new look for my Bluefish Books site.

It looks neat.

Whereas before, my site background was green because that's the way it came and I didn't know how to change it, she actually made the site — get this — BLUE!

Who would have thought of that? My Bluefish Books site is now blue on a blue background with a blue banner.

What a clever girl!

Here's her latest photo:



So, yesterday afternoon, once Helen got it all set up and running, with links and graphics and everything, I went into the matrix to tweak the sidebar.

With the single touch of a button I, John Cowart, King Of The Geriatric Geeks, erased my own entire site.

Yes.

I did.

I said that too.

Helen, who must love my son dearly not to murder his father with an ax, says she will repair the damage I did today. She's on speaking terms with that wizard thingy.

I solemnly promised her that I would never ever, ever, ever to touch the matrix codes again never, ever again —

At least not until I've mastered a three-way light bulb first.

Sunday, May 20, 2007

Happy Girl

Saturday, Ginny and I packed the car with garden tools and headed to our youngest daughter's new home to clean the yard for her.

This is the first whole house Patricia has ever lived in by herself; she's been an apartment dweller until now. She fell in love with this new place and I helped her move in earlier in the week.

Now, the joys of home ownership have burst in her heart. She's thinking about bird feeders and fountains and flowers and park benches for her yard.

Her very own yard!

She envisions hosting family cook outs and chatting over the fence with neighbors and a cat curled on the hearth.

But first...

The place doesn't even have a hearth, but that's a minor detail.

It's been a long time since anyone who cared lived in that house. Discarded lumber, broken cinderblocks, tall weeds, a tumbled down fence, an outside faucet missing a handle, a shed that needs tearing down — that sort of thing needs to be faced first.

Ginny and I devoted our day to the weeds and door locks and carting trash out to the curb while Butterfly Patricia flitted here and there unpacking pictures, arranging potted plants, placing knickknacks in discovered niches — nesting.

It was such a joy to watch her.

Few things make a dad happier than to see a grown child coming into his or her own.

Sometimes the duty of a father is to make his kids happy; it's equally his duty to sometimes make them unhappy.

Saturday was one of those happy times and I relished it.

I can't remember seeing Patty so joyous since she was a tiny little girl on a Christmas morning.

What a delightful day — though I spent a significant portion of it shoveling up dog shit from the previous owner's pit bull.

That's the sort of things dad's do.

One of my best day's ever -- and I have a whole lot of happy days under my belt.

After coming through a very bad patch, my little girl is happy.

She's getting settled.

Thanks be to God.

Monday, May 21, 2007 Tea And Roses; A Root Man And A Stabbing

First important world news — 35 minutes ago, Reuters News Service broadcast that in London flames are engulfing the $Cutty\ Sark$

The ship looks to be a total loss.



The 137-year-old clipper ship, built by Scott & Linton in Dumbarton, was launched in 1869 on Scotland's River Clyde to make the run to China for the lucrative tea trade. It consistently set speed records as the fastest ship of its day. After the Suez Canal opened and steamers took over the oriental trade, in the 1920s the Cutty Sark became a

training ship; and in 1938, it became a nautical exhibit for London tourists.

Recently the Cutty Sark was undergoing restoration and preservation.

The fire apparently is gutting the wooden ship.

I find this news saddening and important because one of the first model ships I build as an adult was a Cutty Sark model given me by my middle son, Johnny, who presented it to me one Christmas along with a half-pint bottle of Scotch liquor named after the ship.

For three years I worked on the model (I even invented some special tools for knotting the intricate rigging) and when it was finally finished, in my eyes at least, I'd created a museum-quality model of the famous tea clipper.

I felt so proud of this model ship that when my daughter Jennifer got married, I presented that model to her and her groom as a wedding present as a special heirloom to be treasured.

They had this cat.

They said the vile beast attacked the model ship's rigging and destroyed it. The monster dragged the ship from a high shelf and ripped sail and rigging and hull to pieces. The kids trashed the wreck.

I've always wondered if the ship didn't suffer damage in one of the couple's squabbles ... but they said the cat did it.

I wonder if it was a cat or some other terrorist that set this morning's fire.

Oh well, this world was not made to last forever.

Nevertheless, I feel loss.

Why is it that it's easier to write about aggravating things than happy events?

Ginny and I spent Sunday pittering about in our garden. We planted several rose bushes the kids had given her for Mothers' Day.

Those two preceding lines of print represent one of the happiest days I can recall recently. Contentment and quiet joy don't lend themselves to journal postings even though days like that are the most important in a lifetime of days.

I'm just naturally given to bitching, I suppose.

Sunday afternoon, my elderly friend Bubba stopped by. He parked his bicycle and came back into the garden to sip tea with us. "Mr. John, I've got a lot on my mind," he said.

I tend to think of our neighborhood as a quiet, typical blue-collar area. One neighbor is a building contractor. Another an engineer. Several office workers live nearby. Two Navy guys, one active, the other retired. One openly homosexual couple and two others I imagine are. Racially mixed homes among the 53 houses in our circle. A smattering of little kids. A gaggle of teenagers who rock the block with their car stereos. A security guard. A couple of elderly shut-ins ... just typical, normal folks.

Saturday night one of Bubba's sons drove his girlfriend's car over to Bubba's house. The young man had been stabbed five times by said girlfriend and was bleeding heavily.

So, home to Daddy.

Bubba urged him to go to the emergency room but the young man refused because he has some outstanding police warrants and was afraid the hospital would call the cops about his wounds.

Bubba said the wounds were deep in his son's chest and arms. They needed stitches, too deep for the old man to bandage.

The boy got mad at him for not being able to tend the wounds and lay rubber speeding away to God only knows where.

Later, Bubba said the cops came to a house near his.

A neighbor lady had called for them to come arrest a root man.

"A root man?," I asked, "What's a root man".

"You know, a voodoo man. He give out roots and spells. He been putting on a black hat, black overcoat, and black boots and walking up and down in front of her house putting a hex spell on her".

Apparently, the reason provoking the spell involved cats, of course.

Her cats came into his yard

So he put on his black overcoat (in 85 degree weather) and black rig and walks back and forth in front of the cat owner's house muttering curses and scattering crushed egg shells as he walks.

The responding police officers refused to arrest the root man.

His only legal offense would be littering the street with crushed egg shells and that does not rank high among Jacksonville crime statistics on a Saturday night.

The lady grew abusive at the police officers for not taking away the root man, so abusive that they threatened to arrest her.

But if they'd arrested her, who would take care of her 60 cats?

Is that right?

Yes, I think Bubba said she owns 60 cats... or maybe it was 16.

I'm not sure.

The lady who takes care of the 60 cats is a different lady from the lady on the same street who cares for the 16 — I don't hear all that well and Bubba's conversation is sometimes hard for me to follow.

Like I said, Ginny and I live in a quiet, calm, typical Jacksonville neighborhood where we laugh and pray and love and worship and tend our own garden, mind our own business, and enjoy happy, warm Sunday afternoons sipping tea.

Here's the most recent AP Photo of what's left of the Cutty Sark this morning; officials say that with enough time and money, salvage may be possible:



Tuesday, May 22, 2007
If It's All The Same To You, Lord, I'd Rather
Have A Dream

All around me, both in the blog world and in the real world, people are moving to new places. Their lives are changing.

They move and change for lots of reasons. New jobs. Redeployment. Divorce. School graduation. Financial problems. New ministries. Budget cutbacks. Aging. Medical problems. — all these things force people to move and undergo changes.

A change is being forced upon me too.

I realized that yesterday in the three grocery stores I shopped at.

Three grocery stores in one day?

Yes. Long story, not worth telling, but I went to three different grocery stores yesterday.

And in one of them I realized that I'm due for a major change in lifestyle.

You see, I plan and a prepare for things — Boy Scout training sticks.

In Scouts I learned to plan a camp menu for cooking, taking into account the planned activities of a trip. To this day, 50 years later, I continue to do that.

Ginny and I shop for two weeks groceries at a time. Since I do most of the cooking during the week, I also do most of the shopping. Makes sense.

I use a form for menu planning.

First I get our wall calendar down and mark anticipated activities on my menu plan. Will we be going

to the library Tuesday and need quick finger food we can eat with our new books propped on the table as we read in happy companionship as we ignore eachother? Do we have a blood test that requires fasting beforehand? Do we expect visitors?

That sort of thing.

Then I list some favorite meals that fit into the calendar of activities. Then I write on the shopping list the ingredients I'd need for that particular meal.

By doing this, I only have to go to a grocery store, which I hate to do, once every two weeks.

But yesterday something changed.

I found that I can no longer see the products on the shelves.

My sight has faded till I can no longer read the prices.

Labels blur before my eyes.

My shopping days are over.

Upsetting, but no real surprise there. I've known for a long time that I have age related macular degeneration and that a day would come when my sight would fade. It's part of getting old and needs to be coped with.

But what has that to do with moving?

As I blundered around the supermarket aisles, I got to thinking about Joseph in the Bible ... actually, there are two different Josephs mentioned in the Bible.

There is Joseph the Patriarch, you know, the one with the coat of many colors; and there was Joseph the husband of the Virgin Mary.

The two Josephs lived hundreds of years apart but both faced a similar problem.

God wanted them each to move to a new place.

God wanted them each to go live in Egypt for a time.

Joseph the Patriarch got knocked on the head, stripped naked, thrown into a pit, sold as a slave, and transported to Egypt.

It was his brothers who did him dirt.

Relatives often motivate life changes.

The other Joseph, the husband of the Virgin Mary, God warned in a dream to pack up and move to Egypt. In the middle of the night, God sent him a dream.

In the case of each Joseph, God was saving lives, changing not only the individual man's life but the entire course of history.

Of course, Joe did not know that.

He only knew that disagreeable change was in the air.

Moving from one place to another. Changing locations. Changing habits. Suffering loss. Winning Lotto. Being mugged. Redeployed. Promoted. Fired. — any change, good or bad, brings stress.

We want to be among the movers and the shakers of this world, not the moved and the shook.

We want control.

We resist change, especially change we perceive as bad — like getting knocked on the head by relatives, thrown in a pit, sold as a slave, transported to a strange land.

God, on the other hand, constantly moves us to new experience.

He discourages stagnation.

If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things pass away. Behold, all things are become new.

I fight that.

I cling.

I'm scared of change.

I don't want to be changed.

I live in my comfort zone; God lives in His.

Why doesn't He leave me alone?

He's bad to me. He seems cruel. If He really loved me, He wouldn't bother me, He'd let well enough alone. My life would flow smooth.

I'd travel on with no change, no interference, no disruptions — straight into Hell.

When Joseph the Patriarch finally rose to become Pharaoh's CEO in Egypt, in the last chapters of Genesis,

he told his brothers, the guys who did him in, "Be not angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither; for God did send me before you to preserve life... God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now, it was not you that sent me hither, but God...

"Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people".

The Lord introduces change into our lives both to save us as individuals and to use us to save much people besides — that is not necessarily a pleasant experience for the usee. But we can trust that He know what He's doing.

After all, He's been God for a long time.

Can you believe that all this long mediation was sparked by my not being able to read a can of beans?

On a more serious note: Ginny is one of the patients who takes Avandia. Yesterday's news says that new studies show the prescription medicine increases a person's risk of dying of a heart attack by 64%.

She already had an appointment with a cardiologist scheduled in a couple of weeks because of something her primary care physician noticed in a recent exam. He said she's in no danger, it's just something he thought merited a closer look. Just in case.

We'll see what happens.

If some change is necessary, we'll deal with it as it happens...

And as far as any changes in our future... If it's all the same to You, Lord, I'd rather have a dream.

Wednesday, May 23, 2007 I Feel Useless

Tuesday, I did nothing.

Well, I did go out for breakfast with my friend Wes, and I caught up with laundry washing four loads of cloth, but I didn't do a lick of work.

Over breakfast Wes and I talked about Drama Queens in our respective families.

We concluded that if Jerry Springer ever wants to air a week-long, 24-hour-a-day marathon tv show, for material he'd have to look no farther than our families.

We could supply Dr. Phil with material for a season's worth of shows too — without having to look up a single phone number.

Later, while waiting for washer and dryer to do their thing, I finished reading a book on Florida archaeology and I started reading a murder mystery.

But, I didn't do a lick of work.

I let my work pile up. There's plenty of it: I'm a third of the way through editing the Ward Diary; the fire department history waits my attention; my next novel sits in a file drawer; a shopping bag full of clippings to be sorted haunts me; and other projects both larger and smaller will not get done unless I do them...

Yet I did nothing useful all day long.

So, I began to feel guilty. Shouldn't I be working? Doing something useful? Marching toward my goals? Writing great literature? Making a difference? Serving God, uplifting mankind, rescuing damsels in distress? Something useful?

After all, today is all we have. If I do nothing useful today, then that opportunity is gone forever. Water under the bridge.

Doesn't God want me to be engaged in worthwhile activities?

Not necessarily.

I go to thinking about King David. He lived a lot of days (I forget how old he was when he died). On one of those days he killed a giant. With a slingshot. How long did that take?

Zap!

Clunk.

Crash.

Ever afterwards, history regarded David as a giant killer.

Most days in his life, David tended a herd of a thousand sheep, either watching where he stepped or scraping off his shoes. He practiced harp. He endured rebellious teenage children. He squabbled with other kings. He wrote Psalms. He peeked over his balcony to watch a naked woman in her shower... But, he is most well known for what he did on one single day out of a lifetime of days.

And in Scripture God calls David, "A man after My own heart".

I feel useless.

But, I got to thinking that perhaps today I am lying fallow. That means... What does that word mean? I've heard it all my life but I'm not clear on the meaning.

I looked it up and it's a farmer's word referring to a "field left unplowed and unseeded during a growing season; cultivated land that is undeveloped but potentially useful; a basic way to improve soil fertility".

In crop rotation, the farmer plants that field one year, then he lets it lie fallow for a year, then the third year he plants it with a different crop.

This process enriches the soil.

While the land lies fallow, underneath the dirt earthworms do their work to the glory of God while on the surface thistles grow and birds nest. Foxes and rabbits and badgers die in their burrows and their decay fertilizes the earth. Snakes move among the weeds catching mice. The land rests. Nature takes its course.

In useless times, invisible stuff is going on.

Good stuff.

The field comes back stronger than before because it has lain fallow for a season.

Not useless.

Fallow.

While all around me others are growing and thriving and bearing fruit and winning souls and proclaiming Christ and getting things done and moving mountains -- here I am lying fallow, undeveloped, unseeded, unneeded, resting for the moment, awaiting future use.

Nothing wrong with that.

Thursday, May 24, 2007 Romance In Olden Days

Yesterday I resumed editing the diary of Samuel Ward, a translator of the 1611 King James Bible.

Between May 25, 1595, and July 1, 1632, Dr. Ward kept a diary in which he records his sins and reminds himself of God's blessings. Existing fragments of the diary contain his accounts of academic struggles and squabbles at Cambridge University and various aspects of church politics.

As I worked on the manuscript, I observed two interesting things: one, an oddity of antique grammar; the other, a romantic tragedy.

I noticed that Ward often said things like, I heard Dr. Fudd his sermon about the plague lately visited upon us.

At first I thought that a period should be inserted after the word *Fudd* and that the words *His sermon* should begin a new sentence.

But that construction made less and less sense.

Finally, I realized that I'm dealing with a possessive. The diary should read, I heard Dr. Fudd's sermon about the plague visited upon us.

Whereas we would say, I kicked Joe's dog, Ward would have said, I kicked Joe his dog showing that the dog belonged to Joe. The apostrophe S is a contraction of his.

Which reminds me of a joke:

"What did you learn in school today," the mother asked her Second Grader.

"Teacher showed us how to make babies," the child said.

Irate, the mother demanded, "Just what did that teacher tell you about how to make babies"!

"It's easy. When you have a baby, all you have to do is change the Y to I and add ES".

So much for grammar.

Ward's diary also reveals that the course of true love never has run smooth.

Ward once contemplated courting a young lady. He

wanted to propose but worried, tormenting himself, that she might reject his advances. He never does give her name but refers to her only as The Party. As an intensively introspective man addicted to listing the pros and cons of everything, Ward made the following entry in his diary on January 6, 1621:

CONSIDERATIONS

Jan. 6, 1621. 1. It will be a great disgrace, so to be entertained, and yet to have a former purpose, to reject. 2. A want of discretion or love, or both, in not signifying before our coming that the Party she could not condescend to thee mayre (marry). 3. The noise of our entertainment will make men brute abroad successful proceedings when all is to the contrary, and augment my disgrace. 4. It is a great private check not to be respected in my first love.

Considerations to support in case all go backward: 1. The Party worldly-minded. 2. May have no child. 3. May be not forward in religion. 4. Never betrayed any Τεχμεριου (sign) of entering affection, but rather, at the last meeting, the contrary. 5. I am improvided of many necessaries which will be expected, house, household stuff, etc. 6. She ...(lacunae in manuscript).

Other considerations of an higher nature: 1. Romans 8, Diligentibus Deum, omnia cooperantur in bonum, etiam •frustratis votorum. (To those who love God all things work together for good even when disappointed in their vows) 2. Consider whether God do call thee to that state, considering how thou failest, notwithstanding thy orderly proceedings. 3. This disaffecting in The Party is from a special providence of God, and therefore (I have) great reason to rest content therewith. 4. It is God that hath command of hearts and affections.

Observations: 1. My impotency to brook the least thing that distastes me. Alas my great weakness. 2. My dejected mind upon any cross accident. 3. How necessary it is in humility to acknowledge my great imbecillity and weakness in bearing any adverse accident. Also my great imprudence and indiscretion in managing even little affaires. 4. How necessary to have perpetual dependence upon God, both for prudence to manage the least affaire, and patience to bear the least misfortune.

Yes, the young lady missed a real catch there.

And Ward consoled himself with more academic studies.

Maybe instead of treating this material as a religious and historical document, I should revise the diary into a Harlequin Romance.

Friday, May 25, 2007 Almost Summer

Watch out world, Maggie is on the road now!

Thursday my daughter-in-law and I went to the State Tag Agency and transferred ownership of my old car to my granddaughter. This was her last day of classes and she can now spend the summer driving. I'm happy for her.

Lord, help her to never get hurt in this car and help her to never hurt anyone else with it.

In the afternoon, my friend Wes dropped by for a late lunch. He'd just come back from downstate visiting a relative he had not seen in ages. The lady gave him a box of pipes for me: one is broken, three are drugstore pipes, and three are superior quality briars. They all smoke cool and smooth. I'm delighted! Thanks Wes and Bobbie.

My eldest daughter and her ex went to court today where the judge told them to go to their separate rooms, leave each other alone, not bicker anymore, and play nice. Same thing I've said since they were little kids.

As the Scripture says, "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men".

Helen is working on my Bluefish Books site and hopes to have it finished and ready to sell thousands of my books by next week — stay tuned to this station.

Ginny is taking today off work to add a day to our long Memorial Day weekend. We plan to lay around the pool and sip iced tea and read mysteries and talk, love, garden, snack and nap — and clean pipes — all weekend.

A good start to our own peaceful summer.

Saturday, May 26, 2007

An Early Morning Conversation At The Cowarts

Got up at my usual 3 a.m. this morning and began work editing the Ward Diary. I ran into several places where the manuscript I'm working with transliterates Koine Greek words and phrases into English letters.

I feel my edition would be more authentic were I to restore such words and phrases back into the Greek alphabet which Ward used.

Went to my book shelf where I keep — Agh! Make that kept — my Greek Testament and grammar books. They are not there!

I did it myself.

Months (years?) ago I gave those book to somebody, perhaps a ministerial student, or maybe to Wes, or even to Donald.

I need my Berry's Interlinear! I need it now!

I do not remember enough Koine Greek to restore the Ward text without authoritative backup.

Who did I give those books to?

Gray and yellow cover for the *Interlinear* and the two volume set of Alfred's *Septuagint*, green cover with no book jacket for the Nestle's .*Testament*. I think I had a copy of *Textus Receptus* too. And a Greek/English dictionary in a red cover... I see the books vividly in my mind, but I can't remember who I gave them to.

Ginny woke up at 5:30 and staggered out in to the kitchen for coffee.

As she poured, I explained my dilemma to her.

"I know," I said. "I'll call Donald and Wes and see if either one of them has a copy of Berry's".

As I reached for the phone to call, Ginny said, "John, you can't call people at 5:45 on a Saturday morning about a book. You just can't".

"I suppose you're right. They may not be up yet. What am I going to do about those transliterations? Where do you think I can get hold of an Interlinear?"

"I like chocolate," she said.

Tuesday, May 29, 2007 The Diary Of A Peevish Man

A bout of depression has been creeping up inside me all this long weekend.

Nothing specific that I can pinpoint triggers it; I go through these periodically and it is only in the past few years that I have come to recognize the onset; but the symptoms are typical.

I get peevish.

My mantra becomes, "Failed Again".

Nothing pleases me.

And I snap at Ginny over things which have nothing to do with her.

I feel discouraged and think "What's The Use" about every undertaking.

Also certain masculine functions get disrupted. I berate myself constantly. I feel angry at God and the world in general. I'll yell at the tv news announcers instead of letting their moronic pronouncements flow by. And I lack energy or enthusiasm for any project; every thing seems futile to me, and past accomplishments feel empty.

I'm such a fun guy to live with at such times.

All that's a fine state for a Christian isn't it?

However, symptoms are not sin. And frustrations are not faith.

Jesus saves sickies but salvation does not always give us glitter.

I started not to post in my diary this morning because I'm in such a downer mood, but that would not be honest. These pages I hope reflect one minor Christian's life and times accurately with as little glossing over as possible. And it would not help any future reader (that kid in the attic I've mentioned before) if I let bad times pass in silence.

We place our trust in Jesus because He is true, not only because it makes us feel good. If He were not true, then it would be nonsense to believe in Him even if such belief gave us an emotional lift. Ginny and I spent most of the weekend doing major work in our garden. I refurbished the jungle path in the wayback and cleared out a corner of the yard that I have not worked on in three years.

You'd think such heavy physical work would be therapeutic for a depressed man. Not for me.

I actually snapped at Ginny over the placement of a bucket of sand!

What would Dr. Phil make of that?

Of course, nothing tops off a pity-party (I understand that depression is displaced anger directed at myself instead of at outside stressors) be that as it may, but nothing tops it off like a shopping trip.

You know a shopping trip on a crowded holiday, 50% off sale, the kind of trip Jesus went on when —

"The devil, taking Him up into a high mountain, shewed unto Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said unto Him, 'All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will give it. If thou therefore wilt worship me, all shall be thine!"

I didn't know they build WalMarts up on high mountains. Probably gave it a fancy name like Mountaintop Mall.

Anyhow, Jesus told the devil something like, "This is my right side. This is my left side. This is my front side. And you know which side you can kiss".

In the King James translation that's rendered, "Get thee behind me. satan".

And Jesus said, "For it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and Him only shalt thou serve".

Anyhow, Ginny and I visited two stores where gaudy goods and glory from all the kingdoms of the world spread in vast array before us. Treasures from China, Ecuador, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Germany — none of it in my size.

Ginny bought some curtains and cloth stuff; I hunted the stores for some cup hooks.

Cup hooks were the only reason I went to the store. (I wanted them to hang some bird houses under the deck

rail).

Ever tried to find some 89 cent cup hooks in a shopping mall?

Simple little cup hooks?

I could have ordered a new deck built by professional contractors easier than I could buy four cup hooks!

Mountaintop Mall indeed!

I'll use rusty nails.

Dumb birds deserve no better. They won't know the difference.

Yes, I'm a bit peevish.

On a happier note: after reading my last post, Donald and Helen called to lend me a copy of a Greek Testament. I will be able to transcribe the passages I need this afternoon.

Then tomorrow, I get to go to Dr. Oz again, for him to probe my prostate cancer. It that doesn't lift my spirits and put me on my tiptoes, nothing will.

Wednesday, May 30, 2007 The Bible Drove My Computer Crazy!

Tuesday I resumed work editing the Diary of Samuel Ward (1577 – 1639).

Ward wrote his diary by candlelight with a goose quill pen.

Trouble is, that although Ward was a translator of the King James Bible which was first published in 1611, in 1628 when he preached a sermon that I'm editing, the rascal didn't use his own translation!

Oh, no. He reverted to quoting from the Geneva Bible, an earlier translation first published in 1570 and favored by English Puritans.

I'm convinced that Ward did this solely to drive me nuts.

That's because all my reference books use the variations and phrases found in the King James Version. Thus quotes like "our hearts burned within us" are rendered, "Our spirits burned within us". Not a big difference unless I'm trying to pinpoint the specific

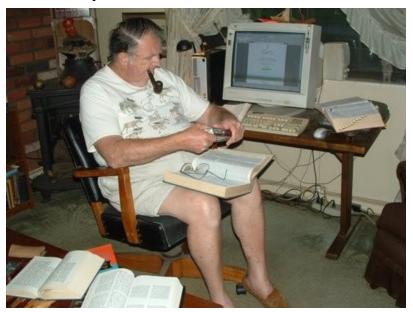
location of this phrase.

And although I am not a scholar, I do attempt to be accurate in citing references.

Ward also uses phrases from the original Greek, and knowing less Greek than most people, I have to chase these phrases down ad nauseam. Because I am no scholar, I need to be all the more careful in handling God's Word and quoting from it.

Besides that, I'm an obsessive cuss.

Look at my work desk:



Open reference books, concordances, Greek/Hebrew lexicon, English dictionaries and grammar books, Several Bible translations, etc. litter the area around my computer.

I use these books to check and recheck things.

Of course, if I had to rescue one Bible study reference book from a fire, it would be a common ordinary English dictionary. Nothing helps me more in my devotions and studies than looking up ordinary words, words I think I already know the meaning of, in an ordinary dictionary.

The results surprise me.

The scene in the photo Ginny took earlier this evening shows the typical state of my desk.

Much of my life centers around books and the computer — a volatile mixture.

Here I worked, immersed in tracking down a Greek phrase this afternoon, when my computer went insane.

Anytime I'd move the cursor, five or six lines of text would be highlighted. Any time I clicked, right or left, those lines would be copied again and again. Then when I tried to move the mouse wheel to scroll up or down a page, the text would jump to 400 times its normal size, but nothing would scroll!

I tried undo.

Nothing.

I tried escape.

Nothing changed.

I saved and filed.

My desktop appeared. So I clicked on a different file to see if the insanity had spread. Ha! The file I clicked on was instantly copied six times on my desktop!

I shut down my computer and restarted it.

Same result. Only now it copied any highlighted file eight or ten times and would not un-highlight them.

Like rabbits they multiplied on my desktop.

"Bet I picked up some fatal virus the last time I browsed a porno site," I thought.

"Be sure your sins will find you out".

What is wrong with this machine?

I've never seen one do that before.

I tried this and that using all my computer skills for 45 minutes with increasing frustration then called my son Donald, a computer network administrator.

I described the problem.

He had me restart. He had me look for new desktop icons. He questioned me about each step I'd taken. He suspected that I'd dropped pipe ashes or tobacco flakes on my keyboard. Again.

(He once gave me one of those miniature scuba diving tanks with compressed air to blow ashes our of my

keyboard — The Surgeon General warns that tobacco flakes and pipe ashes in the keyboard may harm your computer).

Donald questioned if my mouse button was stuck?

Does the mouse wheel roll?

Are any keys stuck?

I looked intently.

"Well," I said, ".... There is this one key... But it's not exactly stuck"

"What's wrong with it?"

In the photograph of me at my desk, did you notice my open Bible under my elbow?

As I piled books around my computer searching for the exact wording of a passage of Scripture, I piled my Bible on top of a concordance in such a way that the open cover of my Bible pressed down on the Control Key.

I had not noticed.

Any other key I touched anywhere was Control + Any key = Monitor Blinking Insanity.

Bill Gates recommends that you hardly ever do this.

This happened about 3 in the afternoon. I'd been working on this stuff since 3 a.m. I decided to knock off work and go swimming.

I moved my Bible, a dangerous book. But left all the other books piled where they were for tomorrow's work.

Samuel Ward used a goose quill pen to write his diary.

Maybe I should too.

Thursday, May 31, 2007 This Couple Wanted My Bed

Yesterday Dr. Oz told me that my prostate cancer progresses as expected; the PSA readings continue to inch up.

We'll see what happens.

After the doctor's appointment Ginny and I ran some errands; and as we drove here and there, we talked about the progress of the disease and especially its effect on our sex life.

That got us laughing over remembered fun incidents from our distant past up to the present.

After she went in to work late, I continued thinking along those lines and I remembered a turning point in my life back in 1970 when I drove an 18-wheeler over the road as an independent truck driver.

The company I drove for played ping pong with me all across the nation. One day loading in Maimi or New York, the next unloading in Richmond and loading for Dallas, then from there to Chicago, to New Orleans, to Los Angeles, to Albuquerque, to Denver, to Boston... on and on wherever the white lines led.

I'd be away from home months at a time.

The company dispatcher and his wife, Bob and Judy, lived in Indianapolis, middle of the country. A compassionate couple, they invited any drivers passing through Indy to sleep over at their house, get a shower, relax, eat a home-cooked meal. Maybe grab a few beers.

They opened their home continually even though they only had one spare bedroom.

I got there early one Saturday and snagged the only spare bed. A bunch of other drivers just happened to be in town later that same evening. Six or eight men camped on the living room sofa or spread sleeping bags on the floor.

I had the only bed until...

Just before dawn Sunday morning, another driver shook me awake and explained his problem. Out drinking, he'd met this young lady in a bar. She was willing but insisted only in a bed — she was a girl with scruples.

"Be a good guy and let us have the bed," the driver said.

Wanting to be a good guy, I got up and let the couple retire behind the closed door of the bedroom.

OK, What can you do early Sunday morning when a batch of sleeping truck drivers litter the living room floor?

I decided to shave and walk to a church I'd noticed down the block.

Just because I didn't want to wake other people and I

had nothing better to do.

Turned out that the church, which I'd never heard of before, had invited a guest speaker, a prominent local attorney, to deliver a talk that morning. He'd never been in that church before either.

He spoke about Christian Vulnerability using the Scripture where God says, "My strength is made perfect in weakness".

He pointed out that we tend to magnify biblical heroes, strong men like Sampson who killed a thousand Philistines with the jaw bone of an ass, or David who brought down a giant with a sling stone, or Daniel who braved the lions, or Paul who fought wild beasts at Ephesus.

These were great men... yet God says, "My strength is made perfect in weakness".

When we act at our strongest, people say, "What a hero! How strong he is".

When we make ourselves vulnerable for Christ's sake, observers can only say, "Look what God has done with such a puny instrument!"

After the service as people strolled out the door, they shook the speaker's hand and mouthed platitudes about enjoying his sermon.

But my own heart was strangely warmed.

I liked to think of myself as a strong man, a potential hero, but deep inside I knew I was faking it. My strength was a mask, a wall I'd built to keep anyone from knowing my weaknesses,. my fears, my shames, my emptiness..

Yes, I'd won karate tournaments and begun to study aikido. Yes, I drove a big rig alone all over the nation solving any problem alone on my own initiative in those days before the cell phone was invented, when there was no one to call for help. Yes, I'd done social work in the midst of burning cities and rioting looters.

But I knew that inside I am a weak man. Weak as a kitten in the rain, proud as a strutting movie hero. What a pathetic combination.

I stopped and drew the speaker aside. We went out for coffee and talked for hours about being vulnerable for Christ's sake, about the sin of pride of heart, about pretending to be tougher than I really am, about building walls and wearing masks.

And about what it means to be a Christian man relying not on our own strength but on God's.

In our conversation, I felt God touch my heart in such a way that I became willing to stop pretending, to be my real self, and to let God do whatever He chose to do with the sorry material He had to work with -- me.

The attorney's name was Donald Duck — "A perfectly respectable name before about 1937," he said.

He was a corporate attorney specializing in labor relations. I suspect he was as wealthy as Midas. He dressed in tailored suits and here I was a truck driver with no better clothes to wear than my company uniform.

Yet, In Christ, we became fast friends.

No matter when I called him, from wherever in the country, he instructed his secretaries to put my calls through.

Months after we met, when I happened to be in the city again passing through, Don Duck asked me to speak to an assembly of society people at a meeting in another attorney's home.

Attorneys, physicians, bankers, architects, elected officials, labor leaders, corporate executives, glittering women in evening gowns — scared me to death!

The Lord said that if we follow Him, we may stand before kings, but He never said we'd stand before them as equals!

But I gave it a try — I put my trucker's uniform in the dry cleaners to wear to the assembly.

I tried to memorize my talk.

As best I can remember, it went something like this:

Hello. My name is John.

I drive a truck.

My truck is 44 feet long and eight feet wide. My legal loaded weight is 76 tons. I drive between 300 and 600 miles every day. Load the truck all day. Drive all night. (If you're with the Federal Trade Commission, I never said

any of that).

To stay awake on the road I drink a lot of coffee.

A whole lot of coffee.

You know they say there's a time and a place for everything, So here I am driving down the road after drinking cup after cup of coffee... The time has come and I'm looking for a place.

I see a sign says, "Rest Area — 40 miles".

Forty miles is a long way when the time came ten miles back!

Then there appears another sign, "Rest Area - 25 Miles".

Good. I can squeeze it in enough to make another 25 miles.

You know, the whole world is looking for rest. People are tired. They are weary. They see a Christian and hear us talk about living with purpose, life with meaning, peace of mind, the joy of the Lord, and they long for all that good stuff.

They see us as signboards saying Rest Area Ahead.

But on the road, as the white lines pass and pass, I see another big green sign beside the Interstate: "Rest Area — Next Right — No Facilities"!

Facilities is the one thing I want most at that moment.

What happens when people get close to you?

Jesus said, "Come unto me all ye that labor and I will give you rest".

The world comes to see us. They're weary. They've been anticipating, hoping for a Rest Area all their lives. When they get to me, when they get to you, do they find ... No Facilities?

When I wear my company uniform, it's a sign that people can expect a certain level of behavior and service. When I name myself as a Christian, people expect no less.

We either live for Christ, or we live for something less.

To the world, we are Rest Area — or we are No Facilities.

You know, the one thing I'm scared of most as a truck driver is ... going home.

That's right. I drive over the road in blizzards of snow, in thick fog and pouring rain and heavy traffic. I've seen hellacious wrecks. Once saw a man's decapitate head laying in the road beside his car, his kids' toys scattered all over the Interstate.

I never want to be part of such a wreck.

But the thing scariest to me is going home.

While I am still a great way off, far across the country, I began to imagine how Ginny, my wife, will receive me when I get home.

One driver I knew went home to Chicago for Christmas. He carried a trunk full of toys and presents for his wife and kids. He parked on the street and ran into the house.

It was empty.

They'd moved.

While he was gone his wife had met another man. She packed kids and all the furniture, turned off the gas and electricity and moved away. No body was home when the driver got there.

So as I drive home, I get to thinking about things like that. Has Ginny met a better man? Have her feelings for me changed? Can things be the same between us? Will she even be there when I get back?

For mile after mile after mile through the night I imagine it this way and that way... and it scares me. What will I find when I get home after being in a far country?

You know, whenever I get to thinking about God, I feel that same kind of scared.

Here I am in a far country, been away from Him a long time. Done things He would never approve of. Hardly given Him a thought. What would happen if I were to go Home?

What if He fusses at me? What if He turns His face away?... What if He rejects me? What if He says, "Cowart, you've had your chance. Too late now. Go away"?

What if... What if I go to God... and there's nobody

there?

An empty house. No heat. No lights. No water.

Nobody, nothing there at all?

Jesus told the story of the Prodigal Son. You know it. Kid takes his share of the cash, leaves home, travels to a far country, lives like a pig. Comes to himself and decides to go back to his Father.

The Bible says that "When he was yet a great way off" the Father saw him, ran to meet him, hugged him, gave him clean clothes, put a gold ring on his finger, killed the fatted calf, threw a party. Welcomed him Home...

"When he was a great way off".

"A great way off".

"Way off".

When I get home, as soon as Ginny hears the air breaks on my truck, she jumps up and runs out in her night dress, throws herself into my arms, hugs me, squeezes me, presses herself against me, showers me with kisses, leads me inside and fries chops, my favorite meal. She kneels and pulls off my boots. She mixes gin and strawberry soda, my favorite drink.... And well, she does other things too, but you get the picture.

She welcomes me Home.

So, what's the most important thing I have to say tonight?

If you've been in another country. Even if you've settled there. If you feel far off from God. If you feel the slightest inclination, the slightest drawing, to return Home...

But, if you fear that you have screwed up too bad, if you've done things, if things have been done to you... Even if you fear that you will come to God and nobody will be there...

Not to worry.

Fear not.

He sees you even when you are a great way off and He runs to greet you.

Jesus said, "He that cometh unto me, I will in no wise

cast out".

Come to Jesus.

You will find welcome.

You will find rest.

You will find Home.

On a side note: When our youngest son was born, we named him Donald, after Donald Duck.

Although Ginny & I have been married 39 years now, and although instead of gin and strawberry soda I'm now likely to drink decalf coffee, and although our ardor is tempered a bit with time and familiarity, Ginny and I are still just as glad to see eachother, same as back then.

Thanks be to God.

Sunday, June 03, 2007 A Great Rainy Day

Saturday, Tropical Storm Barry dropped about four inches of rain breaking a 16-month-long drought here in Jacksonville.

It rained all day.

The frogs in the ditch behind our house sing praises.

The grass in our lawn lift up blades in thanksgiving.

The trees of the forest and herbs of the field join in thanking their Creator for hearing their prayer and breaking the drought.

With all this rain on the earth, soon our garden will break forth with thousands and thousands of ... mosquitoes — and maybe a few flowers too.

Ginny and I didn't even bother to dress. We lay long abed reading, talking, napping, loving, snuggling, praying, planning, relaxing, listening, hearing rain on the roof till late after noon.

We went out to Kosta's for a giant salad then browsed in an antique store, then came home to lounge on the sofa watching back-to-back episodes of *Dr. Who* (Donald & Helen loaned us the whole first season on dvd; we'd never seen the program before).

A great day.

Monday, June 04, 2007 Unglued on Glue Day

Last week I dropped a favorite pipe on the sidewalk and broke off the stem.

Then there was the statue of the coal miner made out of genuine black coal, a souvenir of West Virginia, which one of the kids was handling (when I'd said not to) and broke.

And the two broken lamps, and the plastic dinosaur skeleton which I use as a pipe rack, and a garden light and a saucer and a cup with a broken handle. And on and on.

For weeks I've let all these broken things pile up on my workbench intending to fix them *someday*.

So Sunday afternoon, I cleared a work area and began gluing things back together. I make such a mess of things when I open a tube of glue that I get the stuff all over myself, on my clothes, in my hair, on my glasses.

I find it wise just to designate a Glue Day and get all my repair projects done at once. Sunday was Glue Day and I got to thinking...

About three or four weeks ago, a young lady whose life is going terribly wrong in a number of areas told me, "Everything's broken, John. Everything's broken".

I had to agree with her.

Evervthing is broken. Look at the news. Look at your job. Look at traffic. Look at marriages all around. Look at politics. Look at law enforcement. Look at fraud in sports. Look at tv. Look at business. Look at education. Look at healthcare. ...

Everything is broken.



I THINK I LOOK FOR MEANING IN THE WRONG PLACES SOMETIMES.

We live in a fallen world that is still falling.

I wonder why hasn't the whole world just come unglued?

What... ... I can't think of what to say...

Hebrews 1:3 says that while He was nailed to the cross, Jesus was the "Upholding all things by the world of His power" in other words, He keeps us all from becoming unglued...

I don't know where I'm going with this post. Too damn early to be profound... I give up...

Tuesday, June 05, 2007 Religious Tomfoolery and Holy Bitterness

Yesterday, my friend Wes almost choked on his waffle laughing during our breakfast at Dave's Diner.

We'd been talking about how, over time, organizations move away from the original vision of their founder. This is true of both secular and religious organizations.

Wes complained that I have a cynical outlook on organized religion (as though he doesn't). So I remarked that perhaps I should write a commentary on the Bible.

That's when Wes choked.

He got to laughing so hard at the idea of my writing a biblical commentary that the waitress ran over to see if he was ok.

The thought of that frail little girl trying to do a Heimlich on a 300+ pound man send me into spasms of laughter too.

When he recovered from his mirth attack, I began worrying the idea of writing a commentary or theology book..

"The main problem is," I said, "That all the good titles have been taken already".

This set us to laughing again as we imagined titles for my magnum opus, which would be either a Bible Commentary or a book of systematic theology. Back in medieval times, Thomas Aquinas snagged the title *Summa Theologica* for his set of books (which run five thick volumes in the concise edition). My Latin is a bit rusty but I think his title means *All There Is To Know About Theology: The Study Of God*.

Wes suggested I could call my commentary *Some Theology - Sort Of.*

There are already books of comprehensive theology on the market; perhaps a good title for my book would be Incomprehensible Theology.

In the early 1500s, John Calvin wrote his theology down in his massive tomes, *Institutes Of The Christian Religion*. With weight training I might be able to lift his book.

Since that title is taken, Wes suggested my book could be called *Christianity For The Institutionalized*.

This set us off laughing again.

Customers at other tables stared.

Dave's is a tolerant place; they have not put us out yet.

We came back to my house to smoke our pipes and talk. I have resumed work editing the diary of Samuel Ward, a translator of the King James Bible. Wes helped me translate some Greek phrases from the Ward Dairy. Wes is fluent in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin and he has a smattering of Arabic also. He's a registered member of some sort of International Society of Really Really Smart People.

I'd been trying to solve the linguistic problems in the Ward diary myself in spite of the fact that I hardly recognize the Greek alphabet.

Immediately Wes identified my problem: Samuel Ward sometimes used koine Greek in his quotes; other times, he used classical Greek.

I should have noticed that.

HA!

(I had only the vaguest idea that there was a difference).

Ward, a royal chaplain and one of the translators of

the King James Bible, sprinkled Greek phrases throughout his diary because, to him, these phrases made things clearer. He even made jokes in Greek and expected his readers to laugh at the punch line.

For instance, he speaks of some Christians as "speaking fire, but living water".

And he frets over preachers who feed their people, "ηδυσματι και ουκ εδεσμασι"..

In English letters that's "hêdusmati kai ouk edesmasi"

See the pun?

It means they feed the people, "sprigs of garden mint instead of steaks of roasted meat".

Isn't that a hoot?

If Samuel Ward had been with us at Dave's for breakfast, the three of us would definitely been evicted for rowdiness.

As Wes and I worked on Greek phrases, we realized that we were engaging in petty sin.

Wes, scheduled to work a late shift today, remarked that when coworkers asked him how he'd spent his time off, he'd say, "Oh, I spent the morning translating some Greek phrases for my friend John".

"That will really impress them," he said, "I'll get to feel so big. Smarter than I really am".

I admitted that it would be possible for me to edit the Ward diary without using a single phrase of Greek. I'm handling the text this way because I also want to feel big.

To impress readers.

To come across as an intellectual.

To feel superior,

Smug,

Erudite.

Snotty.

How petty and how pathetic.

Even faith, even witnessing, even sincere religion can provide a corrupt man with an occasion for sin. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; Who can know it?"

In one place Samuel Ward cautioned his readers against ιεραπίκρα, *Hierapicra*, — holy bitterness.

He observes that in some of us religion works like a clock with a broken main spring. That on the face of things, the dial shows the time, but it's stuck. Twice a day, it reads the correct time, but it never moves on.

Ward says this state produces "holy bitterness", a devotion more to religious trivia than to God. An inclination to controversy over tantalizing theological minutiae.

For instance, such folks may feel great concern about how the world began (and those wicked evolutionists) or great interest in the Last Days (Battle of Armageddon) — Things we can do nothing about — but little interest in expressing a living faith here and now in the present day.

Involvement in such theological controversies tends to sour people and make us bitter, dower, harsh, stern, foreboding and forbidding.

What a sad state.

But that's what the world sees.

The joy of the Lord turned sour.

But, who am I to judge another's servant.

I do not enjoy the company of Christians who are inclined to holy bitterness but it is far better for me to tend my own soul than to evaluate another person's.

I may judge what I see as that guy's religion when all I am really seeing is the state of his ulcer or his liver or his marriage.

Before I write off that gaunt old woman's lack of joy as the product of defective faith... If I'd been caring for an invalid child hand and foot for 35 years, maybe I would not be a religious butterfly either.

Yes, Samuel Ward, who was known 500 years ago as a Puritan, a people not known for their flightiness, has a lot to say to John Cowart to day.

He should be editing me, not me him.

And he would not need a word of Greek to do it.

After Wes left, an old lady down the street asked me to fix a flat tire for her... Laughing, thinking, praying, working, studying God's Word, fixing a flat tire for an invalid -- it's all part of the same thing.

Thanks be to God.

Thursday, June 07, 2007 Mostly About Ginny

When Ginny undressed at the cardiologist's office for her exam Tuesday, some vile rascal stole her bra.

I tried to convince her that it was either the EKG technician or Dr. Stray himself that took the garment, but in a fit of giggles she fished it out of my pocket.

That's the trouble of being married to the same woman for close to 39 years, she knows me all too well.

Her heart murmur turned out to be nothing significant — "May not develop into anything for a number of years," Dr. Stray said. Nevertheless, the waiting time, hospital parking, and tension about the exam depleted us both.

However, the day spent around the hospital gave us a chance to talk and remember happy days.

At breakfast, we reflected that it was probably 40 years ago this month that we first met. I have to use the word *probably* because neither one of us can remember first meeting the other. We came to know eachother gradually and are still getting acquainted.

For us, it was definitely not a case of love at first sight.

We were each part of a young people's group at a church serving the poor during the riots of the late 1960s.

I think Ginny was a member of that church; I wasn't.

After a day of doing soup kitchen sort of service, one evening eight or ten of the group went out for burgers. Happenstance seated this quite girl next to me. I began drawing stick figures on my paper place mat. Without a word, she took a pencil out of



her purse and began adding to my doodles.

Here's a photo, taken in 1967 or '68, of that brazen young woman who drew stickmen on my placemat:

We'd both been active in the group for months without having previously noticed eachother. Once we finally became aware of the other's presence, things took off.

My first marriage had failed. So when I met Ginny I was definitely seriously damaged goods, an emotional basket case. That this young lady could see anything worthwhile in me at all amazed me. I still can't understand what she sees in me; that's a continuing source of wonder.

Ginny sewed her own wedding dress:



I took a job as an over-the-road truck driver. During months of good weather Ginny traveled with me and we toured the nation living three feet apart 24 hours a day. We learned how to maintain private spaces in the midst of togetherness.

We learned to say, "I love you forever, but I can't stand you right this minute".

We visited museums, attended rodeos, joined street dances, visited national parks, read poetry in barren warehouse parking lots and worked and worked and worked.

Once a government inspector hassled me about a minor detail in some shipping manifests. I tried to placate the man but he grew more and more abusive until... Ginny came out of the truck brandishing a broom and chased the tyrant to his car threatening to jam it in an unpleasant place. He fled in terror.

"Good Heavens! I've married Boadicea! A real harpy!," I thought. Never have I seen such pure wrath. Where is that quiet, gentle girl I married?

Ginny has a keen sense of right... and she is a mite protective of me.

Here's a photo of her with a puffball in Montana back around 1970:



During the foul weather of winter months, Ginny stayed in an apartment here in Jacksonville while I continued working on the road.

This led to problems.

One vile winter I ended up with a shipment in Colorado Springs. Stuck over a snowy freezing weekend, I wandered aimlessly downtown. A young woman accosted me asking if I wanted a "date", the popular euphemism among prostitutes back then.

I felt really flattered.

"Thank you, but no, Mam," I said reluctantly.

"Are your sure?" she said with an alluring smile.

I was not at all sure. This woman incredibly appealed to me; seldom in my whole life have I felt desire surge so strong, such a pull of temptation.

My Christian faith did not save me.

My love for Ginny did not save me.

My virtue did not save me.

What saved me from taking that lady back to my motel room was the fact that some of her friends happened by and she went off with them leaving me alone and frustrated in the falling snow.

Later that evening I called Ginny (boy did we have long distance phone bills back then!) and we talked over what had almost happened. She revealed that the previous week she had experienced the same kind of temptation when she met a young sailor in the park across from the library. She said that apart from the timely arrival of her bus, she might have been more receptive to his advances.

It's interesting that though two thousand miles apart, we had each been tempted at almost the same time and in the same manner with the same result.

As we talked on the phone we realized that neither of us had the strength to remain faithful while we were physically separated. We agreed that I should either quit the road or that we should agree to having outside affairs.

We chose to be together.

At enormous financial loss, I sold my truck and returned to Jacksonville. Leaving the trucking business left us with tremendous debt. We lost the house we were buying. I had no job. We had a new baby. We had no

prospects. No hope. No future.

But, we were together... and joyous.

In our devotions then, a Scripture from the Prophet Jeremiah impressed us and we have been aware of that verse ever since:

"'I know the plans I have for you,' saith the Lord. 'They are plans for good and not for evil, to give you a hope and a future'".

I entered college again working odd jobs at night. Took me eight years to get my degree only to find a liberal arts degree from a non accredited college was virtually worthless as far as earning a living is concerned.

But college seemed like a good idea at the time.

During those years, Ginny defined her role as wife and mother by giving me her unwavering support in my endeavors. Besides raising our four children and one of my sons from my previous marriage, she took in dozens of neighborhood kids to feed as an act or pure charity.

Her charities are boundless. I recall her bringing home people she found crying at the bus stop to feed, comfort and consol. Once on a vicious cold winter night, I saw her strip blankets from her own bed to take to a poor family without heat.

I'm not very good at earning cash. Even as I worked at various jobs, we lived in HUD housing and received food stamps to survive ourselves. Yet Ginny continued to serve the poorer-than-us by collecting clothing for rescue missions and serving food in soup kitchens, etc.

Ginny felt we have a gift of helps. Not that we had much to share with the poor, but she would see someone with a need, then see someone else who had the needed item, and she'd bring the two together whose paths may not otherwise have crossed.

The gift of helps is an odd gift.

Once when we had no food for the kids breakfast, she and I woke in the small hours of the morning to collect beer cans from a baseball park to sell to a recycle center to buy breakfast for about eight children who came to our house to eat on their way to school.

While in college I'd worked nights at a job with the

local mosquito control board; I stayed at this job for ten years growing mosquitoes for test purposes. A budget cutback caused 18 of us to be fired.

Not much of a demand for a man who knows how to grow mosquitoes. I could not find another job anywhere.

On speculation, I wrote a magazine article about coping with unemployment — but we were so broke, I could not buy postage to mail the manuscript to a publisher.

When Ginny was a little girl, she collected stamps.

Because she believed in what I was doing, Ginny went through the pages of her stamp album and removed mint stamps that were over 20 years old. She used those old stamps from her collection to mail out my first attempts at writing.

A few of my magazine articles began to sell here and there now and then on a hit or miss basis. No steady income at all. I was ready to give up even trying to write.

Ginny encouraged me to continue.

But I was making so few sales that we were dying on the vine. I decided to give up writing and get a real job. As I showered for a job interview, Ginny knocked on the bathroom door and came in.

"John, there's a man on the front porch. He says he's a newspaper reporter. He wants to interview us for an article".

Months before I'd written a magazine article about finding a mattress in the middle of the main street bridge. This woman in Ohio read the article. She liked it and called her son, who was a newspaper reporter here in Jacksonville.

That was him on the porch.

He'd tried to call but we had no telephone so he just showed up on our doorstep.

During the interview, he decided to recommend me for a job at the newspaper where he worked. After talking with the editor several times, he reluctantly hired me — not as a writer but as a mail clerk. I worked at the paper ten years as our children grew up.

While our older kids were in college they brought home dozens of foreign students to stay at our house. Students from Israel and Arabia at the same time, students from Haiti and Nigeria and Romania and France and I can't remember where all else stayed at our home every vacation. Ginny fed and washed clothes and mothered them all.

By now our youngest was a teen and Ginny decided to go back to college herself (A different college from the ones our kids had attended).

I'm especially proud that she enrolled in a learn-toswim class because she had always been deathly afraid of the water. But she conquered her fear and passed that class.

She earned her degree in banking and finance with a minor in accounting.

But, instead of entering the banking field, she felt called to work for a non-profit charity where she is on a team feeding thousands of hungry children, providing scholarships, sending kids to camp, and supporting poor families.

Aside from her work, she continues to do all sorts of silent charitable things unknown even by her husband. Occasionally I'll notice some strange entry in our check book and when I ask her about it she'll say, "Just a little something for the Lord's work; don't worry about it".

Here's a photo of her making out checks in her sewing room:



Primarily because of her thrift and good management we now own our own home with a pool and lovely garden, and Bill Gates himself did not enjoy a better supper last night than I did. Ginny's financial acumen enabled me to stop outside jobs and devote my full time attention to writing books. And, with the help of our grown children, we are in the beginning slow stages of establishing our own publishing enterprise.

Ginny is not vocal about her devotion to Christ. Yet once at an office party, her boss approached me and said, "Virginia just quietly goes about her work. She hardly ever says anything. But nobody, even strangers, can be in that office for five minutes without knowing they're in the presence of a Christian".

I could write more and more about her. She fascinates me.

Ginny is the best thing that ever happened to me.

She's lots more fun than an adding machine!

So, Tuesday morning Dr. Stray said there's nothing wrong with her heart.

I could have told him that.

Can you believe that she will turn 60 next month?



Friday, June 08, 2007 On Writing A Significant Book

This illuminated manuscript from Medieval times shows evil King Manasseh and other literary critics sawing the Prophet Isaiah in half. They did not care for the book he wrote. They used a wooden saw with blunt teeth. He was alive, up to a point, while they did it.



Wednesday my friend Barbara came over for breakfast at Dave's Diner and conversation. She lives in a retirement community where last week one couple celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary.

At the banquette someone told a joke that Barbara is too much of a lady to post on her blog... So naturally I'll tell it here:

This old man and old woman decided to get married and talked over the logistical arrangements.

"Will you move into my place or do I move in with you" he asked.

"I'll move in with you because your place is bigger," she said.

"What about our children?"

"We can spent Thanksgiving with yours and

Christmas with mine," she said.

"How do you feel about sex?" he asked.

"I like it infrequently," she said.

He pondered that answer for a moment then asked, "Is that one word, or two"?

Barbara and I talked, catching up, for about four hours.

"Discontent," she said, characterizes her life at the moment. She spends much of her time driving her grown daughter back and forth to chemotherapy and radiation treatments for small cell lung cancer.

She said that the word *discontent* had come to mind as she prayed driving over to meet me. "Once you've actually put a name to a sin," she said, "It's harder to ignore it".

The Bible uses words like *mumbling*, *muttering* or *grumbling* to describe our feelings of discontent.

"It's like my telling God that I don't think He's treating me as I deserve," I said. "To which He says, 'That's ok, John. I can fix that in a jiffy".

Barbara was religion editor at the newspaper where I worked as a mail clerk; we've been friends for over 20 years. Her *Along The Way* column was one of the newspaper's most popular features attracting thousands of readers each week.

We talked a bit about the Greek phrases in the Ward Diary that Wes has been helping me decipher.

As we sipped coffee, I expressed some of my own discontent, primarily about the poor sales of my books. I do so want to write important things, books that will be widely read. Significant books. Books that will honor Christ and give people hope.

"John, it's ok to be insignificant," Barbara said. "There's nothing wrong with being insignificant. In the eyes of the world, most of God's dearest saints are insignificant people. That's not what counts".

We returned to my house to sit in the garden and continue talking. A huge pine snake, a good five or six feel long, crept out of the bromeliad bed and I tried to catch it to show Barbara, but the beautiful creature eluded me.

Our conversation turned to our Christian witness and conversion.

Barbara brought up several points she'd heard and thought about recently concerning Isaiah's vision of God:

"In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple... and the house was filled with smoke," the Prophet said.

This is <u>Revelation</u>. God reveals Himself to each person in a different way.

I have never had a vision; God drew my attention to Himself through the life of a missionary I met at work in a library and by my reading the Bible.

Few people see visions. Most of us are touched by God through contact with Christians, a line of poetry, a verse of Scripture, a strain of music, a death, a crisis of despair, a passing thought. Brother Lawrence became aware of God when he saw a leafless tree in winter and remembered how it would turn green and flourish in Spring.

But God reveals Himself to each person in a way suitable and tailor made to that person.

The Prophet said, "Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips... For I have seen the King, the Lord of hosts,"

Revelation births recognition.

We catch a glimpse of who God is... and we begin to see who and what we are.

This is not nice.

Our dis-ease comes, not necessarily from remembering things we have done, but from recognizing what we are. Our individualized revelation of God condemns us as we recognize that He is pure beauty and we have hardly given Him a thought, running our own lives as though I personally am the one high and lifted up.

This recognition can lead to <u>repentance</u> or <u>rejection</u>.

God is a gentleman.

He does not rape anybody.

He gives each of us a chance, but, if we chose not to

give Him another thought, He respects our choice.

That's a glory... and a horror.

As Isaiah grew aghast at what he discovered about himself, immediately God sent one of the seraphim, a kind of super-angel, in the vision to the altar to bring a burning coal.

"He laid it upon my mouth and said, 'Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged'".

The Prophet found <u>Redemption</u> linked to Revelation, Recognition and Repentance. Immediate redemption. Specific redemption.

The burning coal, which even an angel had to handle with tongs, was not placed on his feet but on his mouth, the place Isaiah saw as his point of need.

Then guess what?

"I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'"

As the Prophet responded, he began to hear God's voice.

I suspect that the reason I'm dense to God's voice is my sluggish response.

The world says, "God? What God? I don't hear any God?'

The world is being honest. It does not hear. There's a reason for that.

As he overheard the voice of God — and notice that God was not specifically speaking to Isaiah but asking the general question, "Whom shall I send..." —

Hearing this, like an eager student in a class, Isaiah jumped up and down waving his hands and yelled, "Here am I, send me!"

God did not shove the man into being something he did not want to be; but on beholding the glory of the Lord, Isaiah felt old things melt away and flake off. He became God's man. He followed the Lord... and incidentally, as a by-product of that, ended up writing one of the most significant books in human history.

After Barbara went home, I noticed algae beginning to

form along the fringe of our swimming pool; so I spent the afternoon changing the filter, vacuuming the bottom, adding chlorine... And thinking.

Humm...

What did that illuminated manuscript I started out with show?

Am I really willing to <u>live and write</u> a significant book, or do I just want to <u>pipedream and fanaticize</u> about being a rich and famous writer?

Among the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, archaeologists found a copy of Isaiah's book which is virtually word for word the same text you can read in your own Bible; his account of his vision



of God can be found in the sixth chapter.

Thursday, June 21, 2007 My New Blue Computer

Thanks be to God, I'm almost back online!

On June 6th, the innards of my computer melted; last night my son Donald and his lovely wife Helen came over with the latest in new hardware to repair my system.









It appears than in all this trouble, I have not lost a single file!

Thanks be to God!

One thing bothers me.

Are computers supposed to glow in the dark?

Friday, June 22, 2007 On Again, Off Again

Two weeks ago, just before my computer burned out, someone paid me a lavish compliment — I've never known quite how to handle compliments.

Of course, being vain, deep in my heart I agree heartily with their compliment and my own mind thinks it should be even more lavish.

So I could respond by saying, "Yes, I really am great! A whole lot greater than you think. And it's about time you realized how handsome, (smart, strong, beautiful, whatever) I am".

That's churlish.

On the other hand, I feel that the compliment is undue, that what the giver is commenting about is of little account. And I fear that I'll be found out and exposed as a fraud.

So I could reply to a compliment on how nice I look in the blue shirt by discounting it by saying, "Oh, this old rag. I've had it for ages. Bought if for a dollar in the thrift store".

What I'm telling the compliment giver in such a case is, "If you had any taste at all, you'd know that this is a cheap shirt. You lack judgment. If you were not an uneducated clod, you'd know better than to appreciate something like this".

As I've pondered on why I feel uncomfortable receiving compliments, I came to realize that I do not want to put the giver down, nor do I want to appear conceited in my own eyes either; therefore, honesty is the best policy.

Isn't that an astounding revelation?

The best thing to say when someone pays a compliment is "Thank you. That makes me feel good. You just gave me a lift".

Such a statement neither puffs me up nor puts them down. It's honest.

So, to reply to the persons who complimented me, "Thank you. Your kind words give me a lift".

In other news:

Last night Ginny and I got to meet Nancy, Mark's mother. (Mark and our daughter Eve are engaged to marry on a cruise ship in a few months).

The captain will marry them and the happy couple will sail away into the sunset — IF, Mark goes ahead and gets in his passport application. If not, Eve, who already has her passport, may have to toss him her bouquet on the dock while she sails away alone.

They'll work it out. ...

Or not.

Nancy is an adjunct professor of psychology at a university up north but her heart-love is raising and training show horses. Mark developed a website for her at horse business at http://www.harmonyacresparadehorses.com/ .There are photos of Nancy and her horses there.

The five of us enjoyed great food and conversation at a Chinese restaurant. This trip to Jacksonville is the first time Nancy has been in the South. I wish Ginny and I could expose her more to the real Florida but we'll have to leave that to the kids.

I'm too much of an enthusiast to make a good guide.

In other news, yesterday's mail brought news that 71 copies of my book *Strangers On The Earth* have recently sold in the Philippians.

Wow! Seventy-One copies sold in the Philippians.!

Wow. I'll bet Stephen King can't say that. (So, he may have sold a few more than 71 copies of his books. But I'd bet he and I get the same sense of satisfaction when a book takes off).

Anyhow, I'm happy over the news about Strangers.

Many thanks to those or you who have bought my books.

I appreciate you.

Another thing that makes me happy is that today Ginny and I leave for a long weekend mini-vacation.

Yes, yes. I know. I've been back on line for two days after a two week forced absence and here I am taking off

again till June 26th or 27th. After that, God willing, I plan to stay at my desk working with this glow-in-the-dark computer.

We are going downstate with no set agenda except to be together and love — maybe visit state parks and lounge around a fresh water spring beach reading.

While my machine has been broke down, I felt I should read the Bible more. I just could not face New Testament Gospels or Epistles just now (I always feel they give me a beating) and I did not feel up to the Hebrew poetry of the Psalms.

So, I naturally gravitated to the historical books (no surprise there, what with me being a history buff).

I began reading the books of I & II Samuel and I & II Kings, and I've enjoyed them thoroughly.

Reading these books is a bit like watching a mad slasher movie interspersed with bits of profound theology.

You know, "And he borrowed a sword and hacked him to pieces before the Lord"

Good stuff like that.

As exciting as James Bond.

Inspirational too.

I recommend it.

Ginny says I have odd taste in summer beach-reading material.

Wednesday, June 27, 2007 Great Fun On The Gulf Coast

Oysters pop open in a fire.

Steam builds up inside the shells as the flesh cooks so they are easier to open and eat. The prehistoric peoples of Florida harvested tons of easy to gather shellfish as a staple of their diet. Once they ate the sea creature, they cast the shells aside; years and years of this practice built up massive shell mounds called kitchen middens.

Ginny and I explored one of these middens while on our vacation near Chiefland, Florida.

Here's a photo of me looking at an eroded spot in a mound which covers acres of ground:



Here's a photo of one restaurant where we enjoyed some fine sea food ourselves in Cedar Key on the Gulf Coast:



A sign announces that, "Cedar Key is a quaint little

drinking village with a fishing problem". These crab traps stacked along the sidewalk show that the Gulf waters provide employment for the fishermen when they're not drinking:



The Gulf waters claim many boats. Here is a derelict buried in estuary mud:



But not all Florida waters are muddy. At Fanning Spring the water is so clear that the rocks on bottom that Ginny is looking at lie 18 feet below the surface:





was dry enough to explore.

Αt **Fanning** Spring, we also explored a cypress swamp bordering the Suwannee Cypress River. knees grow up from the roots of the trees:

God created cypress knees to fulfill some biological purpose for the tree but I remember can't what it is. Usually, water covers the base of cypress but because of the long drought here Florida, the swamp

Such a swamp forms form a habitant for mosquitoes, ticks, cottonmouth moccasins, raccoon, possum, bobcats and deer ...

And, quite possibly unicorns, centaurs and fairies:



I took several photos of this beautiful dryad looking over her forest grove:



Beautiful as the enchanted grove is, you still need to

be careful walking in a Cypress swamp watching birds and looking at air-plants high in the branches. No telling what you may run into. Snakes are not the only thing to watch out for.

Other dangers lurk.

Cypress knees per se can cause serious damage to the unwary. Those things hurt when you walk into one of just the right height:





But we did not spend all of our time traipsing through swamps. I continued waking up at 4 a.m. and reading through the Bible's historical books; I'm up to the book of Second Kings now, and as I read I learned more about God and man and me.

Great fun.

Besides that a local tv station (which we do not get in Jacksonville) aired 17 James Bond movies back to back to back. We left the tv going day and night so that at any time we could see James bond doing James Bond stuff.

Great fun.

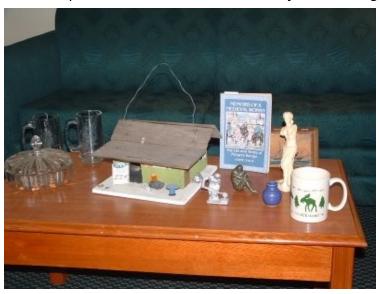
To top off our trip we bought bargains at a huge flea market in Chiefland. On weekends, scores of vendors bring in stuff to sell and stock booths with items ranging from birdhouses to beer mugs to books to boats to airplane parts to sewing patterns, tires, watermelons, jewelry and .farm tractors. Naturally I bought a bagful of books (just like I need another book) including a copy of Margery Kempe's autobiography This English lady lived in the 1300s and kept a diary of her pilgrimage to Jerusalem; she just may have been the first female blogger.

I also bought some neat metal statues and a souvenir coffee mug from Vermont with moose on it. Vermont? Yes. No reason. The mug just caught my fancy.

When I buy treasures at a flea market, Ginny always says, "One man's trash is another man's trash". (P.S. - I bought the covered candy dish — Ginny)

The woman has no taste. Look who she married.

Here's a photo of some treasures Ginny and I bought:



When I asked the old farmer how much the statue of Venus cost, he said, "Five dollars".

But I said, "Don't you think five is a bit too much? After all her arms are broken off and missing".

Catching my joke, the old man got to laughing and said, "Well, ok. Since her arms is broke off, you can have 'er for three".

Friday, June 29, 2007 The Making Of A Slimy Christian

As Ginny and I drove back from our vacation Monday, I fell ill.

In fact it briefly crossed my mind to ask her to drive me to straight to the hospital emergency room; but being the ornery cuss that I am, I invoked the medical insurance policy of the poor which I've lived with most of my life the name of that policy is "Get Well Or Die".

So I toughed it out on my own and eventually got well.

Must not have been anything serious; I got well.

I got well but I imagine she's sick of nursing a grouch.

I do not make a good patient.

I still feel a bit lethargic but now I'm functioning more or less.

Of course, feeling poorly makes me think we need another vacation, but that is not to be. Not for a couple of months yet.

Before we left for the Gulf Coast, I cleaned our swimming pool, brushed the sides, changed the filter, added chemicals. The water looked pristine. Five days later, I walked outside to find the pool slimy green with algae.

What happened?

Apparently, in cleaning, I'd missed some little something, some tiny green spot that should have been killed off, and it spread infecting the whole pool.

Seeing the slime and realizing what had happened, reminded me of a puzzling aspect of the Bible's historical books that I've been reading while on vacation — the whole concept of *Devoted*.

In Hebrew usage to devote means to utterly destroy, to annihilate.

The concept is not uncommon in the books of Joshua and Judges; I ran across this term again in First Samuel where the prophet said to King Saul,

"Hearken thou unto the voice of the words of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord of hosts... Go and smite Amalek and *utterly destroy* all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling babe, ox and sheep and camel and ass".

No loot was to be taken. Cloth and wooden items were to be burned. Pottery smashed. Metal objects belonging to the enemy were to be twisted, crushed and left on the site of the city. Nothing, not one thing, was to be saved over for use by the Israelites.

The term for this type of warfare was "devote to God". Saul disobeyed.

Perhaps, he fancied himself more merciful than God. Perhaps the waste of good stuff appalled him. Maybe he was greedy for gain. Whatever, he kept the enemy king alive as well as the best of the livestock.

"But everything that was vile and refuse, that they utterly destroyed".

They destroyed useless trash but kept the good stuff.

When the prophet met King Saul on his return from the battle, he said, "What meaneth this bleating of sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?"

Saul claimed that he was not to blame but the soldiers saved the spoils of war. He also claimed that the livestock had been saved to sacrifice to the Lord.

The prophet said, "Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord?

"Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice..."

The story goes on to tell how that incident resulted in Saul's losing the kingdom

When I pick some little something to offer God, the choice, great or small, is mine; when I obey, the choice of what and when and where is His.

My choice often picks trash, something that costs me nothing just as Amalek's sheep and oxen cost Saul nothing. In asking my obedience, God zeros in on something which, if left alone, will corrupt me and cause me greater pain — yet something I cling to.

Like slick green algae on a pool side, I cling.

When I chose, my choice enhances my reputation. When God chooses, the choice advances His kingdom.

So, like Saul (one of the biblical characters I most identify with) I obey part-way.

I make a move in the direction of obedience. A

gesture toward the Lord.

But I hold back my own version of a few sheep and ox, and maybe I keep an enemy king (or a few photos of naked internet ladies, or a few cherished prejudices, or a coal of bitterness) alive for ransom and future use.

Like algae in my pool, like the pagan nations the Israelites were supposed to utterly destroy on numerous occasions, the tiny bit I hold back grows and spreads and infects and corrupts.

This results in my being a slimy Christian.

Murky.

Off-color.

Unsightly and unhealthy.

And yet I like to think of myself as a devoted man, totally at the disposal of Jesus Christ.

You know, the One who said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments".

And it's not a matter of His asking some difficult thing of me. He said, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest".

His yoke is easy and His burden light.

Yet I balk at obedience.

I have a better idea.

But I still want to appear to other people as righteous.

What hypocrisy!

Samuel said, "Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry".

So, where does that leave me?

I've heard becoming a Christian described as saying one big Yes followed by a lot of little yeses.

Saint Paul describes this in those painful chapters in Romans (7 & 8, chapters I puzzle over often). He said, "The creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God".

Yes, Christ died for our sin, the Just for the unjust that He might bring us to God.

That's the joy and the glory.

I still must fight the algae.

That's daily life.

As Paul said, "In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that love us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life... nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord".

Monday, July 02, 2007 Bombed Out

Sunday anti-terrorism officers ordered the evacuation of Jacksonville's downtown core because a gentleman from Morocco threatened to blow up the city with a car bomb.

He parked his car, with loud Arabic music blaring from it, in the area between City Hall and the Jacksonville Landing, a popular local strip mall on the river. Then he paraded in the streets near the main library shouting Arabic slogans and saying his car bomb would destroy the city.

This came on the heels of two massive car bombs filled with gasoline, explosives and nails had been defused in London on Friday; and a car exploded when rammed by two Asian men into the terminal at the Glasgow airport on Saturday.

There proved to be no bomb in the car here in Jacksonville, but the threat closed the city core and the Main Street Bridge while police arrested Yossef Bouchlarhem, 34, then searched his car and home for explosives.

Except for hearing snippets of radio news, Ginny and I were hardly aware of the excitement downtown as we peacefully dabbled in our garden and finished our pool cleaning project.

My main concern as we worked and relaxed was how to handle the impatience which has overshadowed my life and thoughts this past week. I've been thinking about my impatience and planning to write about it in my journal today...

That has to wait.

Last night a major emotional bomb exploded in our family.

Our youngest daughter has been sick with a parasitic infection. One sister took her to the hospital emergency room for treatment; another bought her prescriptions. We have all called and visited to see she had everything she needed. We have all tried to be supportive emotionally, financially, and physically...

Last night her sister and my daughter-in-law went over to do her dishes, clean house, cook her dinner, and nurse her.

Like that time back around Christmas, they again found more evidence of her drug use.

She asked them to leave her house.

A flurry of phone calls among family members followed

We feel we have exhausted ourselves and our resources trying to help her. We want to help her get established without being enablers to drug use.

None of us knows what to do next.

At our wits end.

Later this morning I plan to go over to her house. I'm at a loss. I have no idea what I'll say. I'm walking on eggs here. How to help without enabling?

Drugs contributed to her dropping out of college, to job losses, to family tensions, to financial hardship...

Yet I can't tell if the drug use is a cause or a symptom of her pain.

We all want to at least see her through the physical part of this parasite thing (at the hospital she ran a 103 degree fever) but the drug use... That's another matter and I don't know how to deal with it.

Ginny and I (and the others) went through years of horror and depression when she was a teenager involved in drugs. I don't think we can face that sort of thing again now that she's an adult.

The whole situation scares me.

Like the guy who brought his possessed son to Jesus, I can only say, "Lord, I believe; Help Thou my unbelief".

Tuesday, July 03, 2007

My Impatience, The Big Map, & Sheep Transport

It has come to my attention that God has been very slow about granting me the virtue of patience.

This divine sluggishness frustrates me.

I think He really ought to get a move on.

Not that I'm criticizing God, you understand, but if I were in His shoes, a lot of things would be different around here.

For instance, I did not get around to seeing my daughter yesterday. I'd planned to go see her and convey wise counsel about her drug situation (What I call conveying wise counsel is what my wife and kids call nagging).

However circumstances —some of which I had no control over and some of which I did — intervened.

Another daughter pointed out that no one has asked for my help or input. Another pointed out that this "crisis" is not a crisis but the latest episode in a series that has dragged on for years.

Drug problems do not lend themselves to a quick fix.

Me, I always go for the quick fix. I get impatient with people and problems and want them to go away so that my own life can resume a smooth course.

The Lord has other ideas.

He is never rushed about anything.

God Almighty is not given to panic.

He knows what He's doing. My role is to trust and obey.

But I am an impatient man. For the past couple of weeks my tiny store of patience has been sorely tried. When things do not go the way I think they should, I want to manipulate and finagle and circumvent so that they do.

In analysis, even my prayers for others — no matter how I word them to sound nice — turn out to really mean: "Lord, make them do as I wish!", "Make things turn out as I want", "Force people to see things the way I see them". Is it any wonder that the God of the whole universe pays so little attention to my "intercessory prayers"?

Even when I pray for patience for myself, what I really mean is that I'm frustrated and want things to change to my liking.

Being impatient makes me feel uncomfortable.

I don't want to be uncomfortable, I don't want to be patient; I want the situation to change so I do not need to feel impatient.

I do not want to fit into God's plans for people I care about. I want God and man and the universe to fit into my plan of how things should go.

Every thing should be ordered to my personal comfort and convenience.

Don't you think so?

No?

You mean that ain't the way things are supposed to work?

Mulling over this this morning, I began to envision God's will as a giant rolled-up map of the United States.

This map would cover a football field; it's huge. It shows every major highway, every river, every city, every cow path, all the back roads, every mountain, every swamp, every bike and bridle trail, every contour line. Broad roads, red roads, blue roads, broken-dotted roads. Roads that peter out. Roads that go somewhere.

This huge, broad map lies in a tight roll in the endzone of the football stadium.

I'm part of the ground crew unrolling the map.

As it slowly unrolls I can only see the tiny section unrolled before my eyes. Other people lined up on either side of me see the tiny section in front of their own eyes.

The Lord knows the whole map; He drew the thing in the first place.

But each one of us follows the roads and paths we see in front of our faces.

I do not see the grand overview of what God is doing in history or in the lives of the people I pray for, my readers, my acquaintances, my friends, my family, my children, my wife.

For me to superimpose my view, my will, my plans, on these people is ridiculous.

No wonder I feel frustrated and impatient when I try.

Why does God frustrate me so?

Yesterday my friend Barbara mentioned those stained-glass windows we've all seen of Christ as the Good Shepherd; He stands with a limp lamb draped over His shoulders...

NOTE: when I was a kid back in the 1940s, one of my aunts had a fox-fur that she wore like that. Fascinated me. It was made of a real fox. It still had the ears and eyes and paws and bushy tail. Cool. This aunt smoked her cigarettes in a long amber holder too. Cool!

Anyhow, Barbara referred to the Scripture about how the Good Shepherd would leave the ninety and nine sheep in the fold and go out after the one lost sheep. She said that when the Shepherd caught the stray, He'd break one of it's legs so the dumb varmint would not keep wandering off again. That's why He had to carry it on His shoulder.

Now, I doubt if any real shepherd would break the leg of one of his own sheep; that just does not seem kosher to me. (Although God doesn't seem to be given to half-way measures; He's serious about love).

And I doubt if a real shepherd would ever drape a sheep over his shoulders — those things aren't housebroken, you know.

Neither are babies riding on daddy's shoulders says the voice of remembered experience!

But, apart from realism, the Good Shepherd with said sheep does make a picturesque stained-glass window. I'm not knocking that.

However, I do wonder if when I wander off into dumb and dangerous situations, and Christ has to track me down, I do wonder if He does not have to hobble me, to restrain me from what I want to do, to frustrate me in my plans.

I wonder if what He's doing is not only saving me but

also teaching me patience.

Thursday, July 05, 2007 Leaky Pipe

Water floods our hall floor.

I spend much of my 4th of July either in a hardware store or in a dark, tight crawlspace trying to repair a leaky pipe.

It still leaks.

I'll spend much of my 5^{th} of July in that same crawlspace.

Didn't my forefathers fight the Revolution to free me from having to do things like this?

Friday, July 06, 2007 On Reestablishing Trust

"When you are young, you make your reputation; as you age, your reputation makes you".

I forget who said that, but those words stuck with me yesterday as I had a three-hour long talk with my youngest daughter about drugs.

She assured me that she has done no drugs of any kind since our family helped her move back to lacksonville.

I'm inclined to believe her. But then, I always have been. As the Scripture says, "Love beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Love never faileth..."

Or, I may be a sucker when it comes to my children. I've tried to live an honest life before them and I'm inclined to assume honesty on their parts whenever they tell me anything.

She assures me that the ampoules her sisters found when they were cleaning her house Sunday, when they went over to care for her during her sickness with those parasitic worms, were old ones she'd found stuffed between sofa cushions as she unpacked from the move. She said that she'd put them on the kitchen counter to be thrown out in the trash, that she'd not bought any drug of any kind since before Christmas. She said that her physical symptoms we've remarked on are the result of the parasitic worm infection, not drug use. She said that

as she's been applying for different jobs that she's always passed any test for drug use.

She feels hurt that the rest of us have suspected her.

But, all we really have to go on is history. When you're young, you make your reputation, as you age, your reputation makes you. Once trust has been undermined, it takes a long time to reestablish it.

Forty years ago, I broke trust with my two older sons. They still regard me with distrust. Rightly so. They act guarded around me when I see them because they do not trust me not to hurt them again.

I can move on from the situation, but then, I'm not the one who was hurt.

I'm the one who did the hurting and I seriously doubt if I will ever live that down.

Who knows what fine things Benedict Arnold did in later life?

Perhaps the only way to amend things we have done in the past is to live a transparent life in the present, to accept the scrutiny of those around us knowing that we are suspect.

I imagine that one reason Christ converts wicked people is to demonstrate before men and angels and skeptical families that He is Lord, that He can save to the uttermost, that no case is hopeless in His hands.

And, if the world see us stumble and fall, what of it?

"The steps of a good person ARE ordered by the Lord, and if he stumble and fall, it is not fatal for the Lord shall lift him up".

I urged my daughter to be absolutely honest with me in all things as I am with her. Her whole family has proved how willing we all are to help and we all want to be sure we are giving her real help, not contributing to her past addiction.

Because we love her, we are inclined to believe in her.

Then, having given my DAD LECTURE # 834, I displayed a measure of trust in that I let her take off a manuscript copy, the only manuscript copy, of some documents which are extremely important to me.

Then I said it was a shame she was sick last weekend because I'd wanted to take her fishing.

"Fishing?" she questioned. "Why would you want to take me fishing when I was so sick".

"Well," I explained, "I could supply the rod and reel, and you could have supplied the worms".

Saturday, July 07, 2007 Horror Story

Friday I intended to resume work on the Ward Diary, the manuscript I'd intended to have finished editing back before we went on vacation. Instead, I crawled around in a crawlspace under the air conditioner repairing that leaky pipe all day.

That was a job for a guy skinner than I am.

A lot skinner!

Long, long ago our house had two bedrooms. Back in the dark ages, some former owner ripped out all interior walls and converted the house to three bedrooms. That meant that he constructed walls around the air conditioner drainage pipes so that they became inaccessible.

Bless him.

Over the years, these pipes became brittle. Now, they are leaking — or at least they were until yesterday.

I did finally get them fixed.

To do this, John Cowart, human contortionist, wiggled into the crawlspace beneath the machinery and sawed out a spaghetti bowl of old pipes, being careful not to move the brittle corroded sections for fear of breaking off something under the cement slab which the house sits on.

This is what writers do.

I'm sure Stephen King spends many of his days doing the same sort of thing. He must repair his own plumbing too; that's why so many of his books involve people stuck in dark tunnels or caves or dilapidated houses.

While I found my plumbing experience horrible, I did not find it inspirational. I do not see writing horror fiction in my future.

In fact, I don't see writing anything in my future.

All I see are ancient, corroded, dripping pipes with fittings so out of date that they don't make them anymore.

That's horror story enough for me.

Sunday, July 08, 2007 Weddings And Worship

Last night Ginny and I watched a wedding on tv.

Thousands of couples chose yesterday, July 7th, 2007, as an auspicious day to exchange marriage vows; they considered 7/7/07 a lucky day.

In Nevada, couples could even have dozens of Elvis impersonators arrive at the service in a hot air balloon to escort the bride down the aisle and sing *Love Me Tender* to her.

More power to 'em!

I wish them all joy.

Funny thing is that last week while I worked in the crawlspace repairing plumbing pipe, for some reason I got to thinking about worship and that train of thought naturally lead me to thinking about marriage.

No there is nothing romantic about broken pipes. Here I was lying on my belly in an inch or two of filthy water and mud in a dark, spider-infested crawlspace trying to twist around to saw off a rusty leaking pipe and, between hardy curses as I scraped my knuckles, thinking about worship.

Since we came back from vacation I've been reading a biography of Margery Kempe, a lady who lived between the years 1373 and 1438. I bought the book at a flea market while we were on vacation. She wrote the first female autobiography in the English language.

A stanch adherent to the Medieval church, Margery Kempe was noted for her extreme displays of behavior as she worshiped. Besides that, she comes across as a thoroughly obnoxious and aggravating busybody.

During church services, she often fell prostrate on the ground, rolling about, weeping and screaming. She felt the Holy Spirit had given her a gift which she called a Holy Shriek.

A holy shriek resounded much louder than an ordinary

shriek, much to the consternation of other folks who tried to pray in the church.

Margery felt this noise to be an essential part of her worship.

Many of her contemporaries considered burning her as a demon-possessed witch, an idea which as I view it 500 years later finds some merit.

If you've ever watched the British tv series *Keeping Up Appearances*, think of Hyacinth with a strong religious bias.

Anyone interested, can find the text of Margery Kempe's book at: www.holycross.edu/departments/visarts/projects/kempe/t ext/main.htm

So, prostrate under the air conditioner and making certain grunts and noises which can in no way be construed as holy, I thought of Margery and her style of worship (which in no way represents my own).

The lady dressed in white and said she wanted to look like a saint; I dressed in an old swimsuit and looked like Bruce Willis at the tail end of a *Die Hard* movie.

But my face-down wallowing on the floor posture was the same as Margery's.

A posture of private worship.

In long ago times, before lovers started writing their own wedding vows, an ancient traditional wedding service included these words:

"With this Ring I thee wed, with my Body I thee worship, and with all my worldly Goods I thee endow; In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Amen."

What in the world did that mean?

"With my body, I thee worship".

The word *worship* is rooted in the word *worth*. In relationship to God, it means we acknowledge Him as worthy. We recognize His value. We regard Him as supreme. We relish His beauty and perfection.

Or, we don't.

That is why the Scripture so condemns idol worship as

a disgusting abomination; some people attribute to some thing the worth and value of God Himself.

But how does that phrase, "With my body, I thee worship", (for the most part dropped from modern wedding ceremonies) fit into the Christian concept of worship?

I think that when I say to Ginny, "I worship you", I'm saying that of all the beautiful, talented, charming, attractive women I see and have ever seen (and there are scores of such women in the world), I have chosen you as worthy of all my body can give. For me, you are the tops among a hundred thousand thousand contenders for the crown.

That doesn't mean that others aren't out there. They are. It does not mean that I'm oblivious to their existence or that I never notice them. I'm not blind. But it does means that forsaking all others I cleave to you. With my body, I thee worship.

In Saint John's vision of Heaven, he saw ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands of people worshiping Christ saying, "Worthy is the Lamb which was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing..."

Who is He to receive all these things from?

From me.

From you.

Who else?

There is, of course, a flip side to this.

While we worship God, He judges us.

The word *judge* and the word *worship*, in practically, carry the same meaning — to ascribe value to, to determine the worth of, to appreciate, to treasure, to hold worthy.

Both words mean to give one's honest opinion of someone or something.

Today and everyday we give our opinion of God.

On that great and terrible day of the Lord, He gives His opinion of us.

"This is my body, broken for you," He once said.

"With my body, I Thee worship".

Does anybody else see the connection?

Monday, July 09, 2007

A Multi-Birthday Celebration — With Manatees!

Oh but I wish I'd taken my camera!

Four members of the Cowart clan have birthdays in July: Ginny, Donald, Helen and me. Since none of our birthdays fell on yesterday's date, the kids chose that day for a collective observance.

Ginny and I do not pay any attention to our own birthdays and such but the custom is thoroughly entrenched in our children and they insist.

Our friend Barbara hosted the party for us all in a lounge at the retirement community where she lives. This beautiful facility sits on the shore of Turtle Lake, a large millpond, site of a water-powered saw mill back in the 1800s. A few bricks from that old mill remain along with a remnant of the dam and a replica of the waterwheel.

Barbara provided all sorts of civilized delicacies for our enjoyment including a chicken salad laced with white grapes and macadamia nuts, and an olive, pimento and cream cheese dip that I gorged on.

Our daughter Eve baked a strawberry cheese cake as well as a special birthday cake which she decorated so that one slice contained no icing because she knows I like my cake plain.

As usual, some of us exchanged cards and presents, and some didn't. We all do whatever feels right on such occasions.

I received a shark jaws tee shirt (an ancient family jokes calls me, Gnaws, for when I lost my teeth) and a Hooter's Calendar with a giant foldout suitable for a wall poster or it can be folded small to use as a bookmark in my Bible. (Plenty of laughs over that one).

Donald and Helen wanted a water feature for the backyard in their new home, so we gave her a garden fountain — and him, a water pistol.

Afterwards, Barbara took her aluminum walker and led us on a tour:

We walked out on the dam; on the high side, we watched three species of large turtles sunning on a log and numerous water birds including an anhinga which we could see clearly underwater as it captured small fish. An old man in a wheelchair pointed out a four-foot alligator in the spillway on the low side of the dam.

The others abandoned the tour because of the heat but Jennifer and I walked out on a dock where we saw, right below our feet, a pod of huge manatees feeding on a raft of floating vegetation. The two adults, their backs scared by propeller slashes from power boats, weighted about 500 pounds (they were almost the size of our car) and the baby, un-scared as yet, looked to be the size of a coffee table.

Manatees have no natural enemy and no fear of man. Because they swim just below the surface, most are killed by boat propellers. A speed boat approached the dock and I warned them away from the grazing manatees.

Barbara led us over to a museum stocked by paintings, pottery and statues donated by former residents. Lovely things. Then she led us to a boutique, again stocked by residents' contributions, where Ginny bought a red silk robe which looks lovely on her.

Then we visited the art center and I discovered that Barbara, who was an award-winning newspaper columnist before she retired, also has a talent for painting; three of her pictures hang in the art gallery.

I spotted one of her unfinished landscapes which immediately struck a cord for me as being just the thing to use as the cover for a collection of her columns which I'm gathering into a book. The connection between her painting and her book had not crossed her mind, but to me the link was obvious.

Worn out, we all went our separate ways, older, wiser, happier.

I just wish I'd taken my camera for the manatees, the anhinga, the alligator... And, oh yes, the family.

Tuesday, July 10, 2007

Site Search Sidebar, Cat Hair, and Christian Apologetics

Helen, my daughter-in-law, works as a free-lance

graphic artist and yesterday one of her clients flew her up north for a consultation; that left my son, Donald, batching it for a few days and he joined my friend Wes and me for breakfast and a three-hour gab fest on Christian Apologetics.

Great fun!

Before I recount the highpoints of our conversation, I'd like to point out three interesting bits of computer stuff:

First: This morning Donald added a search box to the sidebar of my blog. That way, if you want to read something I wrote about in the past, all you have to do it type in a key word and hit the search button on the sidebar to get a list of postings.

That's so cool...

Or it would be if I could remember what it is I wrote about in the past.

I can't always.

Second: Sunday Wes posted his first ever blog entry. Yes, under my evil influence, he has started his own blog. He calls his blog *I think*, *I Believe* and you can find him at http://ithinksoibelieve.blogspot.com/.

Third: Helen (the DIL who flew out of town) has fallen onto hard times and has been reduced to peddling cat tee-shirts. Although she is an accomplished graphic artist and web designer, she has taken to drawing pictures of her cats, CC and Perl — both named after computer programs — and selling them to make a living.

How sad.

But, if you are ever in the market to buy a tee shirt covered with cat hair, please visit her site at http://www.cafepress.com/ccandperl . To see other examples of her work, please check out her graphic art site at http://www.elemental.name/

Anyhow, with Helen being out of town, yesterday Donald joined Wes and me for one of our bi-weekly talks on family, life and theology — with a smattering of jokes unsuitable for mentioning on a G-rated blog. Like the one Wes told about the three rednecks finding the Dr. Pepper bottle on the beach. All three of us, being rednecks

ourselves, enjoyed that one.

By Christian apologetics I simply mean reasons why we believe the things we believe. We are always to be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within us.

Donald broached this subject by mentioning a recent sermon he'd heard refuting skepticism; he felt the preacher's arguments were weaker than they could have been.

Donald said he feels that much of our unbelief stems from a desire to be in control, that when we realize that we are not in control of most things going on around us, then we clutch at mastery and can not relax in God's hand.

I said that I've encountered people who get mad at God over some pain they've experienced, say the death of a loved one. They imagine God as being one sort of being and when He lets them down, they feel disappointed and renounce Him. They say He does not exist.

I think they are right.

I think they have a perfectly valid point.

The creature they imagined does not exist.

Imaginary creatures don't.

Wes said that my teleological and ontological (good words to try on that search sidebar) thoughts about God constitute an argument leading to the "highly probable" rather than a solid reason for belief. He said that we need to examine how we can "know" anything.

Wes said the most solid reason for believing in Christ is that God has chosen to reveal Himself and that by examining the Bible and applying Greenleaf's laws of evidence, we can arrive at a confident conviction.

(I hate to admit it, but I've forgotten what Greenleaf's laws of evidence are; I think Greenleaf was a Harvard Law professor).

After kicking this ball around the field for a while, the three of us arrived at an interesting conclusion — that reasons and arguments matter little in witnessing to Christ before the skeptics of this world, that our living is more important than our talking.

While some people come to Christ on hearing a sermon or reading a book or sensing guilt, most of us become Christians because we've met someone who had something we didn't have.

We crossed the path of some person who reflected God's presence in their lives.

That dim reflection of the divine attracts (or repels) us. We want that undefined something for ourselves. And when we question the person whose life attracted us and they tell us that it is Christ in them the hope of glory, that's when we begin to search for reasons why there has to be some other answer.

It's that control thing again.

And that's the point where knowing reasonable reasons for our faith come into play.

Our main duty is to walk so close to the Lord Jesus that something of Him rubs off on us. So that they see Him more than they see us. He attracts people, we don't.

Like that old song says, "Oh Thou Spirit divine, all my nature refine, till the beauty of Jesus be seen in me".

Wes, Donald and I also agreed that we are altogether unconscious and unaware of having anything in us that the world sees as drawing them to Jesus. It's there but we just don't know about it. We can take no credit at all.

Here's a case in point:

I vaguely remembered this incident and used that search box thingy on my sidebar to look up this diary entry. It's from my diary on May 20, 1999:

As Gin & I walked home from the bus stop, a lady we have never spoken to but seen around in the neighborhood rushed out of her house waving her arms and yelling for us to wait and yelling back toward her house for "Lloyd".

I thought there had been some kind of medical emergency and she needed help.

Not exactly...

Lucille, who lives on the corner, has watched Ginny and me as we walk to the bus stop, grocery store, church, etc. We hardly notice but it is often our custom to stroll along holding hands; and we almost always kiss hello and goodbye at the bus stop.

Therefore this lady, Lucille, has decided that we are the most loving people she has ever seen and she wanted to photograph us!

I felt so stupid and embarrassed standing in her yard against a background of flowering bushes while her husband, Lloyd (who was just as embarrassed as I was) had to find their camera, focus and snap pictures of me and Ginny.

Oh well, I supposed there are worse reasons to be photographed.

When I told the couple that any love we enjoy is just a reflection of the love that Jesus shows towards people, Lucille nudged Lloyd in the ribs and said, "See there. I tolt you it was something like that"!

Then our conversation veered into favorite quotes from that noted skeptic Mark Twain; my own favorite was, "Yes, the meek may inherit the earth, but they won't keep it for long".

So as steel sharpens steel, our minds whet each other.

Three guys sitting around, coffee cups clutched in our hands, Wes and me smoking our pipes and Donald puffing his cigar, joking and talking about things that matter to us, gossiping about absent friends, discussing personal problems, venting frustrations, and knowing that Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them".

If church were more like that, I'd like to go more often.

Wednesday, July 11, 2007 Treasured Photographs



Ginny's family snaps photographs.

Lots of photographs.

At a gathering earlier this year, a group of shutterbugs on one side of the room took photos of a similar group on the other side of the room:



This addiction to photography spans generations.





Back in June, 2001, Ginny's younger brother (she has a sister and five brothers) her younger brother Danny, a computer whiz, undertook the massive project of scanning in and captioning hundreds of these old family photographs.



This young couple, Ginny's parents, lived in happy marriage for 65 years:



Ginny's parents lived in the same house for over 50 years, taking photos the whole time.

Trunks of old photographs gather dust in the attic. Albums of photographs line the bookshelves. Cardboard boxes of photographs stack up in closets.

Can you see Ginny in this next one?

She's the cute baby:



For six years Danny gathered these old photographs, sorted them, identified the subjects, and scanned them into his computer.

Yesterday, Tuesday, a packaged arrived in our mailbox. It contained a computer disc filled with the results of Danny's labor — scores and scores and scores of old family photographs.

What a treasure!

Seeing such a record of family history helps me understand why those tedious-to-read long lists of genealogy and begats were so important to the biblical writers.

There are happy things to remember about our forbearers:



And sad things too; here's Ginny's Dad during World War II:



Notice his cigarette! This is the same guy who did not want me smoking within 30 yards of the house!

My own family does not have such a photo archive. In fact, once when my mother was pissed at me, she tore up every photo she had of me and ripped me out of any

group photo she owned... I forget why she was so unhappy with me that particular time.

The disc Danny prepared chronicles his family from practically the time photography was invented, from baby Roy:



To the newest baby born into the family:



Somebody needs to buy this kid a camera!

Friday, July 13, 2007 **8** ³⁄₄

Yesterday I enjoyed breakfast with my daughter Eve.

Afterwards she said she needed a particular kind of hat for a presentation at her library on Saturday, so we went hat shopping.

Her program Saturday will feature a talk by the County Coroner, who will talk about how to determine if a dead body died of blunt force trauma — and a troop of hula dancers.

What a blend.

Ginny and I plan to attend the event and I plan to write about it afterwards.

Last night, we enjoyed a fine dinner with our daughter-in-law's parents. We talked about books and birds and their recent trip to Germany. (Blair had just had a cancer removed from his scalp and the fresh wound was sore — .He laughed when I told him he needs a new barber).

Between that breakfast and that dinner, I finished editing A Zealous Heart: the Diary of Samuel Ward, a translator of the 1611 King James Bible!

That book is almost done.

Thanks be to God!

I started this job back in December and by now I'm thoroughly sick of Ward and his diary and his Jacobean English; yet being so close to the end of the project elates me.

Yesterday Ginny compared me to a woman who's eight and three-fourths months pregnant.

Carrying this project around with me 24 hours a day for months exasperates me and I'm tired of it and want it to go away; yet at the same time, the expectation of seeing a shinny new book appear thrills me.

For months I've obsessed over tiny details of dates and times and spellings.

For instance, yesterday I woke at 3:15 a.m. realizing that somewhere in the text I had spelled the word *undue* as *undo*!

Horrors!

My book will never top the Times best seller list with that kind of error.

Why didn't the spell checker catch my mistake?

Why wouldn't WORD's fine/replace feature locate either spelling?

I browsed through 140 pages of text to find my mistake and correct it.

Got the rascal.

Changed it manually...

Got to wondering if that date was 1625 or should it be 1639???

Samuel Ward, a Puritan, said, "Be not overly righteous".

He said, "There be some ... over-nice men in this sense also, who have not learned that God will have them merciful to themselves".

I uploaded the Ward text to the printing company for my proof copy to correct about 1 a.m. this morning. I'll get the test copy in a week or ten days.

Lord, prosper Thou the work of my hands.

All I have to do is wait.

Maybe it will have the right number of fingers and toes and dates and headers and pagination and footers and section breaks and ...

I should not engage in undo worry.

Can't wait to start my next book.

Sunday, July 15, 2007

Congratulations To The New Mother

Saturday my wife birthed a brand new infant.

I am not the father.

It happened like this:

While I mowed grass, Ginny weeded our cactus garden. As she weeded, she spotted a teeny, tiny white thing she thought was a pebble. When she picked it up to examine it more closely, the little egg suddenly popped open in her hand and a baby lizard jumped out.

This so startled Ginny that she gave a little squeak and the new lizard jumped from her hand and darted off into the cactus bed. I hard her cry and rushed over to see what was wrong.

I never actually saw the baby myself.

Ginny says he looks just like his father — whoever that may be.

Monday, July 16, 2007 Scruffy (replayed)

While researching something else in my diary, I ran across this entry from 18 months ago; I think it worth repeating:

This week I've been formatting and editing my current book manuscript, *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad*, I've managed to reduce it from a cumbersome 465 pages down to 393 pages so far. – and still working on it.

I haven't done much else this week, but for some reason recently I've been thinking about Scruffy:

Scruffy lived in the crawlspace under someone's house.

The homeowner didn't know he lived under there because Scruffy stayed quite and sneaked in and out during the dark hours making sure he was never seen.

Scruffy's real name was Lewis but everyone called him Scruffy -- for good reason. He never bathed or changed clothes or combed his hair or shaved.

When I first met Scruffy, I worked as the night janitor at a huge church, a church which sponsored, supported and contributed to many programs to help the homeless... the homeless who didn't happen to show up in the parking lot like Scruffy did, panhandling churchgoers and scaring the hell out of blue-haired old ladies as they got out of their cars at every service.

This behavior got Scruffy barred from the church.

Orders came down from the administration that I was not to feed Scruffy anything from the church pantry or ever give him money for drink and drugs. But he kept coming by late at night when no one else was in the buildings, so I disobeyed.

Ok. I was wrong. I am an enabler; I can live with that.

Several times I offered to drive him to a homeless shelter. He refused saying he felt more comfortable living

under buildings than in them. Maybe that was his legacy from Viet Nam?

I attempted to witness to him about Christ, how Jesus came to save sinners, was crucified dead and buried, rose again from the grave, and promised to return. But Scruffy dismissed my words with, "That's a crock of shit, John, and you know it".

Then for a period of weeks there was no sign of Scruffy until...

Late one night there was a knock on the church door. I opened it and there stood Lewis, clean shaven, hair combed, decently dressed. He glowed.

"I got saved, John," he said as I opened the door.

We sat in the church kitchen drinking coffee as he told me that he'd been crossing the street drunk when a car hit him breaking his leg. Fortunately a nurse and her husband in a car following saw the accident and stopped immediately to render aid.

Laying on the pavement, Lewis looked up and saw this beautiful woman leaning over him, examining his injury.

"Be still," she said, "You're hurt. You were nearly killed. Do you know Jesus"?

Scruffy spent a few weeks in the hospital, then joined that nurse's church. He quit drinking and druging. He got a job with a tire company. He moved into an apartment. He talked about Jesus. He was a new creation... for a while.

A month or two passed.

Again in the wee small hours of the night when I was alone in the huge building, there was a knock on the side church door.

There stood Scruffy. Drunk. Wild eyed. Filthy. Profane. Hungry.

Again against orders, I led him back to the kitchen and gave him coffee.

"Didn't last," he said. "Nothing to that shit. Not really. Not for guys like me".

He stumbled out into the night looking for another fix.

Another month or two more went by when I got word that he'd been found dead under somebody's house. He'd been hit by another car, refused medical attention, but managed to stagger away and crawl up under a house.

The homeowner never knew he was under there till he began to rot and the smell got too bad.

The church where I janitored paid for his burial.

So, do I think Scruffy went to Heaven?

Well, it's by grace that any of us are saved through faith . It's not of ourselves. It is the gift of God not of works, lest any man should boast.

Scruffy was in bad shape to start with. Then, at rock bottom, he called on Jesus to save him. He believed in his heart that Jesus is the Risen Lord and he confessed that with his own lips.

For whatever my opinion is worth, I think Jesus saved him

And Jesus has the reputation of being mighty good at what He does.

But a spiritual commitment and a physical addiction are two different things. So, in so far as I can perceive such things, Scruffy made the deepest commitment he was capable of making, but was physically defeated by his addiction.

I may be entirely wrong about such a thing, but when you get to Heaven, take a look in the crawlspace under the Throne and see if there isn't somebody hiding under there.

His name is Lewis.

Tuesday, July 17, 2007 On Defeat Following Triumph

For our wedding anniversary a couple of years ago, I gave Ginny a paper shredder.

Isn't that romantic?

Actually, it was her idea.

I would have preferred to get her a flaming red lacy negligee, but she wanted to have a paper shredder. So that's what I bought her.

That's the kind of romantic guy I am.

I mention this because last night I walked in her office to find her digging through shredded giblets for scraps and piecing them together on top of her desk.

She'd inadvertently shredded an important credit card. It had stuck to the back of a sheet she actually meant to shred.

So, she was trying to fit the pieces back together so she can order a new card from the maker.

What a picture of life!

We all end up shredding things we don't really mean to; and we can't piece them back together; our only recourse is to do without, or apply to the Maker for a new life.

But, that's not what I meant to write about this morning.

I meant to write about a personal defeat.

Once again I have given in to a temptation (does it matter which one?). Yeah, I suppose it does. Almost immediately after sending the Ward Diary off to the printer for proof pages, I began to browse the internet for photos of bikini girls again.

Yeah, that's also the kind of guy I am.

Why does strong temptation follow right on the heels of spiritual triumph?

In Scripture, we see this dynamic played out again and again:

Smoke had not gone up from Cane's altar before he whacked his own brother in the head with a rock.

The Israelites saw God flatten the walls of Jericho, then immediately afterwards, sin defeated them in the battle for Ai.

Elijah saw the fire fall from heaven, he defeated 400 of Baal's witchdoctors, then immediately afterwards, we see him cowering depressed in a cave because a woman threatened to kill him.

Jonah saw God revive the whole city of Nineveh, but

immediately afterwards, here's Jonah depressed, suicidal, and mad at God because a caterpillar ate his gourd vine.

Within 24 hours of partaking of the Lord's Supper and having Christ wash his feet, Peter denied Jesus with curses.

And John Cowart moves immediately from preserving an important spiritual document to browsing for bikini photos.

Strong temptation often follows spiritual triumph.

Why does this sort of thing happen?

Part of it is the simple human joy of giving ourselves a treat for an accomplishment. Like the lady who steps on the scales, realizes that she's lost 30 pounds and celebrates by eating a whole tub of chocolate chip ice cream to reward herself.

Of course, another easy answer says that religious people are hypocrites, that all this faith stuff is a false front, a facade erected to fool onlookers.

There is an element of truth in this accusation. I know that I want people to think me better than I really am. I want to make a good impression so I glaze over my faults, defects and sins. I even wear aftershave to disguise my natural smell.

That's the kind of guy I am.

But I think the answer to the problem of spiritual triumph and defeat lies even deeper in the very nature of what it means to be a Christian.

Saint Paul struggled with his own temptations with what he calls "the old man". He speaks of a "another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members".

I have no idea which particular temptation provoked Paul to say this; I'm pretty sure he did not have internet access to look at bikini girls.

But temptations are tailor-made to fit the individual. Mine are not yours, nor yours mine. Our struggles may be similar but the details differ. I suspect that's a reason we are told not to judge others.

The Scripture says, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us".

In another place, Paul says that God has grafted us Gentiles Christians onto the root of His Jews. "Thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and wert grafted (contrary to nature) into a good olive tree..."

I may be wrong about this, but extrapolating from that idea, I wonder if the new nature which Christ imparts to me as an individual, has been grafted onto my natural nature, my old man, my carnal nature.

In other words, I wonder if my roots are still faulty.

And, I wonder how, or even if, God can use such a mixed up man as I am.

One chapter in my book *Strangers On The Earth* profiles 19th Century minister Charles Spurgeon, the most popular preacher of his day.

On October 19, 1856, so many people gathered to hear him preach that his church rented a London music hall to accommodate the crowds. Twelve thousand people jammed inside and thousands more stood in the streets to hear his message.

Spurgeon felt this attention marked him as a preacher favored by God.

The service began.

A multitude of voices joined in the opening hymn. A deacon led in prayer. Another hymn. Spurgeon mounted the pulpit and surveyed the thousands of expectant faces before him. He read his text and began his opening remarks.

Then it happened.

Somewhere in the crowd a voice screamed a single word — FIRE!

Other people began shouting "FIRE!" also. Panic spread as everyone stampeded toward the exits. Men and women shoved and clawed each other to escape.

Those outside heard the commotion and pressed toward

the doors to see what was going on inside. Those inside knocked each other down struggling to get out.

People trampled those knocked to the floor. They fought for an inch of space and pulled back those ahead. Mothers dropped their babies. Men smashed windows with chair legs and clambered through.

There was no fire.

Someone had just shouted that to break up the meeting.

Seven people were trampled to death; twenty-eight were hospitalized; scores of others suffered broken bones or were crushed trying to get out of the hall.

Charles Spurgeon was devastated by the tragedy.

He preached to bring men to life in Christ, and he had thought that his extreme popularity was a mark of God's approval. But now, for a time, he felt his popularity had brought death and destruction.

He looked for meaning in what had happened. He said, "If the Christian did not sometimes suffer heaviness, he would begin to grow too proud, and think too much of himself, and become too great in his own esteem."...

The Saturday Night Review newspaper said, "This hiring of public amusement places for Sunday preaching is a novelty and a painful one. The deplorable accident, in which seven people lost their lives and scores were maimed, mutilated or otherwise cruelly injured, Mr. Spurgeon only considers as an additional intervention of Providence in his favor."

Detractors demanded Spurgeon give up preaching lest he "preach another crowd into a frenzy of terror — kill and smash a dozen or two more."

After a time of soul searching, Spurgeon resumed his ministry and gained a reputation in his generation similar to that of Billy Graham in ours. They called Spurgeon, "The Prince of Preachers".

Concerning the theme of triumph and temptation, Spurgeon once said:

"Many professors give way to (temptation) as though it were useless to attempt resistance; but let the believer remember that he must be a conqueror in every point, or else he cannot be crowned. If we cannot control our tempers, what has grace done for us?

"Some one told Mr. Jay that grace was often grafted on a crab-stump. 'Yes,' said he, 'But the fruit will not be crabs.'

"We must not make natural infirmity an excuse for sin, but we must fly to the cross and pray the Lord to crucify our tempers, and renew us in gentleness and meekness after His own image.

I find these words echo across the years for my encouragement and comfort.

Thursday, July 19, 2007 **Busy**

You can tell when I'm working hard because I don't take time to keep up my journal postings.

Time and space constraints have pushed me into 18-hour days recently as I've tried to reduce a 583 page manuscript to under 400 pages. Don't think I'm going to make that goal.

I quit editing last night at page 299 and I still have miles to go.

The printer's protocols dictate that if a book has more than 400 pages, it has to be bound as a hard back. That would bump the price up significantly and I want to avoid that. I want to make my books as inexpensive as possible.

I'm toying with a marketing idea which would give poor people better access to my work. We'll see what happens.

For pleasure, I've been reading Nobel Prize winning author Albert Camus. He struggles with the question of how a loving God could allow an innocent child to suffer with a horrible disease.

Camus does not appear satisfied with his own ideas, which essentially lead to hopeless despair.

Poor bastard.

My favorite Camus quote:

"It is forbidden to spit on cats during plague time".

See. The man's not all wrong.

Jesus is Lord of even the busiest days. His love hovers

over my shoulder even while I've got my nose buried in the project thinking nothing, seeing nothing but the words right before my eyes on the computer screen.

Speaking of eyes:

Yesterday I grabbed a jar of applesauce out of the frig to go on my breakfast toast; when I went to spread it, I discovered that I'd pulled out a jar of sauerkraut!

This is not recommended.

Friday, July 20, 2007

Back To Square — ^&#!@

At 4:15 yesterday afternoon (after I'd begun work at 4:30 in the morning) I discovered why my work has gone so well all week.

In less than ten days I have edited and formatted 410 pages of a 582-page manuscript.

Granted, those work days extended for 16 to 20 hours each. But nevertheless, I covered a lot of text and formatted a whole bunch of graphics.

This labor represents a personal best for me, a Herculean accomplishment.

My work progressed smoothly — **because I've been doing it all wrong**!

I neglected to set a formatting/spacing command in the Page Set<u>up</u> menu, a command which effects the entire 582-page document.

As soon as I noticed my omission, I realized that I knew better.

I knew better! I knew better!

But, I forgot.

To fix this mistake, I must return to page one and begin again.

I should pay more attention to detail — but I'm not the only one who should.

In her office Thursday, Ginny discovered a misplaced comma. That's right, a single simple comma.

A coworker issued a check to a vendor for \$26,000 dollars. It was ready to be mailed when Ginny noticed that comma. The check should have been for only \$2,600

dollars.

Oh well, it's government money. Who cares?

But Ginny caught the office mistake before any damage was done; I bulled ahead 410 pages into my manuscript before I noticed my fatal formatting error.

After I stopped throwing things and hitting my thighs with my fist, I calmed down and remembered that my times are in God's hands.

I suspect the Lord Jesus is more interested in formatting me than He is in the formatting of my manuscript.

If I were walking in His will while I worked on the project in the first place, then I'll be walking in His will while I do it all over again.

I'm resigned to doing whatever it takes to do the job right.

I really am.

I feel at peace.

But somehow I doubt I'll be writing a blog post about the sin of profanity any time soon.

Saturday, July 21, 2007 Viking Treasure

Knowing my interest in archaeology, Ginny rushed home from work Friday excited to show me newspaper articles announcing the discover of a Viking treasure buried in a field near Harrogate in Yorkshire, England.

The treasure had been buried for over a thousand years.



David and Andrew Whelan located a silver pot filled with ancient coins which date to the year 927. A.D.

The father/son team asked a farmer's permission to explore his field with metal detectors. They'd searched this same field before, finding only buttons.

This time, the pair recovered over 600 coins and dozens of other objects. A gold arm band, silver ingots and fragments of silver were found in and around the silver pot. Some ancient artist carved the sides of the silver vessel with vines and leaves along with six hunting scenes showing lions, stags and a horse.



David Whelan said, "We went to a field that we'd got

permission on to detect. We were there about 10 minutes, and I got this signal. I dug down and got a stronger signal, so I kept going. And I started getting lead out, bits of lead. And I kept going, pulling lead out. Big signal, and then this round thing fell into the hole. And I thought, "Oh, it's a bulk-up from an old lead system."

"So I put my glasses on, lifted it out. Put my glasses on, and I could see it was a bowl with all bits of silver in the top, and the coins stuck in the top, and a lovely bowl. So I went over and brought Andrew back. Told him we'd found a hoard".

British Museum officials value that hoard at \$1,500,000. The Viking treasure went on display at the museum yesterday.

Wow! That's the stuff dreams are made of!

A treasure buried in a field!

Once, near the Port of Jacksonville, using a metal detector, I found a single coin from Bahrain.

It was about ten years old.

Probably dropped by some foreign sailor.

Not a Viking.

Drat!

Reading about this treasure in a field, I couldn't help but think I've read something like that somewhere before.

Oh, Yes. It was one of the stories Jesus told.

"The Kingdom of Heaven," He said, "Is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field".

The verse reference is Matthew 13:44.

I've heard preachers apply that verse to say that salvation is so valuable we should sell out everything in order to gain it.

That's perfectly valid idea. Jim Elliot, a missionary martyred by the Auca Indians, said, "He is no fool who gives up what he can not hope to keep in order to gain that which he can never lose".

Give up everything for Jesus?

Many people think that's what it takes.

Personally, I have never given up anything for Jesus; for me, it's been all gain.

When I look at what Jesus said —

"The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field". —

I also look at the Bible verses around that saying.

You know, the ones about the pearl, the net, the leaven, etc.

I see that just six verses before the one about the buried treasure, Jesus said, "The field is the world" (v.38) That's in a story about sowing seed.

In that same story (v.37), Jesus said, "He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man".

So then, if the field is the world.

And if the one walking in the field, the one who gave up everything, is Jesus, then ...

What did Jesus give up every thing for? Why did God become man? Why leave the glory of Heaven, the company of angels, the splendor of eternity to be born in a stable and die on a cross?

If the field is the world...

And if the one who gave up all is Jesus...

Then what is the treasure?

You are.

Monday, July 23, 2007 Pleasures For Evermore!

Saturday Ginny picked up her copy of the 7th Harry Potter book, a copy which she had reserved back in February.

According to tv news, 7,000,000 copies of this book sold within the first 24 hours of its release; at one local mall, over a thousand people stood in line for hours in the rain waiting to buy this book.

After picking up the book, Ginny and I went to Moon River Pizza for lunch. She opened her book to page one, began reading — lost to this world.

Two guys came into Moon River; each carried a copy of Harry Potter. They sat at a table, opened to page one, and fell under that same spell.

Never before have I seen three individuals enthralled reading copies of the same book at the same time in a public place. Once I saw two passengers on the bus each reading copies of *Lord Of The Rings*, but three readers? Never before.

Ginny has hardly spoken a word to me all weekend. She's engrossed in her book. A daughter came over to borrow money; Ginny did not speak to her. Our neighbor Rick came by to kill time; Ginny read ten feet away from him and never even glanced up from her pages.

All this reading delights me.

Seeing Ginny derive such pleasure from the book pleases me so.

Seeing someone you love get great pleasure from something generates the greatest sort of pleasure for the observer. Blog postings from all over the world reveal how pleased mothers are at seeing their babes enjoy some toy or activity.

Seeing my grown children interact and enjoy eachother's company delights me.

A great lover finds the sexual pleasure he gives his beloved magnifies his own pleasure; he thrills at the expression on her face as waves of pleasure wash over her in orgasm.

Grandparents delight in seeing the grandkids frolic with the new puppy.

Cooks derive great pleasure at watching the family smack their lips with pleasure as they dig in to some special dish it took hours to prepare.

You don't even have to enjoy a thing yourself to enjoy someone else's pleasure over it. When Donald was in college studying physics, he'd come home bubbling over with joy as he told me about refraction; I know nothing about refractive lasers, but I got such a kick out of seeing his pleasure in learning.

The ideal motivation for telling others about Christ is to so enjoy Him yourself that you bubble over with pleasure and share the pleasure you've found; not to do so would be churlish.

Giving pleasure, seeing someone else's pleasure, sharing pleasure — All these generate even more pleasure.

God Himself is a hedonist.

The Scripture proclaims, "Thou wilt show me the path of life: in Thy presence is fullness of joy; at Thy right hand are pleasures for evermore".

"The Lord taketh pleasure in his people; He will beautify the meek with salvation"

So, I've felt in good company all this weekend as I've so enjoyed Ginny's pleasure as she relished reading her book. I take pleasure in seeing her pleasure.

And as I did, I reflected on how much the Lord God of Hosts enjoys seeing his creation enjoy frolics and joys and pleasures and quite reading and water slides and volley ball games and chocolate donuts and prayer and snuggling under the blanket and corn on the cob and fireworks and canoeing and bird watching and work well done and Christmas and moonlight swims and ... and... the list goes on forever more.

And it gets even better:

As it is written, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him"!

The Lord means us no pain.

He gave us laws to keep us from injuring ourselves.

Hurt was someone else's idea. Oh yes, there is someone out there who rubs his hands together and chuckles when we hurt ourselves, when we hurt others, when we spread pain, dread, anguish, worry, sadness, evil...

However the looser is loosing; his scorched-earth retreat has set limits, it can not last much longer.

Darkness fades.

Dawn approaches.

Hope remains.

In the mean time, Jesus said, "Fear not, little flock; for it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom".

Wednesday, July 25, 2007 Editing Samuel Ward's Dairy

Over the weekend, the postman delivered my draft copy of A Zealous Heart: The Diary Of Samuel Ward, A Translator Of The 1611 King James Bible.

I wish he hadn't done that.

For weeks now, I've dreaded the arrival of the mail.

Now, I have to proofread the pages to change errors, typos, formatting, graphics, and a host of other glaring glitches.

The Editor asks, "How many writers does it take to change a lightbulb"?

The Writer says, "I ain't changing nothing"!

But, in the name of accuracy, changes must be made.

So this evening I gathered my editing paraphernalia so I can start bright and early.

Here's some of the stuff Luse:



Before I even open the proof pages, on the book cover I see a gap between the A and the Z of Zealous. This does not portend smooth work ahead.

My tattered Bible lies to the left with my glasses and magnifying glass to correlate tiny footnotes. My pipe, tobacco and match case (for large wooden matches) lie to the right; for months I've carried a picture of Samuel Ward on my match case to focus my mind on the work every time I light my pipe.

Of course my Associated Press Style Manual, my concrete mixer paper weight, my sharp red pencils, and my coffee mug (My son Donald had this made special for me; it features my Bluefish Books logo) — all comprise essential equipment.

The ink pot and quill just round out the tasteful still life arrangement.

Yes, it's padding but don't knock it.

I snapped 15 digital photos to get this one to come out.

After I proofread, I'll refer the manuscript to my Department Of Redundancy Department to check that I have not said the same thing twice or more than once; that gives the book readabilityness and makes it easier for readers to follow.

I'll sent the cover art over to Helen, my daughterin-law who can bandage those places where the cover bleeds pixels all over my red pencils.

While I've been waiting for the mailman to deliver this proof copy of the Ward Diary, I worked on another manuscript, a larger one which refuses to be convert to a pdf file without inserting eight blank pages between pages 484 and 485. And the index...

Well, I'll skip writing about the index — unless you'd like to read a bubble by bubble description of the Titanic's sinking.

Oh well, once the Lord Jesus wrote in the sand.

That was when an irate mob brought Him a woman "taken in adultery, in the very act".

They wanted to throw rocks at her head till she died.

Jesus stooped down, wrote something in the sand, then stood back up and said, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her".

For some reason the crowd melted away.

He said to the woman, "Neither do I condemn thee: go and sin no more".

Very next thing Jesus said— "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life".

Writing words in sand — at least that's one area in which I follow Him — I often feel as though I'm doing that very same thing.

Thursday, July 26, 2007

The Most Effective Spiritual Phrase We Can Ever Use

Bad night last night. I was in bed less than three hours when a disturbing dream woke me. Today, I feel ragged, listless and frazzled.

Such weariness leaves me open to a horde of temptations. Often when I feel physically weakest, I feel spiritually weakest also. I'd planned to proofread the Ward Diary today, but being tired out of my gourd makes me

blurry and keenly aware that one click of my mouse will let me see what Bambi is not wearing today.

Realizing this a few minutes ago caused me to remember the most powerful expression of Christian spirituality we can ever use.

This simple phrase can save us from a world of trouble, anguish, aggravation, and temptation. It can remove us from the scene of danger and keep us from globs of dirt and clinging mud.

It works when the folks at the office begin to spout racist slurs and our silence can be taken for agreement. It's effective when gossip begins to tickle our ears.

When the guys propose another round but you know you've reached your limit, all you have to do is utter this phrase.

When the jokes move from the adult risqué to the obscene, when illicit desires pull, when we are tempted to lie, when we feel that urge toward hypocrisy, when someone suggests we do something we know is evil, when someone bullies and needles to draw us into an argument, when the dealer suggests another hand, when peers pressure us toward what makes when uncomfortable. the salesman urges to us overspend, when they pass the box of chocolate donuts then this phrase allows us to escape without putting other people down or being judgmental about their words or actions.

In any of these situations, the stalwart Christian need only speak these deeply spiritual words for all to hear — and a way of escape immediately opens.

Here's the secret:

When we find ourselves facing just about any temptation all we have to do is say, "Excuse me; I'm going to the bathroom".

Then walk away and go into the bathroom.

St. Paul advised his junior friend Timothy, "Flee youthful lusts".

Not fight. — Flee.

The most successful ship's captain is the one who sails fartherest from the rocks.

Jesus said, "Resist not evil". Who are we to fight the devil? We are to flee. To move off site. To go someplace else away from the danger of temptation.

Once, In one of his times of temptation, powerful 19th Century London preacher Charles Spurgeon said, "The wings of a dove may be of more use to me to-day than the jaws of a lion".

There are no new temptations. Every one we face is the common lot of man, but God is faithful and will always provide a way to escape so we can bear it.

And I find the easiest way to escape is to say, "Excuse me; I'm going to the bathroom now".

There's no arguing with that statement.

So, now that I've sat long at my computer this morning, and as I feel weary and drained, and as I begin thinking that Bambi is only one click away from this blog ... Excuse me; I'm going to the bathroom now.

Friday, July 27, 2007

Double Trouble With Samuel Ward



Samuel Ward was a Puritan.

Samuel Ward was a Puritan.

Samuel Ward was a preacher.

Samuel Ward was a preacher.

Samuel Ward was an author.

Samuel Ward was an author.

Samuel Ward was a fellow of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge.

Samuel Ward was a fellow of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge.

Samuel Ward lived during the later part of the 16^{th} Century and the early years of the 17^{th} Century.

Samuel Ward lived during the later part of the 16^{th} Century and the early years of the 17^{th} Century.

The first time I ever heard of Samuel Ward was last December. ...

The first time I ever heard of Samuel Ward was yesterday.

Yes, as I proofread my sample copy of A Zealous Heart: The Diary of Samuel Ward — you know, the book I wrote about editing on Wednesday — the same book I have written about in **31 postings** since last December — the same book I struggled with over all those Greek quotations...

Yeah, that book.

As I used my magnifying glass to check out a footnote reference I read this phrase: "by his namesake of lpswich".

Samuel Ward lived between 1577 and 1639 — Samuel Ward lived between 1572 and 1643.

You got it!

There were two contemporary Puritan preachers — each named Samuel Ward!

And I did not realize that until yesterday.

Since last December I have worked preparing the diary of one of them, the one from Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, (Yeah, him) and writing a biography of the man (men) to accompany the 16th Century text of his diary.

In ignorance I combined the two men and incidents from their lives into one fictional Samuel Ward. I did not realize I was dealing with material from two separate lives.

Oh, there was one subtle hint when there in 1621, when Samuel Ward was in trouble with both the Royalists

and with the Roundheads and I wondered why each of the opposing parties had it in for him. Well, turns out one Samuel Ward favored the Royalists; the other favored the Roundheads.

I just missed that hint, and blithely went on my way combining quotes and character traits and incidents from the lives of the two men and presenting them as one person.

What to do? What to do?

I mean, I'd scheduled this book to go to press this coming weekend. I sank seven months of long days and eye-strain nights into preparing it. The book cover is resized and ready. The promo material written. PDF files converted.

Change a comma here and there and the book is ready to sell.

Right? Right?

Wrong! Wrong!

Discovering there were two Wards, stunned me.

All that time, all that research, all that anguish over Greek phrases, all that eye-strain, all that work — all for nothing. Wasted. Pissing against the wind.

Then came the insidious thought: Who'll know the difference? How many people in the world will realize that I've combined two men into one. I mean, there is not Samuel Ward fan club out there. His is not a household name. Hardly anyone will know the difference if I let it slide. Publish the book and move on. Why not?

Integrity.

How can I claim to be a Christian wanting to be (at times) 100% at the disposal of Jesus Christ if I knowingly publish a book which I know is factually wrong?

Ridicule.

If I publish this amalgamation then I'd be the laughingstock of the whole world, of everyone who knows the truth about Samuel Ward (all six or eight of them). Everything I write from here on would be suspect for these people; they'd know I'm a buffoon faking it.

Honesty.

Do I write for my own amusement? For readers? As a humble witness to my Savior?

The real question for me is not about Samuel Ward, but about Jesus Christ.

Is Christ just prominent in my life or is He preeminent?

In my upset, I questioned why God would let me bark up the wrong tree for months only to reveal that I goofed at the last minute? Why would He let me waste all that time? Why let me make such a mistake and persist in it for months.

Well, my times are in His hands.

My time is His to waste.

My friend Barbara said, "John, I believe that God will let us make a mistake and keep on making it, but He will also turn it to good to honor His name".

So, where do I go from here?

I have not fully decided yet.

There seems to be two options: I can trash the whole project and move on from here; or I can go back, do more research and try to unravel the correct information and present the book as it should be.

As I glanced over the so-closed-to-finished pages last night, I see that over 80 pages and many impressive graphics would need to be culled out altogether. But this incorrect stuff is interwoven in the correct.

To straightened this book out would be like trying to unscramble breakfast eggs.

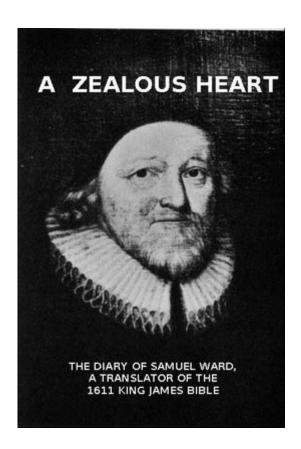
I don't know if I can face that.

And Bambi is only a click away.

If it ain't one temptation, it's another!

I do know that I'm not going to carry Samuel Ward's portrait on my match case any more! Sorry, low-down, two-faced, ruffle-wearing, Puritan-preaching, 16th Century, SOB!

Anybody got a chocolate donut?



Saturday, July 28, 2007 Here, Kitty. Here, Kitty, Kitty.

Friday my middle daughter Eve (I have three daughters and three sons) took me out to breakfast and we talked for about six hours.

Much of our conversation centered around finalizing her wedding plans. She and Mark intend to be married by the captain on a cruise ship, hold a reception while the ship is docked here in Jacksonville, sail away into the sunset, and live happily after.

They are giddy in love.

I wish them joy.

Eve trained in London and is now head librarian at a local branch library. With her training in research techniques, she has access to computer data banks unavailable to ordinary mortals. Thus she tracked down a glob of information on the two 16^{th} Century Samuel Wards.

Her research uncovered two interesting bits of information:

First, she arranged interlibrary loans of some material for me to confirm or correct the research I'd already done. I've done as thorough a job as possible, but I did work from secondary sources; I hardly ever have original 16th Century manuscripts laying around the house.

Second, Eve and I discovered that a lot of people in past generations have confused the two men even more than I did. There's a lot of mixed up material out there which combines the two different Samuel Wards.

Why didn't they fingerprint these guys back in 1577 so we can identify which is which? Or at least sew tags in their underwear so we can tell them apart?

Two phrases of Scripture come to my mind in all this mini-disaster over the Ward Diary.

When I first realized my mistake, my inclination was to shred the manuscript, scream, beat my breast, and throw fuzzy kittens against the wall. The phrase that came to mind at that moment of shock was "Be Still And Know That I Am God".

As I pondered what to do about my mistake, in my mind the phrase arose, "Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counselors there is safety".

Eve advises me to mark the places in the manuscript that I know are incorrect, then to shelve the thing till the Inter Library Loan materials arrive, to hold off making any decision until I see what information those sources contain.

I've also consulted Ginny, Helen, Barbara and I'll be talking with Donald and Wes next week about various aspects of the project. And I also pay attention to e-mails and blog comments about my work.

I stand on the shoulders of many people in order to be "self-employed".

The reason I'm so upset about this setback is not that I made a mistake, I've made plenty of those, but that

I felt so confident — I really thought the Ward Diary could be finished and listed in my on-line book catalog by this weekend.

In fact, confident is not the proper word, I felt so SMUG! I even joked about the final editing in my blog last Wednesday, engaged in arrogant showing off to produce a moooving post.

Maybe the Scripture I should meditate on more is the one that says, "Pride goeth before a fall, and a haughty spirit before destruction".

While this setback disturbs me, I realize that it is not world-shattering. My mini-plight hardly compares with the real plight of those 22 Korean Christians being killed one by one by Moslems in Afghanistan.

But, the old adage is true: In The Whole History Of The World Nobody's Toothache Ever Hurt Worst Than Mine!

We all feel our problems are vital, urgent, demanding immediate remedy.

In seeking God's guidance, I wish He'd give me a Yellow Brick Road to skip along to reach the Emerald City, but that's seldom the way He leads.

Yes there sometimes are green pastures and still waters, but that's a respite, a goal, seldom an everyday circumstance. In fact, the words of an old hymn come to mind:

By the light of burning martyrs,'
Jesus' bleeding feet I track;
Toiling up new Calvaries ever,
With the Cross that turns not back.

So, my dilemma over what to do about the Ward Diary proves to be a minor aggravation of less than Nine-Eleven proportions. However...

What's that Eve?

Did she just say there's more than one Drama Queen in this family?

Maybe so, but I think I'm handling this crisis very well.

Anybody got a fuzzy kitten I can borrow?

Here's a bizarre story from an Associated Press newspaper clipping for the kid in the attic:

Scuba diver dies after lightning hits his air tank off Florida coast

DEERFIELD BEACH, Fla. — Lightning struck a diver's air tank as he surfaced off Florida's Atlantic coast, killing him, authorities said.

The 36-year-old man was diving with three others Sunday off a boat near Deerfield Beach, about 40 miles north of Miami. He had surfaced about 30 feet from the boat when lightning struck his tank, said Deerfield Beach Fire Chief Gary Fernaays.

The other divers struggled to get the man back into the boat and radioed for help, Fernaays said. The victim, identified as Stephen Wilson, of Deerfield Beach, was rushed to the beach, where a rescue crew gave him CPR. He was pronounced dead at North Broward Medical Center.

A severe-thunderstorm warning had been in effect Sunday for Broward County.

The Broward County Medical Examiner's Office planned an autopsy to determine if Wilson drowned or was electrocuted.

Sunday, July 29, 2007

One Thousand And One. One Thousand And Two. One Thousand And...

Ginny and I sat in our car in the Gorgi's BBQ parking lot waiting for the torrential rain to slacken enough for us to make a run for the door.

"Want to share the umbrella?" she asked.

"No. It won't rain on me. I'm a Christian," I said.

"How do you figure that"?

"The Bible says God sends His rain on the just and the unjust; we in-betweeners get to stay dry," I said.

She nudged me out into the rain with her furled umbrella.

The woman has no sense of biblical exegesis.

We scooted between raindrops into the restaurant. On Saturdays Gorgi's offers a senior special about two dollars less than the regular price so we, and a good many other families, often take advantage of this Decrepit Discount For The Elderly.

The manager, a slender, gray-haired gentleman, much younger than I am, maybe in his mid-50s, greeted us at the door. We've been going in there for years and have a nodding acquaintance with him, though I don't remember his name.

We found a table and ordered our BBQ, baked sweet potato and collard greens.

Mid-way through our lunch, a waitress behind the cash register called out, "Anybody in here know CPR?".

Eight or ten young people stopped eating and rushed to the front.

The manager had dropped to the floor behind the counter.

He sprawled there not breathing.

Ginny and I took CPR classes years ago, but we neglected to take refresher courses, so when we saw younger, more up-to-date people aiding, we helped by staying out of the way.

In a snap, all these strangers who happened to be eating in the restaurant formed teams to administer aid. One began chest compressions; another breathing; another established rhythm and counted cadence.

"One Thousand And One. One Thousand And Two. One Thousand And three..."

Knowledgeable CPR bystanders chanted with her as they organized a second team to relieve the first when they got tired.

People who did not know CPR helped too.

While the team of strangers worked to keep the manager alive, several people called Jacksonville Fire Rescue. One old lady customer removed the Please Wait To Be Seated sign back out of the entrance way. One man rushed to the front door to prop it open so ambulance attendants would have easy access. A fat lady in a flowered print dress rushed to the end of the parking lot

to wave rescue vehicles into the correct one of Gorgi's several driveways.

"One Thousand And One. One Thousand And Two..."

Sirens in the distance.

The first fire truck to arrive roared into the drive. A young fireman ran inside, quickly evaluated the situation and called to his buddies, "Cardiac Red"!

They grabbed the appropriate medical kit off the truck and poured into the restaurant. Everyone stood aside to give them working room. An ambulance arrived. Restaurant patrons helped maneuver the gurney around the L-shaped entranceway.

Another fire truck arrived bringing more equipment into Georgie's.

The medics gave shots, inserted a plastic breathing tube, and attached defibrillator leads.

CLEAR!

CLEAR!

They shocked his heart several times. The CPR teams had backed out of the way to give the professionals room to work.

The medics loaded the manager onto the gurney while continuing to work on him. Mid-way out of the restaurant, they shocked him again.

They loaded him into the ambulance and sped off with lights and sirens.

That's a good sign.

As the two fire engines packed up equipment, a guy with a clip board recorded information and let the head waitress know where the patient was being transported. She had already called the manager's family and the restaurant owner.

A few waitress cried in the kitchen door. The cashier's hands trembled. Customers drifted back to their seats to finish their cold meals.

These people had nothing in common other than they happened to be eating in the same restaurant — But they had acted as a well-drilled team; you'd have thought they had rehearsed this.

One man had been stricken. Without question or hesitation, more than twenty strangers jumped to his aid. Every once in a while I'm proud to be part of the human race.

Monday, July 30, 2007 Love's Lament

Sunday, police arrested our youngest daughter and placed her in jail.

I do not know details, but apparently while driving, she hit another car then fled the scene of that minor accident only to be involved in a more serious accident a few miles down the road.

According to the on-line police report, no one was injured in either traffic incident.

She was driving without insurance and with a suspended drivers license.

Monday she goes before a judge for her initial hearing.

When she called me collect from jail she was concerned about loosing the job she just started last week. Her car rolled over three times in the second accident and is now a total unrepairable wreck.

Someone will need to feed her cats while she's in jail for however long. When other family members went over to her house to see about the cats, they found empty aerosol containers indicating to us that inhalants may be involved in what's going on in her life.

Last night, as we brooded long over this latest episode, Ginny quoted a sad Scripture to me; when Jesus stood on a hill overlooking the city, He said,:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killeth the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen doth gather her chicks under her wings — but ye would not!

AUGUST

Wednesday, August 01, 2007 Sad/Glad

Here's an update:

I called one of the girls at Gorgi's BBQ about the manager's heart attack on Saturday. She tells me that he remains hospitalized breathing via a ventilator. He is ok although the outcome for him remains iffy.

The judge released my youngest daughter from jail Monday and set a trial date for her in a couple of months. She said she's going out of town to relax and reevaluate things for a day or two.

93 e-mail messages clog my inboxes, most of it forwarded cutesies.

The Samuel Ward Diary still hangs fire. I have not had the heart to open it, much less work on it, since last week's discovery.

Sleep deprivation guides my life at the moment; I blunder about in a stupor. Disturbing dreams wake me each night after just a few minutes sleep — not nightmares, just upsetting dreams.

For instance, years ago I had a nodding acquaintance with James Robertson Ward, a noted writer and historian who wrote *Old Hickory's Town*, the definitive history of Jacksonville. His monumental series on the route of the King's Road was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

Well, on the night of Monday, July 23rd, (this was three days before I realized my fatal error I'd made preparing the Samuel Ward Diary) — That night I dreamed I was working on some book at my computer when I heard a knock at the front door. When I opened it, there stood James Ward saying that his house had caught fire and burned down. He announced that he was moving in to live with us. In the driveway behind him stood a tractor-trailer truck overflowing with scorched and soggy books, salvaged from his extensive library. The workers with him began unloading all those books into our living room!

That woke me up.

You don't have to be Jungian to see a connection between my working on that 16th Century diary of Samuel Ward, and my dream about eminent historian James Robertson Ward moving permanently into our living room.

See what I mean about disturbing dreams and sleep depravation?

I can't think straight.

I have no spirit for work.

Today I whiled time away playing a game of on-line strip poker with three virtual ladies.

I lost my shirt... Actually I lost a whole lot more than my shirt and the fully-clothed virtual ladies around the table laughed me to scorn.

It's sad when you're laughed to scorn by colored pixels.

Does all this sadness mean that joy has fled my life?

Doesn't the Scripture say, the Joy of the Lord shall be your strength.

Not that anyone has ever called me giddy, but today I'm not happy, happy, happy.

Yet there does remain a slow undercurrent of gladness.

Gladness mixed with bone-deep weariness — the kind of gladness you feel when you've stood at the bus stop for 45 minutes and finally see your bus coming into view three blocks away — That kind of gladness.

For today, it'll do.

Thursday, August 02, 2007 The Miraculously Obvious

Toying with a statement my friend Wes made Wednesday, I came up with a ridiculous mental picture from the Bible.

Picture this:

Jesus intends to feed 5,000 hungry people. He places five loaves of bread and two small fish in a piñata and suspends it above the crowd

He swings His staff.

With a mighty whack, He breaks the piñata open,

Fish and bread sandwiches fly everywhere.

With a mighty shout 5,000 men scramble in a pile, each intent on grabbing his fair share.

Interesting mental picture, but that's not exactly how the Scripture describes the event.

The feeding of the five thousand is one of the few events described in all four Gospels. Each Gospel shows slight variations like you'd get if four photographers were shooting the same scene from different stand points.

Luke quotes Jesus as saying, "Make them sit down by fifties in a company".

Mark elaborates saying, "He commanded the disciples to make all sit down by companies upon the green grass. And they sat down in ranks by hundreds, and by fifties".

Even though Jesus intended to perform a miracle, He first stated the obvious — sit down in groups for orderly distribution of the miraculous bread.

That's the point Wes made.

"God reveals the obvious," he said.

I keep expecting God to say, "Shazam!" and reveal some deep secret hidden from ages of men before me.

He's never done that for me.

Now there are deep secret revelations in Scripture; for instance, Paul uses the phrase, "Great is the mystery of godliness".

So, why would Wes say, God reveals the obvious?

A few weeks ago, Wes packed his brand new pickup truck for an out of town trip. He started the engine but remembered something he'd left in the house. He ran inside to get it and when he came out the door, he saw his beautiful new truck rolling down the drive, and across two lanes of traffic.

Wes ran after his run-away truck.

It rolled into the grass and bumped a fire hydrant on the other side of the street.

No damage to the hydrant but the collision scratched a groove in the side of the sparkling new truck.

As Wes opened the driver's door, he said, "It was like a big light bulb flashing on in my brain, like a voice speaking to me from Heaven; it said, 'When you park on a hill, set the brake".

That's when Wes realized, "God reveals the obvious".

As I pondered this blanket statement, I started to see that it appears true across the board.

For instance, when God said, "Thou shalt not steal", that bit of revelation appears to be obvious even to a little kid; Who wants to meet Farmer McGregor with his shotgun as you crawl under his garden gate?

But say you ignore the obvious, say you ignore God's revelation that says, "Thou shalt not commit adultery" What's so obvious about that?

King Solomon observed, "Men do not despise a thief if he steal to satisfy his soul when he is hungry." When such a thief is caught, he's to restore what he stole and the penalties are not too severe. His crime is understandable.

"But, whoso committeth adultery with a woman," Solomon said, "Lacketh understanding: he that doeth it destroyeth his own soul".

Solomon then rehearses the obvious: dishonor, reproach, a jealous husband (or wife) who's borrowed Farmer McGregor's shotgun, vengeance, exposure to disease, irreparable damage to one's own and to someone else's home.

A moment's thought tells us all this. No revelation from Heaven is needed. It's all obvious. Yet God felt it necessary to say, "Thou shalt not commit adultery".

Yes, God does indeed reveal the obvious.

Why?

Because we ignore it.

Actions have consequences.

I can't speak for anyone else, but when my actions produce consequences, I'll think, I knew better than that! I'll realize that I should not have done that, or that I should have done this. And I knew it at the time!

In fact, I wonder if a good definition of the word **sin** might be, **to ignore the obvious.**

When I think about them, even the three most significant miracles in Scripture seem obvious. I'm

thinking of the resurrection of Jesus from death and His ascension back into Heaven, and His incarnation from Heaven to earth in the first place.

Christ's death on the cross as a sacrifice for our sin is an obvious outworking of the innate love, character and nature of God. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life".

If indeed Christ is God come in the flesh to rescue us, then it's obvious that the Almighty God, the Prince of Life, the creator of life, would not stay dead after we tortured Him to death. The Scripture says that even while nailed hand and foot to the cross, even then He was, at the same time, upholding all things by the word of His power.

Obviously a puny hole in the ground could not contain Him who said, "I lay down my life, that I might take it up again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again".

The Scripture goes so far as to say Jesus is "Declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead".

And after resurrection, What?

Luke, one of those four photographers snapping photos of the same event, wrote about "all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day in which He was taken up".

Luke mentions the apostles, "Whom He had chosen: to whom also He shewed Himself alive after His passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of things pertaining to the kingdom of God. ... And when He had spoken these things, while they beheld, He was taken up; and a cloud received Him out of their sight."

It's obvious from the familiar Christmas story — Virgin, babe, manger, shepherds, wise men, oxen lowing, Angels saying, Glory To God In The Highest — that in the least something important had happened.

And thou shalt call His name, Emmanuel — meaning God With Us.

Here we see the One called "Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" come into the world on a rescue mission.

"I am come to seek and to save the lost," He said.

At the first Christmas, the Creator had imposed physical limits on Himself, he squeezed Godhead into an infant. The infinite God who holds all the universe, small as a nutshell, in the palm of His hand, reduced Himself into a finite, confined, physical time and location.

Mission accomplished, He returned Home, no longer under those self-imposed restrictions. He is at all times and in all places present; in Him we live and breath and have our very being.

Could I be over simplifying things?

Could I be wrong?

Sure.

Not having been dead yet, I don't know any more about it than a moose. But, I see no reason to doubt that what Jesus said is true is in fact true. That's not saying what He said is comfortable for me, but it rings true.

Sin. Christmas. Crucifixion. Resurrection. Ascension. Return. — It blends together. It rings true. It makes sense. It works in daily living. It holds water.

It's obvious.

God reveals the obvious...

Just the same, I wish Jesus had done that piñata thing I visualized starting out.

That would have been so cool!

Friday, August 03, 2007
Was It Something I Said?

While I stood at the kitchen sink washing breakfast dishes Thursday morning I think I heard familiar words coming from the radio playing across the room.

If I heard correctly, a section from my blog was being read on the air.

How odd.

The radio station does a segment called *Heroes & Zeros* contrasting acts of conspicuous bravery and goodness with acts of slime and stupidity.

One of the good things told about on Thursday morning was the wonderful response of staff, customers, and rescue personnel to the heart attack suffered by the manager of Gorgi's BBQ. I'm pretty sure the radio announcer actually read some quotes from my Blog posting for July 29th, "One Thousand And One...".

Of course, having the water running and my own hearing loss made me miss the beginning of the segment, so I can't be positive, but it appears they were actually reading portions of that Blog entry.

Hearing my own words quoted over the radio behind me felt so strange.

Flattering too.

That's a real ego builder.

But, when there's an ego builder, an ego deflater is sure to follow:

Summary by Month										
Month	Daily Avg				Monthly Totals					
	His	Files	Pages	Visits	Sites	KBytes	Visits	Pages	Files	Him
Aug 2007	1493	1284	398	304	1464	277428	914	1196	3854	4481
Jul 2007	2557	2241	727	460	14518	4617854	14281	22563	69476	79296
Fun 2007	5009	4647	11.59	715	23209	8304669	21479	34784	139429	150273
May 2007	6611	6114	1255	648	25001	10827607	20105	38926	189555	204967
Apr 2007	6898	6333	1271	645	28688	10923245	19367	38142	189994	206957
Mar 2007	4669	4234	897	458	22689	7114151	14009	27816	131278	144740
Feb 2007	2809	2389	501	276	20261	3469691	7731	14037	66903	78671
I en 2007	3750	3070	550	293	31095	4472321	9109	17054	95185	116260
Dec 2006	4197	3341	484	256	38543	4130389	7953	15007	103585	130111
Nov 2006	3587	3004	529	262	25342	3504738	7888	15898	90123	107639
Oct 2006	2165	1776	411	205	8872	2366661	6369	12755	55062	67140
Sep 2006	1263	988	305	149	3721	1519117	4498	9170	29646	37911
Totals						61528071	133903	247348	1164090	1328441

It being the start of the month, yesterday I checked the Webalizer software to look at my site statistics. According to that, readership dropped from an average of 715 readers a day in June to 460 readers per day in July.

Since I started posting my journal entries on-line, readership has grown every month until now. The site drew 21,479 visits in June, but dropped down to 14,281 in July.

Now, I appreciate each one of you who bothers to read my blog, your interest builds me up and your comments encourage me. You always give me a lift.

Thank you.

But, I can't help but wonder about this abrupt drop in readership.

Have I chased than many people off?

Have I offended so many readers that they left in droves?

Was it something I said?

Sunday, August 05, 2007

A Bear, A Bridge, & God's Purpose In The Universe

Since my journal entry today kicks around the three interrelated subjects in the title, I'll tackle the easiest topic first:

What is God's plan and purpose in the universe? I don't have a clue.

Now that that's settled, let's move on to the bear.

This morning I climbed up on our roof to blow off fallen branches and leaves to clear the rain gutters. As I worked, I thought about how the purpose of God relates to two recent items in the news.

Here's a clipping from the local newspaper:

Bear in road leaves three riders seriously injured

Three people were seriously injured when they were thrown from their motorcycles in a collision with a black bear.

The three were among a group of six motorcyclists traveling Interstate 95 in St. Johns County about 9 p.m. Saturday.

When the riders were south of Florida 207, the bear ran into the left lane of the interstate and motorcyclist Kristina Hall, 43, of Middleburg was unable to avoid hitting it. Hall was thrown from her 2006 Harley-Davidson.

Rider Harriet Ward, 65, of Orange Park, hit Hall's motorcycle with her 2004 Honda and was thrown from her bike, according to the Florida Highway Patrol.

A second motorcyclist, Russell Lemmon, 38, of Jacksonville, also struck the bear and was thrown from his 1984 Honda.

All three were taken to Flagler Hospital with serious injuries, according to the Highway Patrol.

A later report added:

"All I saw was a black blob in front me, just before I hit it," Harriet Ward, 64, said Monday from her room at Flagler Hospital in St. Augustine.

The Orange Park woman said she was the second in the group of six motorcyclists to hit the bear. ..

Ward faces surgery today to repair fractures to both ankles, she said. She also is being treated for a dislocated arm.

The retiree estimates she will be wheelchair bound as she recovers but knows it could have been worse.

The wreck closed the northbound lanes for an hour, according to the FHP.

A second crash, between a St. Johns County Sheriff's Office vehicle and another vehicle, followed. Sheriff's Office spokesman Kevin Kelshaw said the wreck was minor and occurred as the deputy responded to the accident call involving the bear.

Here's my dilemma:

Hundreds of motorcyclists travel Interstate 95 every day, thousands of heavy trucks roar up and down that same stretch of road just south of Jacksonville every day, hundreds of thousands of cars commute along that stretch of road every day — so why did these three

cyclists hit a black bear and get injured? They were in a party of six. Why were three taken and three left safe?

Are such happenings random chance without meaning? Is it a matter of luck for the cyclists who missed hitting the bear? Or do such tragedies fit into some divine plan?

Or was last Saturday simply a bad day for bears? (Yes, the bear died on the road).

Questions about random meaningless chance and God's deliberate plan have been discussed by generations of the world's smartest theologians, philosophers, and sophomores.

And here I am up on the housetop cleaning rain gutters with a leaf blower and pondering those same questions. The thought struck me that Jesus said something about two men on the housetop and one was taken and the other left, didn't He?

When I checked my Bible latter, I found that He said nothing of the sort; the thing about the guy on the roof came earlier in the passage of Scripture I missremembered. As Matthew records it, what He did say was:

"Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come".

These verses appear to apply to both the Second Advent and to death. When Luke records the same words, he refers to "eagles", meaning vultures, gathering around a dead body.

So Jesus knew that some are taken, but some survive.

In these passages, He does not spell out which person is which or why.

Why? Is it all horrible senseless chance or does God have purpose in the things which happen to us?

On the tv Thursday evening I watched a news reporter standing in the debris of a collapsed bridge struggle with such questions.

During rush hour traffic Wednesday in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a bridge carrying traffic along Interstate 35 over the Mississippi River collapsed into the river.

A school bus carrying children, a paraplegic's van, and many commuters crossing the bridge survived by inches. Even now no one know how many cars, trucks, buses, vans plunged into the river or were crushed by debris. Over a hundred injured people were hospitalized. Twenty people have been reported missing. Only five bodies have been recovered so far but more are expected.

As best I can remember of how the reporter posed the question (and I think he may have been quoting someone else) he said,

"There must be some reason, some purpose for why this happened. Either God governs the universe according to a divine plan, or the collapse of the bridge is a meaningless phenomenon and the universe is without divine purpose".

We don't hear that sort of question very often on the evening news. I suspect we all think about such things now and then, but a tragedy brings them to the surface.

We all ask why.

We seek meaning.

We look for hope.

We flirt with despair.

We demand explanations.

And we blame.

Already I hear rumblings wanting to place blame on the highway department, the bridge inspectors, the construction companies, heavy trucks — God. Some folks even blame the victims of a tragedy for what happens to them!

Ever heard anyone say, "Well, he deserved it"?

Do the innocent and good get called to Heaven early by the Trade Center crash, the terrorist bomb, AIDS, the car accident, cancer, crib death, bridge collapse, bear in the road — while the wicked and bad get zapped in the exact same event? Is that God's design?

In a tv interview one man who crossed the bridge safely seconds before it fell said, "I guess God was looking over me today".

Really?

Was He not looking out for the people who fell 60 feet in a tangle of jagged concrete rebar, snapped cables, and twisted girders into the muddy water?

Were these victims less loved of God than survivors?

Jesus kept up with the news of the day.

Once as He taught, bystanders informed Him that Roman soldiers had killed some Galilean insurgents; the men wanted His reaction to the news.

"Suppose ye," He said, "That these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay! But, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.

"Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men, that dwelt in Jerusalem?

"I tell you Nay: but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish".

In another place, rabble rousers (actually they were His own disciples) pointed out to Jesus a man born blind; they wanted someone to blame:

"Master," they said, "Who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind"?

Jesus answered, "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him".

There's a whole chapter of the Bible devoted to this incident.

Is this why the bear crossed the road?

Is this why the bridge collapsed hurting all those people?

That the works of God should be made manifest??? Is that my conclusion?

Not exactly.

When the tornado struck and the building they were in collapsed killing Job's children, he questioned God; yet at the same time, he said of the Lord, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him".

That makes sense to me even when nothing else does.

I said starting out that I do not have a clue about why or how God's plan and purpose works, but I do have a solid confidence about such things.

When my own life has hit unexpected things in my road, When things I expected to support me collapsed under my feet, When things that should go right, go wrong. When people I thought reliable, aren't. When faith hits the fan and doubts splatter around me...

Even then, I believe God is good.

I trust Him.

I'm neither smart nor profound. I have no answers. But I trust that Jesus is 100% reliable; He's never shown Himself otherwise to anybody.

So, as to the deep, troubling questions of random chance or divine reason, I have no answer... However, I half remember a quote from someone somewhere that sums it up for me:

Five minutes after he gets there, the dumbest man in Heaven will know more about God than the smartest man on earth — and, lost in wonder, he just won't care.

Wednesday, August 08, 2007 **Two Stones**

Trying to unscramble eggs.

That describes my progress in straightening out the mistakes I made with the diary of Samuel Ward. I keep compounding the mistakes.

Consequently, I feel lower than whale shit.

Of course, slow of progress in my work is only one factor: I've also been reading over some of my own diary entries for the past year; Ginny and I are momentarily at odds; financial worries; a deep sense of shame and failure, etc. etc..

All that's also depressing.

My feelings conflict with my beliefs

I feel useless and worthless, like my whole life has been a waste of time; yet I believe on some level, I'm fulfilling God's purpose in my life.

Opposite things: feelings and beliefs.

My feelings devalue me; my belief lifts me up.

I chose which one to go with.

When I feel as though I have a reverse Midas Touch (everything I touch turns to crap) I choose to say "Blessed be His name. The joy of the Lord is my strength".

Reading back entries in my diaries I see a happygo-lucky, light-hearted, flippant, confident person of faith; examining my feelings (what I think of as the real me) I see a bitter, sour, frustrated grouch.

This dichotomy is not a matter of hypocrisy, at least not much; but both aspects exist side by side within me at the same time and both are a pain in the ass.

I really am both men.

For years two small rocks have rested on my computer keyboard above those functions keys (which I have no idea what they do).

The rocks remind me of a story I read about a Jewish rabbi, I've forgotten which one, who lived in those ancient times when a slingshot was a real weapon of war.

He told his students that each man ought to carry in his pouch two stones: one engraved with the words "For my sake was the universe created"; the other, with the words "I am but dust and ashes".

A student asked, "Rabbi, which one should a man use in his sling"?

He replied, "Use the one you need most at the moment".

Thursday, August 09, 2007 Past & Preface

Yesterday I found comfort when I read a section of the Bible I've never read before.

This strikes me as odd because I've read the Bible cover to cover several times in the past.

Oddly enough, the first time I ever read the Bible through was before I ever became a Christian — I read it looking for loopholes so I could avoid the claim of Christ on my life.

Couldn't find any.

In the past I have taught adult Bible classes in various church and rescue mission settings which necessitated my reading individual books of the Bible again and again to ensure that I understood what I was teaching.

Not only that, but I try to order my life and dealings with people on the Scriptures in daily living. I take the words of Scripture seriously. So seriously in fact that when Scripture makes me uncomfortable, I try to wiggle out of it.

I believe the Bible (and I'll not quibble about the verb to use next in this sentence) — is, contains, conveys — the Word of God. I find no reason not to in either my general education or in my life experience.

So over the years I've read the Bible a lot.

But in all these years, I have never before read the section I read yesterday.

I refer to a section of text that is not actually Scripture, but the translators' page dedicating their 1611 work to King James and their Preface To Readers in which they explain the techniques, policies, sources, methods, and reasons behind their translation of the Bible from Hebrew and Greek.

This preface material became so out of date that most modern printings of the King James Bible omit it and start with the first chapter of actual Scripture, the Book of Genesis.

But my work in editing the diary of Samuel Ward, one of the translators of the 1611 King James Bible — that same diary I screwed up so badly, that same diary I've been entangled with since last December, that same diary that's driven me nuts with frustration and made me beat myself on the head in exasperation —

My work on the Ward diary led me into actually reading that fine-print preface to the translation yesterday.

I'd never bothered to read it before.

It surprised me.

The thing that surprised me most in the Translators' Preface was their extreme gentleness.

Off on a tangent:

In the1600s, English Protestants lived in anxiety, constant suspicion, and threat of terrorism. The reign of Bloody Mary and the attempted invasion by the Spanish Armada remained fresh in their minds.

Shortly after King James ascended to the throne, he attended the opening of Parliament on November 5, 1605, . Right before the ceremony terrorists packed kegs of gunpowder into a cellar room under the chamber plotting to ignite the explosives to blow up the king, the royal family, and all member of Parliament.

A justice of the peace uncovered the plot before the gunpowder went off and the terrorists, led by Guy Fawkes, were discovered to be fanatical Roman Catholics

Immediately England tightened air port security, installed surveillance cameras, wiretapped e-mail and phone calls, and barred liquid and gels from being... No, excuse me, wrong terrorist plot. But you get the idea.

Englishmen felt antsy about Roman Catholics.

During much of her reign, the Virgin Queen manipulated religious factions in her realm by threatening to marry a Catholic — or not. Her appointed bishops threatened to defrock all Puritans who refuse to wear the mandated ecclesiastical gowns — a burr of contention often mentioned in Ward's diary.

Another source of tension between the Puritans and the established church involved which Bible to use. The queen and bishops favored the *Bishops' Bible* which she had translated in 1569.

The Puritans, Reformers, Presbyterians, and Separatists favored the *Geneva Bible* published in 1560. It was the first Bible to contain verse numbers so readers could easily locate specific Scriptures. However it also contained Calvinist marginal notes which established church officials felt inflammatory.

Feelings ran high on the matter.

On March 24, 1603, King James ascended to the throne. The very next year, he convened the Hampton Court Conference to iron out differences between religious factions in his new kingdom. One result of that conference was the commissioning of a new translation of the Bible, the Authorized Version or King James Bible.

Working in six committees, 47 scholars from the University of Cambridge, the University of Oxford, and from Westminster Abby undertook the translation.

Each scholar worked independently, without pay, then each committee reviewed, revised, harmonized, and standardized their work.

Samuel Ward served on the translation committee of the Second Cambridge Company which was comprised of the finest biblical and linguistic scholars of the day.

In January, 1609, the General Committee Of Review met at Stationer's Hall, London, to review the complete work of the six companies. Publisher Robert Barker issued the first printing of the King James Bible as a folio edition in 1611. Each page was printed on a cotton-fiber sheet of paper measuring 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ by 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. A bound copy cost 12 shillings.

Back on track:

The translators wrote a Preface which reflected the fears and tensions of their times. Since this Preface is not actually a part of Scripture, it is seldom found in today's printed editions of the Bible.

I'd never read it before yesterday.

Yet it was in that preface that a sentence struck a cord in my heart as I've berated myself over my many mistakes in my work on the Ward diary.

When I realize how badly I'd screwed up big time and how months of my work were invalid, I took it hard. (My posting for July 27th explains).

I have felt like such a fool, buffoon, idiot. This careless goof has colored my life since I discovered it. I like to think of myself as a careful researcher. I pride myself on accuracy, honest, and integrity.

My error hurt my pride.

I'm so great that I expected much better of me. (A friend once quipped, "Cowart, you're an idiot. Good thing God's standards aren't nearly as high as yours").

Anyhow, my error combined with all the other crap that's been going on in my life. Thus I've wallowed in failure recently. I've felt ashamed of myself and my work. It's been a bad time for me.

So, what did the translators' preface have to say yesterday that makes me feel so much better?

"Things are to take their denomination of the greater part; and a naturall man could say, 'Verùm ubi multa nitent in carmine, non ego paucis offendor maculis, &c'. A man may be counted a vertuous man, though hee have made many slips in his life, (else, there were none vertuous, for in many things we offend all) also a comely man and lovely, though hee have some warts upon his hand, yea, not onely freakles upon his face, but also skarres".

Warts, freckles, and scars there may well be without destroying the overall person.

"...Though he may have made many slips in his life".

In other words, there is forgiveness with the Lord Jesus. And, after all, that's pretty much what much of the Bible is about anyhow.

Friday, August 10, 2007 A Happy, Happy Visit



Who is in that unfamiliar green truck pulling into my drive?

I filed the copy of the Ward Diary I've been working on, put on my shoes, and walked to the door to see. I expected some lost stranger looking for directions; that happens a lot on this dead end street.

A beautiful young woman hopped down from the passenger's seat and ran to meet me. The last time I saw this lady, she was a babe in arms.

Now she's a bright eight.

Oh, yes, her dad tagged along too.

It was Mike, whom I have not seen in ages; he is my great friend and my eldest daughter's ex-husband. He is now happily married and he and his wife gave the world their charming daughter, "Call-Me-Bug".

What a great and happy surprise!

With joy, my mind jumped from the 16^{th} century to the 21^{nd} .

You see, Miss. Bug aspires to become a writer. She hounded her dad into bringing her to see a real live writer in his cage.

I think she will make a great writer in the future. I look forward to her first book.

Here's an aside: The other day in a restaurant I heard someone comment that J.K. Rowling, of Harry Potter fame, is richer than the Queen of England.

Her friend replied, "That's because she writes better than the Queen of England"!

Anyhow, Miss. Bug followed every word as Mike and I caught up on family history and told each other how much we love our work. Mike is a firefighter. He recently returned from out west where he trained in how to care for Americans injured in a nuclear attack or radiation accident.

He has read an early edition of my book on the history of the Jacksonville Fire Department (a book I'm revising and updating as soon as I clear my desk). Mike is thinking of writing his own book with a strong emphasis on the camaraderie that exists among firefighters.

Miss. Bug, who is eight, tells me she wants to become a writer and study French and other foreign languages. She listened intently as I described my own life and work as a writer. I think she caught a glimpse of how important it is to work at something you love.

This concept permeated our conversation because as divergent as firefighting and writing are as occupations, Mike and I share the same love of what we do and we communicate perfectly on that level.

King Solomon said, "There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God".

Mike and I are typical examples of this important Bible truth.

Eat. Drink. Find joy in your work. It doesn't get any better that that!

Like a 50-pound sponge, Miss. Bug, absorbed our chatter as she fed Ginny's love bird. I hope she learned something valuable. I think she found the visit and talk of writing's joys educational.

If nothing else, she watched in fascination as I struck a match, fired up my pipe and puffed smoke; that's something she'd never seen before.

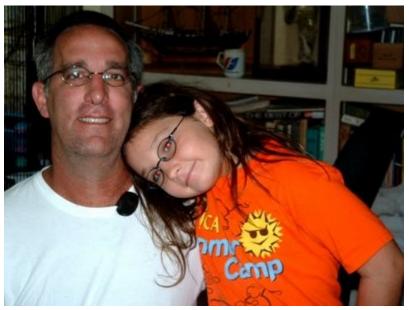
Miss. Bug crinkled her nose at me.

She attached computer wires and cables for me (which I could not see to do) and hooked up my digital camera. Her Dad put new batteries in the camera for me.

I snapped a couple of pictures (Sorry, I don't know how to do that red-eye thingy).

Miss. Bug is now on the Internet.

Maybe she'll use one of these pictures on her book jacket someday.



Saturday, August 11, 2007 A Gift To A Stranger

I suppose it's ok to tell you this because of the way it turned out..

If it had worked out differently, I wouldn't mention it.

"Take heed that ye do not your alms before men," Jesus said. "When thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth". Heck, my right hand never even knows what my right hand is doing. So I suppose I'm ok with that part.

Jesus said that when we give to the poor or do a good deed, we should keep it secret. I think He said that so if people find out, we won't be embarrassed over how few good things we do or how little we give. Or how little we pray or fast. So Jesus said not to boast about such things — to keep them secret.

That's why I never get to write about doing anything good in this blog; besides that, if I never get to tell about doing good stuff, readers will assume that I do a whole lot more good than I say — which is bull.

But, since this time it was a bust, I suppose it's ok to tell about this.

The other day I visited a relative and, because I feel uncomfortable smoking in someone else's house, I walked out in the backyard to smoke my pipe.

There was a guy out there spray painting some fence parts. White paint fumes rose in the air around him.

The robust old guy, almost as old as I am, looked as thought he'd lost weight recently. He wore paint-spattered jeans, boots, and a work shirt.

He commented on how much he liked the aroma of my tobacco. He looked a bit wistful as he watched my pleasure in smoking. He said he'd always wished that he had a pipe to smoke. We chatted on that level for maybe five minutes.

I never caught his name.

I continued walking around puffing my pipe and admiring flowers; he went on with his spray painting.

The next morning, it occurred to me that I have many pipes in my collection. Pipes I dearly love. But, who needs that many pipes?

I decided to send one to the old guy so I began to put together a packet of goodies for him.

I agonized over which pipes to send. Each one I'd choose, suddenly became immensely valuable to me. I'd find some good reason to keep each one. I did not want to give up any of my pipes.

But eventually, I decided on three. Not three of my very best, but three that draw well, look masculine, and have a good feel to them. Actually, one of them is a drug store pipe, but it is well-carved. The other two are top quality. One, the French one, has a sterling silver band.

I cleaned these used pipes thoroughly, using alcohol to disinfect and to cut tar build-up. I chose my best tobacco pouch, the one I use my self. (I believe we should always give the poor our best). I filled the pouch with my own tobacco, not the cheap stuff from my sandlugs can.

I crafted a metal matchcase for the guy. The same kind of case I carry in my own pocket; his had a new striker, a picture of pirate ships on the front and a modest bikini girl inside the cover. I dug under the cupboard to find the good-quality wooden matches, not the cheap ones I use my self.

I fixed up a cleaning kit with pipe cleaners, wire, etc.

The stranger would have every thing he needs for a satisfying smoke.

I arranged for one of my daughters to come over and deliver the packet of goodies to the stranger.

I regretted parting with my pipes and I felt that I'd spent way too much time on this project which had just captured my fancy. But there was also a sense of satisfaction at having done a good deed...

Word came back to me — The guy is undergoing chemo-therapy for lung cancer.

Yes, I'd sent a packet of smoking materials to a lung cancer patient.

Oh, Crap! How was I to know?

Oh well, it's as the Bible says, "Even the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel".

Sunday, August 12, 2007

John Cowart, King Of The Geriatric Geeks!

Last night, I lay back in my recliner eating a grilled cheese sandwich with pickle and flipping the tv remote back and forth between a concert by violinist Andre Rieu and a pre-season Jaguars football game.

Who says I ain't got no couth nor culture?

Anyhow as I watched fiddling and football, I experienced a revelation.

Back on August 2^{nd} I wrote about how God reveals the obvious; back on July 13^{th} , I wrote about problems with printer proof pages.

Well, my work with those pages hit a big time glitch; I thought I'd have to place the whole project in the appropriate receptacle:



To get around this glitch, I needed to convert a 504-page document into a different format.

For weeks I couldn't do it.

That heathen manuscript just would not convert. No mater what I did, it just would not convert. I'd get error messages or a blank screen whichever technique I used. I struggled with this stupid thing, trying this and that and the other for days and days and days.

I called Donald and Helen, both expert computer geeks who usually solve my computer problems in a jiffy, but they were no help at all this time.

I finagled that manuscript.

I manipulated.

I cajoled.

I cursed.

I prayed...

And, last night as I cried at the concert and yelled at the quarterback, I saw the light. In the middle of a car commercial, I envisioned my own computer screen. There on that easy-to-ignore toolbar at the top of the screen, on the far right-hand side is the word <u>Help</u>.

I left concert and quarterback, came out to my computer desk, clicked on that word, and read the pop-up instructions.

Guess what?

Those instructions gave three ways to convert a file; I knew about one and two. I'd tried them again and again with variations. But method number three never occurred to me.

It worked.

My file is converted.

In seconds!

Smooth as peaches through a goose, my file converted!

My point?

When struggling long and hard with a knotty problem which defies solution, ask God to reveal the obvious and see what happens.

And, don't forget to be thankful when it does.

Tuesday, August 14, 2007 While Stars Fall

Over this past long weekend, I proved that it's possible to freeze in Florida's August weather when the day's heat index reached 105 degrees.

Yes, again mid-August this year, 4 a.m. found me floating on my back in our pool watching stars fall in the annual Perseid meteor shower.

Again I proved that only insane people lay in a pool for hours on the off chance of seeing a tiny flash of light. Again I proved that star gazing from the pool in August results in my getting cooler than the mammaries of a sorceress!

Year after year I do this.

Looks like I'd know better by now.

While I saw few shooting stars, one sight excited me.

I'd already come in the house at dawn when Ginny called me urgently to the kitchen window. She pointed out an enormous Barred Owl on our deck drinking water from the bowl we leave out for the raccoons. This Barred Owl stood about 18 inches high (as measured against the fountain). It looked majestic in dignity — more impressive than any shooting star.

Seeing that owl was the highpoint of our weekend.

Which says something about our lively social life.

Speaking of coolness, the tiff between Ginny and me, which has been the biggest problem in my life, apparently healed. For a month or so, we've lived in the same house while eight inches and a thousand miles apart.

I don't know what caused this distancing or how we got over it, but I'm glad we did. These marital problems seem to come up on their own every now and then, and we weather them by treating eachother with courtesy and moving on as best we can. But I really hate times when there's coolness between us.

Three quick family notes:

Our youngest daughter worked briefly at a company that silkscreens tee-shirts. About a week ago, she lost her job, a traumatic experience for her, a really bad thing.

Yesterday, three robbers held up that company.

A shootout with the owner erupted.

The owner was shot in the stomach; returning fire, he killed one of the bandits.

Patricia said that had she still been working there, she would have been alone in the office at the time of the robbery.

Perhaps, the Lord allowed something bad happen to her, loosing her job, to keep her from something worse.

Last week I wrote about the happy visit of Mike and Miss. Bug; among the things we talked about was my joy in keeping this on-line journal and as a result, Mike has started his own blog!

Mike is a firefighter who has won many awards and commendations from the mayor for conspicuous bravery for saving people in danger at the risk of his own life. He is trained in scuba and helicopter rescue, and every sort of First Aid — I even once saw him deliver baby kittens from a cantankerous clawing mother cat.

He's one of the men I most admire.

Please stop by his blog and leave him an encouraging comment saying you visited. Mike's blog is called Starting Anew and can be found at http://cellblock36c.blogspot.com/

In one of his first postings, Mike says some very nice things about me and my books, but other than that he shows good judgment.

Speaking of books, this past weekend, I added two new titles to my Bluefish Books on-line book catalog. Yes, the *Diary Of Samuel Ward, A Translator Of The King James Bible* is finally unscrambled and published.

I'm exhausted and never want to hear of Samuel Ward again ever.

Alas, that is not to be.

My research in unscrambling this manuscript revealed that the article in the on-line Wikipedia Encyclopedia also combines the two different Samuel Wards. To save other readers from the same kind of confusion I fell into, later this week, I've asked Donald to help me log into Wikipedia as an editor and write two new encyclopedia listings for the two Samuel Wards — so, I'm not done with the rascals guite yet.

Oh, the other book I've been working on, but haven't felt comfortable talking about, is a published edition of A Dirty Old Man Gets Worse: John Cowart's 2006 Diary. It's a companion book to A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad.

I've been hung up on old diaries for years, they seem to be my niche in the writing world — when I'm not freezing in the pool watching stars fall.

Thursday, August 16, 2007 **Waiting Room Amusements**

To capture an alligator, straddle it's back, reach under it's lower jaw, and pull up — "So's you bend it's hed way back".

"Them gators'has got powerful jaws for snapping shut, but a gator ain't got that strength for to open it's mouth up wide," said the young man, tall, rail thin, tough and flexible as a steel cable.

How to subdue a gator, how to know when one may attack (they grunt), how to avoid the whipping tail and the "gator death roll" are some of the things I learned from a young man in the waiting room while my eldest daughter was undergoing a procedure to reduce the pain from nerve damage in her arm.

If I recall correctly, this was the third or fourth time in the past couple of years I've waited outside the surgery while doctors have tried this. She faces still more operations in the future.

Few places on earth provide fewer amusements than a surgical waiting room.

There's no way to get comfortable in such a spot.

For a while I talked about art, and her days as an art student in New York City, and her cute cat tee shirt business, with my daughter-in-law, <u>Helen</u>, (caution: revealing bath photo on that link) who drove me over there and waited with me. She also helped me with several computer problems.

But reading her Harry Potter book absorbed her.

The young man who fell to talking to me was bored out of his skull, so he began telling me how he had worked on this farm up in Georgia where the owner raised alligators "fer meat, heds 'n hides".

To move one that doesn't want to be moved, once you pull the gator's head up and back, a partner circles it's snout with duct tape or a wire loop and places a strip of tape over the creature's eyes. You secure the legs then, if you need to kill it, use a boom stick (I'm not sure if

that's a shotgun shell on a pole or an icepick-like spear) to sever the gator's spinal cord.

"You don't wants to break the skull 'cause that messes up the hed then you cain't sell 'em," he said.

You cut the gator's throat and hoist him up on a fleshhook to drain the blood.

"You hose 'em down the hide to clean 'em, then lift 'em up on a cart and take 'em over to the women. They'uns cut the hed clean off, skin 'em out and butcher up the meat for the freezer... I learnt all that stuff," he said.

He told me all about feeding gators, capturing ones that get loose, and about the time his boss (on purpose? inadvertently?) locked him in a pen with 50 or 60 hungry gators.

After that, "I quits that place. My Mama didn't raise no fool". He came down to Jacksonville to earn his living doing yard work; he's enrolled in a trade school to learn welding. "They's good money in that".

I learned a lot from our waiting room conversation. I never knowed any of that stuff 'bout gators afore. I kept looking this kid in the eye and thinking, Here is a man for whom Christ died, just like me. This guy is immensely valuable. Important! Precious!

I wish this young man every success in his welding school; I wish him joy in his new life without gators.

With all our talking, I only got to read a few pages of the book I'd taken into the waiting room to amuse myself.

I carried a reprint of the Sermons of Samuel Ward of Ipswich, first printed in 1636. This is not the same Samuel Ward who wrote the diary I've been editing; this is the other guy, the wrong guy, but I'm tracking him down too just for the fun of it.

Hey, what else is there to do in a waiting room but wait, watch the fish circle the aquarium, wait, talk to folks there, wait, amuse yourself as best you can, and wait?

I just realized something — Were I able to pronounce the words as Samuel Ward of Ipswich did 400

years ago, I'd bet the young man from Georgia would understand those sermons better than I do!

The vocabulary, speech cadences, colloquial expressions, idioms, and contractions of deep-woods Crackers and the people of Southern Appalachia have strong roots in Elizabethan English. Ward's sermons would strike a cord with them.

But, if your tastes run toward neither gator raising nor 400-year-old sermons, but you're inclined in a more modern bend, I follow the blog of a Church of England reader named Pete. His daughter, Karen, was one of the first people ever to comment on my blog and I got to know him through her. His last post links to a sermon he delivered last Sunday.

I think he has something important to say and he says it well.

Wonder if they have gators in England?

Oh yes, my daughter came through her surgery fine — until next time.

Then you'll find me in the waiting room again.

Friday, August 17, 2007 **John's Guest:**

Here's a guest post written by my friend, the award-winning columnist Barbara White:

When God Can Not Be Felt

A friend asked me how she could believe in God when she could not feel. His presence.

It's hard, but what are the options?

Either God is or He isn't.

He isn't real only when I can feel Him. If He is real any time, then He is real all the time and my feelings have nothing to do with it.

God says, His name announces, I AM.

I have only two responses: to believe or not to believe.

Feelings are wonderful, but not a reliable gauge of truth.

I paid a visit to my grandson last Sunday afternoon. The living room was full of people of all ages when I arrived. Russell was one of the small people.

He spotted me as I came through the front door and dropped what he was playing with to rush toward me.

"That's my grandmother," he announced to anyone who might be listening as he raced to fling himself into my waiting arms.

I can't really describe the way I felt when I was holding him — better than wonderful. I would love to have that feeling every day.

I would love to be able to run to God and throw myself into His arms, too. I would love to feel safe, held gently and securely in His arms, my head against His breast.

I know that's quite anthropomorphic — describing God as if He had arms and legs and so forth, just like me.

God is spirit and yet, sometimes, I do feel as if I am held in His arms. Maybe that's because I know God through Jesus, and He has arms for holding.

Sometimes I don't feel a thing — or worse, I feel as if I have never been held, as if those former times were just a figment of my imagination.

That is when I must come back to the original question. My original question, that is, not my friend's.

Do I believe God is?

Since I do believe that, I may say I do not feel Him, but I will not say I do not believe in Him. I may say my feelings are a mess, but God is still God. While my heart aches with loneliness or throbs with dullness and fatigue, I will know that God is still God. When everything seems questionable, I will stand on the fact that God is still God.

Russell is my grandson on days when I don't see him or hold him in my arms.

God is my God on days when I don't feel Him, either.

It's that easy —

And that hard.

Barbara's blog, *Along The Way*, can be found at http://alongthewaybybw.blogspot.com/

Saturday, August 18, 2007 My Shoe Story

In response to Jellyhead's challenge, all the ewomen I know are posting photos of their shoes recently.

I do not have any photo of my shoes. I've never taken one. Can't imagine why anyone sane would. However, I do have a shoe story; it's recorded in my 1999 daily journal. Here's a copy:

John Burns His Own Stupid Foot

Thursday, April 1, 1999 — Spent the day cleaning up the yard extra good for Easter.

I was up on a ladder trimming vines with the electric hedge trimmer and smoking my pipe at the same time. To reach a difficult place, I started to put my pipe away and stretched down to tap it out on the heel of my left boot, a habitual practice.

A ladder is not the best place to do this.

I missed my own heel.

As I knocked my pipe out, the dottle, the lump of red hot charcoal left in the bottom of the bowl as a residue of burning tobacco, fell into the top of my boot. It was still as hot as a charcoal briquette. Intense pain.

Of course, I was wearing high top boots instead of my usual canvas slip-ons as a safety measure because I planned to be running the lawnmower; so it took me a while to cut off the power trimmer, climb down from the ladder, unlace the boot, pull it off and crush out the burning coal.



My sock had caught fire! Horrible pain.

It burned a hole the size of a quarter in the side of my ankle, burned it right down to raw flesh. I think I could see the surface of my ankle bone in there. I nearly fainted. I believe I went into shock. Intense pain

Thank God that Ginny caught a ride home from work and I did not have to walk to meet her this afternoon.

The comment of my sympathetic, compassionate wife as she bandaged my wound this evening:... "Oh well, John, the Surgeon General has warned you that smoking can be hazardous to your health".

Sunday, August 19, 2007 **Golden Years**

Ah, yes!

Ginny and I are sailing into our Golden Years:



Monday, August 20, 2007 **Shuffling Paper**

For years and years and years, I have prayed that the Lord would let me publish a significant book.

I wanted to publish a book which would advance His kingdom, win souls, bring joy to the hearts of men, uplift humanity, rescue fair damsels in distress, strengthen the faint-hearted, comfort the feeble-minded, contribute to the annals of great literature, outsell Harry Potter and Stephen King combined, make a difference in this weary world, and...

Well, you get the idea.

I think I have found just such a significant book.

Trouble is, it's not one I wrote.

The book I think will do all this and more is written by someone else — but I am playing a small part in its production.

I'd like to backtrack a bit to tell about my part:

In my work preparing the 16th Century diary of Samuel Ward, a translator of the King James Bible, for publication, I noticed an odd word — ENDITOR.

In those ancient days, that word referred to the last guy to prepare a manuscript for the printer, the guy who made the manuscript consistent, the guy who ended the book — the person we call today an editor.

That's the role I've been playing recently.

Instead of writing my own copy, I've been doing routine clerical stuff to prepare a manuscript for a series of books by my friend Barbara White, who's work has been awarded by numerous journalistic, religious and civic organizations.

For over 15 years at the *Florida Times-Union*, Barbara wrote a personal account of her spiritual journey. Thousands of readers followed her column, *Along The Way*.

"I write about trying to live the Christian life and failing and trying again," she said.

She says she's nothing special, yet the walls of the hall leading into the editorial board room at the newspaper displayed scads of bronze plaques, scrolls, citations and journalistic awards she won for her writing skill.

Although Barbara is a Christian, she told me that one of her biggest thrills came when a Jewish congregation recognized her writing by planting a tree with a commemorative plaque honoring her work in Israel.

Barbara evaluates her own writings as work that she once did — then stuck in a shopping bag in the back of her closet.

When she retired from the newspaper, the publisher gave her all her by-line files from the newspaper archives, and granted her full permission and copyrights to turn her columns into a book. He appreciated the cumulative value of her work.

Yes, Barbara is a neat lady. But unfortunately, her idea of book preparation is somewhat less than neat.

Here is a photo of the flowered shopping bag full of newspaper clippings she brought for me to turn into a book:



Although Barbara sometimes wears her Phi Beta Kappa Key, proof that she's a brain, I somehow doubt that she's ever read the *Writer's Digest* guidelines for manuscript submission.

My first task involved simply unfolding all these hundreds of crinkled clippings. That alone took days.

Next came sorting. I moved a folding table into our foyer to make a bigger work surface:



Then each clipping had to be smoothed out and pressed under volumes of my *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The work overflowed onto the floor and every chair in the house.

For hours Ginny and I discussed the best way to present this material. Our son and his wife, and our daughters helped us collect and arrange and type and sort — it became a family project.

Why go to all this trouble?

Because we feel that Barbara's work may well be destined to become a spiritual classic.

The humility, power and scope of her life and writing provide a living illustration of what it's really like to be a Christian.

"I write about trying to live the Christian life and failing and trying again," she said.

I read each article she wrote and culled dated material. I focused on saving pieces which feed my own soul, pieces I feel readers can most identify with, and ones which will most provide help in everyone's daily struggles, problems, and joys.



This first reading proved a powerful impact on my own spiritual life. Yes, preparing this manuscript is a pain in the ass, but it's worth the trouble.

Then came the hard part — scanning copy.

Barbara's articles run between two and five columns of newsprint across; my scanner will only pick up a single column at a time. Because of wrinkles, ink bleeds, crinkles, years of being folded, etc., many articles needed to be retyped from scratch.

My daughter Patricia undertook much of that tedious work.

Once an article scanned, it needed to be formatted: Nothing to it —

All I had to do was: Preview the copy, adjust the marquis, scan in one column at a time, close the scanner program, convert the article into Word, go into Page Set Up command and standardize the margins, save, go back into Page Set Up and change the paper feed size, use the Find/Replace function to remover optional hyphens (these are caused by ink dots and unrecognizable characters, etc — as many as 230 per article); save, remove three to five Section Breaks per article, save, remove bizarre symbols which the scanner thought fun to insert for no apparent

reason, save, change the font type and size for Headings and Text Body, Spell Check, save, write a title, insert graphics, save, highlight, copy, transfer to a book format and paste, change indentation, save, re-do the document set up, insert headers and footers, and save. Check the rendering against the hard copy and save. Then red-mark and file the hard copy.

Then move on to the next article.

That's all there is to it.

Why bother?

Because I feel this may well be the most significant project I've ever worked on, the very book I've prayed for years to produce.

It's worth the trouble.

Barbara said, "I write about trying to live the Christian life and failing and trying again" .

To expand my limited work surface I brought in some old wooden onion crates and spread out the scanner operation. I commandeered an asbestoses trivet from Ginny's kitchen to gently flatten each article against the scanner's glass screen.



In the midst of all that work, I've been inserting graphics and playing with book cover designs.

But, more importantly, as I work on these routine tasks, I am becoming more and more aware of the love of God for me.

As I repeat these rote mundane tasks — Ginny says it's like Peter and John repairing their fish nets — I'm catching glimpses of the majesty of Christ.

As I shuffle paper, I feel drawn to worship by the magnetic beauty of Jesus.

And I feel thankful.

Tuesday, August 21, 2007 I Remember Pantyhose

With so many women on the Internet all talking about shoes this week, it's only natural that my thoughts should turn to pantyhose.

Now, I hardly ever wear pantyhose myself — they bind — but years ago, I used to buy some every few weeks.

I bought them to use as a visual aid when I taught Bible lessons at a rescue mission. Actually, the pantyhose themselves, I gave to Ginny; but the pantyhose containers came in handy to illustrate one of my Bible lessons.

Haven't seen them around for years but back in the 70s, there used to be a brand of pantyhose called, I think, Leggs. As a marketing ploy, that company packaged their pantyhose in large, hollow, white plastic eggs which measured about four inches in length.

It was the plastic eggs I used to teach about the new birth Christ offers.

People are like eggs.

We all look the same on the outside. Hard to tell much difference when you look at us, but some eggs have life inside, others don't.

I displayed two identical eggs which I'd prepared beforehand to the men and women at the mission.

The eggs look the same, feel the same, weigh the same — and every one of them is potentially alive.

If an egg does not have life within it, it goes rotten.

I'd recruit a volunteer from the audience and crack open one egg on his head (my Bible lessons were serious

affairs). That egg proved full of black dripping goooo. (That got folks attention).

If there is life within, (I'd crack open the second egg to reveal a cute fuzzy yellow chick)...

Jesus said, that He came that we might have life and that we might have it more abundantly. Paul said that without Christ living within us, we are dead in trespasses and sins. Jesus said, He stands at the door and knocks; He promises to come into us if we open that door...

Eggs eventually crack open.

So do people.

Life within — or putrefaction.

And that life comes from the outside; the egg does get life by itself. It must come from a higher source, a living source.

You can't tell whether an egg is living or putrefying by looking at the shell... You know, a lot of people look at Christians and say there's no difference between us and a nonbeliever.

They're right.

On the surface, there isn't.

We both, godly and ungodly alike, wash our cars, watch the ball game, change the baby, wait for payday... No external difference.

The world finds this disappointing. They expect more of people who claim to walk with God. They think we should glow in the dark or something. They point with glee when some tv preachers runs off with the money, or the choir leader — or both... The world expects Christians to be different, to be a cut above, to fly higher...

Well, no egg can fly.

Yet.

But there will come a day, a day when all eggs crack open, when our rottenness or our living beauty will be revealed.

The difference between people and eggs is that eggs have no choice as to whether they are rotting inside or growing up to fly.

Eggs have no choice.

We do.

Wednesday, August 22, 2007 I'm A Loving Man!

I am sympathetic, loving, generous, and kind — and I'll kick the kneecaps off anybody that says otherwise!

Case in point:

As Ginny and I ate supper last night, a guy from down the street knocked on our front door. At the sound of the knock, I said, "Damn! Somebody at the door. Tell 'em to go the hell away".

Ginny let him in anyhow and as my supper got cold, he told me that his niece had died.

"She was young, just 32," he said. "She died in her sleep. When her husband went into wake her up, she wouldn't wake up. She looked the picture of health but her heart gave out. And my brother drowned last week; he was out fishing up in Georgia and fell out of the boat. Couldn't swim and went under. Death is sweeping my family".

As he talked, all I could think about was my supper getting cold.

I must be a super hypocrite because Ginny says I treated this guy with sympathy and understanding.

It may have appeared that way, but my heart was not in it.

I never met his niece or his brother, I barely know the guy himself. His troubles, his family's troubles mean nothing to me. No more than earthquake victims in Peru or trapped miners in Utah, or Category 5 Hurricane Dean victims in Mexico.

Oh sure, I'll say a perfunctory prayer for such people, but I don't get all worked up over their plight.

This should bother me more than it does.

Yet, in times past, I've prayed for Christ to give me a loving heart.

He must have put that prayer on the spike to be gotten around to later. Maybe I should amend my prayer

to ask for a *conveniently* loving heart, one that won't let my supper get cold.

Thursday, August 23, 2007 I'm Not Commendably Decent At This Hour

It's almost 4 a.m. and I've been at work for three hours now — yes, a disturbing dream woke me up a bit earlier than usual.

In my dream Ginny got into a shouting match with a waitress in a crowded restaurant. Considering that in our 40 years of marriage, I've never heard Ginny shout at anybody for anything, you can see why I found this dream disturbing.

Once awake I continued scanning Barbara White's 15-years-worth of newspaper columns. I'm about a third of the way through now (my blog for Monday, August 20th describes the project).

I'm tired, so here is a sample column from Barbara:

Commendably Decent

Now I know how the company that makes Kleenex feels when somebody calls some other tissue by that name.

I have just learned that Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary says the word Christian can be used to describe someone as "commendably decent or generous."

The person doesn't even have to believe in Jesus Christ.

Kimberly-Clark Corp. has fiercely protected the use of the name Kleenex.

Obviously, Christ's followers haven't done the same about the word Christian.

We have allowed what it means to follow Christ to be so watered down that being commendably decent is enough to earn that precious title.

Jesus, who died on the cross, was not just commendably decent.

He was a great deal more than that. I believe His followers are to be more than that, too.

He was tenderly loving to sinners. He was passionately confronting to hypocrites. He abandoned His own interests in obedience to the Father — to the point of death.

I'm afraid people don't see that when they look at us. That's why Christianity has become something so wan as to qualify for the description of merely decent.

The problem is most of us really don't "die.":

We surrender to God here and there in little ways — in decency and generosity. But we do not "die" in the big ways — in surrender of our wills to His will or in giving our lives for others.

We just don't.

So I suppose we have earned that new definition.

Sadly, many of us appear to be satisfied with that definition. It asks no more than we can easily give.

These Christians ask very little of anyone else, of course. They settle for this least common denominator and call it love and acceptance.

On the other hand, some of us ask a lot more — only we ask it of others. And we don't ask, we demand. Then we condemn those who don't meet our demands.

Jesus could speak pretty harshly when He chose. But mostly only the Pharisees received the brunt of His harshness. And it was their insistence that other people follow their dictates that brought out Jesus' strongest words of condemnation.

Some people have embraced a weak imitation of Christianity because of the teachings of certain Christians.

Some have turned their backs on Jesus because of the actions of others.

What a quandary.

Do I have a solution? I think I do.

As a follower of Jesus Christ I believe I must be tremendously tough and enormously loving and tender.

I must demand a great deal of myself in the areas where God has spoken to me. My God will deal with me according to His wisdom, power and goodness — if I am willing to let Him do it.

He will show me what is needed to make me like Jesus — much more than commendably decent.

And I must allow others to be dealt with the same way — by God. I should tell them what I believe to be God's truth, but I must leave the Spirit room to work.

Jesus said that when He is lifted up He will draw all men to Him.

So Christians need to lift Jesus up. That means we need to become so filled with Him that He is all people see when they look at us.

I'm afraid we have been too busy lifting up our own versions of who He is and not the Lord Himself. I'm afraid we will lose sight of who He is ourselves if we do that long enough..

Friday, August 24, 2007 Remembering Blind Sam

My buddy Sam read the Bible with his fingers.

Sam had been born blind and had never seen anything at all. Yet back in the 1970s he learned Braille, graduated from college, got married, and became the pastor of a small rural church near Jacksonville.

Sam became interested in a method of evangelism I used in a rescue mission where I volunteered and in street preaching. It involved drawing stick-figure paintings to illustrate Bible stories.

Sam asked me to teach him to draw pictures.

A man born blind drawing pictures!

Impossible!

But with God all things are possible.

After much prayer, we had an idea.

I got a long, wide wooden board out of a dumpster, painted it white, and tacked small white nails in a pattern of a picture illustrating a Bible verse along this board. The nail heads protruded about a quarter of an inch.

Thick lengths of different colored knitting yarn were fastened at anchor points at the bottom of the board.

Sam learned the sequence of weaving each strip of yarn among the nail heads to draw a Bible picture. His skill at this amazed onlookers and several watchers turned to Christ on hearing the blind man's message.

With God, all things are possible.

Here is an old photo (taken about 1972?) of people paying attention to Sam's preaching on a street corner while drawing with yarn:



The Bible verse Sam is illustrating is Romans 6:23 — "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord".

Speaking of sin:

Once a bunch of us guys were standing around talking, as Christian guys are wont to do, about temptation — especially as it relates to ogling sexy women.

One of the guys teased Sam saying it must not be a problem for him since he, in spite of being married, had never actually seen a woman. "It's worse for me than for you guys," he said. "When a woman walks by, you can see if she's a dog or not. To me, every time I hear any woman's step or voice, in my mind I see her as a raving beauty wearing a filmy silk negligee. Every woman!"

"How do you know about filmy silk negligees?" a guy asked.

"Reading the Bible is not the only thing I can do with my fingers," Sam said.

As I scanned Barbara White's columns into my computer Thursday, for some reason I got to thinking about Sam....

After I wrote the above journal posting, my friend Wes came over to take me to breakfast. We talked about plans and friends and family... When he asked about my youngest daughter and we talked about things that happened years ago, a crying jag struck me and I could not stop crying for the longest time.

Utter damn wimp! Or maybe my sleep deprivation led to my crying jag. Or maybe something else was at work.

I'm ok now. Maybe I'm just cracking up.

I know the Lord Jesus is the Prince of Peace, and He is my Lord, but I'm experiencing darn little peace at the moment.

That phrase "Help of the helpless" does mean something —not sure what right now.

Victory in Jesus - I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me - we shall overcome — and all that jazz.

Isn't that how faith is supposed to work?

But as Job said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him".

So I weep a little.

Big deal.

I'll survive.

Saturday, August 25, 2007 Jesus Made Me Lose My Santa Suit.

I used to own a Santa Claus suit — red velvet, white fur trim, wide shiny black belt, high black boots, snowy beard, tasseled red cap.

During the season I'd wear it to amuse the kids — (and on one memorable occasion to amuse Ginny, but we won't go there).

Anyhow, years ago this guy asked to borrow my Santa suit for some charity thing.

I loaned it to him.

He never returned it.

And I never asked for it back.

I can't.

Jesus said not to.

"Give to every man that asketh of thee," He said, "And of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again".

I wish He hadn't said that.

It would have been nice if He'd have stuck to talking about the flowers of the field and the birds of the air... But Jesus tends to meddle in real life.

According to Him, I'm to give, to loan things without ever asking for them back.

This situation has percolated in my mind recently because a couple of weeks ago this neighbor borrowed something from me for the weekend with the promise that he'd return them on Monday.

When I loaned the tools I casually mentioned that I'd need them back to do my own yard. I felt reluctant to let him take off my tools in the first place, and I worried that he'd dull the blades, and I hinted that I really wanted them back on Monday...

And he said he'd return them Monday...

But that was Mondays and Mondays and Mondays ago.

He still hasn't returned them.

Sorry bastard!

Why in the world would Jesus let him get away with it?

If Christian bill collectors followed Jesus' instruction, they'd loose their jobs.

If you don't ask for it back, you'll never get it back and come Christmas, you'll be naked beneath the tree (but that's another story and I said we won't go there).

Why did Jesus tell us to let things go without asking for them back?

I wonder if He did it to emphasize that the borrower is responsible for keeping his own promise. When we say we will do something, we are to do it.

Jesus practiced what He preached. Why, when He borrowed a tomb from Joseph of Arimathaea, He returned it just as He said He would. He returned it in good order. Hardly used. He even folded up the grave clothes.

On the other hand, I wonder if this teaching of Christ's lets me know how much of a hold possessions have on me. I loaned that guy my Santa suit over 20 years ago and it still galls me that he didn't return it.

Is that red suit so important that I harbor 20 years' worth of resentment?

Do I own those missing tools, or do they own me?

My Bible contains 1,341 pages. Not one single word in those pages tells me what somebody else ought to do.

Not one single word!

It never says "They shalt not steal" it only says, "John Cowart, thou shalt not steal".

I think it should tell them what to do. In fact, if I were to write the Bible, it would be a lot different. But I didn't, so it's not.

The Scripture never tells how somebody else ought to treat me, only how I am to treat them.

And I treat them nice!

Yes indeed, over the years I have loaned people clothes, and tools and money and boo....

Oh. Damn!

Out of the corner of my eye I see in my bookcase that copy of Archbishop Fenelon's book, *Christian Perfection*, that I borrowed from Mr. Darby over four years ago...

I said I'd return it to him in a week....

Let's forget that I ever wrote this posting. OK?

Monday, August 27, 2007 **Pricks**

Last week my elastic broke.

Like every other well-dressed writer here in Florida in the midst of a drought and 98+ degree weather, my work uniform consists of a cotton tee shirt and a pair of swim trunks. I usually work barefoot too.

Being of robust physique, I place a certain amount of strain on my swim trunks and last week the elastic waistband broke. Any time I got up from my desk to even walk across the room, I had to keep one hand in my pocket to keep my trunks from dropping to my ankles.

I have other swim trunks but this pair is my favorite; I'm reluctant to give them up.

In my many, many years as the father of six children I have learned a few things.

So while Ginny shopped for other things in the Wal-Mart, I wandered into the new-born and infants section looking for diaper pins.

Couldn't find any.

I ask two sales ladies. One had never even heard of diaper pins (too young); the other had heard of them but could not recall having seen any for years. The three of us searched high and low and eventually found a card of four diaper pins on a side aisle spike.

Diaper pins are extra-large safety pins used to hold cloth diapers (apparently those are no longer stocked either) onto a baby; Disposal paper diapers used tape.

I don't think there was any such thing as disposal diapers when our kids were little, only cotton cloth squares to be folded into triangles and pinned at the points. Bet I could still do it. These diapers needed to be washed and Ginny and I still remember how to do that

too.(We did not own a washing machine in those days and diapers had to be done by hand — something you don't forget).

The big selling point of diaper pins is that they sport a large head with a snap so that the pin will not spring open and prick the baby.

Supposedly.

Once home, I gathered a pleat in my swim trunks and pined it securely in front right where a belt buckle would be.

Looked a bit odd but since I work alone 95% of the time, who's to notice or care?

Worked fine.

Until...

I saw a bug earlier this morning — an unusual occurrence, unheard of here in Florida (according to the Chamber of Commerce).

I squatted down to swat it with a shoe — and my diaper pin sprang open.

I noticed immediately.

Those things hurt!

A pin in the bellybutton provokes a response (I wonder if that's why our babies used to cry so much?).

As the rare, strange, unusual, unheard of roach escaped, a Scripture verse sprang into my mind. It relates to the conversion of the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus.

He'd been persecuting Christians when a bright light knocked him off his horse and a voice from Heaven spoke to Paul.

Paul said, "Who art thou, Lord"?

The shining Speaker identified Himself as Jesus and said, "It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks".

Now it's easy for me to think that Jesus was warning Paul about getting along with other Christians.

But, Bible scholars say that's not what the verse means.

Apparently, Jesus was referring to pricks of conscience, those little thoughts that nudge us toward God even when we don't want to think about Him, those ideas that come seemingly out of nowhere that make us uncomfortable with what we are and what we do.

Pricks of conscience. That sudden bitter-sweet yearning for Home, that hunger that can not feed on this land's bread, that longing for Something more, that yearning for Someone we will only recognize when we see Him.

The still, small voice of God. The voice we recognize, but don't want to.

These pricks are hard to escape, to avoid, to rationalize, to ignore.

When God tells you something, you know it. Down deep, He is hard to ignore — but that's possible if we really set our minds to it. God is a gentleman; He doesn't rape anybody. If we insist, He will let us go our own way (wherever that leads).

It is hard to kick against the pricks — but it is possible.

So, when I felt the prick of the open diaper pin this morning, maybe, just maybe, it was a prick from God telling me to loose weight.

Nah! That can't be right. God loves me just as I am, doesn't He? Perhaps I should study the Scripture to be sure if that is what He's telling me.

Trouble is, as my friend Barbara said in one of her newspaper columns: God loves us just as we are, and too much to let us stay that way.

Here's an odd aside:

Back 30 years ago or so, the elastic in my undershorts broke and I could not find a safety pin to hold them up. I rummaged in Ginny's jewelry box and came up with this huge costume jewelry broach given her by her mother. It glittered with sparkling red, green, yellow and blue stones.

No one will ever see I thought, and pined the front of my drooping underwear together. I was a bachelor once and I remembered how guys repair clothing. As I padded down the hall in my briefs from shaving in the bathroom to our bedroom to dress, I encountered the kids in the hall.

"What's that you're wearing, Daddy," they chorused.

"Hush! Go back to your rooms," I said. "Those are the family jewels".

Thirty plus years have passed and the rascals still tease me about that.

I'll never live it down.

Tuesday, August 28, 2007 Me & God's Pigeons

Grateful readers ought to erect a statue of me in the park — or at least award me a kernel of corn.

About 5 a.m. this morning after another 20+ hour marathon at the computer, I finally finished scanning in that shopping bag full of Barbara White's newspaper features. (See my August 20th posting).

The result adds up to 758 pages of text in Word.

Now, all I have to do is turn this raw material into a book (or books).

Since each feature in those 758 pages came from between 2 to six columns of news print and since because of wrinkles, folds, staples, tape, torn pages, uneven copy and bleeds of ink from pages behind — each column had to be scanned one at a time.

Thus, I've spent a lot of time recently hunched over the scanner.

This has been pure dogged clerical work; I keep thinking that I could be replaced by a trained pigeon.

Yes, long ago I saw a tv documentary about how some pharmaceutical company had trained pigeons to work in the production of the life-saving prescriptions we take.

Don't you find that comforting?

They taught the pigeons to tap computer keys in a specific sequence to manufacture the pills. If the pigeon tapped the keys right, a kernel of corn dropped down a chute; if the pigeon goofed, no corn.

Saves the company from having to hire Chinese workers to manufacture the same drugs.

Pigeons work cheep (Lord, I'm clever!) — almost as cheap as I do.

But I don't think my job is in danger.

Most American pigeons don't want to do the work I do.

Speaking of pigeons, remember the collapse of that bridge In Minneapolis, Minnesota, that killed all those people on August first?

Well, a study just came out which blames the disaster on pigeons!

Yes, pigeons!

The weight of pigeons roosting under the bridge and their corrosive droppings made the bridge fall killing all those people... If the pigeons can be blamed, then the disaster was an Act of God and the insurance companies don't have to pay.

It's all God's fault.

I wonder who paid to have this study done?

No, that couldn't be. Insurance companies are honest.

It had to really have been the pigeons' fault.

The Bible says that God knows every sparrow that falls; it does not say a word about pigeons.

I'll bet that Hell is just full of burning pigeon feathers.

Or maybe that's insurance papers I smell burning.

Speaking of acts of God, I took Ginny out to see one this morning because last night we got into an argument.

You see, while we agree on major issues: politics, religion, Iraq, global warming, etc., yet other issues divide us.

I've heard that if you take care of the big issues, the little ones fall into line.

BULL!

That's nonsense.

I've never heard of a marriage in trouble over nuclear disarmament; it's the little things that rub.

Our argument last night was over relish.

We ate hotdogs for supper. Hotdogs with mustard and relish.

I scrapped out the last smidgen of relish from the bottom of the jar to go on the last hotdog I had ...

Then I went to toss out the empty jar.

That woman I married stopped me.

She said their was still relish in the bottom of the jar.

I said there wasn't.

She said there was.

She said the bone-empty jar still contained enough relish scraps for a potato salad.

I defended my evaluation of the relish jar.

A heated discussion developed.

I slouched off to the tv room to watch football; she slammed things around in the kitchen.

Irreconcilable differences.

For a time.

It's all ok now because I'm so thoughtful. Sort of.

As a gesture of conciliation, at 5 a.m. this morning I woke her up to go out in the yard with me to see the eclipse of the moon. Wasn't that a thoughtful husbandly act?

Shouldn't viewing a beautiful act of God together strength our relationship?

Not being a nature lover, Ginny proved unconciliatorized.

She did not relish getting up an hour earlier than usual.

But she got to laughing at my enthusiasm.

It's all ok between us now.

But, know this: If our marriage ever does break up, it will be all her fault — Hey, I'm **not** the one who married an idiot.

Back to the statue of me and the pigeons:

When I was a kid there was a funny popular song about a sailor who thought a statue should be erected of himself because of his heroism in World War II.

I only remember the refrain about the pigeons in the park and his statue:

They build nests on Lincoln, And they build nests on Lee, Oh, what will they do on me? On me. Oh, what will they do on me?

That song keeps running through my head this morning.

And I have this strange craving for a kernel of corn!

Wednesday, August 29, 2007 Stacking Eggs

The final stages in formatting a book resembles building a tower of playing cards.

Each section I add, each header or footer, each font change, any move I make can bring the whole thing down in shambles.

I remember how with the Ward Diary I discovered a fatal error just two days before I'd intended to publish that work; that discovery set me back weeks before I could correct it and finish the book.

I've arrived at another shaky point now with Barbara White's manuscripts. Looks as though I have material for four books here... But formatting them is like stacking eggs.

Because I feel her work is so important and because I'm so nervous about the process of formatting it — I do so want to get it right — I'm going to knock off posting myself for a couple of days and post guest columns she wrote:

The Hard Choice Between Good And Best

I had to leave a discussion before it was finished the other day — a situation that causes me to return over and over to an unsettled question.

In this case the topic was that portion of the Lord's Prayer in which we ask Him not to lead us into temptation, or not to put us to the test.

What does it mean, asking God not to lead us into temptation?

The suggestion was made that it meant asking God not to put before us really hard choices — not choices concerning things we can see are wrong, like adultery or stealing — but choices between Him and good things we hold really dear.

For example, one member of the group told of realizing right in the middle of a Little League soccer match that he did not know where the Lord was in the whole thing. He shared the strange feeling the thought had given him and said he hoped he would not have to choose between soccer, which he loves, and his Lord.

What could possibly be wrong with having that kind of fun, asked another member of the group. And we began to consider the importance in our lives of "having fun."

Football fans in the group stood solidly by their intention to watch the Super Bowl. They said they did not think that made them awful persons — a conclusion with which I agree, by the way.

What the soccer fan meant was not that soccer was "wrong," but that he hoped (prayed?) that God would not lead him to the point of having to choose between hockey and the Lord.

Having fun is not wrong — unless the Lord has asked us to leave that fun and serve Him in another way. It is not having fun that is wrong, but our pursuit of happiness (a national right!) when it takes us along any road that is not the one our Lord has chosen and marked out for us.

There is nothing wrong with such innocent pleasures for anyone before whom God has placed a specific choice. It may still be all right for every other Christian, but the Lord may say, "It is wrong for the you I want you to be, so choose."

The degree of difficulty in that "test" will depend on the degree of attachment sports has for you.

But what if the Lord puts a choice before you between serving Him or pleasing your mother and father? What if He puts the choice of helping a stranger or helping your children?

God wouldn't ask that, you might say indignantly.

But I believe He might and that is the kind of test I ask Him not to put before me, though I think that is exactly what He meant when He said we had to be willing to go instantly to the marriage feast when called.

Saturday, September 01, 2007 My Life In Camelot

Ginny took Friday off work because we both had doctors' appointments.

We spent five hours in that waiting room!

Thus, Mr. Spurgeon's observation on waiting from yesterday's devotional e-mail certainly proved appropriate for my day.

Incidentally, I didn't include a link to my son's blog; it's Donald's blog at http://www.rdex.net/blog/ . He's just posted the oddest thing about prayer. His worldview leaves me in wonder.

As soon as we got home from Dr. Woody's office (Nothing much new on our medical front: my prostate cancer is still growing along fine; Ginny's diabetes is still thriving. Same old thing.) ... As soon as we got home from the doctor's office, Barbara called with news.

Last night she finished the last of the four paintings she wants to use as front covers for the books in her Along The Way series. Here's a photo which her art teacher took of Barbara at work on one of them:



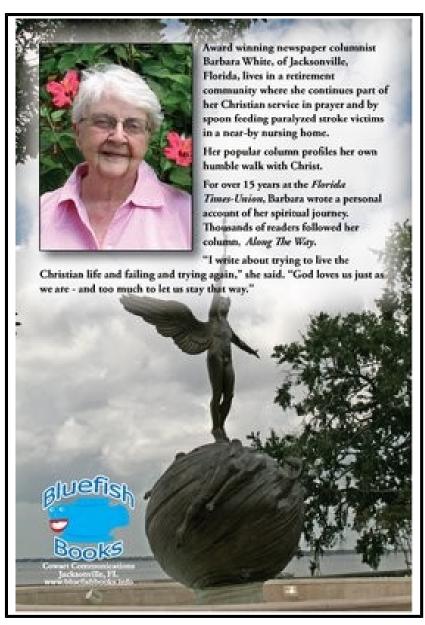
That's her famous chartreuse hat she's wearing as she paints.

Late Thursday night I sent the first 200 pages off to the printer for galley proofs.

It occurred to me as I worked that my sole qualification for this work is that I'm willing to do it!

Besides, I get to add the title, Enditor, to my name in print (That's a wonderful 16th Century joke from the Ward Diary that nobody on earth appreciates but me).

Barbara brought her paintings over to show Ginny and me. I scanned them into the computer and e-mailed them to Helen for a professional opinion. I don't care for one of the paintings but as a graphic designer, Helen has a developed eye for such things and overruled me. Here is a photo of the back cover Helen designed for the first one.



This World War I memorial fountain and statue of Winged Victory is a famous Jacksonville landmark; it's in a riverfront park just a few blocks from our home. The plaque says it's a statue of "Youth rising above the turmoil of war" — it's also a great spot to fish for mullet.

Barbara treated Ginny and me to a late lunch, driving miles across town to her favorite restaurant only

to find it closed, then back across town to a great seafood place.

Gave us all plenty of time to catch up on conversation.

This day helps me realize how privileged I am to be part of such a wonderful family. I'm honored that all these talented people invest so much time, money and energy into my pet project of writing and publishing all these different books.

This morning Dr. Woody and I talked more about books than medicine. He questioned the business end of our venture and seemed amazed that Ginny and I are so dedicated to such an unprofitable venture.

I rather doubt that any of our work will ever prove commercially viable; Richard Murdock can rest easy with his publishing crown.

Yet, I'm part of this wonderful team of people who believe in what we are doing and work together, each person a vital part of the whole unit.

We feel that in some measure we are honoring and worshiping the Lord Christ in what we do and how we work — in the awful jokes, the tears, and the teasing, the laughs, the planning and plotting, even in my fretting..

Once Jesus said "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them".

That's why we do it.

That's what we are.

It's all Him.

But, it seems there's a bottleneck in this smooth operation — Remember Lucy & Ethel in the candy factory?

If you're too young to remember that , get a video of the old tv series *I Love Lucy*; you'll love it!

So, now, if you'll excuse me, I still have another 600+ eggs to add to the pyramid.

Monday, September 03, 2007 Knowing When To Quit First, an important NEWS FLASH: Last night the tv news anchor said, "Early this morning police arrested 28-year-old ———— for the stabbing death of his 11-year-old twin brother".

That's what she said.

I didn't know pregnancies lasted that long.

Now, back to our regular programming:

I never know when to quit.

At breakfast this morning, Ginny pointed that out by reminding me about my younger days back in the 1960s when I was a member of a local archaeological society excavating Indian burial mounds and other sites.

We worked in loose affiliation with the Florida State Museum in Tallahassee, but we were at best enthusiastic amateurs engaged in salvage work ahead of housing developments.

We worked against the time the bulldozers would arrive and plow a site under.

Each day we would excavate till it got too dark to see.

And always, the lingering feeling that I was on the verge of a major discovery haunted me.

One more trowel of earth, one more stroke of the brush, one more shovel of dirt might uncover an effigy pot, a Spanish doubloon, a copper amulet, a perfectly flaked arrowhead — some great treasure.

If I dug just a little more. If I searched a little harder. If I dove deeper in the spring I would find something that would change my life forever.

I'd hate to quit.

I always wanted more.

Am I the only person to be so demon-hounded, driven, and obsessed by wanting more?

Apparently not.

St. Paul advised his young friend Timothy, "Godliness with contentment is great gain.

"For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing our. And having food and raiment, let us therewith be content".

In the 1920s a newspaper reporter asked a billionaire robber baron — I forget which one, Morgan? DuPonte? Doesn't matter — asked the wealthy man, "How much money is enough?".

The billionaire replied, "Just a little bit more than you have".

How much of anything is enough?

As a kid I loved the banana splits concocted at the corner soda fountain. The soda jerk scooped generous dollops of chocolate, strawberry and vanilla icecream into a long narrow dish with a banana split lengthways on either side. He topped this with strawberry preserves, pineapple goo and chocolate syrup. Then came a ladle of walnuts saturated in maple syrup. Then he mounded whipped cream on top. Then added three cherries with red juice flowing over the mountains of whipped cream.

I ate one.

It was good.

So good, in fact that I ordered another one.

Not a good choice.

I should have known when to quit.

I've never known when to quit. When to say enough. When to stop.

After a particularly satisfying enjoyment of sex, even though we're totally satiated, I'll want to try again. Ginny says I'm a glutton for punishment and that I've watched too many James Bond movies.

But I'll have this firm resolve to try again.

Alas, my resolve is the only thing that's firm.

And pushing on and forcing performance never works. It turns a satisfying experience into laborious frustrating work and nullifies the satisfaction we'd enjoyed moments before.

It's that second banana split all over again.

My e-friend Eric, a police dispatcher in Alaska, writes about a *Suicide, Self Mutilation and Compassion Fatigue* seminar he attended. It was a class for professionals involved in helping people through crisis situations. I think the class was designed to help Helpers stay sane themselves.

Many helping people feel driven to do a little more, to never give up — and then to berate themselves and second-guess when they are forced to say, "Enough".

A mantra Eric realized in that seminar was:

All I can do is all I can do.

He says he found that powerful statement liberating.

What brought all this up for me?

Well, before breakfast with Ginny, I'd started this Google image search.

I wanted public domain images of highways signs to use as separators between essays in Barbara's four Along The Way books.

I googled Road Signs (33,800,000 sites) and Traffic Signs (only 23,100,000 sites). Mostly I looked at drivers' license handbooks and manuals from various countries.

I kept searching.

I kept clicking.

I feared missing something important.

I did.

I missed breakfast.

I wanted more. If I click on the next ten images. If I check out one more site. If I look one more place...

I made us very, very late for breakfast.

Ginny — who is the most serene person I have ever met — said I should learn a computer prayer and trust God to tell me when to quit. She said I should pray, "Dear Lord, please tell me when to stop clicking".

Thursday, September 06, 2007 Still Click'n

Still putting in marathon days and nights formatting Barbara White's *Along The Way* series. (My August 20th blog post explained what I'm doing with this manuscript)

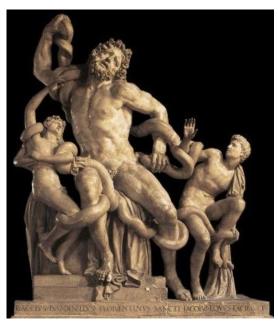
Last night in juggling these 800+ pages of copy, I realized that somewhere along the way in the past couple of days, I'd keyed *Control C*, which copied text but leaves it in place, instead of *Control X*, which would erase the text here but save it to paste there.

So when I pasted it there, I ended up with 42 pages duplicated in two separate places miles apart in the scrambled manuscript!

I had to track down each page separately.

When I discovered my mistake, I said, "O dear."

I don't know who these other two guys are, but I'm the one in this picture shown editing reams of Barbara's text:



But I'm still at it — sent another 200 pages to the printer for proofs yesterday.

I may take a lick'n but I keep on click'n!

Last night, I found Donald's devotional site (at http://www.rdex.net/devotions/) very helpful in my

frustration over not understanding computer, or my life, or God, or the world in general.

Here's the thought from Charles Spurgeon:

"Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea?"

--Job 38:16

Some things in nature must remain a mystery to the most intelligent and enterprising investigators. Human knowledge has bounds beyond which it cannot pass. Universal knowledge is for God alone.

If this be so in the things which are seen and temporal, I may rest assured that it is even more so in matters spiritual and eternal.

Why, then, have I been torturing my brain with speculations as to destiny and will, fixed fate, and human responsibility?

These deep and dark truths I am no more able to comprehend than to find out the depth which coucheth beneath, from which old ocean draws her watery stores.

Why am I so curious to know the reason of my Lord's providences, the motive of His actions, the design of His visitations?

Shall I ever be able to clasp the sun in my fist, and hold the universe in my palm?

Yet these are as a drop of a bucket compared with the Lord my God. Let me not strive to understand the infinite, but spend my strength in love.

What I cannot gain by intellect I can possess by affection, and let that suffice me. I cannot penetrate the heart of the sea, but I can enjoy the healthful breezes which sweep over its bosom, and I can sail over its blue waves with propitious winds.

If I could enter the springs of the sea, the feat would serve no useful purpose either to myself or to others, it would not save the sinking bark, or give back the drowned mariner to his weeping wife and children.

Neither would my solving deep mysteries avail me a single whit, for the least love to God, and the simplest act of obedience to Him, are better than the profoundest knowledge. My Lord, I leave the infinite to Thee, and pray Thee to put far from me such a love for the tree of knowledge as might keep me from the tree of life.

Friday, September 07, 2007 More Important Than Important

Tears streaming down her face, an ancient woman from down the street knocked at my door yesterday interrupting my work.

Actually, she didn't knock; so feeble she could not make it up the single door step, she just stood there crying.

Fortunately my computer desk is right at our front window so I'd seen her totter up the driveway and went to the door to see what was the matter.

Even with my help, she could not make it inside because she was shaking and quivering so. She tried to explain why she had walked to my house but her voice cracked and she cried so hard that I could not understand her.

My first thought when she appeared was "Damn! I'm right in the middle of something important here. I don't need this!"

The importance of my work preparing Barbara White's *Along The Way* columns for publication presses me to work on this project night and day recently. I've been skipping meals, working late, putting in 15-16-18-20 hour days.

Ginny and I talk about little else than The Project. I think about little else. Notes and clippings and file folders have littered our living room for weeks now. We pray about The Project. We've involved our whole family in helping.

I hardly ever post blog entries, grudging the time taken from The Project. My own writing has come to a screeching halt because I feel preparing Barbara's books is more important than my own.

I feel that her work borders on the fringes of becoming a Christian classic.

So, when this old woman appeared at my door, my first thought was one of resentment.

I'm too busy serving God to be bothered with some senile old bitty.

Bullshit!

It much more important to follow Jesus than to write about following Jesus.

Setting aside my first thoughts, I calmed the old lady down enough to find out what had upset her.

She wanted a cardboard box.

She felt ashamed to admit it but one of her children is in jail and had asked her to mail a pair of eyeglasses from home and the old lady could not find a cardboard to put the glasses in.

She said she knew I had boxes because she's seen the postman deliver proof pages of my books in small cardboard boxes.

That's why she staggered to my door.

She needed a box one of my books had come in.

Well, I've prayed to be able to serve Christ with my writing.

Here's my chance.

The old woman found it so embarrassing to have to tell me her daughter was in prison, she was so ashamed of admitting that to me, she was so weakened by the walk to my house, she was so upset and worried about her daughter that her blood sugar had spiked and she was near collapse.

I left my precious writing and found a box, tape, bubble-wrap, etc. and I packaged the eyeglasses securely. The old lady's hands shook so bad that she could not address the package; I had to do that for her.

As I fixed up the box to mail to the prison, I calmed the old woman by asking her questions about her "baby" who is over 50! But still her mother babies her.

The old lady told me about how she married in 1943 but was not able to have children till after an operation in 1951. Then she gave birth — Pop. Pop. Pop. — to six children in less than ten years.

As she talked, she became clearer and clearer. He hands stopped trembling so bad. Her tears stopped and she told me all about that wonderful year 1945 when her husband mustarded out of the service and came home.

Happy beautiful memories unveiled and relived.

So, in all this, I lost a couple of hours work. So it threw my work schedule off. So I won't finish the goal I'd set for today. So I'll have to put in a few hours extra this weekend. So what?

But my times are in His hands.

It does no good for me to write about the love of Jesus if I don't try to live it out.

What's important to me is not necessarily important to God.

Some things are more important than important.

But, it strikes me funny to think that while the last book I wrote may or may not serve the Lord Christ -- the box that it came in will.

Monday, September 10, 2007 Art and Life on A Happy Weekend

For some reason I have more trouble writing about happy days than aggravating ones. I suppose that's because happy times leave an aura of contentment, a state difficult to describe.

The same is true of people.

People you really like are harder to describe than ones who are a pain.

That holds true even in fiction. Villains come out easier than heroes. An evil person leaps to life on a page; a saint comes across as unbelievable. I think that's because as a writer, I can easily imagine characters worse than I am. But, for the life of me, I can't imagine a person better than I am.

This is not vanity; it's physics.

Water can't rise higher than its source.

Familiarity enters into it too.

When I say the name *Ginny* I've said it all. In that one name, 40 years of love, trials, joys, pleasures, frustrations, memories are all summed up. The name

Ginny conjures up a thousand thousand conversations, glimpses, tears, laughs, thoughts.

If I were to have to describe her, I'd describe the girl I courted 40 years ago because in my mind's eye that's how I still see her. She will forever be 22-years-old sitting on a curb waiting for me to get out of class — and her present-day white hair does not exist unless I especially look directly at her sitting across the table from me with the sunset behind her giving her hair a blaze of silver glow.

Then I see a new beauty.

Apart from that, her white hair does not exist.

Odd, that.

Anyhow, Ginny and I spent a delightful weekend together. Saturday morning we met our son Donald and his wife Helen for breakfast at Dave's Diner. Then the four of us visited the Riverside Art Festival to compare Helen's fine graphics with the stuff on display. We urged her to enter an exhibit next year.

While the others looked at art, I looked at women in the crowd.

It appears that this year's art show attracted the world's largest assembly of ugly women wearing extremely low-cut blouses.

A strange dichotomy.

The four of us shopped at the Presbyterian Church jumble sale across the street where Donald, the ratfink, bought a stuffed piranha, a vicious carnivore fish from the Amazon, that I was eyeing and intending to buy.

The Presbyterians only had one single piranha for sale.

Now Donald owns a stuffed piranha — and I don't.

There is no justice in the universe.

I hope his cat eats it.

Speaking of Donald and Helen, I've mentioned how helpful the e-mail devotions Donald sends out have been to me. Now, over the weekend, he has published a 2008 Pin Up Girl Calendar and posted a link on his blog.

Yep, deep devotions one day, pin-up girls the next.

That apple didn't fall far from the tree, did it?

The calendar girls are not real human women but imaginary computer graphic creations called Animes.

No human females are actually shaped like that —

Or, if there are, none of them were at the art show.

I would have noticed.

Thursday, September 13, 2007

Correcting A Gross Misrepresentation

Yesterday Barbara White called me distressed because of something I wrote about her.

I want to set the record straight here.

I'm formatting four books Barbara wrote, the *Along The Way* series for Bluefish Books. These books collect newspaper columns she wrote about her pilgrimage following Christ in daily life. I feel these essays may be enormously helpful to other people interested in Christian living on a practical level.

The thing which distressed Barbara was a blurb I wrote for the back cover of each book in an "About The Author" section. (I posted a photo of one such cover on September $\mathbf{1}^{\text{st}}$.

I wrote that she "lives in a retirement community where she continues part of her Christian service in prayer and by spoon feeding paralyzed stroke victims in a near by nursing home".

Barbara called because she felt the statement misrepresented her.

She said she does not feed the stroke victims.

"I merely visit. Sporadically," she said.

She said my statement was not true; therefore, she wanted me to change my statement on the book cover — a major undertaking.

I came up with an easier solution.

Instead of changing the four book covers, I suggested that she take a packet of peanut butter crackers over to the nursing home tonight and give one to each paralyzed person. That would make my statement about her feeding the sick true, and it would be a whole

lot easier than changing the blurb wording on four covers..

Christian humility and truthfulness can be a pain for the rest of us.

My suggestion appalled Barbara.

She does not want credit for acts of charity she did not do.

Now, why would I think she actually fed the patients?

Because of her overall character.

Her character which we've observed in the 20+ years Ginny and I have known her.

For instance, I know that she worked as a volunteer with a hospice program and that she also volunteered in a clothing center for the poor in Springfield, a slum, high-crime section of Jacksonville.

So naturally, when I read Barbara's May 4th blog posting "Dinner With Friends" about her visits to the nursing home, I misunderstood and I mistakenly assumed that she fed the patients there herself.

She doesn't.

She does not spoon feed the stroke victims.

She found it distressing that I thought she did.

Why would I think that?

I know from personal observation that over the years she has taken in five troubled kids to raise in her home to save them from unstable environments.

So I assumed she also fed sick patients in the nursing home.

I know that back when we were poor, she took me and Ginny grocery shopping to feed our kids, so naturally I assumed that today she fed the stroke victims as well.

I've seen the correspondence documenting that Barbara has long supported a missionary family in a remote section of Africa, so it was not much of a reach for me to think she ministered to old people close at hand.

I know first-hand (because I've driven the van) that she has donated vanloads of clothing and household good to city rescue missions right here in Jacksonville — so naturally I assumed that her sporadic visits to the nursing home, going over there on her own aluminum walker, included hands-on service, and I was under the impression that she actually spoon-fed the people with her own hand.

I was wrong.

Barbara insisted that I correct that misrepresentation

That's what I'm doing with this blog post.

Barbara White just visits the folks in the nursing home.

She does not feed them...

What she does is — hidden in her purse, she sneaks a spoon into the nursing home unit; and when the attendants are not looking, Barbara whips out her spoon, she grabs the bowl of applesauce off the patient's bedside tray — and she eats it all herself!

And while she does, she cackles, "... And your little dog too!"

She's that kind of Christian.

I'm glad I could post this correction.

Friday, September 14, 2007 Just Normal Daily Life

I spent Thursday eating breakfast and lunch — That's about it.

My friend Wes took me out to breakfast at Mimi's Café in St. John's Town Center, a fancy yuppie place where breakfast cost three times as much as at Dave's Diner but the ambiance is certainly nicer.

I could get used to that life style.

I feel that I've found my level.

Ha!

Wes just returned from South Dakota. He was out there negotiating arrangements to support a young man, a soon-to-graduate high school student, through medical school. Then my daughter Jennifer took me to lunch at Sonny's BBQ. She's heavily involved in arranging to send a young man to a welding school.

The willingness of Jennifer and Wes to make a longterm commitment to helping these disadvantaged kids who neither one have any real connection with the principals impresses me. Both Wes and Jennifer appear to regard what they are doing for these young men as just a normal outgrowth of Christian service.

Christians do end up in some of the oddest financial situations.

Personally, I ain't sending nothing to nobody nowhere.

Ginny and I suffer from charity overload at the moment.

I'm still unraveling in tension release from my push at work last week. Just to get away from in front of the computer screen, I intend to finish out the next few days in pleasure reading and in yard work.

God willing, I intend to resume my work writing that book on Jacksonville's fire fighting history next week. I backburnered that book months ago, and it's hard to pick up where I left off. I doubt if I will finish that one before Christmas. But once that book is complete, I will have accomplished my writing goals for the year.

Big deal.

Might as well have spent the past year fishing.

The biggest heart ache at the moment is that there's been no word from or about our youngest daughter for several weeks. She was supposed to appear in court last week but we have no way of knowing if she did or skipped out. She does not return repeated phone calls and messages. No one in the family knows if she's crashed somewhere on drugs, or in jail, or got a job, or left town, or what.

Several of us have driven by her house but there's no answer when we knock.

She's troubled but we've all exhausted our resources and have no idea how to really help her.

Not knowing what is going on is difficult.

Ginny and I try to leave her in God's hands and to trust, but still we worry.

Sunday, September 16, 2007 One Christian's Days of Ups and Downs

- ↑ Up. Friday Barbara White came over with the first set of proof pages for her *Along The Way* series of books and we made the corrections in that first volume.
- ↓ Down. My youngest daughter called about 10:30 Friday night saying she's given up job hunting and plans to abandon all her furniture and move in with some guy (one she conspicuously avoids naming) downstate. She intended to leave Saturday morning.
- ↑ Up. Fifteen minutes after Barbara and I finished the last correction in her first set of proof pages, the postman delivered the second set from the printer. At this rate, I expect to publish her series in my online book catalog, Bluefish Books, within the three weeks.
- ↓ Two of my other children called saying how worried they are about Patricia and how frustrated they feel that after all the help we've given her that she's tossing it all away; the whole family is in mourning.
- ↑ Ginny and I enjoyed our usual Friday Night Date to get reacquainted after the week's turmoil. We strolled around the Five Points shopping center admiring the colorful uniforms all the young gothics were wearing to appear individual and unique.
- \downarrow Because of home owners insurance and car insurance falling due at the same time, we find our bank account is at its lowest in over three years.
- ↑ Back at Christmas two of my daughters found a piece of art in a dumpster, they thought I'd like it, and pulled it out of the trash for my Christmas present. Friday, Helen, my daughter-in-law, tracked down the artist and found the piece is valued at at least \$,1,500. She's undertaken to sell it for me.
- ↓ In phone conversations with various family members I've reevaluated our stance with Patricia and her drug/lifestyle problems. In the past year we paid college tuition for her; but she dropped out. We gave her a used but running car; she wrecked it. We helped her move and furnish a house and even did yard work for her,

she intends to abandon it all. We have prayed for her and counseled with her. At sacrifice to ourselves, we got her new eyeglasses, drove her to job interviews, included her in family activities, bought groceries, and even took her cats to the vet. We now feel we have exhausted all the financial, physical, spiritual and emotional resources we have to invest. We feel we have given her every chance within our power to get her life straight so she can live the way she'd really like too rather than be driven and herded by circumstance. We feel we've failed and berate ourselves and feel guilty wondering what we could have done differently to help her: too much? Too little. We tried to give her a stable base to build on herself and feel our efforts have been futile. We love her very much and hate what has happened to her and what she has let happen, but our consensus is that we have to let go. Whether she sinks or swims now, we can't be pulled under any deeper. And we feel terrible about the whole damn thing.

Now for three ups in a row $\uparrow \uparrow \uparrow$.

- ↑ Yesterday at breakfast at Dave's Diner, by chance Ginny and I ran into our daughter Eve and a gaggle of sisters and girls who had gotten together for breakfast and to shop for a bridal veil. Six giggling girls on an all-day shopping expedition for one flimsy piece of cloth! I told the girls that I'd make her a veil take a mesh onion sack, cut off the end, soak it in bleach and... They hooted me down. Giddy girls.
- ↑ In early morning research, I stumbled across a handle which will enable me to finish writing my book on the history of the Jacksonville Fire Department. That makes me very happy! I look forward to resuming that work next week.
- \uparrow Ginny and I spend Saturday doing virtually nothing. We sat in our garden reading murder mysteries, floated on air mattresses in the pool chatting about nothing in particular, watched some 1950s video movies, ate leftovers a relaxed, peaceful day.
- \uparrow or \downarrow ? not sure which ?—. Patricia called midmorning saying she's delaying her move downstate till next weekend. I don't know what to think or how to pray.
- \uparrow The joy of the Lord is our strength. The last line of an old hymn runs through my mind. Can't

remember all the words (and too lazy to look them up this morning) but they reflect my reality at this moment:

By the light of burning martyrs, Jesus' bleeding feet I track, Toiling up new Cavalries ever, with the Cross that turns not back... While behind the dim unknown, Standeth God within the shadows Keeping watch above His own.

Wednesday, September 19, 2007 Raising A Fatted Calf

They had a fatted calf to slaughter at the feast when the Prodigal Son returned only because the father and brother and other people in the story kept on working the farm and going about their business while the layabout partied in that far country.

Sunday, Ginny and I visited a new city park I'd not been to before and as we drove we discussed the decision of our youngest daughter to abandon our family and move to south Florida with some friend. We suspect drug dependency has a lot to do with her choice.

The main topic of our conversation rehashed what we might have done differently when she was a child or teenager. Her behavior pattern has gone on and escalated for almost 15 years now. I tend to blame myself for failing her in some fundamental area as I grieve at what I see as her path to self destruction.

Ginny says that's nonsense; we did the best we could with what we had at the time; there's little we should feel guilty about.

Patricia appears to be extremely smart. She displays many talents and demonstrated great creativity. Ginny and I reminisced about the steamer trunk Patricia transformed into a work of art, about the birdcage she decorated with a statue of Venus and vampire teeth, about the skirt she sewed out of my old neck ties. The child has a knack for creating beautiful things.

Yet, either drugs or demons or mental problems or just pure rebellion destroy her, make her miserable, and cause her to cast aside college, friends and family.

She will turn 27 years old later this month.

Ginny reminds me that I am not the savior of the world, Christ is.

I want to jump in and fix things, straighten it all out, make it better.

This time I can't.

It appears that I have a dad's most painful duty — letting go. Watching from the sidelines as one of my children circles the drain.

By her own choice.

Wonder if God The Father ever watches me feeling that same way?

Jesus told the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11) emphasizing the joy of welcome when the Prodigal came to himself among the pig husks in that far country and returned home. But the subtext of the story reveals how the Prodigal's action damaged the older brother, the father, the whole household.

I wish Jesus had elaborated.

Our daughter Eve, the librarian/poet, announced a change to a job following her heart. I'm proud of her. She's had three job offers but is taking a lower place in the system because her heart lies in children's work instead of administration. Good for her!

Our daughter-in-law Helen faces surgery soon; she goes in for a consult today and has posted a sonogram of her insides on her blog. Ginny attends a seminar on retirement this morning. Donald continues to render and stand as the backbone of our family. Jennifer continues to be Jennifer, our butterfly, and provide comic relief.

Yesterday I resumed work on my book about the history of firefighting in Jacksonville. And Barbara White came over to correct proofs of the second book in her Along The Way series; she's proofing the text in the waiting room during her daughter's chemotherapy treatments.

We are all wounded but moving ahead; we're raising a blue-ribbon fatted calf to barbeque — with, or without, our Prodigal.

Thanks be to God.

Thursday, September 20, 2007 Why Am I Troubled?

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside...

Oh really?

If the Lord does all those good things, then why do troubles beset me?

Why do aggravations aggravate? Why parking tickets? Why my macular degeneration, trembling hands and prostrate cancer? Why Microsoft Word? Why doesn't my scanner scan? Why loud neighborhood teens with boom box radios? Why insomnia? Why inadequate health insurance?

Ok. I'll admit that my troubles are petty affairs, ripples in a world filled with troubles. Mine don't stack up to the troubles suffered by most of humanity.

But my troubles are mine.

My toothache hurts more than any other toothache in the history of the world. No one can tell me otherwise!

So, if the Lord is indeed my shepherd, why do I have to undergo so many troubles?

Shouldn't a child of God live a smooth, peaceful, prosperous life beside those still waters, lying on my back in a green pasture gazing up at fluffy white clouds like fairy castles in the air...

What's that?

Damn! You're right. That's a pasture patty I was laying on! And that's a fire ant mound I pillowed my head on!

What kind of Shepherd is this who would lead me into a place like this?

I want to complain to the management.

I want to know why, if Christ is indeed the Good Shepherd, why I have to endure so many troubles in this world.

And when I ask this question, a couple of things occur to me; these aren't answers by any means but hints

as to why God allows His children (me in particular) to suffer.

My first thought is that some troubles are impersonal and generic; they come about simply because we live in a fallen world that is still falling and hasn't hit bottom yet. The hurricane forming off our Florida coast this morning has no personal grudge against me. Tree limbs will fall on my roof as well as my neighbors. Churches and bars will both flood. Godly couples have deformed babies just as the ungodly do. War kills sinner and righteous indiscriminately. Forest fires roast bunnies as well as rattlesnakes.

Man that is born of woman is few of days and full of troubles.

That's just the nature of the world.

Sheep in the pasture mean pasture patties on the ground.

Nothing unusual about it.

Some troubles I generate myself. Right now I'm frustrated about trying to scan in 77 old sepia photographs for my fire history book. I curse and hit the edge of my desk and call the scanner nasty names... Nobody is forcing me to scan in these photos. Nobody compels me to write this book. I'm encountering scanner troubles because of my own choice; the grainy photos go with the territory. My current troubles come with the job.... Although it might help for me to read the instruction manual.

When I chose a course of action, then I have also chosen the troubles that go with that course of action.

Other troubles come because evil exists, because an evil one exists. It lurked in the parking garage yesterday just waiting for the meter to click so it could slap that \$15 ticket on Ginny's windshield. And the retirement seminar (which she found of little help) ran overtime just long enough for the evil one to strike.

That may not be the best example of evil at work in the world, but it's the example fresh in my mind this morning.

Of course, everyone knows that sin spawns trouble. Here in Jacksonville our murder rate climbs daily. Groups

of people stand on street corners when a car drives by and opens fire spraying the group and nearby houses with bullets. We've had several cases of children killed in their own beds or while reading library books when stray bullets came through the walls of their homes.

Unintended victims of the local drug trade.

Sin spawns trouble, anguish, sorrow, grief. More sin.

That's what happens to other people. Deep in my heart, I'm convinced that my own sins are petty habits which are nobody else's business. They are my pets. Never cause any trouble at all.

My sins are housebroken.

Familiar.

Mine.

In fact, my sins are hardly sins at all, let's just call them minor character flaws. Actually, I'd only call them little peccadilloes if I could spell that word.

I'm not a dirty old man, just a vigorous senior mature gentleman with certain youthful interests.

Deep in my heart, I hardly think I need a Savior at all because I'm such a nice guy; but I let Christ save me because that's what nice guys do. Only sinners and hypocrites actually need a Savior dying on a cross, my own peccadilloes don't call for such drastic rescue measures as that...

Am I the only Christian to think like that?

I mean for God to come to earth, die on a cross, and rise from death because of me: what I am, what I've done, what I'm still doing. Really, I ask you!. He need not have gone to all that bother; my sins are not that serious, I'm not as bad as all that — Am I?

Humm. Wrong question there.

I think there is another reason the Good Shepherd lets troubles trouble me.

He once said that He has other sheep which are not of this fold.

He expects us 99 comfortable ones to reach out to those other sheep, to testify concerning Him. And they

won't believe us unless we are undergoing the same sort of troubles they are.

Maybe I just suspicious, but when some guy with razor-cut hair wearing a Rolex, smiling with even teeth, shooting his cuffs, with a Lexus or BMW parked outside — when such a guy begins to tell me about Jeeezsus, I write him off.

Sure he can jabber about the peace of God and the still waters and the green pastures. Why not, he probably got laid last night too.

No wonder, he's so pleased about his relationship to God.

I write him off because he does not live in my world. He hasn't a clue about my angst and anguish and inner turmoil.

Whoa! I'm being judgmental here. That polished preacher may very well be listened to by people who would never pay attention to a word I say. He has his own Lord. Who am I to judge another's servant?

But here's another guy — a guy who's been hit by life's truck, who is wounded and bleeding and dirty and hurt...

When that guy glows with the love of Jesus, when he extols this Good Shepherd, the Lamb of God slain from before the foundations of the world, who gave His life for the sheep — Well, just maybe he has something there.

I'm inclined to listen to him because he's suffered the same sort of thing I have.

Maybe the Good Shepherd lets us be troubled so we can be His voice to a suffering world, so that other lost sheep can recognize the ring of truth in what we say about Him.

Sometimes I suspect that we suffer trouble because we have the privilege of being Christ's spokesmen.

We are ambassadors for Christ and our troubles are our credentials.

What an incredible blessing!

What an honor.

My sheep hear my voice, He said.

"A stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers," He said.

Monday, September 24, 2007 **Cat Sniffed**

Our son and his wife allow these cats to live inside their house.

Three starving cats, each weighing something less than 90 pounds.

Donald and Helen like cats. Helen even makes tee shirts with pictures of their cats on the chest.

The cats view Donald, Helen and all humanity with the distain for which cats are noted even though yesterday Donald was actually wearing one of those Ninja Kitty tee shirts.

Yes, Sunday, Donald and Helen invited Ginny and me over for a delicious lunch of Barbecued ribs. When we arrived Ginny, who is also a cat lover tried to pet one of the fuzzy varmints. Naturally, it moved just inches out of her reach.

However, the newest cat in the household discovered me as I lounged on this chaise lounge. This cat began sniffing my feet. It progressed up my left leg sniffing the whole length of my body with its nose a quarter of an inch away from my flesh. It climbed the back of that chair thing and sniffed my arms, shoulders, hair. Then it proceeded down the right side of me, sniffing every inch all the way back down to my feet.

This sniffing inspection process took close to 20 minutes. Cat lovers in the room said they'd never seen any cat ever do that before. I have no idea why this cat sound me so fascinating.

Now, I will say nothing against the beloved cats that inhabit Donald and Helen's home. Their home, their cats. But when I returned to my home, I stripped off all my clothes and stuffed them in the washer with soap and bleach. And I showered thoroughly myself.

Can you blame me?

I've been cat sniffed.

Now cat lovers claim that cats are clean, loving, exotic pets, creatures of grace and beauty...

Maybe so.

I won't deny that.

But I remember someone saying about a glamorous Hollywood actress, a noted beauty, a sex-kitten of international fame, a glamour girl whose image appeared on pinup calendars, movie posters and magazine covers. They said of her, "Yes, you can spend a memorable night in her bed, but in the morning you'll wake up with sequined fleas".

Wednesday, September 26, 2007 A Letter Sealed With Silver Duct Tape

Tuesday I spent accomplishing nothing toward getting my history of the fire department written.

I spent much of the day watching on-line movies which I had no business watching, then most of the evening watching the second part of the Ken Burns movie The War, a history of World War II, which everybody should be watching.

Even though I was a tiny boy during World War II, the Burns film triggered vivid memories. I remembered the fear that the Japs or Germans would bomb our house; we were supposed to hide under the bed when bombs fell. Even though I was only four or five years old, my part in the war effort was flattening tin cans with a hatchet on a stump in the backyard for the scrap metal drive.

I remember War Bond posters which asked Have You Killed A Jap Today?.

I remember news reels showing Jap soldiers tossing babies in the air and catching them on the points of bayonets.

I remember the excitement when the father of a kid down the block came home from the war on leave. He mounted a display of things he'd taken from dead Japs and Germans: a real Luger pistol, a helmet with an iron spike on top, a white flag with a vicious red dot, a Jap sword, a pair of chopsticks, and other exotic items.

I remember being so happy when Daddy got his notice to report for duty because I was sure my Dad would bring me home neat battle souvenirs like that other kid had... and I remember my mother beating me bloody when I said I was happy about Daddy going off to war.

I remember the widespread joy when news of the Atomic Bomb came, one American bomb that would kill whole cities full of Japs. Strangers hugged. People danced in the streets. The man at the corner store gave me a free coke and a punchborad ticket which won a quarter to celebrate. There was such an air of relief: those damn Japs would not be able to kill us any more. We would not have to hide under the bed when they came bombing in the night.

And I remember my puzzlement when some person at school said some people were questioning the use of the Atomic Bomb. Where the Hell were they during The War? Don't they realize what Japs and Germans do to captured people? Didn't they see the films of American survivors of the Baatan Death March? Or what prisoners looked like when American soldiers liberated German concentration camps to open the Jew cages? Without the Atomic Bomb, it would have been us in those cages.

The prevailing feeling was that we did not drop nearly enough A-Bombs.

And I remember the appalling sense of creeping apathy which permeated the country during my early school years as politicians pissed away every advantage American soldiers had gained for our country.

Enough of that.

Yesterday's mail brought an envelope sealed with duct tape. An unsigned card. No return address. The card contained a one-hundred dollar bill. The card said, "Thanks. God bless".

Ginny and I puzzled over who could have sent it and why. We can think of nothing we've done in recent months that would warrant anyone thanking us for anything.

We are grateful for this surprise gift and we can certainly use it, but it is a happy mystery.

Thursday, September 27, 2007 A Full And Silent Moon

Wednesday I continued work writing my history of the Jacksonville Fire Department. Most of the day I spent matching grainy old sepia photographs to thumbnail biographies of former fire chiefs. This feature of the book helps with chronological accuracy but I'm being careful not to get bogged down in internal departmental politics. These of course need to be mentioned, but the emphasis I want spotlights heroism and selfless acts of firefighters over the past 150+ years.

Even though I'm writing a secular history, it contains a natural inspirational element, wholesome examples, little departmental politics and few scandals, odd incidents, acts of bravery, human interest — And even a few firefighter jokes.

For example:

The teacher asked students to use the word ladder in a compound sentence.

To impress his teacher Johnny wrote: "The fireman climbed up the ladder into the burning building and when he climbed down he was pregnant".

"Johnny," she said. "You don't even know the meaning of that word. Do you"?

"Sure I do," he said. "It means carrying a child".

Should be an interesting history book.

Recently I've been dealing with so many religious books, and the special tension that writing about the Lord brings, that it feels good to write straight history again. I don't feel as though I'm walking on eggs as much, no souls hang in the balance, it's just happy history.

But the thought occurs to me that anything a Christian writes is "Christian writing". We need not strain to include testimony, we are testimony.

St. Paul said, "In whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him".

In the light of that statement, a bus schedule written by a Christian, written in the name of Christ, weighs as much in eternity as a theology textbook. The love with which a work, any work, is done weighs more than the work itself.

Late last night after watching the forth episode of The War on tv, Ginny and I walked out into our back garden to watch the full moon rise above distant trees. Without talking we stood silent in the moonlight holding and kissing eachother.

Highpoint of my day.

Highpoint of my life.

Friday, September 28, 2007

On Writing Right & Doing Nothing

Spent Thursday tracking down information on some long-ago fire chiefs. Elusive rascals.

The thing is, I feel I should include mini-biographies of all former fire chiefs in my history of firefighting in Jacksonville, or none of them

Accurate information on important people in city government is hard to come by. In fact, one yellowed turn-of-the-Century newspaper clipping tells more about the fire chief's mule than it tells about him.

Notice to all Important People: any historian can write a book about your organization, church, industry or company with no mention of you in its pages. A tombstone leaves little room for recording our feats. In fact, I imagine that in the far future some scholar's doctorial thesis on *Influential Jacksonville Writers And Literary Giants* could be written without even mentioning my name. Startling, isn't it?

Anyhow, I'm going for a few lines about each fire chief and searching for old photos of each guy.

My friend Barbara White called about a problem with proof pages in the forth of her *Along The Way* books; I'd duplicated a column/chapter. Removing it would throw the pagination all out of whack, so I went into the master file, deleted the repetition and replaced it with photos and text to fill in the blank space. That tactic saved the pagination so the final copy will have the same as the printer's proofs.

Barbara plans to come over Monday. God willing, we'll make the final corrections and publish the four-volume series on-line through Bluefish Books Monday evening. It's been a tedious and difficult process but well worth doing.

Here is a sample column from Barbara's fourth book, Rejoicing Along The Way:

Waiting For Directions

Sometimes doing nothing is better than doing anything — even something "good."

A visiting minister, leading a teaching mission here recently, asked a series of questions that opened up the whole new area for consideration to me.

Why, he asked, when a promotion comes along — and it involves a move to another city, away from the roots you are putting down, from the body you are becoming part of — do you always take it?

Why is it always called God blessing you with prosperity?

Might it not be Satan trying to bring you down instead?

Even "good" things are not good unless God is the one directing them.

When Satan tempted Jesus after His 40 days in the wilderness, he suggested that He turn stone into bread.

Now that is not a bad thing — making bread.

The hungry world needs bread.

And later Jesus would do just that, make bread and feed the hungry.

But He did it when God told Him to, not when Satan did.

Man shall not live by bread alone, Jesus said, quoting Scripture, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Think about that.

No matter how good something seems to us, unless God tells us to, we are not to do it. That's the way Jesus did it.

Doing nothing is hard.

We are so conditioned to doing something, anything.

We try to do good works.

We may know good works are not the basis of our salvation, but we think of them as our response to God's gift of salvation through grace by faith.

And they are, aren't they?

I mean, we're supposed to be feeding the poor, aren't we?

Yes, but first we are to surrender our wills to Him. Then, we are to wait upon the Lord, literally I think.

Learning to hear Him when He speaks follows surrender.

His Spirit speaks to us through circumstances, opening some doors, closing others; through other Christians when they confirm our conviction; through the Scriptures, when we are steeped in them, not when we dip occasionally into them; and through prayer, continual prayer that brings inner peace about the action.

So there may be times when we are to do nothing, but **be** His.

Then when He speaks, we are to respond.

Monday, October 01, 2007

Happy Financial Matters — \$\$\$

Whenever my Daddy would pay a bill, he'd say to the cashier, "That's my last dollar, but don't worry about it — There's plenty more where that went".

This past weekend Ginny and I proved the truth of Daddy's statement. We sat down at the kitchen table to go over our plans and obligations for the next three months, to see what we have and what we need, and to plan for our anniversary vacation in November.

"There's plenty more where that went".

Yes, in November we'll have been married for 39 years. Sometimes it seems longer; sometimes, like we're just getting started. For a long time now, each year we plan a vacation trip to celebrate our love and survival.

Usually we like to rent a cabin in the woods at some state park where we can walk on the beach, stroll through a forest, watch birds, linger over coffee and talk for hours without interruption.

After our planning session we decided to cancel the trip this year.

"There's plenty more where that went".

Increases in homeowner's insurance and car insurance, gas and food prices, medical expenses, major utility increases, and other such stuff of normal life render us a bit shorter of cash than usual.

We always take our anniversary trip on a shoestring budget, but this year we're down to flip-flops.

And cash we've invested in my publishing venture with Bluefish Books drained us a bit also. In fact, I think we have fulfilled a biblical prophesy thus proving the absolute truth of Scripture.

You know the prophesy I refer to, don't you? The prophesy found in the first chapter of Haggai.

The ancient Prophet foretold that in the last days people would earn coins only to put them into a bag with holes in it.

I feel he must have foreseen me and Ginny when he said that.

Anyhow we have made alternate happy plans for our anniversary. No cabin in the woods or antique stores or lounging on a bear rug before a blazing fireplace. But somehow, I think we'll manage. Actually, I suspect we'd be happy living in a packing crate beside the railroad tracks as long as we could be there together.

Which brings me to the real subject of today's journal entry: money

For a long time we've talked this move over with our family and friends and yesterday we made a decision about my book sales.

I searched for clip art to insert on the sidebar of my on-line book catalog. I wanted something to show a poor man but which was not demeaning. I googled homeless, man in a barrel, empty pockets, hobo, tramp, bum, bag lady, etc until I arrived at a cool graphic:

It looks like a poor version of me with a pipe in my mouth and a book in my pocket. Ginny and I decided it would be perfect for our announcement on the Bluefish Books sidebar.

I have no idea how to change anything on a sidebar. So, we e-mailed it to our daughter-in-law, Helen,

to post. Helen is a graphic artist who has designed many of my book covers and she acts as computer guru guiding me through the intricacies of internet morass.

Imagine our surprise when we flipped our wall calendar over to October during our personal vacation/financial planning session to find that this same graphic is the October picture on our calendar!

Whooot!

What a laugh.

Anyhow, Helen added the graphic and the following announcement to the sidebar of my Bluefish Books Online Catalog:

NOTICE TO POOR READERS



I earn my living selling my books. I have no other source of income, so sales are important to me. No sales, no money.

However, I've spent much of my life in poverty. I've often lived in want myself. Many's the time I saw books which I did not have money to buy. That hurt.

Therefore, if you honestly do not have money to buy one of my books, please e-mail me at bluefishbooks@gmail.com and tell me that you honestly can not afford a book, and I will e-mail a pdf, read only,

copy for you to read on your computer. One per customer please.

I know you can't served God and mammon, but I try.

—— John Cowart

Tuesday, October 02, 2007 Upset Over Uncials

Monday, my friend Barbara White came over to finish the corrections in her fourth book's proof pages. All four books in her *Along The Way* series are now available at www.bluefishbooks.info

My August 20th journal entry tells a bit about how this project started for me with a shopping bag. My entries since then tell the saga of the manuscript's progress from shopping bag into four 200+ page books.

During the editing and production process, I illustrated each chapter of Barbara's books with road signs from around the world. Each road sign relates so some aspect of the journey *Along The Way*. I think they're cool and sometimes really funny.

During the final proof corrections, we ended up with a blank page.

To fill the empty space, I wanted to insert a promotion for one of my own books, *Glog: A Dinosaur Novel Of Sorts*. I think *Glog* is the best thing I've ever written. It is my favorite of all my books.

Barbara objected because my promo ad said, "Glog ate muskrats, lots of muskrats, and illuminate the uncials in a biblical manuscript".

Barbara, a supposedly educated woman with a Phi Beta Kappa key, had never heard of uncials.

Can you imagine that!

She said there was no such word.

I called Ginny (she was home from work today) in to referee.

Ginny reads the Bible now and then; she'd know all about uncials and illuminations.

She didn't!

My own wife who's lived with me in my own house for nearly 40 years didn't know what an uncial is either.

I was shocked!

How can anyone be a Christian without knowing about uncials? Isn't that a requirement for Heaven?

If not, it ought to be.

If I were in charge, it would be.

The earliest Greek and Latin manuscripts of God's Word were written by hand in uncials, a hand written calligraphy of capital letters with no spaces between words.

Here's a sample:

пионтопотит	помоденловен	PANKAIOMHEXID	HEDINTHN
HAHOAIAHHIKM	PACMOREMOYER	HUDAHCKIUTOI	KNIANACTACATIO
PHITAMIADINA	TWAIRTIOCMA	MATIONAYTUYKA	THETIFOCEYNHE
TOTTLEFTHONER	YMINKAODON	AFUFACATED MANON	CAUCHITTOCIOY
KYNNOMENON	COCTOMOIOLIA	MAT	MADITIACCYTCH
TEXHNEACTYTEXCIP	THEMOYEACINE	METUDIAFYMINOT	KOIMOMENOTE
TOYTIAPAAIAONI-	ANTHACCOINTIN	TOY TOTOL CLEAMH	AYTOYCATIOTHON
меметемотети	KAITHNITTAICH	NONACTIENCON	THICKMETTIONAL
DICHARICATION	THETPATEZHEM	NAICNEMOLTOKN	
OYCTOYANOMIN	ENTHEACIACIAMS	MEIAANOMUNE	тотеттиклосулер
KATATOOPTCME	KAIKAOHCECOUS	AOTICOHKAIDET	ANACIANTECH
NONHOPEYEDA			еүхссомимы
HAHNOYAITUM	піріонтикін.	перемотрасом	CICCAOHTAICICII
Children	TECTACADAEKA	OIVEELL TYNING.	PACMON
oranimeren-	φγλλαιογιτίλ	MAXAITEUINENTO	CHAYTUYAAAOYN
MONINATATINON	CHIENKEOKCCI	OVECTHENYLOR	TOCIVOLOXYOCR
KALAYTOHIT JANI-	MONTAGYDEAD	IKANONECTIN	OVELOWENOCIAL
CANNILLEMENTO	NACESHTHERIO	KAJETEADONEHO	PYCCICIONNON
CATTOTCTOTICAPA	TMACTOYLINDO	PEYOHKKIKTOC***	KKITPOHPXCTOM
CIHETATTONCH	(DCTONCITONG-	CICTOOFOCTUNG	10YC
OTOYTOMEANUN	ACCACHOHNING	AAIWNHKOAOY	KAIHITICENTOR
DIFACCEIN	COYINAMHERN	OHEANACATIONA	4 INICAIATIONE
TENCTONE PINONI	пинипенссоу	MITHORMIO	MEETHENATION
KIACICEAY TOYC	RAICYHOTEEHER	PENOMENOCACCIO	<i>ФІАНМКІГІОНУН</i>
TOTICXYTONAG	TACCINFICONIT	TOYTOHOYEHIENA	Ισγλησρασισγιο
KEICINAIMIZON	ARRAPOYCCOY	тогстроссухесом	PANIADE
OVECHICNYALION	OYCCILIENTALIO	MHEICEADEINER,	CINON TECKEOIN.
OFFACIACICION	KEMETACOYET	IIIPACMON	LIKALDH LOGGON
CONDNKYHOYT	MOCEIMIKNEE	KAIKYTOCATICCHA	NONEITIANKEE
IOINIMUTYANIS	YYAAKHNKARIF	PEDMOTTAHAND	HATAMOMENEN
шухонтестоне	OANATONHOTEY	MIDOYEOMINKM	MAXAIPHKAJEHA
MOYCIAZOYCHIA	ECON	DEICTATONADAIN	TANNEICTICEA
TUNKARYETTE	ONCERTIENACTURE	HYTRIOXCIUN	TONTOYATXIETS
TATKAAOYNTAP	HELLEGADONH	HATEPEIROYAHIAP-	WETONAGYADN
-MEICAGOYXOYT-	CEICHMETONN	NETKATOYTOTO	KNAMMENTOO
KAKOMETZUNIERI			HOLEDAGTYOTYA
MINITEINECOO	KRDjemerjejar	потиронтоут	ATTORPIOETCAEOF
CONCOMEDITION	ATTAINHCHEIM	АПЕМОУПАНИН	
KMOHITOYMEHOT	NAMESON	товениммоум	CITICHEXTECOR
COCONIAKONON	KNEITENATION	YYLOCONLEINE	ΤΟΥΤΟΥ
TIETH OM CIZON	OTEXHECHALTO.	UNDOHACATURA	KAINTAMENOCTY
OANAKEIMENO.	ATCHARLANTIO	TENOCATIOYPANT	OTTOYIACATON
PHONIAKONONY	KAIRHPACKAIYIP	ENICXYWNXYTON	TON
XIOAHAKCIMEN"	MAKEDMALTING	KAHENAMENOCE	CHIENVERCTICO.
EUDVECHWECO	YCTCHICKINOIN	NATUNIARKIEN	TOYCHARATENO
THUNCIMIEDC!		CTEPONITOCHT	MENOYCHPOON
MAKONONYMIE	AAAANTNOEXU	XETOKNIETENET	TONAFXIEFEICKA
PEECLEOIVINA	KANANTIONARA	IAFCDCAYTOYOU	CITYUUDACIBIE
MENHNOTICME	THOMOHOLDONAPA	OFOMEOINIMATOR	BANGLE A LANGUAGE TO
AND LEGISLE	TEDOMOLEDCKAIO	KATABAINONTO"	royecocemisters

In latter times, velum copies of such manuscripts were decorated, illuminated, with fine colorful drawings often inlayed with gold leaf.

I think illuminated manuscripts and clipper ships are the two most beautiful things ever created by man.

Years ago when I worked at the Library Of Congress, I actually handled some of these manuscripts in

the Rare Book Room and all I really know about them is that they are heavy.

Unfortunately, I do not know enough Hebrew, Greek or Latin to actually read such manuscripts (reading Greek is not a requirement for Heaven), but I do recognize their beauty.



Early Bible manuscripts were illuminated in gold and treated with such care, respect and reverence because they were so valuable — they convey the Word of God.

And what God has to say is important.

But, hey, wait a minute here.

If these words were so important to God, how come these books were all hand written and hand copied for generations?

Doesn't that mean the Bible we have today got messed up when some writer's hand cramped and he didn't copy his lines right?

Good point.

Ever wonder why, if they are so valuable, diamonds are split by hand?

Ever wonder why a Rolls Royce is more valuable that a Yugo? Why a precision Swiss watch is more valuable than a Timex?

In each case, the one is hand-crafted individually; the other, mass produced. Precision hand-crafted workmanship is what you want for solid value and God's word has not come to us cheap.

Many people, such as Jan Hus and Archbishop Cranmer, were burned as the stake for transmitting the Bible to us. Aren't you glad that our Constitution's First Amendment links freedom of the press and freedom of religion in practically the same breath?

I made all these points defending the inclusion of my ad for *Glog* on that blank page of Barbara's book. She and Ginny overruled me. Instead we inserted some wimpy cutesy about prayer or something.

Phooy.

Just you wait and see if I pray for any of Barbara's books to sell.

Thursday, October 04, 2007 Rainy Days

According to the tv weather people, we've had more rain in the past three days than in the past three years. We've been in drought but that looks to be suddenly over.

At places in Jacksonville, the rain fell at a rate of two inches per hour. Many streets are flooded and underground water pressure buckles the pavement.

Ginny stayed home from work only at my insistence; she actually intended to go in although the radio urges people to stay off the roads.

We saw Helen for breakfast. She goes in for her surgery today (Thursday). On our way back we encountered a man whose car was stuck in a mud ditch beside the road. Helen circled back to help him out. She and I were going to try to push his car but as we stood there puzzling out how to do it, a truck load of good ol boys screeched to a halt beside us.

These five guys clambered out with boards and ropes and pry-bars. They hooked cable to the disabled

car, stopped traffic on the road, and yanked the car out of deep mud.

As they were doing this, Helen and I got back in her car and drove away laughing.

I'm sure the five Good Samaritans had stopped thinking that it was Helen's car that was stuck in the ditch.

The moral of this lesson is that if you're ever stuck in a deep mud ditch and you want young men to spring to your aid, it pays to have a pretty girl along.

Ginny, Helen and I spent several hours hanging out and talking about computers, art, family and spiritual matters.

Because of the rain, thunder and lightening, I had shut down and unplugged our computers. I don't trust my files to a \$9.95 surge protector made in China and painted with lead paint. I unplug whenever there is lightening danger.

Florida is the lightening capital of the world. More people are killed by lightening strikes here than anyplace else.

It is still sprinkling rain outside.

A tropical system is forming just south of us and it is expected to bring even more rain; so, I just snapped this photo in our backyard.... Well, if there's much more rain, I could have!



Friday, October 05, 2007

A Perfect Occasion To Sin

Obviously I posted that Dore engraving of Noah's Flood too soon; there was more rain yesterday and yet more forecast for today and through the weekend.

I posted the engraving as a joke. Turns out it may not be so funny after all.

Helen's operation Thursday appears successful. She's back home and complaining about being hungry so I assume she'd doing well.

Because of thunderstorms and lightening strikes, I unplugged my computer most of yesterday. During the time it was up and running I browsed bikini girls sites knowing full well that there were better uses of my time.

I have virtually everything I need to write my history of firefighting in Jacksonville, yet I'm reluctant to get on with the task.

Back in 1986, I wrote some magazine articles and a similar history of the Jacksonville Fire Department for the

Jacksonville Fire Museum. It was a rushed job (their rush, not mine) and I've wanted to expand and update if for years.

Essentially the book I envision is a chronological history of my hometown told from the standpoint of how many times the place has burned down. By moving from disaster to disaster and showing what led up to the crisis, then showing the city's recovery in the aftermath, I'll be presenting a coherent history of the city.

That's my plan, anyhow.

But, I'm reluctant to get on with the project.

I just don't have the spirit for it.

Maybe my problem is just the rainy, dreary days recently. Maybe, I did not give myself a break between formatting Barbara White's books and resuming work on the fire history. Maybe I'm just a lazy lout.

I've noticed in the cycle of my own spiritual life that immediately after some triumph (and getting Barbara's Along The Way books edited is certainly a major triumph) but after any triumph, I'm inclined to fall into sin.

This is strange because after any defeat, I'm inclined to fall into sin.

Then on perfectly normal days when there's no outstanding triumph nor suffocating defeat, I'm inclined to sin on those days too.

I'm a consistent dirty old man.

Fair weather, bad weather, Winter storms or Spring breezes, spiritual triumphs or ignominious defeats, I can fine some reason to justify doing things I know good and well that I ought not to do.

Isn't that shocking?

I must be the only Christian in the world to act that way.

Oh well, Someone said that those who are whole do not need a physician.

The rest of us need a Savior.

In fact, I often wonder if we use the wrong terminology when we say we are saved, I wonder if it might be better worded to say that we are being saved. Anyhow, Christ our Savior came to earth and died and rose from death for lazy louts, dirty old men, apathetic sophisticates, indifferent almost-intellectuals, and us normal degenerates.

His glory shines brighter than cloud to ground lightening.

He sets His rainbow in the clouds after the storms.

And He shall reign forever and ever.

But, until He comes in glory, I really need to get this fire history written... Although I rather doubt if He'll question me about my progress on this book if He comes again before I finish writing it.

Saturday, October 06, 2007 Fast Cash

A Quick Post Between Lightening Strikes before I have to unplug the computer again:

Yes, another storm rages outside here in Jacksonville at 4:30 this morning, so I'll quickly record two things:

Maybe, with all the rain recently, I should title this post after the old song, *Pennies From Heaven*... "Every time it rains, it rains pennies from Heaven".

Looks like that recently:

Over the past few days \$1,160 came into our hands from five different and unexpected sources. The givers stipulate that Ginny and I are to use this God-send for our anniversary next month.

Strange. We didn't even pray for extra cash. It must have been the Lord's idea through the hearts of good people who care about us.

I'm humbled.

Last week my friend Wes and I had a long talk about prayer; he pointed out several factors I'd never thought of before... but, I need to be quick here. I'll get to that discussion some other time.

My point is that I am very thankful to the people who gave us these gifts.

My second point also involves money.

Ginny works for a semi-charitable agency involved in feeding hungry children and providing help for needy families. Yesterday, because of her attention to detail, she recovered \$750,000 which would otherwise have been lost to the children.

Yes, that's three quarters of a million dollars that had fallen through the cracks until she initiated its recovery. She's as delighted as if the money had come to her personally.

Although she did say, "Instead of my salary, I wish they'd pay me a percentage of what I re-coop. We'd be rich".

Know what?

We already are.

Sunday, October 07, 2007 I Missed The Boat

In the midst of my activities last week, I neglected to check my e-mail for three days.

That means I missed the boat.

Besides this blog, Rabid Fun at (www.cowart.info/blog) and my on-line book catalog (www.bluefishbooks.info) I keep a general website of religious humor essays and Jacksonville history articles; that website is called The Rabid FUNdamentalist at (www.cowart.info).

I started Rabid Fundamentalist when my son Donald first gave me a computer. That site is horribly crude because I was learning as I went along, yet it filled a gap in the local Jacksonville history available on the web.

It is not unusual for readers to e-mail me asking questions about local history and I always try to answer as best I can.

Last week, a reader in Asheville, North Carolina, sent me some photographs of a river boat departing a landing; they were taken in 1918:









The reader thought there was a chance these were taken somewhere on the St Johns River and asked my help gathering more information.

But I had not read my e-mail for three days.

I missed the boat.

First, I consulted the closest expert on St. Johns Riverboats, my wife Ginny, author of the article "Paddlewheelers On The St Johns".

We discussed at length how to go about finding the location, the name of the ship and information. Ginny suspected the photos were taken at Captain Jacob Brock's landing in Enterprise. I thought they were taken on the west bank of the river at Green Cove Springs.

We asked Donald to enhance the photographs so we might read the name plate on the ship and a sign on a nearby business.

We prepared to sent e-mails to various people knowledgeable about riverboats, etc.

Then came another e-mail from the reader.

Our help was not needed.

Because I had not checked my e-mail and delayed answering, the needed answer had come from another source.

The reader thanked me for my efforts and said, "Since I wrote to you, the photos have been identified. They are of the Manatee River at Bradenton, and the ship is the "Favorite". There are more interesting parts to this story too. The photo of the old lady and the little boy watching the steamer is my great grandmother Harriett Steele and my father Jack Steele Wallace. That much we already knew. The ship, "the Favorite", we were able to identify this week. As a twist of fate, my mother's father was the pilot of "the Favorite". About 10 yrs after this photo was taken my father's family built a home next door to my mother's family in Pinellas County. It was then that the 2 families met for the first time. Small world"....

Fascinating.

Ginny and I stood down in our search.

- I think I may have learned either of two lessons from this:
 - 1. Check my e-mail daily or risk missing the boat.
- 2. If I neglect a problem long enough, someone else will solve it.

Tuesday, October 09, 2007 Thirsty As A Moose

The stag at eve had drunk his fill Where danced the moon on somebody's rill And deep his midnight lair had laid In lone Glen someplace's something shade...

I can't remember that poem.

It's something I read in an English Lit class way back in the dark ages. As best I can remember, dogs chased down the stag and killed it while hunters on horseback blew horns and followed the howling pack.

I have never seen a stag — although I often feel like the one in the poem.

I got to thinking about this poor beast yesterday following a conversation with my friend Wes. We'd been talking about religious revival, that is a manifestation of God among people with little, if any, human leadership.

On one hand, it's something I long to see; on the other hand, I dread an encounter with such raw holiness.

After Wes went home, I realized what our conversation had been about. That happens to me a lot, I often think of just what to say — an hour or two later.

While our conversation was going on, we were a bit at loggerheads because I was not making myself clear at all. In reviewing the conversation in my mind, I realized that I'd come across as demanding some kind of miracle from God.

A personal burning bush, a Red Sea parting, fire falling from Heaven, a ring-side seat to watch the stone roll away.

Wes assured me in the words of Jesus that it is an evil and adulterous generation that seeks a sign.

He reminded me of the dead rich man in Hell and the dead beggar in Abraham's Bosom. The rich man, concerned for his brothers, wanted the beggar to go back to warn them. But Abraham said, that they have the Scriptures and that if they do not believe Moses and the Prophets, they would not believe even if one rose from the dead.

What that boils down to is I get no sign from Heaven and I'm forbidden to commit adultery on Earth.

Raw deal.

Rats!

Cain't have no fun nowhere.

I kept saying I wish to see a supernatural element in my daily life.

Wes kept saying that believing the Scripture is sufficient for life and godliness.

I believe the Scripture, but I want to see God at work here and now, not there and then, in my daily life as an affirmation of what I already believe.

Wes assures me that I'm unlikely to see a miracle.

By their very nature, miracles are unusual.

Wes said the basis of our Christianity is the authority of the Word of God; if we trust subjective experiences then we tend to base our faith on personal experience rather that that sure foundation. Personal experience may reflect the state of our digestion rather than the state of our soul.

Wes explained my spiritual anguish as a case of imagining what my ideal god would be like, then being disappointed that such a god does not exist.

"And you're right," Wes said, "Such a god does not exist. It's imaginary in the first place".

He said our only sure knowledge of God comes from God's revelation of Himself in the Bible.

After Wes went home, that bit of poetry about the stag began to run through my mind. Haven't thought of that poem, whatever it is, since tenth grade. But my mind linked that line about the stag to a verse of Scripture in Psalms about a hart.

(A hart, like a stag, is a kind of deer. I've never seen one out loose.)

The Psalm says:

As the hart panteth after the water brooks, So panteth my soul after Thee, O God.

My soul thirsteth for God, For the living God.

That's what I'd been trying to say all morning!

I do not yearn for miracles.

If I saw a burning bush, I'd grab a fire extinguisher. If I saw Saint Bambi's image on my slice of pizza, I'd eat her up in a minute. (Ain't sharing my pepperoni with anybody). I'd complain about having to gut, head and scale a miraculous draught of fishes.

I have no use for miracles.

What I long for, what I yearn for, what I desire most, what I pant after is the Living God in my life.

Nothing less will quench my thirst.

Nothing less will quite my heart.

Nothing less will satisfy my hunger.

As the hart panteth after the water brooks...

But I'm not finding any water brooks recently. I've never seen a stag, nor a hart either for that matter.

Saw a moose once — does that count?

The moose I saw was not nearly as impressive as the one in this photo taken by my e-friend Karen on her recent trip from England to Canada:



So, for me

No stag.

No hart.

No moose.

No Miracle.

I guess I'll just have to keep believing the plain ol black and white print of the Bible. —— Lord, I believe; help Thou my unbelief...

As the hart panteth...

P.S. — Last night at a Neighborhood Crime Watch meeting, the group suddenly, unexpectedly, elected me as coordinator. We'll see what happens.

Friday, October 12, 2007 Reminds Me Of An Old Joke

Jesus said, "If a blind dork attempts to lead an untutored, unsighted innocent through the maze of ordering a Bluefish Book online by telephone, they shall both get an Access Denied Screen and fall into a ditch".

Maybe that's not exactly what He said, but an experience yesterday convinces me that's what He meant.

I got a long-distance call from a lady who's been trying to order some Bluefish Books without success. She is 76 years old and she has owned her computer for at least ten years.

Her old system is a different brand from mine.

But, being an experienced computer illiterate who has never even heard of her kind of system before, I nevertheless tried to walk her through the order process step by step.

And the last state of the lady was worse than the first!

As she followed my directions, her computer screen turned black and no pixels would show at all.

Isn't that odd?

Was it something I said?

It's so simple to order one of my books. All you have to do is type www.bluefishbooks.info on the Google screen. That brings up seven listings and I'm the top one, Lulu/bluefish. Click on that and you go to my Welcome screen and John Cowart's Online Book Catalog. Pick a book from the listing and click on Add Print To Cart (that means put a printed copy in a shopping cart). You can add other books to the same cart if you use the Back Button. Once you have picked out your books. You view the cart to make any adjustments. Then click Go To Checkout. The screen will ask where you want the books delivered and your e-mail address and for you to chose a password. Then you Save And Continue and Update Cart. And finally chose how you want to pay for the books, credit card or Pay Pal, and how you want the books shipped (US Mail is cheapest), then you click Place Order.

Nothing to it.

Except the lady speaks softly and I'm a bit hard of hearing and we had a hard time arriving at the step which says Google before her ten-year-old, dial-up computer would time out and kick us out into limbo.

Obviously, I have no business trying to help anyone do anything on a computer; I'm an utter child when it comes to these mystery machines. I can cut. I can paste. Anything beyond that is beyond me.

Finally the lady gave up and said she'd ask her son to order for her on his laptop.

That's the answer to many of life's confusing problems — Ask the Son.

Anyhow, our comedy of telephone errors, the blind leading the blind, reminded me of an old, old joke:

The boss needed to call one of his employees at home on a holiday weekend.

A little girl answered the phone, "Harris residence. This is Melissa. May I help you?"

Impressed with the little girl's good telephone manners, the boss said, "Yes, may I speak with your father please".

"Daddy's not home; he went to gas up the car," the child said. "Do you want to leave a message".

What a well-trained, polite child, the boss thought.

"Well, may I speak with your mother then," he said.

"She's still asleep. She's got a migraine and I'm not supposed to wake her."

"It's important that I speak with your dad".

"Would you like to leave a message"?

"Yes. Tell him to call Mr. Morris as soon as he comes in".

"Just a second, let me get a pencil to write that down,' the child said, putting down the phone.

In a moment she picked up the phone, "I'm back. Thanks for waiting," she said just as business-like as could be. Obviously this kid has been listening to the grownups, the boss thought. Sharp as a tack.

"Tell him to call Mr. Morris," he said.

"How do you spell that," she asked.

"M-O-R-R-I-S," he said.

"How do you make an M?" she asked.

Saturday, October 13, 2007 A Visit With Dr. Woody

Ginny took off work Friday to drive me to my midmorning appointment with Dr. Woody.

After a leisurely breakfast lingering over coffee at Dave's Diner, we drove to a nearby park to smoke and talk about our vacation plans next month. We so enjoyed ourselves that we were almost late getting to the doctor's office.

As soon as he came into the exam room Dr. Woody told us that in an hour he and his wife were leaving to drive to Carolina where her father has had a debilitating stroke. The old gentleman is in his 80s but has lived a fiercely independent life on his own before this stroke. He served as a medic during World War II and served in the D-Day Invasion of Europe.

Dr. Woody said his father-in-law is an intense, strongly focused man who finds the limitations imposed by this stroke greatly frustrating. Dr. Woody and his wife

face some difficult decisions, medical and practical, about the old man's life-style and care.

What a heavy thing to carry.

You Don't Have To Speak Portuguese

My son Donald send me this link to a site in Brazil:.

I do not understand a word of the text, but I find scrolling down the cartoon strip intriguing.

It's based on Matthew 16:24 where Jesus says, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me..."

I wonder what this strange cartoon teaches?



Sunday, October 14, 2007 Queen of the Night Amid Angel Trumpets

Last week's rains spurred the growth of vegetation, mostly weeds, in our yard.

Dog fennel, dollar weed, sandspurs, beggar lice and a thousand other nameless weeds abound, spotted here and there by fairy rings of mushrooms. Our bromeliad beds sprouted and flourished. The flamingo plants we use as a hedge brought forth clusters of flowers. Rain lilies rise overnight. Living growth surrounds us.

Saturday morning Ginny and I joined some of our neighbors in chopping down some of this living growth.

We helped clear, trim and mow a two-block long strip at the entrance to our community. That's a neighborhood beautification project we began five years ago.

When we returned home, we enjoyed a swim in our pool and admired the angel trumpets growing by the pool steps. Here's a photo of Ginny amid the angel trumpets:



The huge white blossoms look lovely but the whole plant is a neurotoxin; every part of it is a deadly poison like the oleander you see planted along the highway. This tree dies back in winter but comes up larger every year and cuttings root easily.

The flowers set off Ginny's hair — an angel amid the angel trumpets.

Then last night several buds of our Night-blooming Cereus opened. This member of the cactus family brings forth huge flowers which open, flourish and die in a single night. Light wilts them.

The common name of this plant is Queen Of The Night. Here is a photo of Ginny who also holds that title:



I snapped this snapshot about 11 p.m. so the flower she is touching has not fully opened yet. When it does it becomes one of the most aromatic of plants rivaling our night-blooming jasmine for perfume.

So, yesterday I got photos of Ginny amid the angel trumpets and another of her as Queen of the Night.. The flowers make appropriate settings for her beauty.

Saturday afternoon we discussed plans for our 39^{th} wedding anniversary.

Monday, October 15, 2007 **Higher Up The Tree**

Over the weekend the guys across the street hired tree trimmers to cut down a huge pecan tree in their side yard.

Sad news for me.

Our house faces west and this pecan tree shaded our living room window from the glare of the setting sun. My computer desk sits facing that window and now I'll have to avoid the computer in late afternoons because even with the blinds down, it's just too bright for me to see the computer screen.

Everyone in our neighborhood gathered to watch the spectacle of the tree coming down.

The workmen began taking off the lower limbs and working their way up the main trunk. They would rope each heavy limb to some higher branch, then as it was detached, they'd ease it to the ground via a pulley system to avoid dropping it on the rooftop.

All this activity and the noise of the chainsaws panicked the squirrels who inhabit the pecan tree. They tried to escape by rushing higher and higher up the trunk.





There's a limit to how much you can escape by climbing higher.

Tuesday, October 16, 2007 Three Cheers For Seeker

Several years ago I received a phone call from a young man from Brazil.

No, he was not calling long-distance; he was at Jacksonville International Airport changing planes on his way from Rio to someplace north.

He identified himself as an engineer. He said he'd been in his dentist's office in Rio de Janeiro waiting for his appointment when he picked up a magazine which was two or three years old. It contained an article which I had written.

When he learned that he would be changing flights in Jacksonville, he made a point of looking up my phone number to call and say how much reading that article had helped him with a spiritual struggle he was facing.

That feedback certainly gave me a lift.

Because so few of my books sell, I often feel as though I'm typing on air when I write. I wonder if anybody anywhere ever reads my stuff and I get discouraged.

Well, yesterday Seeker, a blogger from Illinois, gave me another such lift.

You never know who or what you will find on the Iternet.

Last Friday my son Donald send me this link to a site in Brazil:

I mentioned this site in my journal noting that I had no idea what the intriguing cartoon panels, which are written in Portuguese, say.

Other than that young engineer from the airport, I don't think I've ever in my life encountered anyone familiar with Portuguese.



The electric ink on my blog posting was hardly dry before my e-friend Seeker, the lady who is always posting pictures of her cute grandkids, e-mailed me saying she speaks Portuguese and offering to translate the cartoon strip for me.

How kind!

Isn't wonderful to find such talented friends online, people you are unlikely to ever see in real life but who form a caring community in the electric world?

Seeker's blog address is www.thefirsthundred.blogspot.com/

Here is a copy of her translation.

John, this is the translation of the first paragraph of that cartoon. (I haven't spoken Portuguese in a long time, but it's still easy to read.)

> We all have a cross, But God knows that we can carry it... So don't think that yours Is too heavy, Because it has a reason in the end (after all)

The guy tells God his cross is too heavy and asks Him to lighten it. Then he cuts a piece off by himself. He asks God to make it even smaller and it would be easier to carry. Then he cuts off some more by himself. Then he thanks God, and continues on his way. The rest of the

story is understood by the pictures, I think. Makes a good impact, don't you think?

Here's the rest of the translation:

Whatever your cross, whatever your pain, There will always be sun after the rain. Maybe you will trip and even fall, But God is always ready to answer your call...

He knows all your worries, sees all your tears. One word from His lips can calm your heart... Your sorrows may last the night, But quickly disappear in the morning light...

The Savior is waiting for you, to give you His grace, And send you His love...

Whatever your cross, whatever your pain, "
God will always send the rainbow after the rain..."
God bless you!!! Even through treacherous nights...

If your cross is heavy...
God will be with you.
The world may even make you cry,
But God wants you smiling!

Thank you, Seeker!

Wednesday, October 17, 2007
Like A Dog Chasing Its Own Tail



A curious thing happened yesterday.

My work on my history of firefighting in Jacksonville has progressed to 170 pages so far. I wanted to confirm a fact related to the Great Fire of 1901 when over 400 acres of the city burned and over a thousand homes and buildings were destroyed.

A hundred years after the 1901 fire, in the year 2001, the Jacksonville Historical Society published a glossy, coffee-table sized book by Bill Foley and Wayne Wood. It's titled *The Great Fire Of 1901*.

It is a definitive history of that fire.

So naturally when I wanted to check out a particular fact for the book I'm writing, I turned to those pages. I wanted an authoritative answer to my question. So I checked the bibliography at the end of the book to see where Foley and Woods had come up with their information.

Guess what I found?

To conform the information I want now, I'm to check the book *Men Of Valor*, the Fire Department history book which I myself wrote back in 1986.

They cite me as a source!

This strikes me as so funny.

To find out what I want to know, I'm to consult me.

Isn't that ridiculous?

How can I find an authoritative answer to my question when I'm the authority and I don't know diddle-squat about the subject?

Years ago, Bill Foley, now deceased, and I often used to talk after our fashion (Bill was a mute) about Jacksonville history. I don't recall that we'd ever discussed my Fire Department history; so I was really surprised to find my book cited in his book.

What a nice honor.

I'm inordinately pleased.

But, naturally this odd situation reminds me of a verse of Scripture where St. Paul addresses the issue of authority.

The Apostle says, "We dare not ... compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise ...

"For not he that commendeth himself is approved, but whom the Lord commendeth". —— II Corinthians 10:12-18

In moral situations if I compare myself with myself, I come off pretty ok.

After all, who do I know that's nicer than me?

I measure up to my measure because it's mine.

When I compare myself to myself, I find my self incomparable.

King of my hill.

Lord of all I survey.

Top dog.

But that top dog chases its own tail.

If the standard I measure by is me, then that's a pretty low standard.

If the standard I measure by is other people, then I come off pretty well there too because deep in my secret heart of hearts I'm convinced that I'm as good as anybody, better than most. I have reasons for the things I do.

After all, those poor people are dying. Just a matter of time and they'll be gone. They are only part-time temps. They hardly count at all. Of course I'm better than them.

However, if God is the Standard, if His word is the authority, if His approval and commendation is the only thing that counts, then ...

How short we fall. How we miss the mark. How ridiculous we look proclaiming our own puny claim to righteousness.

That boils down to proclaiming, "I am right because I am me".

No wonder we need a Savior.

No wonder it took an act of God to redeem us.

So yesterday the historical society book I turned to as authoritative cites me as an authority.

What were those people thinking?

Makes me wonder if some books just ought to be burned.



Friday, October 19, 2007

A Knotty Halloween Problem

When I turned 11 years old and joined the Boy Scouts, first thing, they taught me how to tie a square knot; The second knot they taught me how to tie was a hangman's noose.

The sheepshank, clove hitch, sheet bend, timber hitch and diagonal lashing came later. To this day, I can tie a bowlin knot around my waist with one hand.

I'm a bit rusty with other knots. I still have trouble keeping straight how, "The rabbit comes out of the hole, runs around the tree, and goes back down into the hole".

But I can still tie a hangman's noose. That's the sort of practical thing a boy does not forget. It's not like fractions and declensions and 1066, the useless stuff they try to teach you in school.

Every once in a while in Scouts some guy would tie a hangman's noose and drape it on some other guy's tent. When the victim found it, he'd unravel it and use the rope to snap ass with like a wet towel in a locker room. There'd be a big game of chase, lots of laughs, and we'd all pile into the spring for a swim.

Just kid stuff.

I'm remembering these knots this morning for two reasons: our annual Halloween display and the book I am writing on the history of firefighting in Jacksonville.

Since we moved into this house 12 years ago, Ginny and I have set up essentially the same Halloween display every year. We use it as an evangelism tool to illustrate that phrase from Psalm 23, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou, Lord, art with me".

Year after year our display featured this hanging skeleton:



Among the kids in our neighborhood, a visit to the Cowarts on Halloween is a big event and each year they will ask me well in advance if we will be giving out treats again this year. We try to give them the best packet of treats they will get anywhere.

Apart from this chance to spread the Gospel in a low-key, non-threatening manner to people who come to our door asking, we would not bother with Halloween at all. It's just not a holiday we care anything about.

A new factor this year means we may not put up a display at all ...

This bring me to my fire history book.

The main thrust of my book involves the bravery, sacrifice and heroic deeds of Jacksonville firefighters. Yet, to be historically accurate, I'm obligated to at least mention some of the less noble events related to our fire department.

Recently some guy draped two hangman's nooses on the equipment of two firefighters. Instead of unraveling the rope, snapping ass, chasing the culprits and all going out for a glass of Kool-Aid, there came an internal investigation, calling in of the FBI, lawsuits, recriminations, name calling, and all sorts of ill-will.

I wish these guys would grow up like Boy Scouts.

But, they haven't.

Shame.

Anyhow, in recent days a certain segment of the community has taken to putting hangman's nooses around where other segments of the community would find them.

To some people the hangman's noose has become a racial symbol.

And other people get up in arms taking offence.

Doesn't anybody ever grow up?

Criminals were being hung long before the Civil War, long before there was a United States. This form of execution dates back to Bible times.

In the book of Esther, the king hung Haman, the bad guy, and his ten sons from a gallows scaffold fifty cubits high (that's about 75 feet tall).

I used to wonder why they built the gallows 75 feet tall, then I realized that this was a public hanging and they wanted the stage high enough so that all the crowd could get a good view. Then I read somewhere that while the gallows was 75 feet tall, the rope was only say 60 feet long.

That way, when they shoved Haman off the platform and he hit the end of his rope... his head would pop off.

Hey, they didn't have cable in those days.

But, what a show!

Scouts would love it!

In parts of England, public hangings took a slightly different from. They would tie the criminal's hands behind his back then place the noose around his (or her) neck, then the executioner would tighten the rope till the criminal rose up on tip-toe barely touching the platform. That way as long as he could "dance on the end of his rope" for the amusement of the crowd, he would stay alive dancing until his legs gave out and he strangled.

If someone in the crowd really cared about the hanging man (or woman) that person would run up on the gallows to the hoots and cat-calls of the crowd, and grab the criminal's legs pulling down with added weight to tighten the noose quicker and end the dance faster.

That was an act of love....

Anyhow, with all the racial tensions floating around, Ginny and I decided that in order not to potentially offend anyone in our racially mixed neighborhood, we'd come up with some other idea for a Halloween display...

But we can't think of anything appropriate.

I wish people would just grow up and move on.

But Halloween is not the only night evil is loosed on the world.

This is about more than our cute traditional Halloween display

The Apostle Paul said, "Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as in you is, live peaceably with all men".

Sometimes, folks make that hard to do.

Saturday, October 20, 2007

Comfort Me With Apples

The Song Of Solomon, a strange book of the Bible, contains this strange, strange passage:

I am the rose of Sharon, And the lily of the valleys. As the lily among thorns, So is my love among the daughters. As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, So is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight,

And his fruit was sweet to my taste.
He brought me to the banqueting house,
And his banner over me was love.
Stay me with flagons,
Comfort me with apples:
for I am sick of love.

I have no idea what that means.

What the heck is a flagon? How do you get stayed by one?

And what does it mean to say, "Comfort me with apples"?

A reference note in my Bible margin explains the phrase "Comfort me" can be translated, "Straw me with apples".

Isn't that helpful!

In camp settings I have heard people sing "His Banner Over Me Is Love" to a catchy tune — and there are hand motions to the song too.

There's a lot about the Bible I don't understand, but that doesn't bother me unduly, I have enough trouble living with the parts I understand all too well, thank you.

What got me to thinking about Solomon's love poem was that Friday I did something I have never done before in my life.

We have not been to the grocery store this week so our cupboard is bare. No ice cream, no Twinkies, no potato chips, no Nutty Buddies. Nothing but some green leafy things called vegetables. — we face starvation.

To remedy this dire lack of real food, like the folks in the Donner Party, I took matters into my own hands. They solved the problem their way, I solved it my way.

I baked an apple pie!

My first ever.

Here's a photo of it:



From scratch I baked it.

Here's how:

I pared and cored all the apples we had in the house. I chipped them up small. I sprinkled them with a tiny bit of cinnamon sugar (Ginny is diabetic so I used little sugar) and threw on some nutmeg (First time I've ever touched the stuff).

Since I could not add sugar, I dumped in a box of raisins. Those sweeten it enough without adding to Ginny's problem. I melted the end of a stick of butter and poured that on the mixture.

Then came my light, flaky pie crust (it's much lighter than a flagon). I put two cups of flour (more or less) into a mixing bowl, melted the rest of the stick of butter and poured that in with a touch of water and a sprinkle of salt and cinnamon.

Somewhere in this house — only God and Ginny knows where — there's a rolling pin, but I could not find it. So I put most of my clump of dough on a sheet of waxed paper, covered it with another sheet of waxed paper, and flattened the dough out by rolling over it with a plastic two litter bottle of soda pop.

Worked fine.

I lined a round pan with that flattened dough, added my filling, and rolled out the rest of the dough for a top.

I crimped the edges of the two dough sheets together with a fork then circled the lot with a strip of aluminum foil. I'd pre-heated the oven to about 400 degrees (or maybe it was 425) and let my pie bake on a cookie sheet for as long as it took to wash the dishes, answer two phone calls and read a chapter in my spy novel.

Baking times may vary depending on the length of the chapter in the novel you're reading, but it's somewhere between 30 and 60 minutes.

Looked alright to me. So I took it from the oven and let it cool.

When Ginny came home from work tonight I surprised her with my pie.

It tasted delicious!

Like a kitten catching its first mouse, I'm pleased with my accomplishment.

I feel so proud of me.

If the Iron Chef feels threatened by my culinary prowess, I'll bake another pie and comfort him with apples.

But, he'll have to bring his own flagon.

Sunday, October 21, 2007 An Unexpected Pain

Saturday Ginny and I shopped on the other side of the river where we seldom venture. I imagine it's been a couple of months, maybe two years even, since we crossed the bridge into Southside.

When we finished our errands we decided to eat lunch at Blue Boy's Sandwich Shop in Arlington.

Back about 30 years ago we used to eat at Blue Boys often. Back then they were on our side of the river not far from our home. We took the four children there as a special treat and had a slightly more than nodding acquaintance with the owner, his wife and several of the waitresses.

Then we moved to Riverside and they moved to Arlington and our contact lessened, although our family still gathered there for special occasions like birthdays and college graduations.

But, as I said time and distance lessened our contact with the staff of Blue Boy's.

When Ginny and I walked in the door yesterday, the owner's wife welcomed us profusely as did one of the waitresses who still works there after 30 years.

We enjoyed one of their fabulous sandwiches for lunch and wrapped halfs for supper. Ginny had the Italian Veal and I had the Mushroom Omelet sandwich. These sandwiches are so huge that Blue Boys bakes their own bread because normal bakeries don't make loaves that large. We can only eat a quarter of a sandwich at a time, so buying one sandwich is actually buying four meals.

When we walked up to the register to pay our bill, for a few minutes we talked with the owner's wife. She told us that a couple of weeks ago they became grandparents for the first time.

She asked about each of our now grown children whom she has known since they needed boaster seats to get up to the table.

We told her about the successes of our eldest three.

Then she asked about our youngest daughter, the one we may have lost to drugs.

I mumbled something or another about her.

And this near-stranger lady said, "I will pray for her".

I started crying.

And I couldn't stop.

The surprising thing about my reaction was that it caught me completely by surprise.

I thought I was coping with the pain.

I thought I was dealing with it.

I thought I was managing.

Apparently I'm not.

I could not stop crying. Ginny and I went out into the parking lot to shelter under a shade tree and smoke. I began trembling and I still cried.

Later in the evening — we were watching some stupid zombie movie on tv — and tears still streamed down my face.

I certainly didn't expect that.

This does not mean I'm cracking up or loosing my mind. Doesn't everybody cry when paying a bill or while watching a zombie movie? I'm not ready for a straight jacket.

I'm no crazier now than I've always been...

Er, that didn't come out quite right, but you know what I mean.

For the past couple of weeks I've known something undefined was wrong with me. Even more trouble sleeping than usual. Impotence. Lack of spirit to work although I normally love my work. No interest in Bible reading. Rote prayers if any at all. Cursing people who bug me by crossing my path. Irritability with Ginny. Inability to plan ahead. Slinking around reading murder mysteries when I should be working. Looking at naked ladies on the web. General malaise. Letting the yard grow un-mowed. Not shaving as usual in my daily routine. Letting e-mails go unanswered. Paying little attention to my blog. And a host of lesser symptoms.

I thought all these were just symptoms of aging, I did not identify them as manifestations of grief.

I had no idea that I have been in pain.

After all, we've been dealing (I thought) with our daughter's drug thing for over a dozen years now. I thought I had it in perspective, pigeon-holed in the back of my mind. Written off.

I thought I had desensitized my self into a state of not caring. I feign an aura of indifference. Of taking it as it comes. Of blessed numbness. Of positive thinking and cognitive therapy techniques. Of hardening my heart.

Apparently, I'm not very good at that stuff.

I'd just managed to paste a thin veneer of coping on the surface of my soul.

I had the pain and grief nicely bottled up and sealed.

When that lady at the cash register said, "I'll pray for her", her concern triggered something inside me; the bottle shattered and my tears flowed.

This unexpected manifestation of pain caught me completely by surprise.

I've heard of people in a bad traffic accident walking around with a ripped and broken arm dangling by a thread and saying in shock, "I'm alright. I'm not hurt at all. I'm alright" while their blood dribbles on the pavement.

Maybe I've been in that sort of shock too.

"I'm alright. I'm handling this. I can cope. I can function," I say daily.

Part of my problem is a background attitude, not a deliberately taught doctrine, that as a Christian, I should be able to deal with anything the world, the flesh or the devil throws at me.

I quote St. Paul's statement, "I can do all things through Christ, which strengthens me".

I believe that.

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Not because I am strong, but because He is Lord. He is love.

That doesn't mean I don't hurt.

Thanks be to God — anyhow.

Monday, October 22, 2007 Carded

As Ginny and I traveled to and fro yesterday, we stopped at a drug store so I could buy some pipe tobacco. When I took two packs up front to pay, the young man at the register asked me for a picture ID to prove that I am over 18 years old!

This confused me because I turned 18 over 50 years ago but I dug in my pocket and showed him my senior citizens bus pass.

He said that the chain management has decreed that anyone, without exception, making a tobacco purchase must show proof of age.

Since no one else was waiting, I told the young man about something that had happened to me back in 1969 or '70 when I drove a tractor trailer truck all over the United States.

I happened to met a bunch of other drivers in some city; I think it may have been Indianapolis or Okalahoma City or Omaha — doesn't much matter. Anyhow, six or seven of us got to talking and decided to go out for supper and a beer.

We settled in this bar and the cocktail waitress, a youngish but veteran blond, came over to our table. She appeared very shy and spoke to the youngest guy among us saying, "Can I ask you a personal question?"

All conversation stopped as we focused on her.

She dropped her eyes and spoke just above a whisper, "How long are you?

She captured our attention now as she extended one arm and began to measure off inches with her other hand. The flustered young man stopped her when she's measured about a foot. "I believe that! A handsome young guy like you. You don't have to prove it... not here. Not now," she whispered throatily in a voice laden with undefined promise.

She really had our attention now.

She demurely spoke again, "Can I ask you another really personal question?"

The flustered young man bobbed his head, too stymied to speak.

She leaned close and said, "How old are you"?

"I'm 22" he replied.

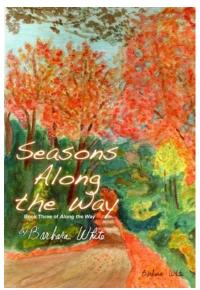
"That, you are going to have to prove," she said, "Let me see your ID".

At that the lot of us roared laughing. Not a one of us had seen that coming.

That clever, diplomatic waitress created a lot of good will for her bar without embarrassing anybody about being carded.

She entrenched her tact in the memory of a crusty old truck driver 40 years later — and earned herself an extravagant tip.

Tuesday, October 23, 2007 Two Rain Storms, 25 years Apart



Monday my friend Barbara White drove over to our house through a blinding rain to pick up some materials for an art show next weekend..

Barbara attends an art class in which she painted the scenes which my daughter-in-law Helen, a graphic artist, transformed into book covers for the four books collecting Barbara's newspaper columns, the Along The Way series.

The art teacher sponsoring the show wants to

feature Barbara's original paintings along with the book covers as the centerpiece for the show.

I printed some preview chapters from each of the four books as part of the display. Then Barbara and I drove up to Silver Star for delicious Chinese food. Barbara dropped me at my house on her way to run other errands.

Again, there was a blinding rain.

This weather reminded me of how Barbara and I became friends about 25 years ago:

This is a weird friendship because, other than a mutual regard for Jesus Christ and a love for Chinese food, Barbara and I have virtually no other common ground. She is an opera buff and I have no taste in music. We both worked for the newspaper but she was an exalted editor, while I was a mail clerk. She was quite wealthy, I supported my family with the help of Food Stamps. She is a local celebrity, I'm unknown. She moved in realms of

high society, led retreats, enjoyed luncheons with the bishop, etc.

Nothing in common.

I had a nodding acquaintance with Mrs. White through the newspaper. She read a magazine article I'd written about family prayer and came to dinner at our house once to write an article about my family and how Ginny and I worship with the children.

But I didn't know the lady at all except from a far distance.

News came that Barbara was hospitalized facing cancer surgery.

I felt an odd urge to go visit her the night before the scheduled surgery. I planned to just pop in and out because I was sure that swarms of editors, reporters and other famous people would be visiting and I certainly had no place among them.

It would be silly for me to even put in an appearance but I felt strongly that I should.

Now, at the time, Ginny, our four children and I lived in an upstairs apartment across from a school in Springfield, one of the rougher slum sections of Jacksonville.

That afternoon as Ginny and I stood at the front window looking down at our car which was parked on the street, we saw a mature gentleman walking past. He appeared clean-cut and was dressed as though he had just come from church or something of the sort.

As the man neared our car, he passed a chain link fence surrounding the school playground. He turned aside and grabbed the corner fence post and ripped it up out of the ground. The cement clump anchor came out of the ground with the metal post.

The man swung this post over his head as a club and smashed our car window.

He dropped the metal post with a clang on the side walk, wiped his hands and continued his stroll as though nothing had happened.

How bizarre!

Obviously this proved that God did not intend for me to drive far across the city to visit the editor in the hospital.

Yet the feeling persisted that I was supposed to go.

Ginny and I talked and prayed about the matter but the compulsion to go grew stronger and stronger. It made no sense at all. I hardly knew this lady and we hardly had gas enough to drive anywhere and with the car windshield smashed out...

The feeling that I was commissioned to go resisted all common sense excuses.

After super I showered and got dressed still debating whether or not I should go.

A rain storm broke. A super driving gully-washer, frog-strangler of a rainstorm.

I could not drive in that.

Not with a missing windshield and glass shards all over the soaking car seats...

"In as much as ye have done it unto these, the least of My brethren..."

We just knew I had to make that drive regardless of external conditions. Ginny and I felt this trip was a divine mandate for me.

Few other cars ventured on the streets that night; the storm was too violent. Roads flooded. Branches across the roads. Traffic lights out. Electric lines down.

Blinding, torrential rain driven horizontally by the winds.

I got to the hospital soggy.

I went up to the room and found Barbara alone praying on the eve of her cancer surgery. Not one other person was there. The violent storm kept her friends from visiting till the next day.

For several hours we talked about Christ and the wonders of His love. And she and our family have been fast friends for the following 25 years. Yesterday's rain storm reminded me of how this odd friendship began.

I don't put much of stock in religious feelings. The vision or compulsion may indeed be, as Scrooge said, "an undigested bit of beef".

But...

When we feel that God is guiding us to do something out of the ordinary and even against common sense, we never know what will result unless we obey in spite of the circumstances.

We'll never know — unless we obey.

Without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness.

Wednesday, October 24, 2007

Travel On The City Of Jacksonville In 1917

First, Helen finished the poster for Barbara's Art Show display which I mentioned yesterday; Here is a copy. I think it's terrific!



For the past four days I've suffered with a sinus headache so I've not been able to concentrate on work.

Yesterday I got caught up answering an e-mail request instead of working on my fire history. At least it gives me something to blog about:

Can you tell me what travel would have been like on the "City of Jacksonville" in 1917?

My grandmother traveled to Enterprise, Fla and stayed in the Benson Springs Inn when she married my grandfather in 1917.

Thank you, Robin, Asheville, NC

Here's my reply:

Hi Robin.

The source you want is *First Coast Steamboating Days* by Edward A. Mueller. Published by the Jacksonville Historical Society. © 2005. ISBN 0-9710261-3-0. If your local library does not have it, ask the librarian to arrange an Interlibrary Loan for you.

This book contains page after page of information on the *City of Jacksonville*. Attached is one of several photos of the ship.



The coal-powered, side-wheeler *City of Jacksonville*, built in 1883 by Harlan & Hollingsworth of Wilmington, Delaware, was 169 feet long and 52 feet wide with a draft of 7 feet. She ran 459 gross tons, with a passenger capacity of 275 people

In 1917, Woodrow Wilson was President and the U.S. was in the First World War so your grandmother may have encountered uniformed doughboys on her trip. The Spanish Lady flu epidemic had not broken out yet, but there may have been some early indications, health posters, etc. There may have also been No Smoking signs on the salon deck as gentlemen's cigar smoking on

shipboard was a controversial topic that raged back and forth.

Ladies back then never smoked. (At least not in public) although they may have dipped snuff at home.

In those days travel was a special occasion and people dressed their best for it. Your grandmother would likely have worn gloves, her Sunday best, a travel cloak and a hat with a veil. The cloak and veil were to protect her from smoke — not from the gentlemen's cigars but from sparks, ashes and smoke from the ships boilers. Although the ship's stack should lift smoke high above the deck, passengers sometimes complained about flying sparks burning holes in their travel costumes.

If your grandmother was a Suffragette, she may have worn a sash or pin advocating women's right to vote (not passed till 1919) or denouncing U.S. involvement in the World War and "Kaiser Wilson".

The ship consistently left Jacksonville about 3 in the afternoon and arrived in Sanford the next morning.

The ship changed owners and configuration several times over the years.

The City of Jacksonville, then owned by the Clyde Line, ran her last trip on Memorial Day, 1928, She was converted into a dock-side dance hall and finally broken up and scuttled in the Intercoastal Waterway just prior to World War II.

Hope this helps.

Be sure to get the Mueller book; it's chock full of information.

John Cowart

Five Quick Historical Notes For The Kid In The Attic:

1. The Space Shuttle *Discovery* launched yesterday with seven astronauts aboard. They plan construction work to expand the International Space Station. I'd planned to watch the launch from our backyard but I forgot the time and missed it.

- 2. Wild fires along a hundred mile front have forced the evacuation of between 500,000 and a million people in Southern California. The fires, driven by Santa Ana wind gusts up to 100 miles per hour, jumped a ten-lane-wide Interstate highway. Over a thousand homes and businesses have burned in the past four days. No end in sight. News reports are calling this the worst disaster in U.S. history.
- 3. Staph infections have broken out of hospital environments and are appearing in public schools and college campuses around the country. More commonly known as MRSA, methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus is blamed for several deaths.
- 4. For ages high school football games in Jacksonville have been played on Friday nights. But a recent spat of shootings during high school games have resulted in night games being canceled. Yesterday, officials announced that games will have to be played during daylight hours.
- 5. Recently Florida chose to hold our Presidential primary earlier than we have before. Both Democratic and Republican parties threaten to ban Florida delegates from national conventions because of the change (although both parties continue fund raising drives here). If either party does override state law and bans our delegates, many of us vow not to vote for any candidate they pick without our representation but to vote for some third party candidate. Our votes ought to count.

Thursday, October 25, 2007 Conversations & Cole Slaw

First, earlier this month my friend Wes and I enjoyed a stimulating conversation about hope, miracles and authority. I wrote about it on October 9^{th,} "Thirsty As A Moose"; Wes wrote about that same conversation in his blog post yesterday, "A Hot Stake or a Cold Chop". It's interesting to see our two different takes on the same conversation.

Speaking of conversations...

Yesterday my daughter, Jennifer, dropped by to pick up mail, treat me to lunch, and touch base. She told me what she's been doing recently.

For instance, she just went down to Daytona Beach, just a two-hour drive south of Jacksonville.

Last week she met a young man, a friend of a friend, who invited her to a quaint Florida festival — Biketoberfest — also known as Bike Week At Daytona.

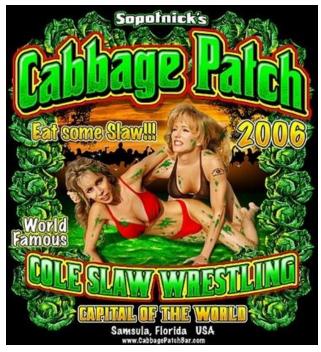
During this annual festival thousands upon thousands of bikers from all over gather to see and be seen drinking beer.

Instead of joining this new acquaintance pillion on his bike for the festival, Jennifer insisted that she drive her car and be the designated driver. Also, she refused to stay overnight in Daytona — a prudent move on her part. Things do get a little rambunctious there as the drinking day wears on.

Jennifer said every possible style of motorcycle and motorcyclist were on the scene. She described bikes covered in chrome and bikes covered with rattlesnake skins. She saw one bike for sale that had been reduced to only \$50,000.00.



One of the first places Jennifer visited was the famous Cabbage Patch, known among sports fans as the World Capital of Slaw Wrestling.



What? You've never heard of Cole Slaw Wrestling?

Cole slaw is shredded cabbage mixed with relish, mayonnaise, oil and assorted spices. And, in this sport young ladies enter a plastic arena filled with cole slaw and wrestle. Sometimes in the competition participants have been known to experience a wardrobe malfunction. In fact, that happens in nearly every match.



This is a good clean sport because helpful volunteer spectators hose the ladies off after each contest.

Because so many motorcycles and throngs of bikers congest the streets, Jennifer said the best way to get from point to point is by tram car.



Jennifer and the young man were riding aboard one tram car with a bunch of other people as the tram pulled away from a stop. Two very drunk young ladies, who were dressed appropriately for the occasion, ran to catch the tram trying not to spill their vodka barrels. The two girls swung aboard and plopped down into a seat facing two elderly tourist women there for the people watching.

One girl looked up and exclaimed in shock, "MAMA! What are you doing here!"

Neither girl nor mother had realized that the other was attending Biketoberfest. The drunk girl complained loudly to her friend, "I'm 30-years-old and I still can't get out from under Mama's thumb".

Jennifer made it home safely.

I hope everyone else does too.

Maybe next year Ginny and I can drive down to Daytona for the festival. I'd like to attend Biketoberfest because it's culturally broadening.

Besides, Ginny makes the best cole slaw in the world.

Maybe she would...

No.

No, I seriously doubt that.

Saturday, October 27, 2007 Stultified. So An Instant Replay

Overwhelmed with work which I'm ignoring, and events I'm not planning for, and tasks for which I lack energy, I remember a recent promise I made to write about desire.

I'm stultified.

So I typed *desire* into that little searchbox in the upper right hand corner of my sidebar above *About Me*, and I find that I've written about desire back in June, 2006.

So, at the moment the best I can do is give an instant replay of that post — the flower bloomed again last week so I could have written these same words then:



Last night Ginny's Nightblooming Cereus plant (sometimes called Queen Of The Night) blossomed. We've had this plant since the mid 1970s and it blooms erratically. Some years we get just a single flower; once we had 22 bloom in the same night.

A bud will start opening after dark; and the flower wilts permanently at daybreak so you have just a few hours of darkness to see the beauty. The flower opens fast enough to see it move as it blossoms releasing a haunting aroma which permeates the whole neighborhood.

Last night Ginny and I saw a tiny, pure-white spider busy inside the bloom; that's something we've never seen before. If we had not seen movement, we'd have never spotted the spider inside this natural cathedral. The Lord builds His own church. Here is a photo of one of the blossoms:

This flower got me to thinking about desire.

Desire, wanting something, indicates that that something exists.

When we thirst, we desire water. And water does exist to satisfy that thirst.

When we feel hunger, we desire food. And grits do exist to satisfy that desire for food. (Dry beans satisfy yankees).

We feel horny. And sex exists to satisfy that desire.

Sometimes we desire Something we can not define or identify. We yearn for the eternal. We long for the touch of Something or Someone beyond nature, above anything in our experience.

Every once in a while something strikes a cord. We hear a strand of music; we see a misty landscape; we catch the haunting scent of an unseen flower — and this desire wells up in our hearts.

We want that beauty. It calls to the depths of our hearts.

To desire something means that somewhere in the universe that something exists.

Just as thirst means there is water and hunger means there is food, then our desire for God means ...

We never want something that does not somehow, somewhere exist.

We want what is, not what ain't.

What a horrible tragedy to desire something vital and not get it. That does happen. People die thirsty. Some starve. Some live without sex. Some perish without God. What a horrible, horrible tragedy!

An ancient Psalm comes to mind:

Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. Delight thyself also in the Lord; and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.

Sunday, October 28, 2007

Barnacles On The Cross



During our breakfast and conversation session this week, my friend Wes and I focused mainly on family and work-related problems. But we also touched on the subject of Christian accretions.

Accretions, like barnacles on the hull of a ship, stick to the main body (of which they are no part) and grow thicker and thicker till they slow everything down and sometimes take over entirely.

These parasites cling tenaciously.

They distort the shape and destroy the function making the original surface unrecognizable; like barnacles, oysters and Toledo worms eat away at a on a dock piling till the once-solid post assumes an hour-glass figure and eventually falls into the mud.

There are accretions to Christianity that do exactly that.

Yet, sometimes these accretions appear to be the main thing. They assume such a large place in our Christian thinking that we defend them as though the salvation of souls depended on believing the accretion rather than the Gospel.

When I first became a Christian, the church I began attending assigned me a mentor, a mature gentleman who undertook to show me the ropes of my new-found faith.

Boy was he happy. He'd found himself a listener, and he intended to make the most of it.

Please understand he was a good man, a sincere Christian, but he'd allowed some accretions to overgrow his basic faith until ...

First, he told me that no one can be a Christian and smoke a pipe. Being a pipesmoker, I found this doctrine difficult but I complied at the time. He said that Christians never play cards; I'd never learned how to play anyhow, so that was easy for me. Then he revealed that no Christian ever goes to movies because attendance at a movie supported the ungodly lifestyle of Hollywood. OK. I hardly ever went to movies anyhow, I watched them at home on tv, so I could go along with him on that.

Next he said no Christian ever drank tap water because tap water is fluoridated and that process is a Communist plot to over throw America.

So I'm supposed to give up tap water. No problem, I'm a Pepsi man myself.

He said Christians never eat white bread because all the nutrients are leeched out. "Real Christians only eat whole wheat bread," he said.

Screw that!

Merita Bread sponsors The Lone Ranger on the radio!

The Lone Ranger was my childhood cowboy hero. No way is the Lone Ranger a Communist! Communists don't give out silver bullets like he did at the end of every story.

I balked.

I decided that I'd never make the grade as a Real Christian. I decided that instead of being a Real Christian, I'd just follow Jesus from a distance.

Only years later did I realize that my mentor relished accretions that have not one thing to do with following Jesus Christ. I also realized that my mentor was typical of a certain mindset which outsiders mistake for Christianity because that's what they see.

Accretions obscure Christ.

Yet accretions abound in religious circles.

Wes told me about a preacher who insisted that the Bible teaches that e-mail addresses, product bar codes and ATM PINs relate to the Mark Of The Beast in the Book Of Revelation.

I assure you that the terms e-mail, bar code and ATM never appear anywhere in the pages of Scripture.

Neither do the terms rapture, millennium, abortion, Republican Party, school prayer, ban the bomb, In God We Trust, tobacco, movies, fluoride, nor whole wheat bread.

Beliefs about such things are accretions on the Gospel. Such issues are barnacles on the cross.

It is much easier to get excited about accretion issues than solid Christianity; none of these things involve

following a living Lord. It's much easier to follow causes than Christ.

Accretions demand less of us.

They can be managed.

Yet their proponents proclaim them loudly as essential to the Christian faith. Sometimes to the exclusion of that faith per se.

While the accretions make many believers miserable as we try to fit in with man-made, traditions and impossible rules, these accretions also muddy the water for many nonbelievers. People who are not Christians yet see and hear the accretions and mistake those for faith; thus they feel that all Christians believe the ridiculous.

So, when we scrap away accretions, the barnacles, what's left?

What is the real rock substance of Christianity?

The Scripture says, "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved".

That confession with thy mouth may be as simple as, "Oh Wow. I never realized that before!" It's a realization that comes from exposure to Jesus. It is realizing His worthiness and value. It's acknowledging Him as who He is, your Lord. It's linked to realizing that He is not a system of doctrine but a Living Person.

Believing in your heart means acting like it.

As many as believe the Gospel should live as becomes the Gospel.

As the Prophet said, "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God".

That's easier — and harder — than it looks.

The very nature of turning to Christ involves turning away from something less than Christ. That something less may be our own feeling that we are always right, or our own feeling that we are doing wrong.

The important thing is not what we turn from — that's something different for each of us — but Who we turn toward.

Jesus Christ is either living Lord or just another loser, dead as a doornail.

Risen or rotten.

Nothing in between.

What about all those accretions?

Some are nonsense. Some are evil. Some are worth keeping.

Whichever, they should never be mistaken for the underlying faith.

I have an entrenched idea that a Christian gentleman will always stand up and give a lady his seat on the bus. This in spite of the fact that buses are no where mentioned in Scripture. That is just one of my personal scruples, an accretion that has nothing to do with root faith.

But, I still eat white bread.

That ain't in the Gospels, but it's good enough for me and the Lone Ranger.

Monday, October 29, 2007 John Cowart, Coffin Maker

Saturday afternoon I spent in a dumpster.

Behind an appliance store I fished for a large sheet of cardboard, the flattened box a washing machine or refrigerator had come in. Of course the large sheet I needed lay in the bottom of the tall dumpster and I had to drag over a wooden pallet to use as a ladder to climb over the top then use my cane to hook the cardboard being careful not to bring out anything I would not want to fish out.

I wanted the cardboard to make our front yard Halloween display. Ginny and I give out a special packet of candy and goodies to trick-or-treaters each year; these packets include evangelist tracts which are the only reason we bother with Halloween at all. We try to make the goodie packet we hand out the nicest treat the kids will get anywhere. They include candy, flying frogs,

dinosaur models, color books, spider rings, whistles, and such stuff as well as the religious comic books.

Back on October 19th, my posting explained the noose problem in our traditional display and how we want to avoid offending our neighbors.

Since this year, we don't feel comfortable using the gallows and noose that we've used in years past, we faced a dilemma over how to illustrate some positive Scriptural thought in our front yard Halloween display.

I thought of I Thessalonians 4:16, "The dead in Christ shall rise first" but I could not think of a way to illustrate that verse in a display. Same thing's true of Ezekiel 18:20, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die".

And how would I make a yard display illustrating Hebrews 9:27, "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment"?

None of those Scripture verses seemed right for our front yard.

But then I thought of a fun thing for the kiddies.

I suggested to Ginny that we build a merry-goround for the skeleton to ride. The kids could spin it and read that happy verse from Ezekiel, "Turn ye, turn ye ... for why will ye die"?

I thought that display would be cool but Ginny nixed that one.



The photo shows her beneath our just-beginning-tobloom Cassia Tree as she helped set up our yard display. Her shirt says, I Only Look Sweet And Innocent!

How true. How true.

Anyhow, Saturday I prowled the dumpster, retrieved the cardboard, and fashioned a coffin for our display skeleton to welcome trick-or-treaters and to remind them of the Bible verse we hear recited at practically every funeral:

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me".



I hope our new display carries over our theme from previous years' without spooking neighbors.

P.S: Those are pineapple plants anchoring the coffin in the Valley Of The Shadow Of Death.

Tuesday, October 30, 2007 John Cowart, Ex-Coffin-Maker

If I never make it as a best-selling author, apparently I can not fall back on coffin making as a second career.

After all the weekend work Ginny and I invested in our beautiful, meaningful, front yard Halloween display, look what happened last night:



Yes, by dawn a smattering of wind and rain Monday morning crumpled my coffin.

How tragic.

Maybe if I'd have used more duct tape?

I thought I built that coffin strong enough to last for three days; I planned to remove it after the last trick-ortreaters leave on Wednesday night. I never thought it would be permanent, but I did expect it to last long enough to accomplish its purpose.

Alas, even more duct tape would not have helped my display last a full 24 hours. My skeleton was doomed from the start... as are all things.

Recent tv news reports are filled with pictures on multi-million-dollar homes in California which burned to piles of rubble in the forest fires. Some homeowners woke from a sound sleep to see flames, run dive into their swimming pools, and watch their homes burn to the ground in less than 30 minutes.

Things it takes years to build can be destroyed in seconds. Remember the World Trade Center skyscrapers?

(The postman just walked up our drive way. He paused looking at the wreck of our display. I see wheels turning in his head as he wonders, "What the heck is that supposed to be"? This display may not be polished

effective evangelism but perhaps, it gave him food for thought).

When I first saw the soggy mess this morning, the temptation arose to see it an allegory of my entire life. Time and again I have invested myself into what I thought were good, worthwhile projects only to see them come to futile ruin.

This tempts me to despair.

Why bother doing anything if it all comes to naught?

And every human endeavor does.

The pyramids may stand longer than my coffin, but it's only a matter of time till they crumble too. The sun will not have time to reach entropy before the pyramids turn to dust in the wind. The degradation of matter and energy in the universe presses on toward an ultimate state of inert uniformity.

So why bother building or doing anything?

Even with the most up-to-date medical care and miracle cures, all patients eventually die. The most educated brain dies — or disappears under Alzheimer's. The sea claims all ships.. Bridges fall. Money flys. Fame vanishes.

Of course, great literature always endures. That means the books I write are sure to last forever ...

Won't they?

Not necessarily.

Can anyone name America's first best-selling author? She became a celebrity in her day. Her book went through numerous printings. Her fame resounded throughout the English-speaking world.

Ever heard of her?

Her name was Mary Rowlandson. She died in 1678. And I would never heard of her either except I included a few pages about her in my book *Strangers On The Earth*.

The temporary is not permanent.

St. Paul recognized the true state of things when he wrote:

For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire (or in the case of my cardboard coffin, by rain drops); and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

Wood, hay, stubble, cardboard & duct tape — such things have their place. But it is temporary, not a permanent place.

The only thing to last forever is people.

You and I will spend all eternity somewhere.

All things considered, the Bible says surprising little about either Heaven of Hell. The Scripture emphasizes our journey more than our destination, our here and now more than our there and then.

No foundation but Christ — then it's all about what and how we build on that foundation, the Chief Cornerstone, the Stone which some builders rejected.

So, how do I build anything that will last?

If I write like an angel, if I have the gift of prophesy, if I understand all mysteries, if I have faith to move mountains, if I go broke feeding the poor, if I get burned as a martyr — if I do any or all of those things without love, I'm building a temporary shanty on shifting sand right on a fault line.

Love lasts.

Love lasts.

Only love lasts.

Isn't that romantic?

No.

Love is not a notion. Not a warm fuzzy. It has more substance. Love is dead serious.

The first and great commandment says, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind".

And, like that first, the second commandment says, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself".

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Anything less is cardboard in the rain...

I'm not sure what to do about our Halloween display now. Repair seems futile because the weather report projects more rain over the next few days from an approaching tropical storm.

I may uproot the whole thing and trash it.

I may just leave the ruin and move the signs.

Not sure what to do.

Oh well, that's the way the coffin crumbles.

Wednesday, October 31, 2007 Me And Other Victims Of A Cruel Hoax

I'm not the only one.

Hundreds of people all over the Internet were suckered in by a youtube site post which claimed to produce a bright glowing light by mixing Mountain Dew soda pop with baking soda and hydrogen peroxide.

Since my Halloween coffin collapsed, I thought it might be a neat idea for a yard display to do something with glowing green lights, so this morning I experimented with the ingredients and I produced a sticky mess which does not even twinkle.

I tried again and again thinking I was doing something wrong, maybe adding too much baking soda or something.

More sticky mess.

Maybe if I shook the bottle harder...

I spilled some of the glop on Ginny's dinning room table and it corroded the finish! (No, I did not think to spread waxed paper first.)

Boy, am I in trouble when she comes home!

Maybe if I put a placemat over those bloches... Thank God for *Antiques Roadshow*; I'll tell her that I've added to the **patina** of the table top. Yes indeed. **Patina** is a great word; I'd never heard it before watching the *Roadshow*. Now, I use it all the time.

Since shaking the bottle harder did not produce light, I decided to check back online to read the instructions again. I Googled the words "dew & glow" and I found that the whole scam is a hoax.

I'm not the only one to get fooled. Scads of people produced the same sticky mess I did without a glimmer of light; they posted their results online too with comments ranging from puzzlement to outrage.

No wonder.

We'd been promised light only to get sticky glop.

We were deceived by a slick liar.

Who does that remind me of?

Who is it who imitates an angel of light only to spread darkness and nasty sticky mess? Who lures gullible people into doing foolish things and making a mess of their lives? What hoaxer tricks us into mixing up perfectly good ingredients in ways their Maker never intended?

Some people think Halloween celebrates the power of this creep.

The power of evil?

Phooy.

What power does evil have?

But doesn't evil hold sway in the world? You see evil things on tv news every night.

Would it be news if it were not unusual?

Don't most people try to lead useful, peaceful, purposeful lives as best they can? Evil makes the news because it is an anomaly.

What would a news broadcaster have to say about a man who kisses his wife bye, goes to work, eats lunch with friends, knocks off at five, enjoys a beer with buddies, goes home for supper, watches the game, tucks the kids in, makes love to his wife, and drops off to sleep?

Most of us are so used to a peaceful, loving life, that we take it for granted.

That's why evil things shock us. The cancer diagnosis, the affair, the child abuse, the divorce, Daddy's death, getting fired — all these evil things seem powerful not only because they are evil but also because they do not fit our normal pattern of life.

Yet the imitation angel of light shines his spotlight on vile tragedy to magnify the worst things going on in the world. He appears to be in charge because his acts are all he wants us to see. He can not obliterate the glory and majesty of God's creation, he only obscures it and misdirects our attention to lesser things.

If we lived in a cave, the enemy would shine his false light only on bats and spiders, he would never illuminate the crystal stalagmites shimmering all around us.

He fosters a distorted view of life, and creation.

What a looser.

I'm involved in writing a book on the history of firefighting in my hometown and I've gotten up to the Civil War period... Not to disparage my northern brethren, but here in the South, to hear my grandparents tell it, the yankees personified evil.

At 1 p.m. on March 12, 1862, yankees invaded Jacksonville, the first of four such occupations. When they retreated, according to my Grandmother, they torched homes and businesses, they poisoned wells, they chopped down pecan trees, they slaughtered livestock. They raped women and molested children, they uprooted crops, they stole Bibles from the churches, they robbed banks, and drank up all the whisky in bars. They plundered and looted and destroyed and burned and spoiled.

Reminds me of the power of evil.

That looser angel is beaten and in full retreat to his appointed place, but as he goes down, he acts like a yankee spoiling all the good things in his path. Not because he has any use for good, but just to keep God's people from having it.

The above is a bad example because in real history the yankees won and many returned to Jacksonville to live after the war and some of those immigrants assimilated into Southern society and eventually became almost civilized.

(Would you ever guess that I'm from the South?)

They had no monopoly on atrocity; our brave Southern troops did the same sort of things. Remember Andersonville?

And I've done more than my share of evil in my time. Hate to admit it, but in my own way I have out-yankeed those old-time yankee soldiers. Jesus is my only claim to righteousness and that is only because Christians are accepted in the Beloved.

All have sinned and fall short. There's not a teddy bear among us.

But, my point here is that like a defeated, loosing, retreating army, the enemy of our souls acts out of pure spite.

A spoiled brat on his way to bed down where he ought to, he's throwing a temper tantrum as he goes.

This is not to say the looser does no damage. He does plenty of damage. He ruins lives, corrupts love, spoils life, squelches hope. He lies and cheats and steals joy. He wastes good things like a rat in a flour package pissing and crapping on the grain he can't eat.

That's the pathetic power of evil.

Yet the Apostle John said, "For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil".

And Jesus Himself said, "The Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them".

Remember, the evil one has no use for human souls. He just wants to spoil us.

The love of God is shown toward us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us, nailed to a cross, pinned down and splayed out like a frog on a dissection tray.

The regard of satan is shown toward us in that he... in that he... Er, come to think of it, the evil one never suffered so much as a hangnail to gain us.

Some prince, huh?

The matter is really quite simple:

God loves; satan deceives; man chooses. But, alas, men chose darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil.

The only wormglow the adversary offers us is a deceitful, spiteful hoax that will never light up no matter how hard we shake the bottle.

Now, it's time for me to stop writing — I need to dig in the linen closet to find a really big placemat for the table.

Happy Halloween.

Friday, November 02, 2007 And The Glory Of The Lord Shown Round About



The cassia tree that overhangs our front door has just begun blooming. A recent visitor saw the blossoms in the sunlight and said, "That's glorious"!

That casual remark got me to thinking about the word *glory*.

Naturally the first things I thought of were Christmas angels and shepherds:

"And the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid".

Why would they be afraid?

When my girls were little they played the part of angels in many a Christmas pageant — bare feet, white gowns, cardboard wings, tinsel halos — I carried many a limp sleepy angel home draped over my shoulders after a Christmas Eve midnight service.

Why would shepherds be afraid — sore afraid — at seeing an angel? Yet the first thing the angel said was, "Fear not!"

It went on to say, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy".

Maybe the scene is just too familiar from too many Christmas pageants, but good tidings and great joy certainly seem like nothing to fear.

And yet, glimpsing glory generated fear.

I've heard the word all my life but I'm not sure exactly what *glory* means, so I checked my dictionary and here's what I found.

Glory— marked by great beauty and splendor; illustrious, magnificent, delightful, wonderful, splendid. worshipful, brilliant, resplendence, rejoicing proudly.

I begin to see reasons for fear of the Lord — religious artist represent glory by applying gold leaf halos or radiating light.

I think of a deer caught in the brilliant brightness of headlights coming around a sudden curve, the animal too petrified by fear to move out of the path of the speeding truck. I think of a criminal climbing over the prison wall caught in the glare of the tower searchlight freezing at the expected bullets to follow.

Sudden light is scary.

No wonder that almost every time men, even holy men, encounter God in the Scripture, it terrifies them.

Peter screamed, "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man".

Isaiah trembled, "Woe is me! For I am a man of unclean lips"!

At the Burning Bush, Moses "Hid his face; for he was afraid".

Hebrews declares, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Loving God".

The brilliant light of incredible splendor and beauty and wonder overwhelms us. The sheer majesty of God strikes us with awe. His vast hugeness renders us insignificant as we realize that He could crush worlds like bugs and hardly notice.

Seldom in my life have I encountered such realizations of God — once when I was a child, once when I saw a red fox on a trail in the forest, once when I saw a girl in a yellow dress silhouetted in a sunny doorway at

the Library of Congress, once while dissecting a pig in a biology lab, once in a Christmas Eve church service, once last summer laying on an air mattress in our pool watching stars at night. Occasionally these moments have come in relation to my studying Scripture with a pencil in my hand and a pipe in my teeth.

I'm not at all sure we can deliberately trigger such moments of awareness of God. For me, they have come unbidden and unexpected; however, the Scripture does assure us, "While ye are seeking Me, I will be found" and "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you". However, the Wind bloweth where it listeth, and we hear the sound and see leaves move, but we can not tell where Wind came from nor where it is going.

Now while earthshaking to me, my own spiritual experiences would hardly jiggle the needle on anybody else's Richter Scale, but each one left me with an acute sense of unworthiness, an intense sense of wonder, and a near overwhelming sense of gratitude.

I become conscious of being loved through no merit or credit of my own. These moments remain precious in my memory.

I am neither mystic nor visionary. I see no visions and hear no echoing voice from the bottom of a barrel. My own thought encounters with God are just that — thoughts.

But they are thoughts of His beauty and love.

How is it that having a somewhat high regard for God, I can be so flippant when speaking or writing about religious matters? I sometimes speak without signs of respect and use visual images that make things clearer to me but upset other people.

And I often laugh when I pray.

Is this any way to associate with the High And Lofty One Who Inhabits Eternity.

Yes.

I think it is.

"I call you not servants," Jesus said. "But, I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my

Father I have made known unto you. Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you...".

Friends laugh and joke and talk and tease and feel comfortable together.

Jesus offers everybody a relationship with God. For each person it is different. Some people find Him through music. Some in a crowd of people clapping and lifting hands. Others find Him through tragedy. Others through prosperity. He tailors the relationship to the unique person; He is, after all, infinite.

Once when he was a tiny boy memorizing Bible verses, I asked my oldest son what the word *infinite* means.

Freddy pondered for a moment and said, "That means God has all the jelly you've got bread for".

This infinite, majestic, glorious, beautiful, happy God made friendship available to us at a terrible price.

In my blog post yesterday I used the image of Jesus on the cross — the Almighty God, King of the universe, Who holds all creation small as a peanut in His hand — Jesus nailed down hand and foot, pinned down and splayed out like a frog on a dissection tray. A living, bleeding man writhing in deliberate agony because He loves us.

With death came postmortem lividity as His face turned ashen and His feet purple as blood settled to the lowest points.

And, even at this low point, Jesus, God Almighty come in the flesh, held together the universe by the word of His power. While He hung there naked between Heaven and Earth, He gave breath to the mockers and strength to the guys who hammered in the nails.

Gore and glory.

Crucified. Dead. Buried.

The Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Prince of Peace, Creator and Sustainer of all living things bounced back. The Lord of Life returned to life, Scared with nail prints and spear thrust, yet vibrantly alive and glowing.

"I have not called you servants, but friends".

Greater love has no man than to lay down his life for his friends.

Well, I've rambled a long way from the glorious flowers of our cassia tree. My thinking has hardly touched on the meanings of glory.

I want to think about this a lot more.

But this is as far as I've gotten today.

It's something for me to cherish.

Something to relish.

Stepping Away For A While



For the next few weeks several things call for my attention:

Although we still have no firm plans, Ginny and I will be celebrating our 39th anniversary.

All Summer I have neglected house and yard and I really need to do some time consuming work on home repairs.

In fooling around with other things I have fallen far behind in writing my history of the Jacksonville Fire Department; I want to bear down and finish that book before Christmas.

We also need to look at some minor physical things ahead .

Therefore, I plan to stop posting for a while to pay attention to these other matters; I hope, God willing, to resume posting again about the 19^{th} of November.

For I have delivered unto you first of all that which I also received,

How that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures;

And that He was buried,
And that He rose again the third day
According to the Scriptures...

— I Corinthians 15:3

Monday, November 19, 2007 We're Back And Still Happily Married

To celebrate our 39th Anniversary, Ginny and I traveled about 200 miles to Seminole State Park in southwestern Georgia. We've thoroughly enjoyed ourselves.

A few duties involving a neighbor's heart attack threw our timing off for starting our trip; I helped in a very minor way, but he's recovering nicely anyhow.

Once we did get underway, we stuck to back roads enjoying the rural countryside and the small towns we passed through.

One abrupt physical limitation surprised me. I expected to cruise all the way in one marathon driving stretch but my arthritis pain, which is always in the background, kicked in so bad that that I could not drive even 50 miles without stopping. When we were young and driving the truck cross country, I used to drive 500 miles a night without giving it a thought.

I thought I still could.

I can't.

What a shock.

I have scads of photos to post but my *Contribute* software keeps giving me an **Access Denied** message, so those will have to wait till our son, Donald, doctors up the web server so it will let me in.

Each day we were gone Ginny and I went for long walks. We strolled around the verge of a placid lake, hiked to a beaver pond, balanced our way across rickety boardwalks above the swamp, and viewed wildlife and autumn foliage.

We hoped to see some of the rattlesnakes, gators and gopher tortoises for which the park is famous...

No snakes.

No gators.

And only one tortoise. This substantial beast, Georgia's state reptile, stood on a mound outside its burrow by a paved road until I got the camera out. Then it scuttered underground. Four times on different days I tried to sneak up to snap it's picture. The creature always moved underground before I could photograph it... To be outrun by a tortoise says something about my speed.

However... While standing on a bridge above a swamp, I got this photo of a giant snapping turtle swimming underwater about 30 yards away. You can't grasp the size from my cropped photo but this turtle's shell is bigger around than a car tire:

I'm so proud of getting this long-distance photo of the monster:



Of course, we did not spend all our anniversary time tramping through the woods. The immaculate cabin we stayed in featured comfortable rockers on a porch overlooking an arm of the massive lake. So we watched birds from the comfort of our rockers. We saw a family of unfamiliar ducks and a pair of Canadian Geese feeding right at our door. And we watched red-winged black birds flit from reed to reed, and an osprey divebomb fish from a nearby pine.

We rocked and talked for hours and hours on end. We never run out of things to talk about, although sometimes we do spend hours on end without speaking. We're comfortable being silent together.

One of the nicest features of our vacation was having time for uninterrupted reading.

I read a book on archeology in Denmark, one on ghost towns of Georgia, a book about travels in London, and two murder mysteries.

Besides those books, in the New Testament I read Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. Hardly understood a word in any of the three letters. That doesn't bother me greatly. Paul's letters hardly ever make sense to me. If St. Peter said St. Paul's letters contain "Some things hard to be understood" then my lack of understanding does not overly upset me.

I've reached an age when taking a nap with an open Bible on my lap appears venerable to onlookers, even though I'm dreaming about bikini girls and a team of ostriches pulling a cart.

Another exciting feature of our time together is that Ginny and I began reading *The Imitation Of Christ* by Thomas A' Kempis. Our readings spark discussions about our focus on worshiping Christ and how unimportant most mundane things are in reality.

Of course, I believe there are no mundane things. All creation declares the glory of the Lord. Worship can be sparked by things as varied as seeing paramedics resuscitate a neighbor with a heart attack, or feeling my frustration over a camera-shy escaping tortoise, hearing wind whisper through pine needles, or watching a fog bank creep across the lake, or laying guietly with my Bride holding hands and stroking her silver hair, or seeing a monster snapping turtle lurk beneath a bridge, or touching cotton boles in acres of white fields, or listening to workmen talk over lunch in a small town diner, or trying to read a map while traveling over unfamiliar roads, or comforting a young couple of strangers in a roadside grill who out-of-the-blue told us about their relationship dilemma, or even realizing my new-found physical limitations and dependency ...

Christ is all in all.

God is all around us.

In Him we live and move and have our very being.

The call to worship our Lord is in all things, in all places, at all times.

There is no limit to worship for a loving heart.

Tuesday, November 20, 2007 A Photo From Another World

Thanks to my son Donald's repairing the access software, I can now get into my website.

Therefore, even though I know that looking at somebody else's vacation pictures bores folks, nevertheless, here is a link (http://www.cowart.info/SeminoleLakeVacation2007.htm) to photos Ginny and I took on our Anniversary trip to Seminole State Park, Ga.

Speaking of photographs:

Girls mature faster than boys.

That's what I've been told.

Having never actually matured myself, I have to rely on hearsay evidence.

Ginny returned to her office yesterday; I resumed nosing around my 1,200 pages of notes on that book on Jacksonville's firefighting history that I'm writing.

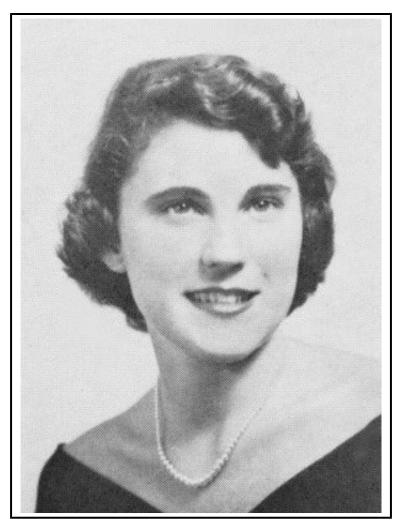
My research led me up an odd alley.

While trying to confirm a fact about a Jacksonville fire that burned over 60 years ago, I followed a research trail that caused me to stumbled across — my own High School Yearbook!

HER photo was in it.

No, not Ginny; I did not meet her for another 20 years. I found a photo of HER, the girl I anguished over in high school with a desperate, heart-rending, teen-aged crush..

Seeing her yearbook photo sparked a host of bittersweet memories.



This was the girl I adored from afar.

The object of my yearning..

The girl of my waking fantasies and sleeping dreams.

But, alas, a romance between us was never to be.

An insurmountable obstacle kept her far distant, out of reach above me.

You see, she was a whole year older than I.

She was 17 and I was only 16. I was a lowly junior while she was actually a Senior. In the 1950s, I was convinced that an older, mature woman would be offended to be approached by some inferior punk kid.

Daily, I ate my heart out.

A scheduling fluke landed this lovely creature and me in the same art class for two years. — Our art teacher was Memphis Wood, who later became famous in national art circles as "Jacksonville's First Lady Of Art".

For two years, I languished knowing that the girl sat and created lovely art at the table behind me. I found every excuse to turn around and look at her.

That's all I could do.

Look.

I was much too shy to even speak to her, much less approach her.

Then, one day she boldly approached me.

Sort of.

Since I made fair grades in science, she invited me to her house to talk with her little brother about his science project.

I was going to her house!

Oh, how I fretted over what to wear and what to say and how to act. It was terrible. I so wanted to make a good impression on her.

I went.

Rode the bus over.

She met me at the door (Oh she looked so beautiful!) and introduced me to her parents and brother.

We went into the bedroom — the kid brother and I — and talked about astronomy for an hour. I knew next to nothing about astronomy and wondered why she had asked me to talk with her brother about stars???

That really puzzled me.

She had disappeared into the kitchen and I did not see her again till she walked me to the door to see me out. She seemed a bit funny. Disappointed. I could not understand. I had done exactly what she had asked. I talked with the brother about astronomy. I'd even brought library books about stars with me to talk with him. But she did not seem satisfied with my behavior. It was like she expected something more of me and I did not know what.

I longed with all my heart to think of something to say to her. Anything at all. I froze. My mind went blank. I mumbled something or another to say good bye.

I rode a cold, lonely bus home kicking myself all the way.

You may find this hard to believe, but I was dense as a kid.

I continued to see and adore her in art class every day.

But I don't recall that we ever actually spoke again. I felt too shy.

The barrier of age seemed too high.

She graduated.

I remained a high school kid for another year.

I never saw her again.

I imagine she went to college, married, had kids, probably has grandchildren by now. I hope she has enjoyed a happy life. I wonder if she would even remember my name if she ran across it somewhere?

I had hardly thought of her for years until my fire research led me to her yearbook photo.... One other thing I recalled on seeing her photo:

Back in the 1950s, our schools had a dress code. I don't think it was written down anywhere but everyone just knew how to dress for school. No one wore jeans. Boys wore dress pants and an ironed shirt with a collar; girls wore dresses, blouses or sweaters and full skirts.

Once in art class — we perched on these high stools at work tables — Once in art class maybe — I'm not sure about this. I may be wrong — I may possibly have seen — probably not, but maybe — as she got on her stool with a flip of her skirt, I may possibly have caught a brief glimpse of her thigh.

It was probably just a tan slip or pink crinoline or whatever girls wore underneath in those days. I may not really have seen what I thought I saw, but I think I may have actually glimpsed a flash of her thigh — Above the knee!

That haunting glimpse of her fed my fantasy life for months and months ...

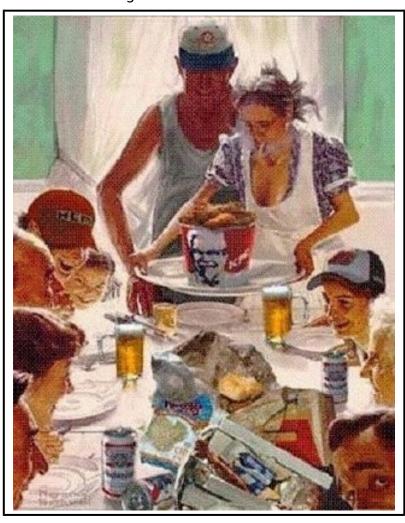
Come to think of it, now that I'm 50 years older, it still does.

Wednesday, November 21, 2007 A Real Florida Thanksgiving

My friend Wes, author of Jesus Christ, Morons & Blood Clotting, done gave me this here E-Male pitcher.

Us Redneck Crackers down here in Florida surly do know how to do up Thanksgiving right nice and purely good.

Y'all have a good un too.



Sunday, November 25, 2007 Various Holiday Weekend Happenings

The day before Thanksgiving a guy I've never met took a close look at Ginny's breasts.

Last month she went in for her annual mammogram which revealed two worrisome anomalies. They called her back in for a second x-ray and a sonogram to look at the spots closer. Wednesday the radiologist examined her thoroughly and decided that both suspicious areas were benign.

Can't top that as something to be thankful for!

We had decided not to mention the situation before till we knew exactly what we might be facing, so the radiologist's news provided us with a great relief.



I find that I am not naturally a thankful person.

When good things happen to me, I tend to feel that they are my due. When bad things happen, I tend to feel that God has it in for me.

Neither stance lends itself to a thankful heart.

I fit in with that group of people of whom the Scripture says, "When they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were they thankful..."

Not a good position to be in.

A thankful heart requires conscious awareness and effort; we don't just drift into it. Thankful hearts begin with an awareness of good's Source.

The Apostle James said, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights with Whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Of His own will begat He us with the word of truth..."

Until that mind set becomes a part of us, and I loose sight of it all the time, we remain ungrateful slobs blundering through life feeling as though we deserved nothing but good and feeling slighted any time our will is thwarted in any little thing.

Thursday the whole family gathered at Donald and Helen's home for the feast.

What a riot!

Helen roasted a turkey and baked a tasty corn casserole.

Ginny mixed her famous dressing (the pigs ate every smidgen leaving me none to bring home).

Patricia, our token vegetarian, ate plenty of imitation straw made of soy meal.

Jennifer boiled huge pink shrimp on a bed of greens.

Eve boiled bananas and shredded coconuts in whiskey as a topping for pound cake.

I baked an apple pie but only two people tried a slice and I had to bring it home and eat the rest myself while watching football.

After the feast we gathered in the backyard to write our Christmas gift wish lists. This family Thanksgiving tradition admits no limit. Anything you might possibly ever want can go on your list, and when each person reads their list aloud around the family circle, unmerciful teasing ensues.

We laughed till we choked and all the red faces were not from a holiday fire's glow.

Of course I urged everyone to buy nothing but copies of my books as Christmas gifts — What could be

more suitable than a copy of *Gravedigger's Christmas*? — but they listed silly things like Peace On Earth, a moose head lamp, donations to charity, and other impractical stuff like that. No body in my own family wants to buy my books!

I'm stuffing stockings with lumps of coal this year.

See if I don't!

Ginny and I seldom exchange gifts — all we want is eachother — but if we do, it's something simple.

For instance, for our anniversary last week, I gave her some cotton boles I picked and a large snail shell I found on the lake.

She arranged these with a pine cone she found to make us a 39th Anniversary Tree:



But we try to ensure that each person gets at least one thing on their list. We spend money we can't afford buying things that no one on earth needs — just for the pure fun of it.

Therefore, on Friday, Ginny and I joined at least four or five other shoppers in the stores for the After-Thanksgiving Sales.

Any reputable psychiatrist would certify us both for such behavior.

Now for years and years we often have shopped at Big Lots. So Friday we went there again. But....

But, when I went to get a shopping cart, I found them locked. Each cart now has a meter and you have to pay a quarter to use one in Big Lots.

Fat chance. This is not an airport.

Ginny and I walked a dozen steps to two other stores in the strip mall and spent \$60.47 on trinkets we intended to buy at Big Lots. In trying to gouge customers out of an extra quarter for a previously-free shopping cart to shop in their store, they screwed themselves out of our \$60.47.

As far as I'm concerned, from now on the cheapskates at Big Lots can enjoy their empty shopping carts and cash registers.

Have you ever noticed that for a Christian, I can be a bitter little person?

Saturday we received a queer birthday letter (not our birthday) requesting a response but we have no idea how to respond. We're puzzling over this one.

Saturday night, Ginny and I braved the cold 60 degree weather to attend the 23rd Annual Jacksonville Christmas Boat Parade — the link is to some photos I took of the celebration.

What a blast!



Police estimate that over 200,000 people watched more than 70 boats decorated with Christmas lights parade between two downtown bridges.

Only in Florida will you see a woman watching the Christmas Parade on the river with a mink coat on her shoulders and flip flops on her feet.

Be sure to check out my photo link, the boats do not show up well in the thumbnails but look ok when you click on the full-sized shot.

Following the parade, fireworks erupted from both bridges and from two barges anchored mid-channel in the St Johns.

Reflections from the water and from downtown office building windows triple the lightshow in the sky.

To conclude the program, fireworks cascade from the bridge decks into the St Johns.

Because of the crowd and our location all my photos have only one bridge, the Acosta, in the background:



Of course, Jacksonville firefighters supervised the display and our fireboats patrolled the river ... which reminds me that I need to get to work again tomorrow writing that history of the Jacksonville Fire Department....

No way am I going to finish that book before Christmas.

Wednesday, November 28, 2007 Wondering What I Lost

First, I want to thank those readers who have been buying my books; this is shaping up to be my best quarter for sales ever. I appreciate your vote of confidence. And there's still plenty of time to order from www.bluefishbooks.info for delivery before Christmas. The recent upsurge in sales makes me feel good.

What makes me feel bad is that I've lost something but I don't know what.

Back on November 2nd, I began a push to finish writing my history of the Jacksonville Fire Department before Ginny and I left on our Anniversary trip.

I got up to 1963.

On the up side, while we were gone, several permission letters came in allowing me to quote or use photos from a tv station, other fire histories and websites. That's a relief. Since my research relies totally on what

other people have already written about, I do try to avoid outright plagiarism by asking their permission and giving them footnote credit. Although I admit that trying for spiritual and intellectual honesty is a royal pain in the ass, I try to play fair... most of the time. (If you steal material from a lot of different people, it's research not plagiarism).

So, I got up to 1963...

Then, what with Anniversary and Thanksgiving, doctors' appointments and life in general, I backburnered work on my history book and just got back to work on it again this week.

Something's missing.

I spent yesterday searching for gaps in materials that I'm sure I had but I can't find them now.

The fire history generated over 1,200 pages of notes which I'm reducing down into a 300-page book.

But when we got back from our Anniversary trip, I found there had been a power outage. I figure this wiped out some of my files, but I can't tell which ones.

I know some things are missing but I can't tell exactly what.

Yes, my mind is going, going... gone.

And this is frustrating.

My offsite backup copies and my search programs are no help at all until I can remember the names or contents of the various files. It's all here in the computer somewhere.... If I could remember what it is that's missing.

But I'm not sure what is missing, there's just this vague sense that I've misplaced something and that it was important. But I can't pinpoint what it is.

This whole situation reflects my spiritual life as well as my writing life.

I often feel as though Something (could it be God?) is missing from my life and I can't pinpoint where I missed Him.

Isn't this a sad thing for a Christian to admit? Aren't we supposed to be confident and sure of our relationship with the Lord?

And for some people, that really does seem to be the case.

Good for them.... But that's beyond my own experience.

A friend of mine says that I am a Puddleglum Christian, that I live my whole life in the Dark Night Of The Soul. (Puddleglum was the delightfully gloomy Marshwiggle in C.S. Lewis' book *The Silver Chair*.)

I say, where else is there to live?

By nature I am a morose, morbid, plodding, trudging kind of Christian (and I wonder why everyone else isn't too).

I'd never make it as the happy, smiling Christian Poster Boy.

Heck, I have a hard enough time selling my books much less my religion.

But, on one level this does not bother me greatly. I mean, I know it's there, but it does not cause me great anxiety.

We walk by faith not by sight.

I figure that if the Lord wants me to recover the missing research notes for my fire history book, then He will bring it to my mind. If the stuff I think is missing is frivolous bizarre incidents of no lasting interest to anyone but me, then there is no great lose. I mean, if I, the writer of the book, can't identify what's missing, then who else is likely to notice or care?

I'm confident that the Lord will bring what is essential to light. After all, Jesus said, "The Son of Man is come to seek and to save the lost".

The same thing is true of my morose faith. I feel confident that the Lord will supply what is missing if He thinks I really need it.

After all, salvation is about something more than my personal comfort level.

Saturday, December 01, 2007 If I Had My Druthers

Friday, Ginny accompanied me to Dr. Oz's office where he gave me a prostate exam, then we went shopping at Wal-Mart. If I had to chose between the two, I'd rather have another prostate exam.

Sunday, December 02, 2007

If God Loves Me, Then Why Won't My Lawnmower Start? And What Set Off The Car Alarm?

Six trees overhang our house.

All year long they drop twigs, leaves and acorns on our roof.

Periodically, I climb my rickety ladder onto the rooftop to blow this debris off and clean the rain gutters.

Yesterday, although I'd suggested several fun ways to spend our weekend, that woman I live with dictated a massive general cleanup in preparation for Christmas. So, like Santa, I found myself up on the rooftop.

It's been a while since I last cleaned the roof so there was quite an accumulation of fallen branches and leaves around the chimney pot. I successfully avoided being electrocuted by the electric wires up there and used the leaf blower to clean the roof.

Then I climbed down and raked all the accumulated leaves away from the house foundation in neat rows so I could run the mulching mower over them so they'd disappear into the soil and I would not have to pick them up.

The lawn mower would not start.

Fuel. Air. And Spark — the three elements of ignition. I checked each one in turn. Put in a new air filter; that seemed fine. Removed and cleaned the sparkplug; no problem there. Drained the fuel tank and put in fresh gas; should work perfectly now.

Ha!

I pulled the rope. I primed the carburetor. I pulled the rope. I pulled the rope. I pulled the rope. I pulled the rope. I pulled... I cursed like a sailor!

When we came back from vacation, the little boy next door asked me if I ever got angry. His mother apparently had used me as an example of a calm, peaceful adult; she told him to be like John. She said that in the dozen years she's known me, she's never seen me get mad about anything.

Good thing she and her six-year-old son were not around yesterday.

I grew livid over that trouble with the lawnmower. Furious! Here I'd done all the right things and the thing still would not work. I did everything I was supposed to do, and still nothing worked right.

I shoved the damn thing back into the shed and began to rake up leaves and put them into trash bags....

The car alarm went off.

Beep! Beep. Beep. It blared. Neighbors ran out to see what set it off; neighbors Phil & Sherri, Rick and Bubba all looked out or came by to see if I were ok. Ginny ran around the house to see what was the matter; she thought I'd pushed the panic button on the remote car key...

I had.

Being so fat, when I squatted down to pick up a rake-full of leaves, a roll of my belly fat squished the car keys in my pocket and mashed the panic button setting off the alarm.

Guess who had to explain what happened?

Damn!

Looks to me like if God is smart enough to create man smart enough to invent a lawnmower (or a computer) then that same Creator, source of all power in the universe, would be smart enough and powerful enough to keep my lawnmower working so I could mulch the leaves (which He also is responsible for creating).

Ok. Historically, I know that the love of God is shown toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. But on a practical level, how does God show His love for me?

If I loved somebody and had the ability and power to make their lawnmower start, then I'd do it.

Makes me wonder if God doesn't have a funny idea of how to show love.

He calls us friends, but I would not treat my friends the way He treats me.

Of course, I have to consider the real tribulations Christians all over the world now and throughout history have suffered. Persecution, discrimination, torture, execution for the name of Christ. Having a wonkey lawnmower may well be the slightest trouble any Christian anywhere has ever undergone.

God knows that if having my will and plans thwarted in so small a matter as mulching leaves, then I'm certainly not ready to handle any of the major troubles life brings by its very nature... One way you know anything is alive is by its response to a stimuli; dead things don't respond to pain. They're dead.

Still, theology aside, I wish I could get my lawnmower started.

Ginny, God bless her, got out another rake and helped me bag leaves. And, for supper, she served us the very last bit of the leftover ham she baked for Thanksgiving. It's finally gone.

Know a good definition for the word ETERNITY?

Two people and a ham.

Tuesday, December 04, 2007 John's Comforters

Monday three extremely smart Christian friends met me for breakfast at Dave's Diner then adjourned to my house where we discussed the burning theological issue of why God won't let my lawnmower start.

Yes, that problem has bugged me all weekend.

The mower is only a couple of months old; and I have done all the right things to it, but it would not start Saturday when I needed it to.

I blame God.

I mean, if He is all knowing and all powerful, if He really loves me, then I figure such minor aggravations should not loom so large in my life.

My lawnmower ought to start!

Of course, I'm sure that any adult hearing me rant realizes that my frustration over my lawnmower represents a deep, on-going, life-long pain and that the lawnmower is only a symptom of a deeper, more serious hurt.

Everybody has a broken lawnmower in their life.

But mine bugs me.

I suppose I could concern myself with larger issues such as world hunger or the AIDS epidemic or the presidential election, but my mower is here and now sitting silent in my garden shed. If I knew I had done something wrong with it, then I could understand its not working. But, when you do everything right and life still goes wrong, then I think it only logical to hold the Creator of the Universe accountable.

Am I the only Christian to think this way?

My three comforters were Barbara, award-winning newspaper columnist.; Wes, a Greek and Hebrew scholar who is concerned because a student he is mentoring has bought a Stumblegardtunersbergstein text of the Hebrew Bible instead of the more correct one and Wes fears the student stands in danger of eternal perdition for reading this apostate text (would I make that up?); and Sam, who holds a degree in philosophy from Yale and runs an import business trading with Japan.

Having this august group of devout Christians at hand sitting around in my own back yard, naturally, I stopped scratching, put down my potsherd, looked up from the heap of ashes I sat on and raised the question: Why would anything bad ever happen to a nice guy like me?

How can I know that God loves me today?

Wes answered, "Because He says so".

Wes said that the Bible's authority confronts us with absolute truth. If we reject that there is such a thing as absolute truth, then we loose the concept of good and evil because we have no standard to judge what is right and what is wrong.

He said that in the Greek text of John 3:16 "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth on Him shall not perish" that the

word "so" is not a word of intensity, but of manner. It's not a case of God loved the world so much that He did something. Rather it's a case of "Thus, God loved the world. He gave..."

When God's word says God loves me, then I should believe that God loves me in spite of all evidence to the contrary — such as my lawnmower not starting.

I responded that actions speak louder than words. I could say I love my friends but if I treated my friends like God treats His, then they'd naturally doubt that I really love them.

Barbara pointed out that suffering in this world is but for a time. By it's very nature bad is finite. There's only so much bad that can happen, then it's over. God's goodness on the other hand is infinite. There is no end to the good that can happen to us.

As I recall she mentioned that passage from Hebrews, "But ye have need of patience, after that ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise".

She said that the spiritual life is a journey. It is progressive. That by accepting what is going on in my life here and now, God will give me greater understanding or at least a degree of harmony with His will so that life's aggravations will hardly matter.

I argued that a major crisis is easier to deal with that the petty annoyances of day to day living. If a whale attacks you, you can harpoon the sucker; but what can you do when you're being eaten alive by minnows?

(I hope you understand that I am compressing four hours of conversation into a few words; I hope I am not misrepresenting what any of us said).

Sam said, "Whom the Lord loveth, him He chasteneth". A father shows his love by correcting his son — even if that correction means punishment. You don't chasten somebody else's kid, you don't much care how they turn out; but you care deeply for your own children and you correct them because you envision them as good, decent, upstanding men and women.

Sam said that I need to trade expectation for vigilance.

Instead of expecting God to act like I'd like Him to act, I should drop my expectations and become vigilant by looking at what God is actually doing in my life and in the world in general. That would move me from the imaginary to the real.

Barbara and Wes talked about how hymn music plays a large part in their devotion and worship. I mentioned that the only song that's been running through my head is "I Want A Hippopotamus For Christmas". The radio plays that thing continually recently.

Sam and Barbara also mentioned how petty my problems are when compared to the tribulations of some martyr I had never heard of before.

Yes, my problems are petty.

But they are mine. They bother me.

Petty of not, these minnows keep me upset and off balance.

At that point, Wes quoted some preacher who told his congregation, "Sometimes when you is in the midst of tribulation, all you can do is just stand right there and tribulate"!

No whirlwind appeared to answer any of my questions.

But I could not help thinking, God may be trying to do me in, but He's sent me some wonderful friends to comfort me while He does.

After my wonderful comforters left my house to go their separate ways, I thought it was too late to work on my fire history book and I felt the need of more uplifting spiritual input, so I watched the movie, *Snakes On A Plane*.

Wednesday, December 05, 2007

Still More About My Lawnmower - For The Third Day In A Row!!!

Tuesday I spent the day tidying up Class B projects, answering e-mails (over a hundred in my inbox), crafting some new tin boxes for my wooden matches, and obsessing about my lawnmower.

In case you haven't guessed, the incident Saturday really bugged me. Obviously my ire over the lawnmower

represents a manifestation of a much deeper problem. Remember the single straw that broke the camel's back?

I can carry a huge load of ordinary troubles then when one more little thing comes up, I react all out of proportion to that small matter.

I doubt if I'm the only Christian to loose my cool over small matters which reach a critical mass. Like the old man I heard about who committed suicide when he lost his favorite hat or the long-married couple who split up over where to hang a picture.

Unless we deal with them, life's aggravations have a cumulative effect and one small, additional peeve tips the balance so that we A-Bomb Luxemburg.

Such things ought not to be.

Incidentally, in a phone conversation this morning a person who read my blog said that she's bringing me a new lawnmower next week.

I'm grateful.

But I have not written three postings about lawnmower problems trying to weasel a new mower out of someone. My reaction to the mower problem is the symptom, not the disease.

My whole life seems like one big lawnmower with my necktie tangled in the blade. That is what I'm really writing about: living and how to handle it as a Christian.

While the new mower solves the practical lawn care problem, the theological implications remain.

Why, when I follow all the right steps do things still go wrong?

If God loves me, if He is all powerful, If He is all knowing, if He is everywhere present, then why pain, aggravation, hassle, waste of energy, frustration and why haven't I won Lotto yet?

In our group conversation yesterday Sam said that God is completing us, perfecting us, disciplining us, polishing us so that we reflect His glory. He is conforming us into the image of His Son. He is making us Christ-like.

He uses abrasives to smooth us out and grind off the rough edges.

The purpose of God's treatment of us is not the test; honing our reaction to problems is.

I struggle with two major difficulties involved in my unhealthy relationship with my lawnmower: Control and Reaction....

But, to tell the truth, I'm stymied.

I've thought about these problems so much that I don't know what I think anymore. I've already spent two hours this morning writing this little bit of a journal entry and I still haven't been able to think the thing through.

I give up.

I can't solve the problem.

So I'm going to quit and backburner the whole matter for now.

In spite of all evidence to the contrary, I believe that God loves me and cares what happens to me in every little detail of my life.

When hairy problems arise, I rely on the fact that the very hairs on my head are numbered and that He who names each star in the heavens also knows every sparrow that falls.

The love of God is shown towards us in that while we were still sinners, stymied and confused and lacking answers, Christ died for us.

And He rose from the tomb under His own steam because He is the Prince of Life, God come in the flesh. And He promised that He is with us even until the end of the age and He returns to take us to Himself.

When all is said and done, lawnmower problems — or any other problem we face — hardly matter.

If I can't understand how my lawnmower works, how can I expect to understand how the King of the Universe works?

Five minutes after he gets there, the dumbest man in Heaven will know more about God than the smartest man on earth — and it won't matter to him one little bit.

Want To Hear A Lawnmower Joke?

Years ago I read this book (sorry, but I can't remember author or title) in which a thief steals a riding lawnmower.

To steal it he snipped the lock off the garden gate with bolt cutters. Then he pried open the locked shed with a crowbar. Then he cut the chain locking the mower with his bolt cutters and rode away.

A policeman stopped him on the road and accused him of stealing the riding mower.

"I didn't steal it," the thief protested. "They left it out 'cause they didn't want it".

The cop said, "What do you mean they didn't want it. You had to cut through three locks to get it".

The thief said, "Yes, but if they **really** wanted to keep it, they'd have locked it up better".

Thursday, December 06, 2007 A Page From My Book

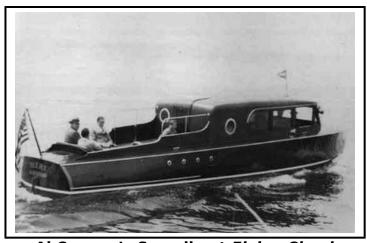
Yesterday I worked on my history of firefighting in Jacksonville.... Here's the first draft of a page I wrote::

The 1920s brought two national phenomena into Jacksonville's culture: Prohibition and the Great Depression.

On January 16, 1919, this amendment, Number 18, was ratified in the United States Constitution:

After one year from the ratification of this article the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States and all territory subject to the jurisdiction thereof for beverage purposes is hereby prohibited.

When the entire United States went dry, Demon Rum became illegal everywhere in the country... but Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Bahamas lay with in the range of bootlegger speedboats which operated out of Jacksonville.



Al Capone's Speedboat Flying Cloud

In 1928, notorious underworld figure Al Capone bought a 32 foot powerboat, *Flying Cloud*, in Jacksonville. He used it for parties and to travel between Jacksonville and a home in Miami — and possibly for rum running. In 1933 Capone was put in prison for tax evasion and later his boat was put up for sale to satisfy his debts.

Local and federal revenue agents fought the illegal importation of liquor.

When smugglers saw revenue cutters approaching, they dashed for shallow water and threw cases of whiskey overboard attached to marker buoys. But if the revenuers saw the buoys, they'd confiscate the liquor. So, when they threw the liquor overboard, the bootleggers anchored their buoys underwater with heavy bags of salt.

In a few hours, after the revenuers left, water dissolved the salt, the buoy floated to the surface, and the smugglers would retrieve their cargo...

Until the sheriff learned that slick trick.

In spite of the Law's best efforts Jacksonville remained soaking wet while legally dry.

Sam L. Varnes March 1, 1927

Firefighter Sam L. Varnes was crushed to death under Engine 2 after being thrown from the

apparatus as it skidded on the wet pavement and crashed into a pole at Eighth Street and Tallyrand Avenue while rushing to a fire.

The beginning of the Great Depression in the United States is associated with the stock market crash on October 29, 1929, known as Black Tuesday.

Thousands of companies went bankrupt and closed throwing millions of people out of work. Inflation soared. Work and money disappeared. Within a year, 24,000 people in Jacksonville faced starvation. Men turned to begging in the streets till city government banned all beggars except for "cripples who sell newspapers".

The city tried public works projects to hire the unemployed. Pay for unmarried men was a dollar a day; married men earned a dollar and a half per day.

To keep hoards of job seekers from the north at bay, Jacksonville stipulated that only city residents could work for these wages.

To give as many people as possible a chance to earn a living, hours for all city employees were cut; first to 30 hours a week, then to 24 hours. One crew would work Monday to Wednesday; another from Thursday to Saturday. Firefighters held on to their jobs by the skin of their teeth.

By December, 1932, city government turned Camp J. Clifford R. Foster into "an unemployment, relief and concentration camp". A thousand unmarried men were interned there. Jacksonville Mayor John T. Alsop said, "Jobless men who have been begging on the streets will be given an opportunity to enter the camp...If they do not want to... they will be sent to the city prison farm".

Remember the opening scene of the movie *King Kong* when Fay Wray fainted in the soup line? That scene could have been filmed in Jacksonville.

But even though soup kitchens opened here to keep people from starvation, in August, 1931, ten thousand destitute people in need of immediate assistance marched on city hall demanding a chance to work.

Families were existing on bread and water alone for month after month and ...

Friday, December 07, 2007
Magic Twangers And Jacksonville Fire
Rescue



The other night the temperature in Jacksonville dropped to a bone-chilling 46 degrees — We Floridians think of 46 as bone-chilling.

As Ginny and I darted from the library to our car through this artic blast, she held the car key remote door opener in her hand but she was slow in opening the car door as I stood there freezing.

To hurry her along I called out,

"Pluck Your Magic Twanger, Froggy".

Where did that come from? It's a phrase I have neither spoken or even thought of for over 60 years.

Ginny had never heard the expression before. She's too young.

I remembered that the phrase came from a radio show I'd faithfully listened to as a kid. I remembered that I thought the show hilarious and that I loved Froggy, but I could not remember the name of the program.

When we got home out of the cold, I googled "Pluck Your Magic Twanger, Froggy" .Turns out that the kids radio show I listened to as a child in about 1948 was the Buster Brown Show, sponsored by Buster Brown Shoes.

The show ran for 23 years but it finally degenerated into a television show or real radio shows went off the air, or I out grew Froggy's wit, or something. (Ginny says I have never out grown anything).

Froggy was a gremlin with a magic twanger which he used to confuse other characters and get them into all kinds of trouble. His character developed during World War II when pilots blamed all sorts of malfunctions on gremlins.

Smiling Ed, the human host, would invoke Froggy with the phrase, "Pluck your magic twanger". I used to laugh so hard at Froggy's radio antics that my mother would shout at me, "Turn That Damn Thing Down" but Froggy loved to confuse humans — like the time he substituted plaster of Parris for flour in a visiting cook's cake recipe.

I'd cackle at Froggy's jokes. He always won out over the adults of this world. He was a hero in my sixyear-old perception.

There is a nostalgic website devoted to Froggy and the Buster Brown Show at www.michelesworld.net/dmm/frog/gremlin/gremlin.htm .

Even though the radio program delighted me as a kid, and although I now realize that Froggy contributed greatly to my adult sense of humor, I had not given the magic twanger a thought in over 60 years...

So, why did that phrase pop out of my mouth when I wanted Ginny to use her magic remoter door key opener to let me in out of the cold?

The Bible says something about training a child right to let him grow up right.

St. Paul told Timothy, "Continue thou in the things which thou hast learned... knowing of whom thou hast learned them; and that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus".

What we learn as kids sticks with us.

It may lie deep, deep, deep down under the surface only to pop up 60 years later on some dark freezing night. We may forget it's there and not know the meaning of it when it does pop up, but it is there.

I've often wondered why I do some of the things I do. I can't always fathom the reasons for my own behavior. I'm a mystery to me. And I'm a mystery to Ginny and to my children and hardly anybody understands my sense of humor or laughs at my jokes.

Lets face it.

Somewhere over the years, I've lost my magic twanger.

Now, for another subject:

At 5:58 a.m. yesterday a building in downtown Jacksonville, a parking garage for a luxury condo, Berkman Plaza II, a 23-story condominium, collapsed.

The building was under construction and workers were pouring concrete on an upper level. The disaster stuck right as workers were changing shifts so no one was sure how many people were trapped beneath the rubble.

Six stories of the structure fell in an instant, each floor compressing floors below. One witness described it as a stack of pancakes

Right now the Jacksonville Fire Rescue Division is still in the midst of search and recovery operations so the facts and figures are still sketchy

At least 23 people were hospitalized and many more injured were treated on site. No one know how many are trapped beneath the rubble or, indeed, if all the people inside made it out.

That Berkman place is on the river right across the street from police headquarters within two minutes of the collapse, police, fire, ambulance, rescue workers and volunteers responded

If nothing else, having spent a couple of years researching and writing our fire department's history, I've gained a layman's appreciation of what a great job they are doing right now this morning.

Every Jacksonville firefighter receives an extra 50 hours a year training in mass causality protocols and urban rescue techniques As I've listened to radio news and watched to reports, I see this training show up in spades.

These guys are good.

In responding to the building collapse they are using everything from Halligan bars and search dogs to thermal imaging cameras and Hurst Extraction Tools (Jaws Of Life) to locate and rescue any victim.

It's amazing to see in action tools and procedures I've only read about during my research. I come to a deeper appreciation of firefighters every day.







OHSA (Occupational Health and Safety Administration) officials are investigating. It's too early to say for sure exactly why this building collapsed, but as an amature historian, I could hazard a guess.

Before the 1950s the St. Johns River was much wider with mud banks along the edges. Construction projects dumped fill dirt on top of the mud making the river narrower and narrower, then a crust of asphalt topped the fill dirt and buildings went up.

The water used to be right at Bay Street, now two city blocks of structures lie between Bay Street and the water. All these new things stand on a foundation of

squishy river mud being constantly undercut by the river's flow.

There was a day when a man standing on Bay Street could shoot alligators. It's a wonder to me that more buildings along the river bank haven't collapsed. What foundation can there be underneath? Already parts of the Riverwalk built just before the 2005 Superbowl have fallen into the river.

The wise man builds his house upon the rock, the foolish man builds his house in Florida.

But, who am I to criticize the foundation another man builds on?

After all, I'm the guy who build my entire adult personality on the foundation of Froggy and his magic twanger.

So, what spiritual lesson is there in all this for me?

First thing that comes to mind is that Jesus said, "Which of you intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost... lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it..."

But, He also warns me against crowing about other people's flubs.

In speaking of a construction accident in His day, He said, "Those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwell in Jerusalem? I tell ye, Nay: but except ye repent, ye shall likewise perish".

But I'm getting far afield here.

The main reason I'm mentioning this present disaster is that it brings me a deeper appreciation of Jacksonville Fire Rescue Division.

Seeing them in this kind of action certainly motivates me to get back to work writing their history.

Seeing them do their job makes me want to do mine better.

Sunday, December 09, 2007 My Feet Are Sore, My Spirits Soar, But My Ears Don't Hurt

Saturday Ginny and I did it all.

After Breakfast at Dave's Diner with Donald and Helen — where I teased Helen unmercifully about revealing the lavish \$4 present I planned to Give Ginny for Christmas (it was a topper for her car antenna) — Ginny and I attended two, almost three, holiday celebrations back to back to back.

First we toured the *Festival Of Trees* at the Main Library where various groups decorated dozens of Christmas trees around three floors of the library's central staircase.



We viewed the most charming Christmas village display I have ever seen. The patriotic tree covered with flags behind Ginny displays the photos of Jacksonville service men.



This tree decorated with antique dolls charmed Ginny:



After wandering hand in hand among the forest of Christmas trees, we visited a number of different churches in *A Century Of Sanctuaries*, the 2007 Historic Church Tour, sponsored Downtown Vision Inc.

We walked to the first four churches on the tour then sore feet dictated that we ride the trolley for the rest of our tour.

Twenty-three of Jacksonville's churches burned to the ground during the Great Fire of Jacksonville in 1901. Therefore few of our church buildings can claim to be more than a hundred or so years old; practically all of them were constructed after the fire.

In Jacksonville the term "Historic" means anything older than John Cowart.

Churches of all sorts were open for this tour: AME, Baptist, Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian. While on the surface various Christian denominations differ, all main-stream churches have one thing in common.

Here are three photos of stained glass windows I took inside three different churches along the tour. (I could post others of the 65 photos I took, but Blogger will stand for only so much).







Each of these windows portrays one thing.

The one thing that counts. Without it Christianity is meaningless, the Virgin Birth a fable; walking on water a hoax; love thy neighbor a joke; the cross a travesty.

These are Resurrection Windows.

The sparking solemn glass depicts an artist's idea of the scene when Jesus came out of the grave to be greeted by Mary Magdalene.

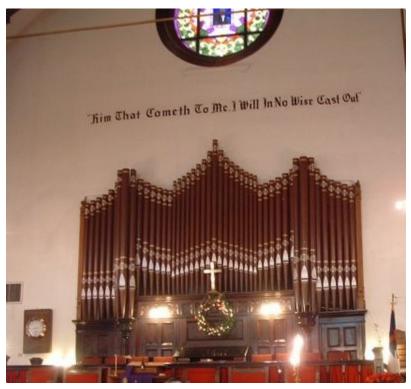
"Jesus is declared to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead".

Jesus Christ rose or rotted.

If He's just another dead guy, who needs Him? The caverns of the earth are filled with the pestilential dust of dead guys.

Because Jesus Christ is our risen Lord, everything else falls into place; without Him alive and kicking, nothing else makes sense.

Because He ever lives, He is able to say these words inscribed above the organ pipes at the front of one church we visited:



Because they knew He is Emanuel, the living God, God come to earth in the flesh, the Christmas angels could proclaim at His birth, "Fear not. Behold I bring you good tidings or great joy which shall be unto all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord".

Without this Savior, who rose from the dead, we die without hope and the weight of our sin presses us down into the dank moist soil at the bottom of the grave.

And that sin weighs on us for all eternity.

And our children have no more hope than our parents did.

But because He lives, we also shall live.

It's Jesus or nothing.

For there is none other name under Heaven given among men whereby we must be saved.

Don't understand it all?

That doesn't matter.

Come anyhow.

"Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give thee rest," He said.

That's His promise.

As the Christmas hymn Hark The Herald Angles Sing says, "Join the triumph of the sky. Born that man no more may die, Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give us second birth".

That's what Christmas celebrates.

Speaking of song and music...

After walking through the *Festival of Trees* and the *Century of Sanctuaries* tour, Ginny and I kept on walking.

We intended to take in an open air afternoon concert of Christmas music given by a group playing 100 tubas.

But the rascals finished playing earlier than their brochure announced.

We missed the hundred tubas.

By the time we got there, expecting to hear another hour and a half of tuba music, the players had all packed up their tubas and blown away.

Tuesday, December 11, 2007 A Christmas Thought About Love And Garbage

Sunday I dug in stinking kitchen garbage up to my elbows looking for a photo of — what else — a cat.

Our garbage men come but once a week, so seven days worth of garbage accumulate between one garbage pick up and another.

When grapefruit rinds, onion peels, celery tops, coffee ground, egg shells, chicken bones, all the ashtrays

we've emptied — when such stuff sits in the garbage can for a week, it reeks.

That didn't stop me.

I sifted garbage piece by piece by piece looking for that cat's photo.

You see, Ginny's favorite cat, Jessica, is long dead (a dog attacked it while Ginny watched from a distance).

That cat had lived with us for years.

It treated us with utter distain but Ginny treasured the creature.

But, alas, Ginny only had one single small photo, about two inches square, of that cat. She kept it in a little kitchen magnet frame bordered with flowers and tiny birds (which the cat would have eaten).

The kitchen magnet attached the photo of Jessica to our refrigerator.

Sunday, Ginny noticed that the frame was empty.

The photo had slipped out.

The cat was gone (how like it!).

How long has the photo been gone and where did it get to?

We checked under the refrigerator and in all the nooks and crannies all around the kitchen floor.

Maybe, just maybe, the photo had slipped out of the frame and fallen down into the kitchen trash can.

Only one way to find out.

I'm a not a cat person, but I am a Ginny person, so I stood one garbage can next to another and carefully transferred ripe garbage from one plastic bag to another. With my bare hands I examined every ounce of garbage.

I got my hands filthy.

As I worked, an odd thought occurred to me:

Out of love for us, Jesus got His hands dirty too; God came to earth to seek and to save the lost. He dealt with garbage too.

Sometimes, that's what love does.

He injured His hands digging through garbage.

Nails.

Hands bleeding.

St. John wrote, "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins".

I know that the Scripture refers to Christ as "The lamb of God slain before the foundation of the world".

Nevertheless I wonder, I just wonder, if the day He came into the manger, just might not have been the day He took the lid off the garbage can.

Incidentally, I did not find the photo of the cat.

I'll keep looking.

Wednesday, December 12, 2007 **Work Days**

Recently I have focused on writing my history of the local fire department and I feel as though I'm working slower and slower.

It's not that I'm dragging my feet; it just that I keep finding more and more things I want to include in this book.

In essence the book will be a history of Jacksonville told from the standpoint of how many times the place has burned down — or how many times our firefighters have saved it from burning down. The fires and hazards, disasters and near-disasters bookend the events shaping our daily lives.

My theme dwells on the heroism and professionalism of firemen, yet, to be historically accurate and honest, I have to include even internal squabbles, political intrigues, and just plain stupid actions.

And the more I work, the more work I find to do.

For instance, the main body of my text is up to the 1980s now but yesterday I ran across some more information about the 1888 Yellow Fever epidemic. So I'm bouncing back and forth over a hundred-year span blending it all together into a continuous narrative. (While at the same time inserting more information about some charitable actions of local firemen during the 1930s).

God! But I love what I'm doing!

I feel so much in my element when I'm writing this sort of thing, like I'm doing what I was created to do. I'm a squirrel gathering nuts, a beaver building dams, a bear catching salmon, — I'm doing what I was made to do.

And that is joy.

There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and enjoy his labor which God has given him to do under the sun.

And, it gets even better. Ginny totally supports me in what I'm doing even though my books earn diddle-squat and my sales are sparse. Years ago we developed a life plan which would lead to the lifestyle we enjoy now and my work would not be possible without her.

That also is a joy.

Last night our daughter Eve invited us over for supper; she and Mark have their home in order (except for all those cats). She is loving her recent job change even though it brings in less money. She's doing what she loves and I'm delighted for her.

Mark just earned a 5% bonus related to a perfect performance at his work; he's what you'd describe as a brilliant young attorney.

And in after dinner conversation, Eve and Mark discussed with us ways to help me in my work. We talked over ideas I'd tried futilely years ago as well as exciting new methods of advancing my work and gaining a platform to speak from.

For their Christmas charity this year, apparently they are buying a cow for some family in a third world country.

I told them that if they bought me a cow, then I'd be able to sell my books bound in leather.

Eve said, "Ooooh, Daddy" like she always does on hearing one of my good ideas.

It's really humbling to see these two young people express confidence that what I'm doing is worthwhile when I doubt that myself so often.

One idea Mark advanced is that I spend less time blogging. It is not unusual for me to spend three to ten

hours writing a single blog posting (It's something I do in the wee small hours of the night). Mark says I should limit my journal writing to 20 minutes tops.

He seemed shocked that I put so much time into this.

I'll try to pay attention to his advice, but that will be hard...

I never know what I think until I write about it.

Friday, December 14, 2007 Still In The Fire

The last line of my last entry said, "I never know what I think until I write about it".

Wow! Am I in good company.

Last night I read Stephen King's mystery novel *The Colorado Kid* and in his afterward, King said, "I write to find out what I think".

Isn't that cool!

Great minds follow the same thought pattern. So, if Stephen King and I arrive at the same conclusions independently of each other, that means my books ought to sell as well as Stephen King's do. ... Well, maybe not.

Yesterday's mail brought me an unexpected check for \$15.01 — Fifteen Dollars and One Penny — a surprise royalty check for the German translation of a book I wrote 20 years ago. I'm on the road to riches.

My diary entries for every day this week all say the same thing — Worked on my fire history book.

I'm up to the year 2000 now.

Whoot!

The end is near.

A problem I confront daily is how to handle warts.

Yes, firefighters are strong, handsome, brave and pure-hearted, but they have a few warts too. Since my aim is to emphasize the strong, brave and pure-hearted aspects of their history, daily I'm tempted to gloss over the sleazy parts. That wouldn't be honest.

While I naturally want to put the best foot forward, as a Christian writer, I feel constrained to treat my subject with a modicum of integrity.

But, this is a secular subject; what does being a Christian have to do with it?

Well, anything a Christian writes is Christian writing. I should never divorce what I write about from what I am. Christ is at least prominent in my thinking even if He is not always preeminent. The writing approach is Christian even when the subject is not remotely religious.

Even my grocery list is Christian writing.

The way I'm handling this in my fire history is to say, for instance, at the start of recording each year's events, "On the downside of 1899, such and such happened" Then, in the next heading or paragraph I say, "On the upside of 1899, such and such happened".

That writing technique helps keep me more or less honest.

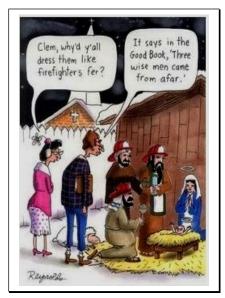
I wish there weren't any warts, but since there are, I can't think of a better way to handle them.

I'd hoped to finish work on this book last month, but I drug my feet. Now, thoughts of Christmas interrupt my thinking about the book.

Ginny and I spent an hour or so last night discussing the logistics of getting the whole family together at the same time. I love them all, but having a family is like having a bowling alley installed in your brain.

How can I combine thinking about my fire history with thinking about family Christmas plans? And what about the holy religious aspects of Christ's Incarnation?

In my fire history research I ran across this cartoon. You may have to have heard us Southerners talk in our unique drawl to catch the joke, but I find this hilarious:



Saturday, December 15, 2007 Process & Product

When one of our children was born, I stood in the delivery room with Ginny holding her hand.

There's a reason why they used to have expectant fathers stay outside in a waiting room.

But, I vividly remember one thing about the birth; at one point, Ginny screamed, "Get this damn thing out of me!"

Here, for months she'd talked about the little baby. She stopped smoking, gave up coffee and tea, went for prenatal exams, took vitamins, prepared baby clothes, loved the baby — but there came a time when she called that much anticipated and much loved baby a "Damn Thing".

This morning I can identify with that.

That's how I'm regarding my Fire History book.

After working on it for ages (this is an updated second edition of a book I originally wrote in 1986) I'm ready to be done with the damn thing.

I want it out. Finished. Done with.

Recently I've become so obsessed with the end product — the finished, printed, bound book — that the process of making it has become a frustration.

From past experience with other books, I know there always comes a point when I get to hate the very thought of writing. Once when some preacher interviewed me on his television show about one of my books, I told the viewers (an audience which he said numbered upwards of 20 million people) I told the viewers, "I hate this book".

In fact, I'd relaxed in the course of the interview so I may well have actually said, "I hate this damn book".

He never asked me to appear on his show again.

I'm not much of a book salesman.

Anyhow, yesterday I realized that I've become so focused on the product that I'm sinning in the process. I've neglected household duties, ignored Ginny, put aside Christmas projects, turned down invitations from friends, alienated family... Two people called me this week hinting they needed my attention. I played dense. I suppose if they'd come right out and said, "John, I need your help with ..." I would have set aside my work and gone to help.

But since they only hinted, I pretended not to hear the need in their voices.

By letting myself become so product-oriented, I'm spoiling the very process which produces the joy.

Yes, I know that product-oriented men accomplish great temporal things. By Whatever Means Necessary becomes their motto. Alexander The Great did not build an empire by fretting over the morality of his methods.

He just got it done.

And, then he wept that there were no more worlds to conquer and drank himself to death.

As a Christian I should remember that God is more interested in my process than my product. The end result of all things is in His hand and under His control. Our eventual arrival in Heaven is not a goal, it's a byproduct.

Just as babies are.

Maybe it's just a guy thing, but while I have great interest in the process of sex, the concept of baby never enters my mind. Process and product are very different things.

Like all guys who are honest would say, I looked at that baby Ginny cradled in her arms and wondered, "Where did that come from"?

So...

I've decided to slow down on the process of writing this fire history so that I can enjoy this process more. I've been putting in 18-hour days and being a bear the rest of the time. Yesterday I realized that my work is causing more frustration in me than joy.

For God only knows what reason, I've been obsessed with the idea that I've GOT TO FINISH this book before Christmas.

Why?

What is it that drives me? What compels me when the timetable for publishing the end product is an arbitrary goal I set myself in the first place?

It's not like there are lines of starving children languishing as they wait for my fire history book to come off the press. The world hardly needs my book desperately.

If I never finish the thing, if I stopped work on it altogether, who will notice? Maybe Ginny and my immediate family would notice — and they're likely to be relieved.

It is doing the work in harmony with Christ that's important. When I steamroll over everything and everybody pressing toward my goal of a finished product, I loose peace and joy in the very work I'm doing. ...

Which, in essence, is carving an idol.

A little idol with red cover and pages

Thou shalt have no other gods...

Oh.

I forgot.

But, this thing I' making, it's so important, it's so interesting.

It's so me.

I haven't looked up chapter and verse, but as I recall, after He rose from the dead, some women were

going somewhere along a road to be with the disciples and before they got to where they were going something happened.

It's one of the most important things told in the whole Bible:

"As they went forth to tell... Behold, Jesus met them".

As they went forth...

As...

Monday, December 17, 2007 Candle In A Bag — Luminary Night

During Luminary Night Sunday, at a Living Manger Scene sponsored by some church, I overheard a woman. In the press of the crowds of people in the street pressing forward, she and her friend were moving away from the front and her friend was complaining about not being able to see because of the throng. Without knowing it, this lady summed up the real spirit of Christmas:



"I saw the baby Jesus, and he wasn't very impressive," she said.

Bingo!

He hardly ever is.

The meek and lowly one born to serve and to save.

He had no form nor comeliness that when we see Him, we should desire Him.

Despised and rejected of men.

Nothing new about that.

Ginny and I walked for about two miles enjoying Luminary Night Sunday. It's always a blast. It's a cross between "Silent Night" and a Mardi Gras riot in December.

The initial idea was simple — but it ballooned.

A Luminary is a light. A simple candle in a white paper bag anchored in place by an ounce or two of sand. Nothing to it:





These bags glow softly. Not very impressive.

But on Luminary Night in Jacksonville's Riverside section, where we live, people set out thousands upon thousands upon thousands of these lights in front of their homes and line the streets:



There is a tradition, legend, fairy tale, whatever, that these lights along the roads are supposed to help Christ find his way. They light the way to your home so he can find you:

That's theological nonsense but great fun.

As though the God who created the universe doesn't know how to work a GPS. As though He who calls every star by name and knows every hair on our head, doesn't know one street from another. As though the Light of the World, needed a tea candle in a paper bag — Luminaries are a silly idea and I love them!

Luminary Night is always my favorite part of the Christmas Season.

While quite side streets glow with the little bags of light welcoming Christ, the main drags of Riverside/Avondale flash with every gaudy idea ever associated with a secular Christmas:

No one in particular organizes or controls Luminary Night (although the Riverside Avondale Preservation Society sells bags, sand and candles as a fund-raiser). Everybody does their own thing in wholesome fun just because they want to. And thousands of people walk the streets for no other reason than to stroll, see lights and enjoy.



See the float behind Ginny? Scores of drivers decorate cars, trailers, trucks, buses — and decorate them anyway they please. Folks may dress up as Santa, reindeer, snowmen, Elvis, the Grinch, Batman, bellydancers — whatever.

And the impromptu floats are just as varied. We saw one rolling along with a Power Point computer presentation being shown from the back of a pickup truck. When I say rolling along, I mean, the traffic creeps; Ginny and I walk faster than traffic on the main drags moves. And kids sing, cheer and toss candy to bystanders.

The glory of all this is it's complete lack of organization — just folks having wholesome fun for the fun of it.



Homes decorate according to the taste of the owner with displays telling Bible stories or fairy tales, to ... to... Well, to whatever:



Some people hold open house. Some assemble their church choirs on the lawn to carol. Some offer anything from a toke, to hot chocolate and cookies. Some let strangers sit on their front porches.



Others build fires in braziers so passersby can warm their hands.



Ginny and I strolled both the main drags and the still, silent back streets. We got so interested in the conversation we were having that we forgot and walked way past where our car was parked.

I know some sincere Christians bemoan the secularization of Christmas. I respect their stance. But I

love it. I love the camaraderie of strangers handing out chocolate and building fires for strangers. I love kids excited to meet a snowman (or Elvis)...

Yes, it is all glitz and gaudiness.

No, it has nothing to do with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Yes it is rooted in the Saturnalia.

So what?

So what if God does not need tea candles to find His way?

Isn't this misguided custom an unconscious acknowledgement that He is looking for us?

And that on some lever, we are glad He is?

Isn't this a way of responding to say, "Lord, here I am"?

In all of this falderal last night I thought of an old cartoon I once saw.

In front of a huge crowd of pagan worshipers this priest is throwing babies onto a fire in front of a horned idol. As two guys on the back row whisper, one says, "No, I don't really believe in it any more either — but it's a lovely old custom that ought to be preserved".

Tuesday, December 18, 2007 And Daniel Said...

I'm proud of me.

Yesterday I did not so much as open a single computer file on fire history.

When I realized just how much that project was pushing me and controlling my behavior, I cut back and slowed down work on it. I'm still working on that book but I've decided not to let it drive me to the exclusion of all else.

I find that when I feel harried, that generally means I'm doing something God has not told me to do.

He said, His burden is easy and His yoke light. And when I'm being driven and stress out over a project, that's a good sign that I'm acting because I've got some bug of my own up my ass. I mean, can you imagine the Lord getting frantic over anything?

That's just not His way.

Anyhow, instead of pushing ahead with fire history, I did a few things around the house and winterized some of Ginny's plants because a freeze is expected tonight (down from the low 80s last week).

Oddly enough, as I worked moving plants under cover, and not even thinking about the fire history book, I suddenly realized a discrepancy in an incident from 1985 that I should reconcile. Had I been steamrolling ahead with the text, I may well have not seen the error.

My friend Barbara came over and we went to lunch at Dave's Diner.

Barbara has been reading the last book of the Bible, *Revelation*, and she got to telling me about something Daniel said... I know I've been tired out of mind from all the extra work I've put into the fire history, but my friend's words made less and less sense to me.

I felt as though I would droop over with my head on my plate and go to sleep right there in Dave's as she talked about what Daniel said.

Now, in biblically oriented circles the Book of Revelation, last book in the New Testament, and the Book of Daniel, the Old Testament Prophet of Lion's Den fame, are often linked because of similarity in language, imagery, and vision.

(I think the connection between the two is speculative at best, but that's neither here nor there).

What I'd forgotten is that the name of the pastor of the church where Barbara worships is Daniel.

She was talking about her pastor **Daniel**; I was hearing about the ancient Prophet **Daniel**!

No wonder I got so confused.

Saw a cartoon the other day:

Death with black cowl and scythe knocks on a door.

A tottering old lady answers.

The grim reaper announces, "I am Death".

She shouts, "THAT'S OK, SONNY. I'LL TALK REAL LOUD".

Wednesday, December 19, 2007 Three Disparate Entries

Occasionally we chose between clear-cut good and evil, right or wrong; but most often, our choices lie between the good and the best.

Good seems good and demands less of us.

Jesse Ball DuPont, a local philanthropist, once said, "It is good to do good because good is good to do".

Jesus calls us to the best.

And sometimes that means bypassing things that seem like a good idea at the time.

For instance, I think it would be good to have this fire history book written, edited, printed and done with. I push to get it finished. I want it off my desk and out of my mind.

I want to rush it.

But recently I've realized that the Lord has called me to slow down, to be more thorough, to backtrack and correct discrepancies instead of bulling through them. He's in no hurry to see this book in print.

It would be good to have the book finished; it is best to take my time.

Being a Christian is saying one big "Yes, Lord" followed by a lot of little "yeses" through all the following days.

It would feel good to have a systematic theological system printed on a card I could carry in my pocket to consult now and them. That way I could order my life around it and get done the stuff I want to get done.

Instead, we have a Living Lord who butts in with specific instructions, who does not settle for any good idea that happens along, who leads us along the best path — at least when we cooperate.

Thus, yesterday I added only three lines to the text of the fire history book. But I feel they were the right three lines. They corrected a mistake I'd glossed over earlier in the text...

And, more important, they were three lines I would not have thought of had I not stopped, delayed work and re-evaluated what I've been doing. God says, "To obey is better than to sacrifice".

Sacrifice is good.

Obedience is best.

After a trip to the library last night Ginny and I ate supper at Famous Amos where we read our new library books over the meal while ignoring eachother in intimate companionable silence.

When you're deeply in love, you can do that.

Each library trip, along with our favorite murder mysteries and such, we each try to check out one book about some unfamiliar subject unrelated to anything we're normally interested in. For instance, I'm reading a book on contract negotiations — not my normal fare — this week. It helps me be aware of a broader world than the one I'm usually exposed to.

Speaking of broadening! We stopped at the grocery store to buy a fruitcake for Ginny to take to her office party today and the two young people at the checkout counter came from a different culture from ours -- neither one knew what a fruitcake was!

I was flabbergasted.

Who in the world does not know and love fruitcake?

Anyhow, after supper at the restaurant as we sat on a brick wall outside smoking, I remembered a method of giving to the poor without making them bellycrawl for your help.

When you see someone in obvious need, wad up a couple of dollars into the palm of your hand. Approach the person and reach down right at their feet saying, "Excuse me, Buddy, looks like you dropped your dollar". As you rise up, hand them the money and keep on walking. That way they have not had to bellycrawl and they have no one but God to thank for His assistance.

The Apostle John asked, "Whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him"?

Just an idea.

Here's a clipping for the kid in the attic from Reuters News Service at http://www.reuters.com/article/americasCrisis/idUSL18866 730

By Stephanie Nebehay

GENEVA, Dec 18 (Reuters) - The eight suspect human bird flu cases in Pakistan are likely a combination of infections from poultry and limited person to person transmission due to close contact, a top World Health Organisation expert said on Tuesday....

Eight people have tested positive for the H5N1 bird flu virus in North West Frontier Province since late October, and one of the confirmed cases has died. A brother of the dead man also died, but was never tested, so is not counted among them.

H5N1 is mainly an animal disease, but experts fear it could mutate into a form that could spread easily between people, causing a pandemic which could kill millions of people.

Thursday, December 20, 2007 **Weakness**

Back 40 years ago, when Ginny and I were driving a truck cross country, there was a joke I'd play on her.

After a particularly heavy day, when I felt so tired I could hardly move, I'd say, "Call St. George. Call St. George".

"Why call St. George," she asked?

"Cause my ass is a draggin"!

Well, maybe you'd have to have been there to see how funny that joke is.



The Lord told St. Paul, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness".

This divine message uplifted Paul.

Good for him.

This week for me, on the other hand, ...

"Call St. George! Call St. George!"

All that to say, I'm really weary.

An e-mail from my eldest daughter yesterday morning asked me to give a devotional presentation at our family Christmas get-together at her house.

When I read that my heart dropped.

I feel depleted. Wiped out. Weary. Empty. I have no clever demonstration of some Nativity scripture to present. I just have nothing.

Jennifer wants something special and I just have nothing to offer.

Call St. George.

I called her last night to wish her a happy birthday (I had no present for her either this year) and told her I don't think I can do it. I felt so bad about that. She so seldom asks me for anything; and here when she does, I fall through.

A radio news bulletin yesterday afternoon announced that a major explosion and fire forced the evacuation of a large area near an industrial park north of town. Four people died and 14 were hospitalized. Nearly a hundred firefighters, rescue and HAZMAT personnel responded. The explosion blew up a plant which makes gasoline additives and the plume of smoke was visible from 20 miles away...

When I heard that news, my heart dropped.

Did I pray for the victims? Did I pray about the toxic cloud? Did I pray for the injured? Did I pray for the firefighters?

No.

When I heard the news bulletin, my first thought was, "O Crap! Now I'll have to write another damn section updating my fire history book".

Weary. Worn out. Weak. Exhausted...

I've pulled some boxes, about a third, of our Christmas decorations out of storage but I've not even had the stamina to unpack them. We just may go without decorating our home at all this year.

Then Ginny came home from work last night sniffling and coughing with a major cold. Poor kitten is so sick, yet it was all I could bring myself to do to microzap a frozen tv dinner for our supper. She may have to call in sick today — she's only called in sick three times in the eleven years she's been working there. I may be nursing her this weekend.

How can I go on when I've reached the end of my rope physically, emotionally, spiritually?

What a downer.

Yet... yet, even in weakness we can go on.

When we were yet without strength, Christ died for the ungodly.

He did not come to rescue heroes.

Right after Paul told about the encouraging message he received about God's grace being sufficient for him, he went on to say, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me".

In another place he says, "Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day".

Tell St. George to stand down and put away his spear.

I'm gonna make it after all.

I may not overcome but, by the power of the Living Christ, I just may muddle through.

Friday, December 21, 2007

One Christmas In My Fire History Book:

Being it's so close to Christmas, here's a section of my unfinished fire history book which you may enjoy:

Red Lights — Red Faces

Documentation is hard to come by for this incident, but as best I can tell, it happened on the Saturday night before Christmas, 1987:

It seems that on that night, two sailors, stationed aboard the destroyer *USS Hanks* in Mayport, got commode-hugging drunk in downtown Jacksonville.

That same night a sprinkler went off in the May Cohen's Department Store. Cohen's at the time was Jacksonville's largest store; it occupied the entire St. James Building (Now, City Hall).

Huge crowds of Christmas shoppers gathered at Cohen's windows all season long to view the annual elaborate animated window displays.

More crowds packed inside the store, so when the sprinkler went off, an alarm went in, and Hook And Ladder 1, biggest fire truck in Jacksonville, rushed up — siren howling, flashing red lights ablaze.

Cops also came by the carload., sirens howling, lights ablaze.

Firemen rushed into the store as cops blocked the streets and hundreds of onlookers clustered to watch.

The two blotto sailors joined the crowd.

Firemen, cops and crowd paid intense attention to the possible fire (there wasn't one). But nobody paid attention to Jacksonville's largest fire truck. No body except the two drunk sailors — They stole it.

They headed down Duval Street (it was two-way then), one drunk in the driver's seat, the other in the tiller seat.

Cops on the scene laughed at the expression on firemen's faces as they called in the stolen fire truck to dispatch.

A police dispatcher, trying seriously to do this with a straight face, put out a Signal 10 -- stolen motor vehicle -- dispatch. It went something like this:

"Be on the lookout for a Signal 10, city Hook and Ladder No. 1, large, red vehicle, city license tags, believed traveling east on Duval Street toward the Gator Bowl ..."

But soon the Cops had to swallow their snickers — two police officers working further down Duval Street had not heard about the stolen fire truck but they saw it having difficulty. They asked the driver (who wore his white uniform and a stolen fire helmet) where he needed to go.

He pointed toward the Gator Bowl and yelled, "We're headed thataway".

The helpful officers hopped into their patrol car, darted ahead of the fire truck, giving it escort!

Lights and siren going full blast, the cops escorted the stolen fire truck — till it crashed into a street sign.

Then the other Cops caught up.

And the angry firefighters arrived — one threatened the sailors with a fire ax yelling something about capital punishment. One drunken sailor complained, "We would have turned on the siren. But we couldn't find it."

Even more policemen arrived. Even a few State Troopers joined the scene. Officers J.P. Branch and R.W. Wollitz made the arrests.

The report. says, "Several Duval County patrolmen stopped by, too, ever eager to help and to lend as much

moral support as they could while holding their sides and laughing until they got all red in the face and tears ran down their cheeks and they had to put their heads down on the top of their patrol car and slap their hands up and down on the roof."

Sailors. Firemen. Cops — there were a lot of red faces in Jacksonville that Saturday night just days before Christmas.

Saturday, December 22, 2007 Four Things To Know About Me — A Meme

Last night, Ginny, with her miserable cold stopping up her nose, tried to eat the chili I'd cooked for supper. She had trouble eating and breathing at the same time and said, "My Mother told me not to, but I've got to eat with my mouth".

She meant, of course, chewing with her mouth open.

I just about fell over laughing and teasing her all evening about eating with her mouth.

I'm such a comfort in her affliction..

After supper we enjoyed a long discussion about the meaning of the word *succor*.

Yesterday my e-friend Amrita in India (http://yesugarden.blogspot.com/) gave me a nice compliment on her blog; it follows a cartoon about how to become a famous blogger. She once told me that reading my blog inspired her to start her own; now her postings are consistently much better than mine. That makes me feel good.

Yesterday also , my middle son, John, who lives in Maryland, asked that I fill out this Meme:

A - Some Jobs I've had in my life:

- I've been a freelance writer for 30+
- years
- Janitor
- Gravedigger
- Over-the-road truck driver
- Installed huge plate glass storefront windows.

- Home healthcare giver to difficult terminal patients
- For several years I grew mosquitoes (for test purposes)
 - Editorial Assistant at newspaper
 - Caregiver at an old folks home
- Night watchman at a city dump (best job I ever had)
- Tour guide and deck attendant at Library of Congress
- Worker in a plant that made chicken feed (worst job I ever had)
- Burger cook on the 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. shift in all-night restaurant
- B Four movies I would watch over and over:
 - National Lampoon's Christmas

Vacation

- I, Claudius (13-part series with Derek Jacobi)
 - Griffin & Phoenix
 - Adventures In Babysitting
 - The Day The Earth Stood Still

C - Four places I have lived:

- Jacksonville, Florida
- Maryland
- In a truck, driving all over the U.S.
 - In my mind

D - Four tv shows I like to watch:

- Monk
- Evening News
- West Wing
 - The Benny Hill Show

E — Books I read again and again

- The Bible
- Bram Stoker's Dracula (the book that started me keeping a daily journal)
- The Chronicles of Narnia (7 volumes by C.S. Lewis)
- Stephen King's *Desperation* (and most of his books)
 - H.Rider Haggard's She
 - Poems of Robert Service
- Donald Westlake's Dortmunder novels (Hot Rock, Drowned Hopes, etc.)

• Brother Lawrence's *The Practice of the Presence of God*

F - Four places I've been on vacation:

- St. Augustine, Florida
- Port St Joe State Park
- Fernandina Beach
- Lake Seminole State Park, Ga.

G - Four of my favorite foods:

- Fried post chops (If it ain't fried, it ain't food!)
 - Fired shrimp I've netted myself
 - Egg Foo Young or any Chinese food
 - Fig Newtons

H - Four places I would like to be right now:

- There's no place I'd rather be than where I am right now.
- I My Favorite Bible Verse:

I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord,
They are plans for good and not for evil, to give you a hope and a future.

— Jeremiah 29:11

Sunday, December 23, 2007 No Real Entry Today

Yesterday I wrote a lengthy entry to post this morning... but when I reconsidered I find that I was fabricating.

What I was saying is just not true.

Therefore, I deleted it.

Instead, just for the joy of it, here's a copy of a greeting card used as a place marker in an old book — an

1880 edition of Lew Wallace's Ben-Hur — that I bought at a vard sale:



The date on the back of the card says 1910. The book is certainly old enough for that date, but the card's in such good condition I think it's a more recent reproduction.

Monday, December 24, 2007 **Christmas Eve**

Not that I've been obsessed with writing my Fire Department history all season long, but today this cartoon seems just right:



Yesterday I had great trouble getting anything at all posted, but my son Donald went into the computer server matrix and did whatever he does in there so I'm able to post graphics again.

This morning I plan to go to the cemetery to tend my parents' graves. It's something I've done every Christmas Eve for years. In times past that duty has not bothered me at all, but this year I find I've been having to steel myself for it for weeks.

I've caught Ginny's Christmas Crud Cold and my eyes are swelling shut.... I'll have to eat Christmas Dinner with my mouth. I shouldn't have teased her.

Wednesday, December 26, 2007 **The Ugliest Virgin**

The Cowart Family Christmas celebration resulted in the usual mayhem as we exchanged valuable gifts which no one should live without: :

- An ice-skating moose that sings,
- Antique cameos,
- A skeleton on a motorcycle,
- Statue of Gort (the robot from Day The Earth Stood Still)
- Pots and pans and perfumes.
- All life's essentials.

I received some odor-eater socks wrapped in biohazard packaging from Patricia's lab ...

Is she hinting at something?

One of our customs at such get-togethers is to have a brief devotional thought after the feast. My daughter Jennifer asked me to prepare something special for this occasion.

I chose a meditation on a single word from the Christmas narrative: *Swaddled*.

"And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger".

I told the kids that while I had to check various dictionaries to find the meaning of the word *Swaddle*, I had actually done this for each one of them when they were babies.

So, to illustrate what it means to swaddle a baby, I put on a one-person play in which I draped a blue scarf over my head and stared ...

As the Virgin Mary.



Some wag remarked that I was the ugliest virgin ever to appear in any nativity play anywhere.

Since I did not have a baby doll, a teddy bear played the part of Baby Jesus:



To set the stage for what happened on that first Christmas, we read the ancient prophesy of Isaiah, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given... and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace".

We scanned that passage in Philippians where Jesus is referred to as, "Being in the form of God ... Equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, and took on Himself the form of a servant...and being found in the fashion of a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross".

Again, we looked at the passage in Colossians where Jesus is "The image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature... For it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell..."

And Hebrews, where it says that Jesus is appointed heir of all things, the brightness of God's glory, the express image of His Person"

Heavy things to be said of a baby in a manger.

We all know that a manger is an animal food trough, it's like saying Mary swaddled him and put him in a lage dog food bowl.

But what does it mean to swaddle?

That's where things got wild. Using an adjustable ironing board as a changing table, I demonstrated how to diaper a baby.

Not having any frankincense of myrrh handy, I used Old Spice aftershave. But I had plenty of Johnson's Baby Powder and proceeded to cloud the air with the stuff as the baby bear kept trying to roll off the table.

Then I folded a diaper and pined it on — pricking myself only a few times. The family rolled in the aisles laughing.



Once I finally got the bear diapered, I used my blue scarf as a baby blanket (Mary may have used a feed sack), then showed how to snuggly wrap a baby so the kid can't wiggle out and fall on his head (Something that never happened to my six kids — or at least, not very often).

Here is the bear swaddled:



What are we to make of The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, Equal with God, The express Image of His Person, who yet comes as a helpless baby that needs to be changed and swaddled and nursed?

There's a tendency to regard Jesus in either of two false ways:

We tend to see Him as a glow-in-the-dark magic charm, too divine to be approachable. Like in the old country/western song:

> I don't care if it rains or freezes As long as I got my little plastic Jezus, Up on the dashboard of ma car.

Or to see Him as just another guy who bugged the wrong people and got himself killed, a great teacher whose teaching lives on in all good people.

Scripture allows neither heresy.

He is presented as fully God and fully human who came to earth for us and our salvation, who suffered

under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, who rose again on the third day and ascended back to where He came from and shall return again to judge the living and the dead.

The Lion Of The Tribe of Judah, The Alpha and Omega, The Bright and Morning Star. The Judge Of All The Earth Who does Right.

By becoming human, God raised all human activities into the realm of the sacred; whether changing a baby, changing a tire, changing a printer ribbon, changing the world, in Him we live and move and have our very being.

"And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and The Father by Him".

By His becoming fully human, Jesus is touched by the feeling of our infirmities; He was tempted in all points same as we are, yet without sin.

He knows from experience what we are going through.

Therefore, the Scripture says, "Let us come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need".

Mercy.

Grace.

Help.

All ours.

All because He descended to became a man.

One of the kids got a camcorder for Christmas and recorded my talk. They say they plan to edit the sound track and such and post it on You-Tube. If they get around to doing that, I'll post a link.

Thursday, December 27, 2007 More About Love and Garbage

The mystery of the missing cat photo is solved.

Back on December 11th (see archives) I wrote about digging through garbage to find a missing photo of Ginny's beloved damn cat, Jessica.

How I sifted through onion scraps and coffee grounds trying to locate that two-inch square photo, the only one of the cat that Ginny had.

And I told about how that dog in the next yard had killed Jessica as Ginny helplessly watched from our bedroom window.

And how we scoured the house looking for that missing photo.

And how I moved the refrigerator just in case the photo had fallen out of its magnet frame and slipped behind.

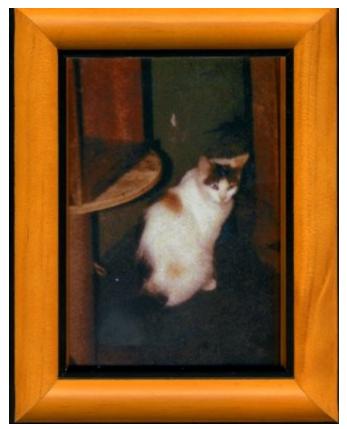
Well, the mystery of the missing cat photo is solved.

A burglar stole it.

Not a burglar exactly but our daughter Eve, an accomplished sneak thief.

On Christmas day it came out that Eve had slipped the cat photo out of our house thinking we would not miss it. Eve took the treasured photograph and had it professionally digitalized and enlarged and enhanced and gave it back to Ginny for Christmas.

Here's what the enlarged photo (now 7X10 inches) looks like now:



Eve did all this stuff with the photo for the same reason I dug in the garbage looking for it.

Love manifests itself in many ways.

Eve could have clued me in and saved me a lot of digging through garbage, but she wanted to keep her gift a secret.

Ginny is thrilled.

Even with all the digital enhancements, the cat still looks malevolent to me.

Friday, December 28, 2007 Took

When our daughter Eve said she took the photograph of my wife's cat, Jessica, I thought she took the photograph of the cat, but she meant that she took the photograph of the cat.

There.

That clears everything up.

No?

The problem is the word took. It's easy to see from my diary entry yesterday (and the one from December 11^{th}) that I thought when Eve said she took the photograph, it meant that she took the photograph. I thought she removed it from the magnetic frame on our refrigerator; what she actually told me was that she snapped the original photograph with her camera.

Eve wants me to assure all readers that she is not a thief.

She made the enhanced digital enlarged photograph of that damn cat for the same reason I dug in garbage hunting the missing photograph — we both acted out of love for Ginny, out of our esteem for her.

Ginny is a person easy to love. Once at an office party her boss came over to me and he said, "Virginia hardly ever says anything, she doesn't have a sign on her desk, she doesn't even wear a cross — but no one can come into that office for five minutes without knowing she's a Christian".

Anyhow, acting out of love for Ginny, Eve and I confused each other.

It's all that damn cat's fault.

To clarify the confusion, I took a moment to look up the word *took* in the dictionary — All it says is, *past tense* of take.

Following that lead, I discovered that the word take, in its past tense form, took up most of an entire page of my dictionary.

When Eve said "I took the photograph" she was using definition 11b (3).

When I heard her say, "I took the photograph" I was hearing definition 16a.

The word took up a column and a half of fine print in my dictionary!

It can mean victory "The army took the fort". To rest, "We took a five minute break". To endure, "The boss took a lot of heat over that question". To study, "I took piano lessons". To remove or steal, "Eve took the

photograph". Or to get by drawing, painting or by photography, "Eve took the photograph".

It can even mean to welcome and care for, as when Jesus said, "I was a stranger and ye took me in".

The word has a wonder variety of meanings.

We can say:

He took a stand. He took a swing at the ball. He took a fancy to her. She took him for all he was worth. I took the ax by the handle. He took the job. Her mother took his side. She took all the credit. He took the bus home. It took two matches to light the fire. They took my fingerprints. She took my advice. We took pleasure in the sunset. He took me wrong. The storm took its toll. He took off running. I took a bath once.

Boy, this is fun, but it took all morning for me to write this and I'd better quit now.

Besides, over the holiday, I took a vicious cold and my nose is dripping but I need to get to work anyhow.

The important thing Eve wanted me to clarify is that she took the photograph, the photograph was not taken by her.

Friday, December 28, 2007

Year's End — It's Not As Bad As It Sounds

Examining my life over the past year, I see I've continued to decline.

The same sins and faults of my youth grow more entrenched. All people mellow or sour as they age.

I ferment more daily.

Often in jest I've referred to myself as a dirty old man.

No jest to it.

I harbor bitterness in my heart. As I age, I dwell more and more on slights committed against me years ago and resentment wells up. I hardly ever turn on my computer without being tempted to look at naked ladies on porno sites. I'm often tempted to steal things. Curse words color my speech. Self-will motivates me. And any thoughts of charity grow cold.

As the Bible says about the man freed from one demon only to fall again to seven others, "and the last state of the man is worse than the first".

For the past couple of months Ginny and I have been reading a short passage from Thomas A'Kempis' *The Imitation Of Christ* after supper for our evening devotions.

"Blessed are the single-hearted," he said, "For they shall enjoy much peace".

"If every year we would root out one vice, we should soon become perfect men. But now oftentimes we perceive it goeth contrary, and that we were better and purer at the beginning of our entrance into the religious life than after many years of our profession.

"Our fervor and profiting should increase daily; but now it is accounted a great matter if a man can retain but some part of his first zeal".

But, he observes, it is a hard matter to leave off that to which we are accustomed.

In that same vein, 18th Century London preacher Charles Spugeon said, "The Christian pilgrim having obtained fresh supplies of grace, is as vigorous after years of toilsome travel and struggle as when he first set out.

"He may not be quite so elate and buoyant, nor perhaps quite so hot and hasty in his zeal as he once was, but he is much stronger in all that constitutes real power, and travels, if more slowly, far more surely.

"Some gray-haired veterans have been as firm in their grasp of truth, and as zealous in diffusing it, as they were in their younger days; but, alas, it must be confessed it is often otherwise, for the love of many waxes cold and iniquity abounds, but this is their own sin and not the fault of the promise which still holds good:

"The youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall, but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint."

Spurgeon said, "Let the oldest saint look well to the fundamentals of his piety, for gray heads may cover black hearts".

I suspect that's about where I stand as this year 2007 ends.

A sad summary.

Big deal.

King Solomon said, "Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof."

Butterflies are better than caterpillars.

So if I'm feeling wormy at the moment, all I have to do is hang on and await the glorious change which will enable me to fly in the air and drink nectar from flowers.

The whole point of the Christian life is not my progress or lack thereof, but what Christ has done for me.

Nothing I do or fail to do will put Almighty God in my debt.

It is not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy that He saves us.

Pride inspires me to check my spiritual progress to see where I stand on a scale of one to ten — living like a caterpillar with a stopwatch.

The Scripture declares that we are accepted in the Beloved.

That's all that counts — being in the Beloved.

So, I don't measure up to my own standard.

Big deal.

I never have.

My friend Wes laughs and says, "Cowart, God's standards are considerably lower than yours".

On one level I'm not satisfied with my progresses, but I'm beginning to learn how to simply abide. And for a frantic activist and progress checker like me, abiding is harder than it looks.

Yet, on another level, I can rest in the arms of Jesus and say with St. Paul, ""The life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God."

So, apart from either progress or setbacks, this particular dirty old man stumbles on toward Glory.

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