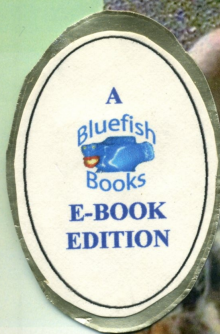


A Dirty Old Man Goes To The Dogs



John Cowart's 2009 Diary



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John W. Cowart

Bluefish Books



**Cowart Communications
Jacksonville, Florida**

www.bluefishbooks.info

A DIRTY OLD MAN GOES TO THE
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To Ginny



Log Cabin Lady

JANUARY 2009

Friday, January 02, 2009 On Receiving A Gift

At the midnight service in church Christmas Eve, something disturbed my equilibrium.

As Ginny and I attended the service, I anticipated singing *Silent Night*, holding up a pretty candle, and feeling nostalgic about Christmases past.

But just before the service started...

First I should say that six or eight weeks ago, I told someone about something that concerned me. On Christmas Eve I discovered that that someone told someone else who... Well, you know how that goes.

Well there I was in church listening to the organ prelude, praying a bit, feeling sentimental, observing the cleavage of a woman in an extremely low-cut Christmas dress a couple of pews away, minding my own business,

Then, just before the midnight service started, a wealthy gentleman came over to the big stone pillar I hide behind when in church and announced that he intended to help me with the matter that concerned me. In pure Christian charity, he offered to bail me out. He was only being kind.

I took it wrong.

I reacted as though he had said, "John Cowart, you failure. You looser. You no-good sorry excuse for a husband. You should have provided for your wife better than you do, you stupid, useless drone. Now I'm going to

have to step in and straighten out the mess you've made of your life and marriage, you pathetic, pitiful bum".

That's not what he said; that's what I felt.

Here he offered me a gift which involves a considerable amount of money, and I felt offended.

His offered gift struck me as an affront.

What business is it of his how I provide for my wife? In fact, why is my private business being talked about by people who are in no way involved?

I don't even belong to that church; I'm just visiting.

I balked big time.

Got my ass on my shoulder and sulked. Wanted to rev up my lawnmower and shred poinsettias. Wanted to stuff my candle someplace where it could never be lit. Wanted to pluck the wings off angels. Wanted to tell the low-cut woman to put on a sweater. Wanted to stomp out without taking communion. Wanted to huff and puff and... Well, that service was a wash.

Why is it so hard for me to receive?

Somebody said it is more blessed to give than to receive.

A lot He knew!

It's easy for me to give. Makes me feel important. Empowered. A contributor. One of the blessed prosperous.

But to receive—that's hard. It's humiliating. It means I have to acknowledge my weakness, my neediness, my lower station. It makes me beholden.

When I first became a Christian, I remember what a struggle I had with the idea of receiving salvation as a gift from God. I felt I should earn it so that God would be beholden to me.

John's Gospel says, "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not. But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name".

I think it would be easier to be saved if God only asked that I swing over a river full of crocodiles holding the rope in my teeth while carrying an anvil. It would take a real man to get saved that way.

But to acknowledge that I have no merit, that I am a spiritual paraplegic, that I need Someone to save me because I don't stand a chance otherwise. That I live every day on life support. That the building is burning and I can't get out, that I need a Savior, that I have to receive Him—that's hard.

So, on Christmas Eve and in the days following, I've behaved churlishly.

Instead of feeling gratitude for the help offered, I've felt resentful, offended, hurt.

Instead of seeing the offered help as a gift of love from the Father through the hand of man, I've wished I'd never confided in anyone about my concern in the first place. I've fumed and worried and twisted this situation in my mind again and again.

So much for the openness and transparency I wrote about on New Year's Eve.

Oh well, this is an on-going situation.

May the Lord teach me how to cope with it... and maybe, eventually, be thankful.

What a crock! Changes in attitude, heart-changes, are also a gift from above, and have to be received. How you react to a gift, reveals what you are inside... and right now, I don't like what I'm seeing within myself very much.

Ugly Ingratitude overshadows all my thoughts since Christmas Eve.

I don't know how to cope with this.

What's worse, I 'm not sure I want to know.

Lord, be merciful to John Cowart.

Saturday, January 03, 2009 Return To Normalcy

At last a weekend with no holiday activities. Thanks be to God!

However, in the past week Donald and Helen gave us an office chair and a microwave. And yesterday Terri and Rita (friends of Jennifer's) brought over an over-stuffed chair... But we already had chairs.

Eeeek!

I'll have to move furniture all weekend.

It looks fine where it is. No need to move it over there.

Didn't Solomon or someone say, "He that increaseth goods, increaseth sorrows"?

No?

Well, he should have.

Sunday, January 04, 2009 Staying Connected

Saturday's mail brought in a royalty check from the my book sales in the Philippines; there I earned one dollar and 22 cents (\$1.20) last year.

Not enough to pay for a cell phone.

Saturday also, Ginny and I went to browse in Jacksonville's main library. After checking out our books, we paused in Hemming Park for a smoke.

Here's a photo of Ginny in the park:



Hemming Park pre-dates the Civil War. Right across the street from City Hall, the park is venue for concert, speeches, art displays, whatever. Disguised as decorative rocks in some flower beds are electrical outlets for use in park activities.

Snowbirds flock to the park—snowbirds are homeless people who migrate south every winter to escape the cold in the north—Snowbirds flock to the park because it's in easy walking distance from the City Rescue Mission, the Salvation

Army Shelter, and the Clara White Mission. It's not

unusual to find snowbirds asleep on park benches or playing checkers beneath the Civil War Memorial.

As Ginny and I talked about our library finds this week, we noticed a snowbird settle on a wall across from us. Ragged clothes, shoes in tatters, worldly goods in a pillowcase, unshaven, typical. He fiddled with something in his pillowcase and drew out an electrical cord. He moved aside some bushes and uncovered one of the rock-disguised outlets and plugged in—He was re-charging his cell phone!

This year, Jacksonville attracts a better class of bum.

Monday, January 05, 2009

Rearranging Furniture

I spent much of the weekend rearranging furniture with Ginny.

If you really hate a man, give his wife two new chairs and a large ottoman on a weekend when bowl games are being played....

No, Honey, the fireplace would not look better over there!

Since nothing much is happening in my life recently, I find joy in reading about what's going on in the life of my e-friend Good Listener at *Making A Life* .

I've followed his blog for over a year now, and it seems to me that God's hand is on Listener; I enjoy reading his quiet adventures. You can drop by his site at <http://makingalifewithk.blogspot.com/> ; please leave him a comment.

Thursday, January 15, 2009

Treading Water

I don't know the name of the singer or the song.

But the other day Ginny tuned the car radio to some folk song where this guy in jail bemoaned his unfair treatment.

All he had done was shoot a deputy, he wailed, and that mean judge sentenced him to 99 years in jail. His cellmate comforted him saying it could have been worse; "He could have sentenced you to life".

For some reason, not sure why, that song resonates with me.

While waiting for a manuscript's proof pages to come back from the printer, I hesitate to start a new project till that one is finished, so I'm treading water between times. When the proofs return, I'll correct them, then I'll be ready to move on.

Meanwhile I spend my days moving Ginny's dirt-eating plants inside out of the cold (yes, winter has finally come to Jacksonville) and reading murder mysteries.

In my devotional reading yesterday, I ran across an odd phrase about righteous people: "They shall still bring forth fruit in old age...to shew that the Lord is upright".

That's a nice thought.

I feel pretty dried up and withered myself.

However, I've still got it!

As Ginny and I enjoyed breakfast at Dave's Diner, I pointed out a speck of burned crumb on my toast and told her it was a bug. As she leaned forward to see, I pretended to examine the speck more closely. "No, it's not," I said. "Insects have six legs," I said biting into my toast, "This one only has three".

She's crazy about me!

Don't worry, Honey, we've only been married 40 years... It could have been for life.

Friday, January 16, 2009

Historical Notes For The Kid In The Attic

Every writer envisions the reader he expects to read his work.

For me, that's the kid in the attic.

Though few of my contemporaries buy my books, I foresee that 50, 70 or a hundred years from now, on some rainy afternoon, a teenage boy prowling through boxes in the attic of his house will chance upon a dusty box of old books. Some title will capture his fancy and he will begin to read my diaries.

This is the reader I write for; I want to show him the reality of Christ in one ordinary guy's life, to reveal the good and bad of how the Christian life works out for me.

In order to put that spiritual dimension in context, every now and then I feel it appropriate to mention contemporary historical events as pegs to hang the personal elements on. Two such events happened yesterday:

President Bush, our 43rd president, gave his farewell speech to the nation last night.



His first speech as president came on September 11, 2001, the day muslim terrorists crashed airplanes into New York's World Trade Center killing thousands of Americans. This tragedy launched our war against Al Quaida in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Last night President Bush pointed out that there have, as yet, been no further terrorist attacks on U.S. soil. He cited the founding of the Homeland Security Department and refurbishing of FBI and intelligence agencies. And he warned "The gravest threat to our people remains another terrorist attack; we must never let down our guard."

He mentioned the present economic depression we are entering—a depression I feel is caused by greed, corruption, bribery and usury.

And he spoke of the smooth transition of presidential power to Barack Obama, who is scheduled to become our 44th president next Tuesday. This transition from one man

and one political party to a different man and party appears to be smooth and seamless. Bush appears to have handled his party's defeat with grace. I think more of him now than when he assumed office.

His brief farewell speech shows a strength of our democratic system of government wherein it takes no bloodshed or military uprising to move from one power base to another.

Yesterday's news also reported another significant event:

In New York, U.S. Airways Flight 1549 lost power on takeoff and crash landed in the Hudson River with 155 people on board.



The pilot, C.B. "Sully" Sullenberger, said a flock of Canadian geese smacked into the jet knocking out both engines. He saw he could not make it back to LaGuardia airport so he smoothed the plane into the river.

Apparently all New York saw the crash. Immediately, ferry boats, water taxis, Coast Guard vessels, and dozens of private watercraft rushed to aid the passengers who scrambled out of the fuselage onto the wings of the floating plane which sank shortly after all survivors were removed..

Other than a couple of broken legs and a bunch of frozen asses, all aboard survived intact.

As the plane went down, many viewers feared another 9/11 sort of incident, to the contrary, the accident proved the heroism, skill and character of good people as all aboard the plane were rescued.

Never though a plane crash could make me proud, but this one does.

But, all is not good news:

On the local front—yesterday Jacksonville Mayor John Peyton send out a looong e-mail explaining why \$67 million, earmarked for a new court house, has disappeared from the city's treasury leaving the city with nothing but a weed-covered vacant lot.

The money was in the city's pocket, now it is in someone else's pocket.

Yet, the e-mail explains, no one did anything evil, criminal, corrupt, or even stupid.

That's good to know.

On a personal level, as I await my manuscript proof pages to come back from the printer, I've been reading Stephen King's latest book, *Just After Sunset*, a collection of his short stories. The sheer beauty of some of his tales brought me to tears.

Two phrases from my devotional reading struck me:

"They refused to obey, and were not mindful of the wonders that You performed among them... But You are a God ready to forgive...and abounding in steadfast love".

Not mindful of wonders... I feel as though we drive daily through a thick fog. All we can see are the white lines in the center of the highway as we move through the mist. Then suddenly a solid shape appears in our path—a deer, a tree beside the road, the bumper of a car ahead. We zip on by still focused on the white lines on the asphalt unmindful of the real, the concrete solid spiritual things God reveals.

We ignore the real and live in the mist... Yet He is ready to forgive, abounding in love.

The other phrase I noticed:

Jacob bewailing his circumstances said, "All these things are against me".

What he was bitching about was the fact that God was saving him and his family from a seven-year-long famine! But he only saw the immediate circumstances and thought they were terrible.

How often I echo his words, "All these things are against me!"

Another Scripture says something about "All things work together for good" for somebody or another.

I often fail to see that.

As Granddaddy used to say, "There's some folks would complain if you was to hang 'em with a brand new rope".

Ginny and I are scheduled for a Civilian Emergency Response Team training session tomorrow.

Maybe we'll learn how to help in a plane crash.

Sunday, January 18, 2009 The Last State Of The Man...

A mass casualty event, such as hurricane, terrorist attack, earthquake, etc., may overwhelm Jacksonville Fire Rescue Division personnel. It may take several days before they can reach individual neighborhoods. Therefore the city sponsors all-volunteer Community Emergency Response Teams, CERTs, to help in their own neighborhoods during an emergency until professional help can arrive.

The JaxCERT website is at <http://www.jaxcert.info/> .
Ginny and I are members.

Saturday we attended an advanced CERT training class where we learned more about personal safety preparedness, bandaging wounds, and back boarding.

We also learned that one neighborhood team, from one of Jacksonville's wealthier areas, has acquired a Humvee for their rescue efforts; our own neighborhood team will stumble among the ruins on foot.

Life is not fair!

I did tell our team leader that if we ever get a Hummer, I have room to park it at my house. I'm generous that way.

In training, our group encountered a volunteer casualty with back/neck injuries and we secured him to a back board for transport—sort of.

I knelt up at the victim's left shoulder attaching him to the board with broad, bright orange nylon straps...Got him buckled up, but, when we went to lift him, my knees gave out, I got the shakes, and I almost fell on top of him! Being too weak to lift the guy surprised me; I had to withdraw and let another team member take my place.

I really thought I could do this.

But I was just too weak.

Poor victim, he had to give me a hand up to keep me from falling on him.

That's not the way it's supposed to work.

A Scripture came to my mind:

Jesus said, "When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he saith, I will return unto my house whence I came out. And when he cometh, he findeth it swept and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh to him seven other spirits more wicked than himself; and they enter in, and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first".

That's what I thought about our poor volunteer victim after we got through with him—The last state of the man is worse than the first!

However, I was not completely useless in the exercise:

While our team practiced first aid for broken collar bones, burned hands, arterial bleeding, severed limbs, and gasping chest wounds, I showed the ladies in my group how to fold the triangular bandages to make a bunny rabbit.

What did you expect?

I don't have a Hummer to drive yet.

Friday, January 23, 2009
Out Sick For A Week

Last Sunday I fell sick with the worst cold of my life. Only now am I beginning to come out of it. Wednesday, Ginny fell sick with the same cold; she's still down.

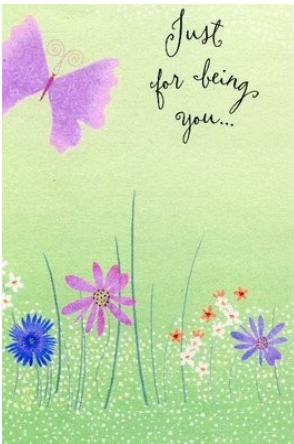
Tuesday the United States inaugurated Barack Obama as our 44th President;.

Tuesday also, my proof pages arrived from the printer. I felt too sick to pay much attention to either event. The manuscript box still lies unopened on my desk. I don't have the energy to face it.

I dozed off and on during the inauguration ceremonies, parade and balls on tv, but I could hardly take it all in. I think the tv commentators slight the man in their constant references to his being black as though that were the only noteworthy thing about him.

God bless him. He's got a tough row to hoe.

Sunday, January 25, 2009
Out of the Blue--Thanks



Ginny and I still battle these super colds.

One bright spot: yesterday's mail brought this unsigned card containing an anonymous gift of \$150. Thank you; we'll try to spend it wisely.

Wednesday, January 28, 2009
Preparing to surface

При расточительном дворе Короля Солнца, Луи XIV из Франции, развернулась бурная светская деятельность вокруг...сидений.

Those are the opening words of the Russian translation of my profile of Madam Guyon, a chapter from my book *Strangers On The Earth*. Maria and Kent, e-friends in the Ukraine, are preparing this translation and have sent me various questions about it.

In English that opening sentence reads: "In the lavish court of the Sun King, Louis XIV of France, elaborate social activity revolved around... chairs".

My profile of Madam Guyon can be found online at <http://www.cowart.info/John%27s%20Books/Guyon/Guyon.htm> .

Responding to Maria and Kent's e-mail is the most active thing I've done recently; this cold just knocked all my props out. It's been all I can do to read a murder mystery. Most of the past ten days has been spent in a stupor... I mean more of a stupor than usual.

Ginny returned to work yesterday but she's not really up 100 % yet either..

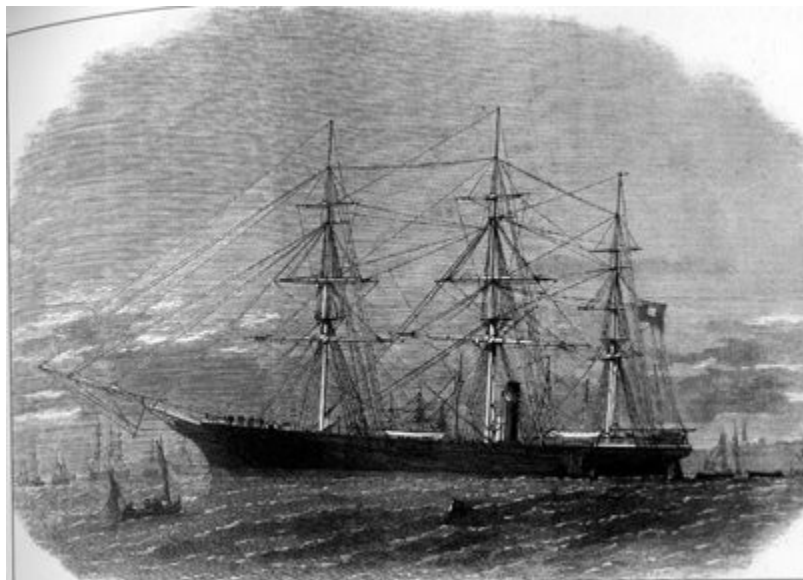
I feel like a bear just waking out of hibernation, or a submarine preparing to surface from the deep green cold depths.

The world is out there waiting for me. Do I really want to face it?

Thursday, January 29, 2009
Convalescence Reading

As I recover from this cold (must be just a cold because I had a flu shot months ago) I've begun reading again. Yes, during my illness I stupored through a couple of murder mysteries and a few science fiction tales, but a week later I can't even remember what they were.

But over the past few days I've really enjoyed Tom Chaffin's *Sea Of Gray: The Around-The-World Odyssey Of The Confederate Raider Shenandoah*. It's the best book of this sort I've ever read.



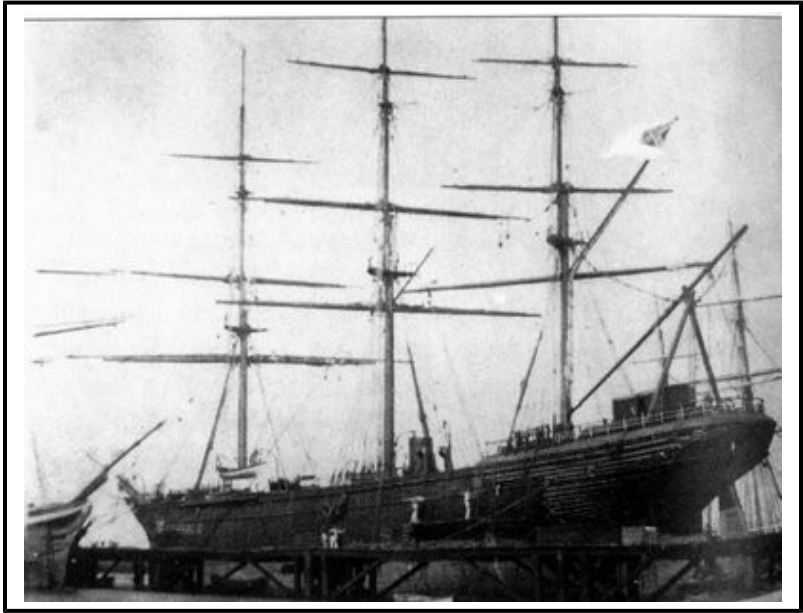
During the War Between The States, the enemy's "Anaconda Plan" strangled the South by blockading all southern ports. The federal navy cut off imported necessities from the Confederate homeland and prohibited the export of cotton, on which Southern economy depended, by sealing ports and rivers.

The South responded by enlisting privateers, privately owned ships outfitted for wartime duty, by commissioning blockade runners, swift vessels which tried to break through the yankee stranglehold, and by outfitting a dozen raiders to prey on yankee commerce.

The idea behind the raiders was to thin out enemy warships by drawing them away from blockading ports, and to run up insurance rates so yankee merchants would sue for peace—hit the enemy where it hurts—his pocketbook.

The *C.S.S. Shenandoah's* mission as she left Liverpool, England, required her to destroy the yankee whaling fleet in the Arctic's Bering Sea, and whatever and wherever else she could attack.

Here's a photograph taken of her during a stop in Melbourne, Australia, in February, 1865:



Chaffin's book, drawing heavily on journals kept by *Shenandoah* officers, details the ship's voyage that circumnavigated the globe. Covering 58,000 miles, she was the only Confederate ship to do so. During her quest she burned 32 yankee ships, ransomed six others, and captured 1,053 prisoners of war.

Oddly enough in this war, during the *Shenandoah's* operation, not a single man on either side was killed in battle.

Problem was...

While the raider cruised, out of touch of land and news of the day, in the Arctic, much of the damage the *Shenandoah* inflicted occurred two months after General Lee had surrendered to Grant effectually ending the war. The yankees labeled the *Shenandoah* a pirate ship saying all officers and crew should be hanged... The *Shenandoah* had to make it from the Arctic, down the Pacific around the Horn of South America, and back up the Atlantic to Liverpool to surrender to the British there without falling into yankee hands.

What a tale!

Delightful.

Great reading!

Also, this morning I finally finished reading the Book of Genesis, first book of the *Old Testament*. Yes, I'm way behind in my resolution to read the Bible through this year. Is being sick a good excuse (or the fact that I read murder mysteries and Sci/Fi instead)?

Anyhow, my general impression of Genesis is a sense of wonder at how God dealt with people who were busy doing ordinary things.

When visited by God, most of these folks were breeding goats, tending sheep, digging wells, watering camels, buying fields, dreaming dreams. They seldom seemed to be doing religious things at all.

Yet the Lord God had His hand on them.

Even the people who were religious didn't make a Thing out of it. They worshiped the Lord and milked their cows and cooked dinner and got married and buried their dead and squabbled among themselves and fled famines and simply lived in the light of God.

Yet they were by no means flippant about it. They held the Lord in highest regard while weaving Him into the warp and woof of their lives without much fuss.

I'm impressed.

Saturday, January 31, 2009 **Bird In The House!**

Friday night, for the first time in two weeks, Ginny and I went out for our Date Night; this was the first time I'd set foot outside since we got sick.

We've been together in the same house but miles apart because our illness created a barrier. Ever try to kiss a coughing girl with a runny nose?

We'd watched the tv news before we left the house, so in the restaurant our conversation naturally turned to the state of the economy. TV says that 100,000 Americans lost their jobs this month.

Since President Obama is moving the terrorists prisoners of war out of Guantanamo prison camp, I

suggested that the government round up all oil company executives (tv news says Exxon garnered the largest prophet of any company in the history of the world last year), all stock brokers, bankers, mortgage lenders, insurance agents, etc. And put them in Guantanamo to be tried for treason. These villains have damaged the U.S. more than any other terrorists.

None of the bailout packages or economic incentives the President proposes will touch us personally at all. All that money goes to somebody else.

However, I assured Ginny that at least my job will never be outsourced to a foreign country.

"There's not a peasant in China who wants to do the work I do for the same amount of pay," I said. "He'd want more money".

My book sales have not done well recently.

When we returned home, we discovered damage.

Part of a statue from a high shelf lay on the living room floor. Fancy, Ginny's lovebird, squawked frantically in her cage. A model clipper ship (the Joseph Conrad) I'd worked on for ages had been knocked on its side as though it had floundered...

Ah, there's the culprit—a bird in the house.

Apparently as we left for our date, the bird had entered to escape the cold.

We propped open the front door. I grabbed a broom. Ginny, a towel. We stalked the invader to capture and set it free outside. Not understanding our intention, the bird careened around the living room and kitchen from curtain rod to bookcase to ceiling fan blade to model ship to chair back in a panic.

Laughing, we finally chased it out the open front door.

Then we sat down to reminisce about how when all the kids were home and we lived in HUD housing and Ginny did not have a dryer but hung clothes on the line, wrens loved to nestle in folds of our clothes and inadvertently be brought into the house.

The cry would go up, "Bird in the House! Bird in the house!"

We and all the kids would garb dishcloths, towels, sweaters, brooms and chase the bird through the house. The three cats leaped in the air trying to catch the wren first. Broom-holder batted them back. Our black lab Sheba would charge around barking frantically but having no idea of what caused the commotion. At last the bird would be captured and released unharmed outside.

The Peaceable Kingdom our home was not.

In fact, I once wrote a magazine article, “The Hand Of The Almighty Smites A Sea Gull”, about one Cowart bird encounter. It can be found at <http://www.cowart.info/Family%20Life/seagull/The%20Hand%20Of%20The%20Almighty%20Smites%20A%20Seagull.html>

As I remembered that incident, it half-way brought to mind another:

Years ago I wrote some article for some magazine (can’t remember which one) and inside the back cover of that magazine was a poem by some lady who wrote about a sparrow being trapped on her sun porch.

The poet likened that situation to the frustrated, trapped feeling of so many people.

People who could identify with how that bird was feeling

Her trapped sparrow tried frantically to escape by flying here and there, crashing into the wire mesh, feeling trapped and frustrated and thwarted by its circumstance—yet the screen door stood open all the time.

The door to freedom always stands open.

Jesus once said, “I am the door”.

Sunday, February 01, 2009

I Spread Light and Joy Wherever I Go

I’ve been down with a terrible cold—but I’m feeling much better now—Ginny, my bride of 40 years, has reservations about that.

Saturday as we dressed to go out for breakfast at Dave’s Diner, Ginny dolled herself up. She fixed her hair, put on her favorite weekend blouse (the one with beach umbrellas on it), and she freshened her lipstick.

When she sipped her coffee as we waited for our breakfast order, I noticed she'd dotted the rim of her coffee cup with lipstick.

Gave me an idea.

I switched coffee cups with her.

Then I beckoned our friend the waitress over to our table.

"There's lipstick on my cup," I said pointing it out to her.

That distressed her.

So I lifted the cup to my lips and licked the rim. "Oh," I said, "That's alright; it tastes delicious".

Our friend the waitress and Ginny ganged up on me.

Some women have no sense of humor.

Later into our meal, Ginny dribbled a bit of egg on her blouse.

Ever the caring husband, I pointed this out.

She wet her napkin in her water glass and dabbed the front of her blouse. "Did that get it?" she asked.

"Still a bit left," I said.

She wet her napkin again and scrubbed the spot again. "How's that?" she asked.

"You need more water," I said.

Again she dipped and dabbed. "That take care of it?"

"No," I said, "You need more water".

"John, That's impossible. There's nothing there".

"No, but I think you're about ready for the wet tee shirt contest".

I thought that was funny as anything.

She just sighed.

My cold is over. I'm feeling great. I'm on a roll.

Ginny must be feeling better too. Before we left the restaurant, she showed me how to count to six on the fingers of one hand.

I couldn't get the knack of it; she thought that was hilarious. I guess that must be an insider joke among accountants.

We drove downtown to the main library where I encountered one circulation clerk who apparently can not read or write, and another one who has not mastered the intricate skill of passing a bar code in front of the little red light on the scanner—Sometimes I think that in this country the wrong people are losing their jobs.

Anyhow, when we returned home and Ginny backed the car into our drive, as she got out of the car, she almost stepped on a snake.

She yelled for me and I ran around the car to rescue her, but I saw it was a red rat snake (easily mistaken for a rattler) only about three feet long. Poor creature had sought to sun itself on the warm concrete of our drive.

I picked it up and moved it into the bromeliad bed in our back yard where it would be safe.

Besides rescuing her from serpents, as a Christian husband of 40 years standing, I feel it my duty to spread light and joy into my wife's dull, drab existence.

Thus, while we have been sick with these awful colds, Ginny found that her hearing aids irritated her ears so she hasn't worn them. This has made for some interesting conversations between us over past ten days. So, this afternoon when she was cleaning her ear pieces, I picked one up, held it like a microphone, and shouted, "Can You Hear Me Now... Good!"

"You're definitely feeling better," she said. "I think I liked you better when you were sick".

A Christian spreading light and joy everywhere, that's me.

Oh, by the way, Super Bowl commercials Sunday cost three million dollars a minute. They estimate that 98 million people world-wide will watch the game. All of you be sure to watch my Bluefish Books ad at the end of the game.

I feel sure my commercial will sell scads and scads of my books.

I'm feeling confident.

I'm feeling great, spreading light and joy wherever I go.

Monday, February 02, 2009
My Super Bowl Ad

Curses! Foiled again!

Every year I try, but once again this year nobody saw my Super Bowl ad selling my books.

NBC broadcasting sold every single one of the 69 Super Bowl ad spots. According to the *Washington Post* newspaper, the TV company charged \$3 million dollars for each 30 second spot generating an income of \$206 million in advertising revenue. The *Post* estimates that 98 million people watched the game.

Not one of these people saw my ad.

Here's why:

My February Social Security check has not come in yet so I was a trifle short of having the \$3 million needed to buy a regular ad.

I worked around that.

To understand how I did, here's a little background first.

One source I've read said that Tiffany and Co. produces the Vince Lombardi Super Bowl Trophy as well the Super Bowl champion rings. The silver trophy weighs about 250 troy ounces. It's valued at \$100,000.

Usually I fall asleep by the end of the game so I'd never actually seen this trophy. In fact, I don't even remember ever having seen a picture of it.

My mistake—I made an assumption.

You see, about 55 year ago, when I was a Boy Scout, I won a big silver loving cup; it looked a lot like this:



Now my parents had not attended the awards banquet, so I had to walk home lugging this huge silver cup. When I walked in the house with it, my shocked mother accused me of stealing it. She could not believe I had won such a trophy till I showed her my name which a jeweler had engraved on the cup's base.

By then I'd taken off my Scout uniform and dressed in civilian clothes. But now, she wanted a photograph and forced me to put my uniform shirt back on and pose for a picture with the bitter cup.

I hope I have never done such a joy-killing thing to my own children but, God help me and them, I imagine that I have.

Anyhow, in my mind a valuable Super Bowl trophy must look like that old one I once won—a big silver loving cup.

So, here was my Super Bowl ploy—

I slipped \$3 (that's three dollars, not three million) to a stagehand working the game. He agreed to paste a sticker with my Bluefish Books logo under the bottom of the Vince Lombardy Super Bowl Trophy.

That way, when the winning quarterback drank campaign out of the cup at the end of the game, as he upended the cup—it must hold at least two magnums of campaign—as he chugalugged campaign in front of rolling TV cameras, all 98 million viewers would see my Bluefish Books logo on the bottom of the cup.

Here's that beautiful logo:



Alas, it turns out that the real Super Bowl trophy is not a cup at all—it's just a tinfoil football on a pole. The thing looks like this:



Nobody could drink campaign out that thing.

Not even with a straw.

Besides, all either team's quarterbacks drank during the game was Gatorade out of a plastic squeeze bottle.

That's why nobody saw my Super Bowl ad, my Bluefish Books logo glued underneath the bottom. of that trophy.

Somebody at NBC owes me my \$3 back!

However, on the up side, yesterday's *Times-Union* carried an announcement about my friend Barbara White's Bluefish books on the newspaper's bookpage which—it being Super Bowl Sunday—was read by at least 9 or 8 people (not 98 million).

Here's a copy of that notice:

Former T-U Staffer Publishes New Series

Florida Times-Union religion editor Barbara White wrote a weekly column for 15 years. It described her personal

spiritual journey, and readers drew inspiration and encouragement from her popular "Along the Way" column. Editors at Jacksonville's Bluefish Books collected the best of these columns in a four-book series called "Along the Way" (\$16.95). It is available at www.bluefishbooks.info. White, who worked at the paper for more than 25 years, retired in 1994.

So, Barbara's books got a media mention on Super Bowl Sunday.

My books didn't.

Curses! Foiled again!

All I can say, like the Arizona Cardinals, is, "Just you wait'll next year!"

Tuesday, February 03, 2009
And They Shall Be Given New Robes

Can you guess what this photo shows?



You're right!

That is a photo of my best bathrobe held up to the light. The starry constellations are holes burned into the chest by ashes from my pipe.

It's a perfectly good robe; even the elbows provide ventilation:



Besides that, I have a whole drawer full of matching underwear.

But I have this wife.

And on Super Bowl Sunday the thrift store sale offered cloth things at 75% off, so Ginny decided we needed new robes to wear while watching the game. So we bought two new ones. Here is a photo my daughter Jennifer took of my new robe:



My friend Wes was over and Jennifer told him, “Dad looks very distinguished, like that guy on Masterpiece Theatre, you know, Alice Cooper.”

Wes just about choked. “You mean Alistair Cooke,” he said.

“Yeah, that’s what I said,” she said.

Well, it’s easy to confuse the two men. And I really do look almost as distinguished as Alice Cooper.

Sunday Ginny also bought herself a new robe, a dainty thing originally from Victoria’s Secret. Fetching. I’ll not post a photo of her in that one on the internet.

When Gin and I got home with our new robes, I folded my old one up carefully to go to the Lord’s Store, a mission we have supported for years. She pulled it out of the bag. “You can’t send that thing to the poor,” she said, “The poor deserve better stuff than you wear”.

Maybe she has a point.

Once I got in all sorts of embarrassment and trouble by giving cast-off clothing to the poor; I wrote about that adventure in an article entitled “My Great Brassier Hunt”. If you’re interested you can read it at <http://www.cowart.info/Journal%20extracts/brassierhunt/My%20brassier%20hunt.htm>

During the Apostle John’s vision of Heaven in Revelation, he saw a crowd of people around the throne of God and John said, “And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season”.

One great Christian mystic, I think it was Leo Tolstoy, advanced the idea that the only clothes anyone will have in Heaven, is clothing we have given to the poor down here on earth.

I hope he’s wrong about that—if he’s right, then I’ll spend all eternity wandering the golden streets wearing that cutesy tee shirt with the fuzzy kittens on the chest that one of the girls gave me one Christmas. Saints will stare and wonder how such a wimp got past the gate.

After Jennifer left, Wes and I talked about how the English Bible has been transmitted to us. Well, he talked; I listened. Here’s a photo of Wes, I took this afternoon:



I asked him what his sweatshirt says and he said, “ἱὲν ἰῖο ἀείιέ Ἀεῆςῑῆά” (or something like that).

“No. No, what does it say in English”?

“It says, ‘It’s All Greek To Me’”.

That’s his idea of humor.

Wes, a master printer, tells me that the printers of the 1611 King James Bible worked in teams of three to hand-set the sheets in foundry type from the job case matching the notch lines, then the brayer wound ink the frisket with lampblack and linseed oil, and the next man would pull the devil’s tail to print each sheet. A cutter would check the orthography and thus make a printed Bible. On a good day they could print 500 sheets.

But once some madcap printer apprentice pulled a fast one on his boss. In Psalm 119 where the text says something like, “The princes of the earth have persecuted me” he fiddled with a line to make it read “The printers of the earth have persecuted me”.

I told Wes that I had never heard about any of this stuff before.

“Well, how did you think the Bible came to us?” he asked.

I said, “I thought that every night God came down and put Bibles in hotel room dressers. If you steal one, He comes down again the next night and magically put a new Bible in the drawer”.

I live on the cutting edge of biblical higher criticism.

I have long urged Wes to translate the New Testament into modern English for people who have the same level of biblical knowledge as I do.

He has my advice under consideration.

We also talked about my own writing. Long years ago I promised someone that I’d write a book about finding the will of God. I haven’t done it. The subject is far too deep for me. And I’m not qualified. It would take a far better Christian to write such a book.

Knowing and doing the will of the Lord puzzles me. I have enough trouble just simply believing that God tolerates me, much less loves me and has any plan for my life.

While we were at breakfast this morning, before we even ordered coffee, the our friend the waitress came to the table. Her first words were, "The boss put me on time out in the ally because I had a fight with One-Eyed Annie".

How's that for an opening conversation gambit?

She said, "He treats me like a child. He's trying to make me look incompetent".

I comforted her saying, "There's nothing he could do that would make you look more incompetent than you already are".

That's me spreading light and joy.

In these hard economic times she supports three other adults, all unemployed, in her home. Wes and I talked with her about her options, about belief, and about God's faithful provision.

Later, Wes and I drove to a thrift store for him to look at some books on music composition (he's an accomplished organist among other things). While he browsed text books, I spotted a leather chair and ottoman that had just been put on display. Dreamy comfortable!

I called Ginny at work about it and we decided to buy that chair. But I lacked enough cash so I talked it over with the cashier who knocked \$10 off the price. And we loaded it in Wes's pickup truck. And Jennifer, who'd come over to take Fancy, Ginny's lovebird, to the vet, helped us unload it into the living room. Jennifer said that my old chair was more worn than my old robe).

While Wes and Jennifer chatted, I gave my new chair a test drive:



Wes said that the circumstances of finding my new chair and of my getting a warm new robe—it's originally from Bloomingdale's—provides at least a hint of how much God loves and cares for me.

"John," he said, "You were concerned about learning the will of God for your life—now you know. He must want you to become a full-time couch potato".

Thursday, February 05, 2009

Luminous?

My new chair proved a snare.

Yesterday, after breakfast at Dave's Diner with my friend Barbara, she drove me home where I intended to work on those manuscript proof pages.

But first I decided to sit in my new chair to smoke one pipe.

That was about 10 a.m.Zonk!... I woke up at 3 p.m.

That the way I get so much accomplished—I starts slow, then I tapers off.

I like my new chair.

Barbara and I had talked about grief; her daughter died of cancer three months ago. And we talked about truth and why Jesus came into this world.

Barbara referred to the Scripture telling about the trial before Pilate when Jesus said, "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice".

And Pilate said, "What is truth".

He left without waiting for an answer.

The night before this, Jesus had told his disciples, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but by me".

At the same time, speaking of His crucifixion and His return to life again, He told them, "Ye shall be sorrowful but your sorrow shall be turned into joy...but I will see you again and your heart shall rejoice and your joy no man taketh from you".

Grief. Trouble. Truth. Joy.

Jesus was the ultimate realist.

While Barbara told me about grief, truth and joy... I told her about archaeology.

When I was a young man, I aspired to become an archaeologist. Got sidetracked. But my interest in the subject still holds, and each day I follow news of archaeological activities throughout the world.

A big news this week is the underwater discovery of the *HMS Victory* in the English Channel. The ship sank in 1744 and almost a thousand sailors died. The warship's cargo included over 4 tons of gold coins. A Florida-based company has discovered the wreck and is negotiating with the British government about how to divide the treasure.

In New Zealand this week as they study Polynesian migration patterns, archaeologists are using a device called a fluxgate gradiometer to read what lies underground in aboriginal burial sites without disturbing the soil.

But here's the one discovery that really sparked my attention: According to Xinhua News Agency correspondents reporting from Xinjiang in western China, "Archaeologists and local officials in charge of protecting cultural heritage have recovered ruins believed to be the

worship sites of an early Chinese Christian group called Jingjiao”.

The ruins and a stele, an inscribed tablet, there indicate that the Christian religion was well established in China as early as the year 400.

And at that time, Christianity was known by the name Jingjiao (景教), it means the *Luminous Religion*.

That information really struck me—The Luminous Faith.

I checked my dictionary—the word *Luminous* refers to things: Reflecting light evenly and efficiently without glitter...radiant in character or reputation...a glow of light from within...gleaming... bright... an inner beauty... attractive excellence.

Would anyone ever describe my faith life as luminous? Hardly.

Although I am a Christian, by nature I am also a sullen man, bitter, morose, somber, petty, resentful, holding grudges, remembering slights, complaining...

Once last year Ginny teased me saying I hold a Black Belt in whining.

And once—while I happened to be wearing my Incredible Hulk tee shirt with Dr. David Banner turned green and throwing an army tank by its cannon barrel—I got peeved at something; and Ginny observed that, by contrast, when I get upset, I transform into The Incredible Sulk.

After 40 years of marriage, my beautiful bride knows me all too well.

Oh to be a luminous Christian. To have unconverted people who cross my path daily see an attractive excellence, an inner beauty, a radiant character, which would draw them to Christ.

He is the bright and morning star, the express image of God's person.

The Apostle John described the resurrected living Christ saying, “His eyes were as a flame of fire and His feet like unto fine brass as if they burned in a fire...His countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength”.

And somehow those ancient Christians in China reflected Him so that their pagan neighbors spoke of them as the people of the Luminous Faith.

Not glitz and glitter and hype, but reflected light.

Luminosity is reflected. No self-contained light, only reflected glory. His brightness reflected in His people because of their association with the Light of the World.

As Paul said, “Christ in you, the hope of glory”.

During our prayer time together last night, Ginny read a Psalm that says, ““Let all those that seek Thee be joyful and glad in Thee: and let all such as delight in Thy salvation say always, the Lord be praised”.

Luminous Faith—this subject deserves a lot of thought... This morning I think I'll put on my Incredible Hulk tee shirt and snuggle down in my new chair to smoke a pipe and think about it before I begin proofing those manuscript pages...

ZZZZZZ...

Saturday, February 07, 2009 A Day, Bitter And Cold

Temperatures here in Jacksonville yoyo between 81 degrees last week and 18 degrees Friday morning.

Here is a photo I snapped of one of the fountains in our garden:



Poor cherub can hardly toot his horn because of the ice.

Don't let the Chamber of Commerce know I posted this photo. The Chamber lures unsuspecting yankee tourists here with lying tales of warm Florida winters.

Notice if you will, that my middle daughter Eve and her husband Mark sailed for the Bahamas on a cruise ship yesterday. They're off to where it's warm. They're getting out while the getting's good. What is it they say that deserts a freezing ship?

Not only was yesterday cold, it also proved bitter for me.

I suffered a great disappointment that leaves me discouraged.

Same thing happened twice before: once back in the mid 1980s; and once back in 1996. Both those occasions embittered me. I wallowed in despair and self-pity.

But by now, I'd have thought my skin had thickened too much to be wounded the same way again. I was confident that the same thing would never happen again. And even if it did, I believed that I'd matured enough as a Christian that I'd be immune to such bitterness if the same thing ever did happen again.

It did.

Yesterday.

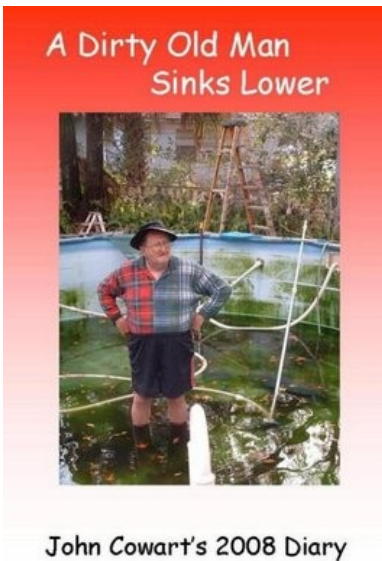
And I find I'm not immune to wounds and bitterness at all.

Oh well, I'll live.

A verse of Scripture comes to my mind:

Writing to folks he described as "wearied and faint in your minds", the Bible writer says, "Ye have not yet resisted unto blood".

Now, isn't that comforting!



However, on the up side, Friday I published my 2008 diary with Bluefish Books under the title of *A Dirty Old Man Sinks Lower*. It is the fourth book in my Dirty Old Man Goes Bad series.

As always, I feel uneasy about publishing such a diary for people to read over my shoulder. I always feel ashamed of my writing whenever I publish anything. I fear that readers will spot my mistakes, see me for what I am, and denounce me as a

Christian fraud—and as a lousy writer.

Being transparent is traumatic.

So I hesitate and feel reluctant to promote any of my own books.

However, as my newspaper columnist friend the late Poke McHenry once told me:

He that tooteth not his own horn,
The same getteth not tooted.

Yes, but like our fountain cherub, I freeze up.

Which reminds me again, please do not let the Chamber of Commerce know that I'm the one who posted that photo of a frozen fountain in Florida on the internet.

Were the Chamber to know the photo's source, they'd dispatch the Chamber Hit Squad to dispatch me.

Tuesday, February 10, 2009
Rejection Collection

Writers Read

When I'm not writing, I'm reading.

I read a lot. I feel this sharpens my mind, keeps me up to breast on what other writers think, and increases my level of suave, distinguished sophistication.

This week, as I begin a new writing project, I want to avoid the temptation to talk instead of write. If I talk about the subject, instead of write about it, then talking relives creative pressure and I never get around to writing. So I won't talk about my next book, instead I'll talk about someone else's—I'll write a book review in keeping with my level of suave, distinguished sophistication.

It's never been filmed to appear on Masterpiece Theatre, but my most recent reading has been *The Rejection Collection: Cartoons You Never Saw, And Never Will See, In The New Yorker*, edited by cartoonist Matthew Diffee (c.2006. Simon & Schuster, Spotlight Entertainment. N.Y. 262 pages).

Anyone visiting our home recently will see why I identify with this panel:



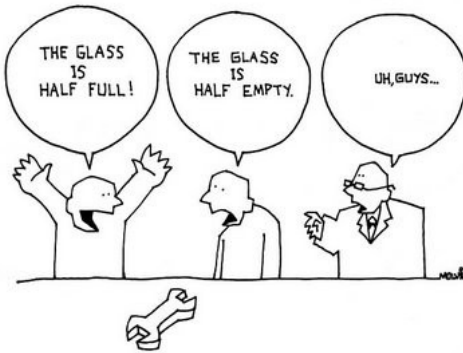
Yes, the cartoons in Diffie's book have all been rejected by New Yorker editors as unsuitable to appear in that swank publication.

Diffie explains that each issue of New Yorker has room for only 20 cartoons, yet 50 regular established cartoonists submit ten cartoons every week—that's 500 right there, besides slush pile entries submitted by hopefuls hoping to break into the magazine.

Thus over a thousand cartoons get reviewed each week and only 20 make it into print. Most are rejected.

The Rejection Collection...er, collects these rejections.

AN OPTIMIST, A PESSIMIST & AN OPTOMETRIST



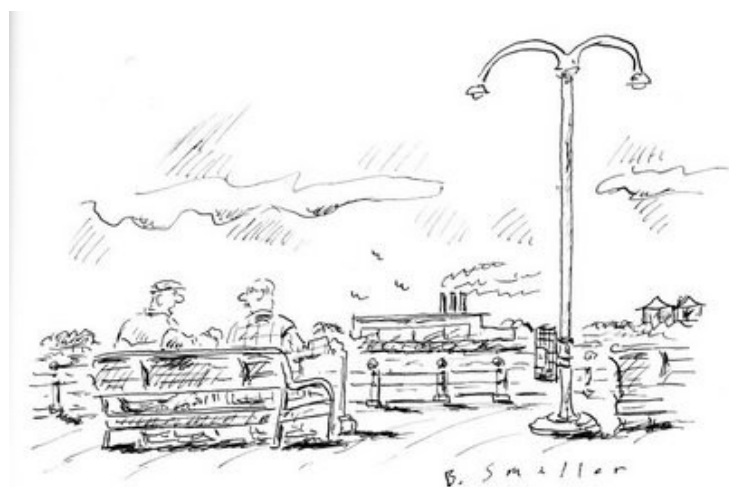
"You're one sick puppy, Nadine."

Those of us with suave, sophisticated taste, may wonder why such fine cartoons might have been rejected.

Diffie said, "Some of these cartoons are too racy, rude, or rowdy; some are too politically incorrect, too weird: a few are probably too dumb; but mostly, I think, they're just too many".



"Well, you certainly were right about the power of prayer, dear!"



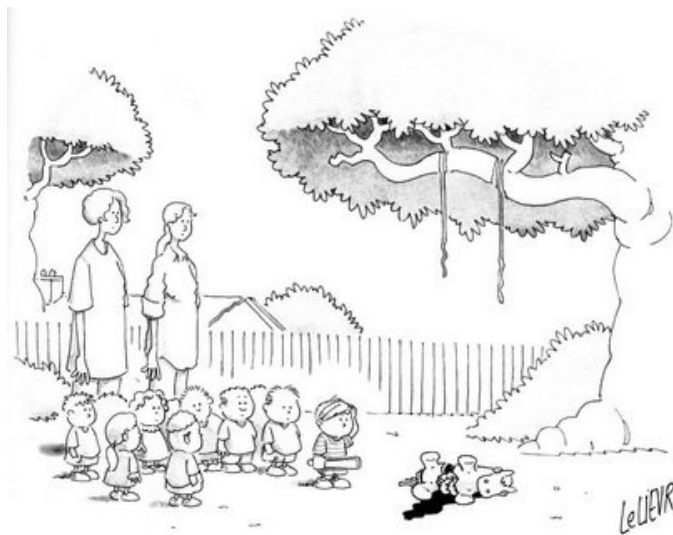
"I can afford to die or I can afford to be sick, but I can't afford to be sick and then die."

Well, maybe it's not too hard to understand why some cartoons were rejected; for instance, some degrade blacks, homosexuals, women, married couples, Arabs, dogs, smokers, cats, and Mexicans.

Not all at the same time, you understand, but one cartoon panel at a time.

The book even contains a few rare cartoons which prove tasteless even to my refined taste.

I'll have to browse the pages again and again to mark the ones which offend me.



Wednesday, February 11, 2009
To Catch A Sparrow---A Thought Train

To catch a sparrow sprinkle salt on its tail.

My grandmother told me that when I was about six years old.

I believed her.

I grabbed a saltshaker from the family table and stalked sparrows in the front yard. Again and again I tried to sneak up on a sparrow. Again and again the birds flitted away. Again and again I failed. Again and again I tired again.

I grew more and more frustrated.

I questioned:

What's wrong with me?

What am I doing wrong?

Why doesn't this work?

Dumb birds!

Eventually—it seems like hours later-- it dawned on my precocious young mind that I'd been acting on faulty information. I'd been made a fool of. I felt gullible. Childish. Betrayed. Stupid.

Any wonder that I matured into a suspicious adult, distrusting authority figures?

Point is: For the past couple of days, memory of my childish exploit with the sparrows replays over and over in my mind. It's like a snatch of a tune that I can't get out of my head.

I don't know why.

I puzzle over the incident wondering if there is some deep spiritual lesson I should get from why I'd remember this childhood embarrassment.

But, if there is any meaning, I can't figure it out.

Why do I keep thinking about this?

Is God, or my subconscious, trying to tell me something?

I looked up the word *Sparrow* in the Bible:

“I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert. I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top”.
—Psalm 102:7

Well, don’t we all know how that feels? But it tells me nothing about why I keep remembering the sparrows and the salt—a thing that happened 65 years ago.

Early this morning Ginny drove me to the doctor’s office for a test. They canceled it. I have to go again tomorrow. Joy, O joy. They are making me come back. I suspect those young nurses have a thing for me. Good thing my wife’s along when I go there.

Another Psalm says, “Yea, the sparrow hath found an house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, even Thine altars, O LORD of hosts, my King, and my God. — Psalm 84:3.

That’s nice.

A pretty picture of little birds nesting safe in the cornice of the temple.

But why do I keep remembering my own childhood sparrow hunt?

This afternoon (Tuesday), my daughter’s former husband, Mike—a young man I greatly admire—came over to help me with a project. He’s a fireman who has won citations for bravery in risking his own life to rescue people in danger. He recently completed a state-level course qualifying him to train other firefighters in Live Fire exercises.

I’m proud of him.

When I called and said I’m in a jam and asked for his help, Mike’s very first words were, “Anything. Where? When? How much?”.

He treated me to lunch at Dave’s Diner (his first time there). As we talked and enjoyed our patty melts, I noticed a burn on his right arm.

Expecting a tale of some heroic rescue, I asked him about the burn.

Alas, he’d burned himself trying to cook hamburgers in the rain on the outdoor grill in his own backyard—the hot grill lid closed on his arm as he tried to flip burgers.

Not all wounds are heroic.

Back to this sparrow thing:

Jesus once said, "Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows".—Luke 12:6

Is that why I keep remembering my childhood sparrow chase?

Does this train of thought lead anywhere?

Is the message that we are not forgotten, that we are valuable even when the world sells us out cheap?

That's a fine thought but it doesn't explain why I keep remembering the salt shaker and sparrows—I just can't shake thinking about that.

After Mike left, overwhelming weariness tired me out. I'm feeling a lot of that recently. I napped in my new chair and woke thinking of the evil king the Prophet Daniel saw in a vision (yes the same Daniel God rescued from the lions' den).

Daniel said of the evil king in the vision, "And he shall speak great words against the most High, and shall wear out the saints of the most High..."

"Wear out the saints" is the phrase I caught.

It was all I could do to struggle awake before Ginny got home from work.

I'm so weary. Long-term, bone-deep weary.

During our prayer time after dinner, Beauty read the passage from Luke's Gospel where as Jesus went up to Jerusalem, He passed through the city of Jericho and a blind man stopped Him by yelling to receive his sight.

Jesus restored the man's sight, and Luke says the man, "followed Him, glorifying God: and all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God".

I'd never noticed it before, but Ginny said, "What had that man been healed to see? He followed Jesus into Jerusalem to see Him crucified".

That sounds so strange: healed just in time to see Him crucified.

That merits some thinking on.

Lots of things deserve serious thought.....

I wonder if I used garlic salt???

Friday, February 13, 2009
A Touching E-Mail

Someone mentioned that yesterday was Abraham Lincoln's birthday... Er, birthday...birthday... O CRAP! I forgot my middle son's birthday; it was last month. I'd forgotten so I sent him this e-mail:

Hi Johnny,

I forgot your birthday.

Didn't even send you an e-card.

Didn't remember till now, almost a month later.

It's not that I don't think of you; it's just that I don't think--

Period!

I'm sorry.

Love, Dad

I felt so proud and humbled when he sent me this reply:

Dad, I love you and think of you often. Yet I never seem to remember to send anyone I know a birthday card. It's not something I'm overly good at. Knowing that folks are there and doing well just seems more important to me than a card or the like. Recently I'm thinking of valentine's day. A complete fabrication that should be ignored. But Lord help the man who does.

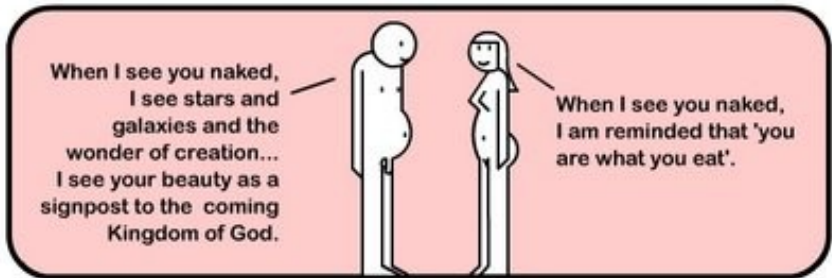
In some ways I think it a good thing. After all, how often are we busy saying something else to the important folks in our lives? Did you remember to pick up the milk is no where near as important as I love you. Then I can ask if you picked up the milk.

So it's a day to remind me to say the words which I guess I've never been very good at. Having emotions and showing them to me seem far distant things from each other. Maybe one day when I grow up I'll see things differently. Or maybe I'm just your basic antisocial slug.

Anyway, I love you Dad. You've been one of the greatest inspirations in my life. You're a great man, a great writer and in my world one of the best people I've ever known. I'm so proud to be your son. Thank you for that....Johnny

Saturday, February 14, 2009
A Day Of Love & Romance

Ginny & I have managed to live in love and harmony (mostly) for 40+ years without paying any attention to Valentine's Day; however, for those who observe the day, here are a few love notes I garnered from the hundreds by cartoonist Jon Birch at <http://asbojesus.wordpress.com/> :



It's what's in your heart and mind...



All you need is love,



I am Grace.



A vision of the Kingdom.



The start of a beautiful relationship.



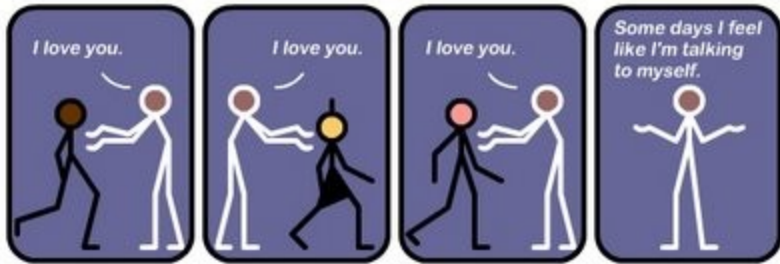
It ain't necessarily so...



Think again.



There was now a third party in their relationship . . and it wasn't Jesus.



Are you listening?

Sunday, February 15, 2009 Romantic Love, Hard Times, A Nice Dinner, A Night Drive, & Angry Shouting

The old man (he's about my age) who runs the news stand approached our table as Ginny and I ate breakfast at Dave's Diner. He said, "You two always look so happy. Every time I see you you're always holding hands and acting lovey-dovey. What's she do, hit you if you're not nice to her?"

He'd noticed that we treat each other with courtesy and that we often talk absorbed with our heads together "like honeymooners or something".

Nicole, one of the waitresses at Dave's, gave us a cute Valentine card. She didn't feel the printed message

was appropriate for us so she had erased it and amended the saying. She called us “lovebirds”. She often calls us that.

Lovebirds?

We are unconscious of our behavior; we just do what’s normal to us.

Being in love is normal.

But later on, after a trip to the library, as we sat on a cement wall in the park in the drizzling rain talking and smoking, we asked each other, “How did we ever make it this far”?

As we drove downtown, Ginny played a Kingston Trio DVD and we sang “Hang Down Your Head, Tom Dooley” along with the trio—music from our youth. So in the park, we talked about the ‘60s music and culture—which mostly went over our heads in those days because we were busy making a living, falling in love, witnessing for Christ, starting our family, deciding what to do with the rest of our lives. Mostly in the ‘60s (and since) we lived oblivious to the world swirling around us.

But as we talked about the early days of our marriage back when we were poor, and especially about raising our children. We questioned how we ever managed.

Ginny said we had two things going for us: the grace of God and ignorance.

We survived because the Lord let us survive and because we didn’t know any better.

We were too naïve to give up.

Looking back, I wonder why we didn’t.

When our children were small, one month I earned a total of \$7 cash money; the next month things improved, I earned \$32.

Bad times.

In those days I worked all sorts of jobs—delivering fuel oil, mowing lawns, flipping burgers, digging graves, cleaning toilets, mopping floors, killing bugs, writing magazine articles, tending dying patients—but however hard I worked, I never earned enough.

For months we lived without electricity or running water. Late at night I'd sneak down to Panama Park with empty plastic milk jugs and draw water from a stand pipe there. We heated our home with wood but having no car at the time I'd scrounge branches and boards along the highway and carry them home on my back. But we kept our children clean and warm and safe and dry and fed (Although on several occasions I stole food—that was a matter of vanity and pride because I did know people who would have given us food had I begged, but I was too vain to ask).

Thank God, we made it—ER, can you thank God for being able to steal food?—Anyhow, I did it and we made it.

But life was tough. It pressed Ginny and me together because all we had was each other and that made all worthwhile.

We lived in HUD housing and drew food stamps but those were never enough. I recall once Ginny and I got up at 3 a.m. and collected beer cans along the road and at a baseball field to turn in to the recycling plant to get cash to buy the kids breakfast when they got up that same morning.

Back in the 1730s, Susannah Wesley, mother of the founder of the Methodist denomination, lived in grinding poverty with her houseful of children. She praised the Lord Christ for helping her make it.

This dedicated Christian lady once said, "I never did want for bread. But then, I had so much care to get it before it was eaten, and to pay for it after, it has often made it very unpleasant to me. And I think to have bread on such terms is the next degree of wretchedness to having none at all."

I understand where she was coming from.

Jesus brings us through—but not without pain and damage.

For instance, I vividly remember having an abscessed tooth and not having money to go to a dentist so I boiled a pair of pliers and pulled out my own tooth myself.

My loving Lord enabled me, but I'm not likely to ever forget that.

I remember once having no money but one single quarter. I tried to use it to make a phone call to an editor who owed me money for a magazine article I wrote—and the pay phone swallowed my quarter and would not give it back.

Bad times.

Once a preacher rebuked us saying, “You two have a siege mentality” and Ginny told him, “That’s because we live under siege”.

We developed an “us against them” attitude. The two of us hung together finding joy in our friendship, fellowship and love.

But by the grace of God we got the kids (our own four, my teenaged son from my former marriage, and several neighborhood kids who practically lived at our house because their own families were in worse shape than ours) we got the kids grown, graduated from high school, then—with many student loans—the ones who wanted to get through college. Then Ginny went back to college and completed her own education.

Our grown children now prosper with good jobs, professional careers, families, and taxes of their own. They tell me they led a happy childhood with many fond memories.

Amazing!

We flourished in those bad times because of God’s grace—and because of our own ignorance. Ginny and I didn’t have sense enough to give up. We didn’t know any better than to keep on going, to try this and try that and endure.

Those hard times bonded us. It was us against the world. All we had was each other and we clung tight. We learned how to value each other, to comfort, to love. Damn right we still hold hands, I’m scared to let go.

Ginny is the best thing that ever happened to me in my whole life.

The highpoint of my life was finding her sitting on a curb waiting for me and I realized that this beautiful woman actually wanted to be with me.

Were anyone to ever write the story of my life, it would be a love story.

Talk about the grace of God!

That's what we did yesterday sitting on the concrete wall ignoring the drizzle of rain—we talked about the grace of God.

In the evening Ginny and I were invited to dinner far out in the wilds of Southside with two young couples, Mike & Laurel and their daughter Anna; Jason & Colette, and their two children (whose names I never heard or have forgotten already). It felt refreshing to be around thriving young families.

Laurel cooked delicious casseroles and Anna baked an almond pound cake served with chocolate-covered strawberries and bananas for desert.

It felt strange to listen in on the conversations and concerns of the young. The guys talked about guns, work, boats, motorcycles, investments and far-off pension plans ("In only 22 years I can retire"). The young ladies talked about magnet schools, commutes, politics, French, and philology. The kids played Trivia Pursuit and showed off Webkin animals.

These three kids appear incredibly bright. Even the 18-month-old baby shines with intelligence and motor dexterity. She has better balance than I do—My arthritis pained me fierce and I shook and wobbled something awful; but nothing wrong with me that the resurrection won't fix.

Anyhow, I marveled at how the baby figured out how to unscrew the lid from her bottle—she figured out how to do it by watching her mother, but she just lacked the strength to get it off her self Very focused.

And Anna, who is in the fourth grade, showed me an essay she wrote which is better plotted than I can do; it's about a scavenger hunt. And she told me about using Power Point software on her computer to prepare illustrated talks at school... Power Point! I can barely cut and paste.

Jason and Colette (we were meeting them for the first time) had read my book *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad* and had nice things to say which gave me a lift. Jason

remarked, "I liked the jokes; she was interested in that religious stuff".

That pleased me. Proves that book does what I want it to do.

Time to drive home.

The plot thickens:

It was a dark and stormy night...

Ginny avoids driving on Interstate 95; I avoid driving at night. She is almost deaf, I have trouble seeing at night. It was raining and glare reflected from headlights on wet, unfamiliar roads.

Lost in the dark wilds of Southside, a section of town we seldom visit.

"Turn right," I said.

She must not have heard me and drove straight through that first intersection.

"Go west," I said.

"It's east," she said.

"Now, go straight," I said.

"What's that road sign," she said.

"Turn left at the..."

See where this is going?

We circled some closed, dark office building with an unmarked batch of streets lacing the area and we started blaming eachother for our confusion.

I may have said something about being married to this left-handed, wrong-headed woman. She may have vigorously offered to let me drive my own damn self.

Louder and louder, we discussed our directions.

Aggravated

Frustrated.

Confused.

Tired.

Lost.

We grew angry and yelled at eachother.

Did this argument signal the disintegration of our 40-year love affair?

No. It merely proved that we were tired human beings, both trying to get to the same place, home, each of us with our own abilities and disabilities. Each of us with our own idea of how to get to where we both wanted to go.

Finally, although I was right and she was wrong **(the management may disagree with the foregoing statement)** ... well, let's leave it there.

Anyhow, by the grace of God and through ignorance, we finally stumbled by chance across a recognizable road—far from where we thought we were—and eventually we wound our way home in fuming silence.

In spite of what the '60s Beatles song said and what many Christians say today, love is not the answer.

Sometimes shutting your mouth and letting her drive is the answer.

Are Ginny and I still in love despite the tension, anger and shouting of that dark and rainy drive?

Yes, we're still in love—but I wouldn't push it right this very moment.

Wednesday, February 18, 2009 A Wristwatch And Blood Sacrifices

Having survived Florida's six or eight days of winter, Ginny and I contemplate Spring gardening. This past weekend we did not actually do any gardening, but we sat out in the yard and planed what we may do.

And we drove to the nursery/hardware store to buy chlorine for the pool, gas for the lawnmower, birdseed, etc.

On our way, we attempted to return a watch.

A few weeks after Christmas, as we walked to Dave's Diner, we'd found a wristwatch near the entrance of a closed store, an area where they load and unload goods. Put it in my pocket intending to locate the owner and return it. Every time I'd go by that business, the place would be closed or I would not have the watch with me.

Forgot about it.

In my effort to read through the Bible this year, I've often fallen asleep over Leviticus—all those laws and arcane descriptions work better than sleeping pills. But Monday this passage perked me up:

And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, If a soul sin, and commit a trespass against the LORD, ... Or have found that which was lost... then it shall be, because he hath sinned, and is guilty, that he shall restore that ... lost thing which he found,... and give it unto him to whom it appertaineth, in the day of his trespass offering. And he shall bring his trespass offering unto the LORD, a ram without blemish out of the flock..., for a trespass offering .. and it shall be forgiven him for any thing of all that he hath done in trespassing therein.

I remembered that watch I'd found.

So Ginny and I made a special side trip to the place we found it and sought the manager who made several phone calls to customers and employees trying to locate the owner.

No body had lost the watch.

Apparently it's mine to keep.

But this non-incident got me to thinking about law and sacrifice.

Most of the Levitical laws relate to decent things decent people do. Common sense things like returning lost property and respecting boundaries, the sort of thing you'd want people to do to you.

Other laws, I frankly wonder about—do I really need God Almighty to tell me not to eat a buzzard?

That's one law (about the only one).I have faithfully kept

But then I come to the rules involving sacrifice. I see a certain beauty there. as Leviticus describes an intricate dance of movement around the blazing altar in the Tabernacle. The killing of animals. The pouring of blood. The burning of meat.

Sacrifices included burnt offerings and sin offerings and peace offerings and heave offerings and drink offerings and wave offerings and meal offerings and thanksgiving offerings.

Joyous, but serious, business.

I see a difference in attitude between myself and those ancient worshipers. When I offer something to the Lord, usually money, I want to see a concrete result. I like to think my gift is going to a specific purpose such as fixing the church air conditioner, buying a new van, feeding starving children, finding a cure for breast cancer—I look for a tangible benefit for my offering.

In contrast, the worshipers in Leviticus looked for the intangible. They brought something extremely valuable to them such as the best bull in the herd or the best lamb in their flock and saw it cut apart and utterly burned on the altar. Every bit gone up in smoke. A sweet savor unto the Lord.

They offered their most valuable because they valued God as magnificent, glorious, exalted, beautiful, precious, invisible, intangible, worthy.

And those ancient worshipers approached the Lord knowing that blood had been shed.

In many churches today Christian worshipers chant, “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us, therefore let us keep the feast”.

My friend Wes constructed a huge (ping-pong table sized) model of the Tabernacle which he uses in teaching Bible lessons. He said the sacrificial system was didactical in that it taught worshipers about the holiness of God and their own place before Him.

The Law acted as a tutor to bring us to Christ.

No one keeps the whole law.

I suspect that most folks act like I do: I try to be a nice guy, I try to be a nice guy—and I try not to get caught when I’m not.

Holiness requires more.

God never said, “Be ye nice”.

He said, “Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy”.

Leviticus even provides sacrifices for people who sinned but didn’t realize it at the time. Our sins differ according to our individual tastes; but just as embezzlers,

robbers, rapists, and horse thieves are collectively labeled *criminals*, so collectively we all fall under the heading of *sinners*.

But here is the wonder:

“The love of God is commended toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”.

Not with the blood of bulls and goats and lambs, but the Lamb of God offered up Himself for us and because He is “the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world” and because He rose from the tomb, the sacrifice of Christ is sufficient for all mankind, for all sin, for all time, and for all eternity.

Makes sense to me.

St. Paul told the Ephesians, “By grace are ye saved through faith, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast”.

And when someone asked Jesus about working for God, He said, “This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent”.

But, you know what? I find it easier to return a wristwatch I don’t really need, than to trust the Lord Christ. For me action is easier than belief. When I take action, I feel I’m in control; on the other hand, when I trust Christ, I must voluntarily relinquish control to Him.

You know what that means?

While in action, I have never eaten a buzzard; in belief, often I have to eat crow.

Friday, February 20, 2009

No Blog Posting Today

I wrote today’s extremely clever and creative blog posting as a Word Document..

I was about to paste it into this space when I realized that what I had to say was neither uplifting, helpful, kind, or even particularly funny.

I chose not to post it.

Sometimes the best thing to say is nothing.

Drat!

Sometimes being a Christian cramps my style.

Saturday, February 21, 2009
Important Medical Information

Friday, Dr. Woody entered the exam room laughing with my x-ray in his hand.

"I've found the trouble," he said, "Your right leg is being held onto your body by a safety pin".

Oh, Crap! What happened is... 60 years ago my mother told me to always wear clean underwear in case I was ever in an accident and had to be taken to the hospital.

I do wear clean underwear... but I wear it a long time. In fact some underwear in my dresser hangs in tatters. So what? Who in the world is ever going to see my underwear?.

However, I keep one newish pair which I never wear except when I go for a doctor's appointment. I wash that pair immediately after each doctor's visit to keep it whiteish. To mark this pair in the washer and separate it from all my others, I keep a safety pin in the waistband.

For my x-ray, I had to dress in this frontless/backless hospital gown thing. Ladies were present so I kept my underpants on.

I heard the doctor and the x-ray technician out in the hall laughing like crazy. My safety pin showed up brilliantly on the film.

Ever notice? The Lord Jesus may save us from our sin, but He does little to protect our dignity.

At Dr. Woody's office I encountered three physicians, the x-ray technician, and six or eight nurses.

And I learned one important bit of medical information:

One of the sweet young lovelies who worked on me wore this smock, material printed with cartoon characters.

Her smock gapes open a tiny bit at the neck.

She wears a fetching black lace bra.

Sunday, February 22, 2009
Big Belly, Poor People

While downtown Saturday, Ginny and I spotted a new garbage can.

We'd never seen one like it before.

We didn't have a camera with us, so we drove downtown again Sunday just to snap a photo of this garbage can in Hemming Park. The marquee in the background is the entrance to Jacksonville's City Hall.



Yes, it is a Big Belly solar powered garbage can which compacts the trash put in it. According to the manufacture's website each of these solar garbage cans weighs 300 pounds and costs \$3,750.00

Now in all fairness, I do not know if the manufacturer put this fine product in Jacksonville's premier park as a promotional

gimmick, or whether our wise city government paid for it with tax money.

Wouldn't surprise me either way.

Being a cynic, I imagine taxpayers bought this much-needed device to replace the park's static garbage cans with plastic liners which cost about \$5 for a box of 25.

Jacksonville can afford Big Belly. After all, I understand that last week President Barack Obama

introduced a \$750 billion economic incentive plan to help financially strapped cities.

But, all the above rant is just background, not the actual subject I want to think and write about.

I'll get to that now:

On tv, in personal conversation, and in overhearing strangers talking—I hear a tone which disturbs me.

It scares me.

This tone rings harsh, mean-spirited, critical—but also somehow right.

I mean, it is sounds justified, like righteous indignation, but it's doesn't ring deep-true. Yet, what is being said probably is superficially true—but it's not the only thing that's true.

All over I'm hearing people voice bitter resentment toward poor people, toward sick or injured people, toward unemployed people, but especially toward people losing their homes.

I hear the term “personal responsibility” thrown out as though it were a curse word.

Ginny and I have never been late with a mortgage payment in the 15 years we've lived in our home. Many of our friends and neighbors say the same. Yet all over the country thousands of other home buyers face foreclosure. TV news says 10% of the homes in America are in default.

The federal government is instituting a program to help these people pay for their homes.

Last week President Obama signed a \$75 billion dollar homeowner relief program.

"The plan I'm announcing focuses on rescuing families who played by the rules and acted responsibly," Obama said, announcing the Homeowner Affordability and Stability Plan, or HASP. He explained this would be done by "refinancing loans for millions of families in traditional mortgages who are underwater or close to it, by modifying loans for families stuck in subprime mortgages they can't afford as a result of skyrocketing interest rates or personal misfortune, and by taking broader steps to keep mortgage rates low so that families can secure loans with affordable monthly payments."

A noble effort?

Yet all around I hear a lot of resentment about helping people whose own poor judgment and lack of responsibility put them in this fix.

I agree, the poor people ought to be like me. My poor judgment and lack of responsibility never got me in... Well, I'd be lying to say that.

I've screwed up so much and so often that the president ought to declare me a one-man federal disaster area. Heck, if President Obama knew me, he'd send in a helicopter.

But my point is I'm disturbed by the antagonism and resentment and bitterness I hear directed toward people who need taxpayer money to avoid being homeless. Or indeed against any person who can not afford the price of a ticket—like that woman with the eight embryonic implants. I've heard good people say, "Let the little bastards die; she should never have had 'em in the first place".

Part of me is inclined to agree; her actions were not very bright.

Problem is God's a realist.

He deals with us on the basis of what is, not what should be.

Now I'm sure that if a hungry kid stood in front of a guy who expresses harsh criticism of the poor, that same guy would buy the kid a burger. We can all slough off starving children at a distance, but when we hear the kid next door hungry, we react differently. That's natural.

But I'm not thinking of individual charity here, but of tax dollars.

And, I've been reading Leviticus where God says:

If thy brother be waxen poor, and fallen in decay with thee; then thou shalt relieve him: yea, though he be a stranger, or a sojourner; that he may live with thee. Take thou no usury of him, or increase: but fear thy God; that thy brother may live with thee.

Hummm.

Relieve him ... that he may live with thee.

What kind of bailout program is that?

It's as though God made some of us self-reliant so we can help people who aren't. He made some of us responsible so we can rescue the irresponsible.

Yes, they were stupid to skate out on thin ice, but once they're in the ice water, my duty is not to stand by the fire saying, "What you should have done..." but to risk my own life trying to pull the stupid SOB's frozen ass out

Yes, that carload of teenagers acted irresponsibly when, joy-riding, they smacked into a telephone pole. Dumb of them. Stupid. No accepting of personal responsibility. But even at the risk of getting burnt, my responsibility is to jerk as many as I can of them out of the fire.

Warn beforehand, rescue afterwards.

It's like God saying that even the dumb should be saved whatever the cost.

The apostle John wrote about this same idea:

Hereby perceive we the love of God, because He laid down His life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

But 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.

Now the government is going to take tax money from you and me.

That's a given.

That's a shame, but that's a given.

Remember the old saying about death and taxes being the only sure things.

And the government is going to spend that tax money on something.

Wise or wobbly, that tax money is going to get spent on something.

Which something?

Helping someone who waxed poor and fallen in decay and facing foreclosure...

Or on solar garbage cans and their ilk?

Monday, February 23, 2009
More Medical Information

During my doctor's appointment last Friday, other than that pin holding my leg on, Dr. Woody said I'm in fine shape—almost::



Wednesday, February 25, 2009
Mules Wearing Snowshoes,
A fascinating (to me) but long posting

My Aunt Hazel, God rest her, collected family ephemera from way back.

She kept these papers in an old candy box.

Years ago, she showed me an 1880s receipt for the sale of alligator hides.

My great-great-great grandfather shot gators in the swamps of South Jacksonville and sold the skins to a local

leather company. He earned \$50 selling the hides for five cents each.

Looks like my ancestor single-handedly put the Florida alligator on the endangered species list.

I'd forgotten about my aunt's ephemera collection until this week when I finished reading James Hammond's book *Florida's Vanishing Trail*.

In the midst of his comprehensive history of south Florida, focusing on the area around the Tamiami Trail (the road which runs east/west across the Everglades between the gulf coast and Miami) Mr. Hammond told me a lot about alligators which, although I'm a Florida native, I never knew before.

"Explorers in the 1700s report thousands of alligators and crocodiles filling every river and stream on Florida's east coast. These hungry predators line the shores awaiting their abundant prey. The annual mullet run brings great swarms of fish literally swimming into their open jaws, and turning peaceful tributaries into 'pots of boiling water' rising 25 feet in the air," Hammond said.

In 1898 at Roberts Lakes during the dry season 10,000 alligators gathered in the shallow water; when hide hunters began firing their rifles, "the shooting caused the alligators to stampede like cattle".

Today in Jacksonville if a single alligator shows up on a golf course, or in a storm drain, or in somebody's swimming pool, the incident makes tv's 6 o'clock news.

Time has not only diminished Florida's alligator population but our water resources as well.

The geology of South Florida forms the Everglades as a state-wide slow seepage of water moving south; the abundant marshgrass laced with hammocks above the swamp, give the area the name A River Of Grass.

Hammond says early visitors to this watercourse noted this about the River of Grass:

"Florida's water supply - then seemingly endless - rises from a reported 2,000 first-magnitude springs, each capable of producing over one million gallons of water per day.

"Historical records by eyewitnesses of the era describe a sudden trembling ground, and a rushing sound

like a mighty hurricane, followed by a phenomena that quickly starts spurting great fountains of water, rapidly covering all the available ground. Days of such a flow form a broad river and eventually a lake.

“Modern travelers no longer witness this magical process. Canal dredging, extensive cutting into natural aquifers for roads, drainage ditches, retention ponds, and thousands of miles of irrigation culverts crisscross the entire face of Florida.

“Only 27 such springs remain”.

For five years author James Hammond spearheaded a research project for State of Florida’s Division of Historical Resources; this project was designed “to assemble all relevant data on the Army Forts of Southwest Florida during the Second and Third Seminole Wars through books, journal accounts, State files and records, and historical archives. A survey project to assemble all periods maps from 1835 - 1858 including civilian and military with landmarks, compass and transit recordings with a view of verifying locations, trail junctions and site recorded locations into an accurate map with GPS coordinates to identify ten (8 Army Forts and two (2) army camps in and around modern-day Collier County...to place this information on the Florida Master Site File”.

The project captured Hammond’s interest so much that he exceeded those perimeters into a comprehensive 170-year history of the entire area including information about the unique flora and fauna.

Great reading!

It’s got everything.

Hammond begins by telling about the three Seminole Indian wars from 1817 to 1858. He includes eye-witness accounts from U.S. soldiers, army records, pioneer memories, and contemporary interviews with Seminole chiefs.

In 1842, one soldier wrote:

“Every leaf seemed to bear some poisonous insect as dangerous as the serpents under foot, and still more dangerous than all the rest, the cunning redskins had slowly retreated before the United States Army; for this war had been going on for years, and they had penetrated

the jungles deep, and here and there cleared the hammocks of timber and built themselves comfortable homes from the bark of the cypress tree; and they defended those homes with that fury that only men driven to desperation can do. Concealing themselves under the dense foliage, covered with Spanish moss, they were indiscernible until they revealed their position by a rifle shot. This, of course, was often too late for some poor comrade who was pushing his way determinedly through the tangle, and with death lurking on every hand.

“The night was made hideous by the howl of wolves, the scream of the panther, the bull-like bellow of the alligator and dismal cry of the loon, interspersed here and there by the sweet notes of the whippoorwill, or the song of the American nightingale, that most beautiful of all songsters, the mocking bird”.

In 1850 a band of U.S. soldiers “stumbled into the camp of Chief Hollata Micco, better known as Billy Bowlegs. It was unoccupied at the time so the men took it upon themselves to destroy the gardens and fruit trees just to see, in the words of one soldier ‘how old Billy will cut up’. They slowly removed some of the fruits and journeyed a short distance away before setting up camp for the night”.

Bowlegs cut up by attacking at the start of the Third Seminole War.

“The Army’s scorched earth policy of capturing the women and children, burning villages and crops, taking all the livestock including cattle and hogs to the nearest depot, and if it was not practical, destroy them. The policy to “shoot warriors on sight” began to take its toll and led up to one of the last battles of the 3rd War.... (On November 28, 1857)

“The Indians, indeed, soon found that in open fight they were wholly unable to cope with the whites. They adopted the true policy of scattering themselves in small detachments, striking a sudden blow upon some exposed point, and then taking refuge in the almost inaccessible swamps”.

One army veteran said, “Of all my experience of hardships in three wars, that which I experienced in Florida was the worst”.

As the Third Seminole War wound down, white pioneer families, hunters, trappers, preachers, and farmers, entered the area.

In 1900, planter Walter Langford brought in a special hybridized grapefruit strain. Seedless, tasty and fast growing, Langford's grapefruit changed the face of South Florida.

To get his crop north to market, Langford lay down 14 miles of rail line between his grove and the town of Everglade. Soon 17,000 wooden crates of grapefruit moved over those rails each season.

"In 1911, land in Southwest Florida was considered swamp overflow lands. The average price going for an acre of land was between 12 and 30 cents," Hammond says.

In 1915 state legislators along with business men from the east and west coast of Florida formulated a plan to put a highway through the Everglades from Miami to the west coast of Florida. It would be called the Tamiami Trail.

Hammond says, "When the Tamiami Trail was completed in 1928, not enough culverts were placed at the bridge built over the river, and the Turner River Road, Birdon Road, and Wagon Wheel roads built later, reduced the river's flow and according to one report 'resulted in several undesirable hydrological and biological consequences affecting about 18,000 acres of wetlands.

"The report, completed in 1981, went on to state that construction of Turner Road and Turner canal severed the Turner River from its upper drainage basin. Surface water, which normally contributed to the River's natural stages and discharges, bypassed the River, making much of the natural stream virtually unusable.

"River waters became shallow and stagnant. The stream bed began filling with detritus, promoting the growth of emergent thickets of giant cutgrass. By cutting off much of the Turner River's water sources, the channel's depth was decreased. Shallow waters experienced higher temperatures, less dissolved oxygen, and different successional processes in and along the River. All of these consequences also influenced the River's aquatic fauna'".

Yes, but transportation availability also opened more agricultural vistas.

For instance, swamp logging operations increased.

In 1926, lumberjacks cut down single bald cypress tree so large it took ten railroad cars to carry that one tree's lumber to a sawmill.

Hammond's book includes photographs of this logging operation as well as photos from all phases of south Florida history and detailed maps contemporary with each era.

One logger, Captain Jaudon, sometimes called the father of the Tamiami Trail, discovered that sugar cane flourished in the rich, drained soil of the Everglades. He intended to distill rum and export sugar to the north. By 1935, his plan included planting 75,000 acres under sugar cane cultivation.

The thick mud and marl of the fields bogged down the mules pulling harvest wagons so Jaudon's workers outfitted the mules with modified snowshoes to keep them from getting stuck.

Tomato plants also flourished in the drained marl. During the 1930s over 1,200 workers earned \$1.25 a day while working in area tomato fields. They were paid in company-issued money called "babitt or jigaloo," which was good only for purchases at the company store

Over the years different people entertained different ideas about how South Florida land should be—developed, protected, exploited, preserved—these different ideas generate different tensions which *Florida's Vanishing Trail* examines.

Why, in 1902, virtual war broke out between game wardens and plume-hunters who killed birds in Everglades rookeries to sell the feathers to northern milliners to decorate ladies' hats.

That year, one ounce of gold sold for less than one ounce of feathers!.

I could wish that Hammond told more about the 1928 Lake Okeechobee Hurricane in which over 1,800 people drown in the town of Belle Glade, but maybe my geography is hazy and that area lies outside his criteria for this book.

“On December 6, 1947, President Harry S. Truman speaking to the whole nation by radio, dedicated with great fanfare, Everglades National Park from Everglades City, to the people of the United States,” Hammond says.

Everglades National Park was the first Park in the United States established to protect biological resources instead of the usual geological ones.

Hammond says, “Collier County is surrounded by the Picayune Strand State Forest, the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve, the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge, the Big Cypress National Preserve, and, along the entire southern border, the Everglades National Park”.

Florida's Vanishing Trail tells about the largest complex of Indian burial mounds ever found in Florida, about pioneer homesteads, outlaw hide-outs, 1800s fortifications, and many other historical and archaeological sites...

But...

Hammond also says that, “Almost no historic structures or sites on the National Register of Historical Places today can be visited by the general public in 5 of the largest State and Federal Parks in South Florida. This encompasses a vast 21,000 square-mile area that can best be described as ‘historically threadbare’. It should also be noted that there is no historical district (an area to incorporate any past place or communities) between Miami on the east coast and Naples on the west coast....

“It is also interesting to note that no development company has ever found any archaeological sites where they were required to look for one by Florida law in Collier County, where eventually a historical marker was placed.

“Most historians familiar with the process of developers hiring “out of town” consultants to do their archaeological surveys before beginning any development see the process as a fast food operation. Opinions are strong in the belief that instead of being paid to find any historical sites some are actually being ‘paid to not find them”.’

Hammond says that in December, 1988, the Tamiami Trail was approved by the State of Florida as a designated “Florida Scenic Highway.” In June, 2000, a 50- mile stretch

of the Tamiami Trail was designated on the Federal level as a "National Scenic Byway."

Yet, he says, "Certain vested interests" without the knowledge of all the people and groups involved, came before the M.P.O. (Metropolitan Planning Organization) Board in early 2005 and requested the State and National designations be removed.

"In May of 2005 the M.P.O. Board voted to remove the Scenic Highway designation. When the State and Federal Authorities received the request to remove the designations they were astonished The battle to keep the designation intact was still going strong when on September 14, 2007 the M.P.O. reiterated its position at a public meeting, and proceeded with the motion to "dedesignate" the stretch of highway on the Tamiami Trail. It was not without protest on the part of a large group of organizations.

Yes, James Hammond's book describes many types of conflict—plume-poachers vs wardens, Indians vs soldiers, loggers vs farmers, developers vs conservationists, mules vs mud—and yet the swamp remains.

But sometimes it looks like the gators—of one kind or another—are winning.

James Hammond's *Florida's Vanishing Trail* is available at <http://stores.lulu.com/jameshammond7>

You may not have guessed it, but this book really captured my interest.

Florida history interests me.

But, for tomorrow's posting, I'll write my critique of Tolstoy's *War & Peace*.

Thursday, February 26, 2009 Time On My Mind

My poor beautiful wife!

Yesterday her job required that my poor Ginny attend an all day-loooong strategy meeting across town.

Management required meeting participants to turn off cell phones.

Time dragged.

She could well have taught the whole seminar, but she had to just sit through it and listen.

Ginny got so bored she just had to check the time; she turned her phone on to look at the digital display—It was not even 10 a.m. yet!

She endured.

While Ginny was at that interminable meeting, our friend Barbara White and I enjoyed breakfast at Dave's Dinner where we discussed the nature of time.

Barbara takes some sort of class at her church.

Voluntarily taking it.

Beats me why.

Anyhow, she explained that the word *past* refers to things that have already happened; that the word *future* refers to things that have not happened yet; and that we live in the present, right-now moment.

She compared time to the thin line cursor on my computer screen moving from left to right. That spider-web-thin line is the present moment. As it moves, it constantly creates the past.

She quoted the Psalm that says our times are in God's hand. And she said we tend to remember the wrong things from our times past. We easily forget things God told us to remember, but remember--and dwell on—things best forgotten. We forget the good God has done for us, and remember the bad times in our lives.

I ventured my deep understanding of Einstein's Theory of Relativity; that the faster we move, the closer we are to being in two different places at once. The quicker you move from here to there, the closer you get to being both here and there at the same time.

Therefore, God must be very fast indeed because He is omnipresent, in all places at all times.

I love and find great comfort in St. Paul's observation about time, "Now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face".

What a delight and wonder to look forward to!

Once years ago my youngest son, Donald, while a physics student interning at Los Alamos Nuclear Labs,

tried to explain Chaos Theory and String Theory to me; I vaguely recollect that those theories have something to do with time's nature.

And, in his February 18th post, my e-friend Jon in Great Britain (and the 27 people who comment on his posting) all discuss Christian concepts of time exhaustively; you'll find them at <http://asbojesus.wordpress.com/>

I didn't contribute to that discussion.

Thinking makes my brain hurt.

Like Charlie Brown's dog Snoopy, all I need to know is supertime.

At present, all this reminds me of one of those rejected *New Yorker* cartoons:



Also, all this thinking about time eases me into remembering with a deep hearthunger longing what I consider the single most beautiful passage in the whole Bible, the words of King Solomon in Ecclesiastes:

To every thing there is a season,
And a time to every purpose
under the heaven:
A time to be born,
And a time to die;

A time to plant,
 And a time to pluck up that
which is planted;
A time to kill,
 And a time to heal;
A time to break down,
 And a time to build up;
A time to weep,
 And a time to laugh;
A time to mourn,
 And a time to dance;
A time to cast away stones,
 And a time to gather stones
together;
A time to embrace,
 And a time to refrain from
embracing;
A time to get,
 And a time to lose;
A time to keep,
 And a time to cast away;
A time to rend,
 And a time to sew;
A time to keep silence,
 And a time to speak;
A time to love,
 And a time to hate;
A time of war,
 And a time of peace. ...
God hath made every thing beautiful in His
time:...
And He hath placed *yearning* in the hearts of
men...

Friday, February 27, 2009
Winter Weary?

Yesterday I hung my winter clothes back in the closet.

Yes our eight or ten days of Winter here in north Florida proved grueling, (Remember that photo I took on Feb. 6th?) but Ginny and I survived.

Now cold weather appears to have passed; tv weather guy predicts mid 80s temperature by Saturday; so I packed away my parka and mukluks.

This morning I put on my swimming trunks and began cleaning the pool.

I haven't cleaned the pool since November; King Algae reigns.

If the tiniest bit of algae remains in the water, it spreads green slime on walls and bottom. In a few weeks it turns our pristine pool into thick green soup.

I should have kept it down.

But I didn't.

Some spiritual lesson here? Yes, for several weeks now, I've had algae of the soul. I need a good scouring—with the Christian equivalent of chlorine (whatever that is). My filter is clogged.

I'm reluctant to read the Scripture; just don't have the energy for it. I neglect prayer. I waste time looking at naked internet ladies again. I find even the thought of church attendance loathsome. I avoid witnessing to people I previously intended to talk with about their souls. I'm ignoring my diet. I regard the poor as a nuisance.

Spiritual algae—I wallow in it.

Maybe it's just the doldrums of Winter. I'd like to think so...

But come right down to it, I'm me just being me.

Lord, have mercy on John Cowart... Green pastures, not green algae, please, Sir.

Here's Jon's take on the matter:



A heart felt prayer.

Different subject:

Tuesday night, Feb. 24th) President Obama addressed a joint session of Congress.

Concerning education, he said that learning is not just for kids.

"Tonight," he said, "I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training... this country needs and values the talents of every American".

In the light of that, Ginny and I have been discussing how to enhancing our own education. Certainly not by going back to a classroom; I hated school when I was there. Maybe something on-line. I'm considering advanced rescue training, Latin, computer stuff, or some subject altogether unfamiliar. We've even talked about square dancing. We'll settle on something soon. But we do plan to do it.

Another thing the President encouraged was for Americans to express consumer confidence in the economy. So, this morning I bought two books I've been hesitating to buy for six weeks.

I didn't vote for either of the two major candidates (see my November 2008 postings in the blog archive if you really care about political stuff more than I do), but once a President is elected, I'll do what little things I can to support him and the nation.

I always pray that politicians know more about what's going on than I think they do.

Hummm... Can you get a billion dollar federal grant for a scaled-down algae eradication project (i.e. Fight unemployment by hiring a pool boy).

Would that qualify as one of those Green Projects the President was pushing?

Last night Ginny and I stayed up way too late watching Anthony Hopkins and Jessica Lange in *Titus*, a DVD film version of Shakespeare's first play, *Titus Andronicus*. We watched the play for hours, then stayed up even later talking about it. Vengeance, rape, murder, mutilation, manipulation, betrayal, and Roman Legionaries on motorcycles--Great fun!

Worth staying up late to watch; But I'm paying for it this morning.

Sunday, March 01, 2009
A Silly Saturday

A hunt for missing potholders, the ones with chicken heads, started the silliness.

Someone in this house (I refrain from naming names) in a deep-seated commitment to sharing in household chores, cleaned the kitchen back in October or November.

Yesterday that person's wife began looking for her chicken-headed pot holders—not in the potholder tray, not in the linen closet, not in any kitchen drawers, not in a cupboard.

Where could they be?

I could not remember.

I know they were there. Now, they're not.

Someone may have moved them someplace else.

I encouraged her to use the lobster pot holders, or the ones with snowmen; but that woman insisted on finding the chicken ones.

Now, a year or two ago our dishwashing machine broke down. We've never repaired it—too expensive and with only two of us in the house, it's just as easy to wash dishes by hand.

That wife knowing the way the other person's brain sometimes works (or doesn't) said, "I'd better check the dishwasher"..

There she discovered two cutting boards which had gone missing, a tall pillar candle in a glass holder, her two chicken-headed pot holders, and a Christmas present I'd hidden but forgotten.

Ginny will tease me about that forgotten cache till Judgment Day.

Hey, when I clean the kitchen, I clean the kitchen.

That incident started us on a day of silliness. Like two pre-teen school kids we laughed over inane jokes which would make no sense to anyone else. They were only funny because we were telling them to each other. We caught a bright emerald grasshopper in the garden and talked about him for 20 minutes; great fun, but we really need to get out more.

Just having fun together for no other reason than we were together.

In the afternoon, after a trip to the library, I discovered something I've never known before about this mysterious woman I've been married to for 40 years.

As we waited for our lunch to arrive in the restaurant, Ginny scanned some printed pages from her purse. When I asked, she explained that the pages were her four-page checklist of Agatha Christie mystery novels. Ginny said one of her life goals is to read every novel Agatha Christie ever wrote—all 80+ of them as well as over 160 short stories. Ginny has checked off as read about half her Christie reading list.

I never before knew that reading those was one of Ginny's goals.

Wonder what else she intends?

I've never read an Agatha Christie novel. But, I once fell asleep during a Masterpiece Theatre showing of a Miss. Jane Marple mystery; does that count?

It's good that Ginny and I have so much in common.

But, alas, a dark cloud arises on our horizon:

The taskmaster at Ginny's office has dispatched her to an out-of-town convention later this month. She tried to get out of it, but can't because the office considers her indispensable for all activities--except a pay raise.

This will be the first time in about 30 years we've been separated overnight.

We both find the prospect traumatic.

We like being together.

We have fun.

No possibility of my going with her, so being a dirty-minded old man I immediately envisioned what might happen—I've heard tales about beautiful women at out-of-town conventions.

Hey, even after 40 years of marriage, she's still a babe.

Remember Tailhook?

I told her to be sure to take her pepper-spray to fend off admirers, the horny cads.

Being a Christian husband at peace with the Lord and serenely confident of His daily protection, I also entertained visions of traffic accidents, plane crashes, hotel fires, and even a nuclear attack on one city or the other while she's gone. I believe you can never be too paranoid

No problem in any of these scenarios.

If we both survive we have a pre-designated contact point in another place.

If only one survives, the other will grieve but carry on.

If neither of us survives, we'll meet before the throne of God—where she will tell all the assembled saints from time and eternity about me and the stuff in the dishwasher.

That's ok.

While she's out of town, I plan to clean the kitchen again.

Tuesday, March 03, 2009

A Fun Hodgepodge

Sunday's *Florida Times-Union* newspaper ran this notice about our friend Barbara White's books:

Familiar Voice

For 15 years, award-winning Florida Times-Union religion editor Barbara White, now retired, wrote a weekly T-U column profiling her personal spiritual journey. Thousands of readers followed her accounts drawing inspiration and encouragement from her popular *Along The Way* column.

Recently, Jacksonville's Bluefish Books collected the best of these columns for a series of four *Along The Way* books.

"I write about trying to live the Christian life and failing and trying again," White said, "God loves us just as we are—and too much to let us stay that way".

Her first *Along The Way* book is available at www.bluefishbooks.info.

Ginny and I have known Barbara for about 30 years; all I can say is that she lives what she writes. I wish

Barbara's books circulated more. They carry the potential of becoming spiritual classics.

Monday my friend Wes treated me to breakfast at Dave's Diner where we discussed the process of formatting the Pentateuch as advanced by proponents of Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis. Wes denounced the presuppositions and conclusions of these critics, while I applauded their initial observations.

In the midst of this highfalutin theological discussion, we laughed like crazy over the waitress' Midol joke (which need not be repeated here). The three of us laughed so hard that other customers stared and the cook came out of his kitchen to see what was so funny. That made us laugh harder.

Once Wes and I arrived back at my house and got our pipes stoked with fine tobacco, we talked about unemployment, foreclosures, financial crisis, bankruptcy, Depression, bailouts and taxes.

Then, our conversation turned serious:

Recently a young pastor from out of town called Wes asking advice about dealing with an adolescent in his flock who is tormented by a poltergeist.

The unclean spirit has manifested itself in visions of a black hand, by physical fires, and by throwing heavy objects.

Wes has previous experience confronting demons; I have none.

Wes traveled out of town to consult the pastor. He advised first eliminating natural phenomena, such as emotional, mental or physical illness, attention seeking, or outright fakery, before looking at occult influences.

Wes says we face two equally mistaken attitudes when it comes to unclean spirits: first, we tend to ignore or disbelieve their existence; or secondly, we tend to nurse an unhealthy interest in them. Either attitude is counterproductive to life and godliness.

I'm glad of this reminder. I tend to think I fight a lone battle by myself against circumstances without a spiritual dimension. I forget that St Paul said, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against

powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places”.

On a happier note:

Wes brought me a typescript diary which a young Jacksonville woman wrote in 1942, the first year of World War II.

After Wes left, I read the whole text in one sitting. Fascinating! Filled with zest and breathless energy, innocence, and curiosity.

What a delight!

She was 17 and a college freshman when she wrote:

“This morning I did the most awful thing that I have ever done—I’m still mortified to death & I still don’t see how I managed to let it happen!

“Something happened to my sense of time ‘cause at 10:10 I heard Tish coming up from her 9:00 class & realized that I should have been in English class at 10:00! You should have seen me dash! I got there 15 minutes late... That’s no way to act!”

On July 12, 1942, she describes her first-ever kiss:

“Charlie kissed me tonite for the first time! I mean, on my lips. I got all kinds of tingles all over me & I almost felt like crying! It was awful & wonderful & everything all at the same time. I had really not intended to let him do it ‘til the end of the summer, but I just could not hold out any longer”.

She and Charlie married and lived together for, I believe, over 50 years.

I knew them as an elderly couple; she survived him by a few years before her own death. I wish I’d known them young.

Last night, as Ginny and I were praying after dinner, the telephone right beside us rang. So we put God on hold while I answered the incoming call.

The young lady on the phone said she’d called to let me know that she’d read my March 1st posting (about the chicken-headed potholders) on her computer at work and started laughing. A coworker came up to read over her shoulder and started laughing too. Soon five ladies

clustered around the computer to laugh at me and those potholders.

That news gave me such a lift. So often I feel as though no one reads my stuff and I'm just typing on air. I wonder why I bother writing. It makes me happy to know that there are a few readers out there.

After I hung up the phone, Ginny and I resumed praying—the Lord God was still on the line waiting patiently for us.

He always is.

Wednesday, March 04, 2009

Transcribing On The Cutting Edge

Reading that young girl's 1942 diary Monday, reminded me of how remiss I've been in transcribing all those diary notebooks Barbara White entrusted to me for eventual publication. So Tuesday I typed another few pages into the computer.

Understand please, that I do not actually know how to type—a strange confession for a writer, but I never learned how. And I've only been a free-lance writer for 30+ years.

To change Barbara's handwritten text into computerease, I follow the lines of her hand-written text with the forefinger of my left hand, and punch computer keys with the forefinger of my right hand.

That's the way it works as I straddle the cutting edge of high-tech electronic communications.

Ouch!

God made a serious mistake in judgment in laying this task on my heart. Had He known what He was doing, He'd at least have picked someone who knows how to type.

And I dare not outsource the task. The last time I let someone else take off manuscript pages to transcribe for me, the irreplaceable pages ended up in a dumpster. That experience spooked me. I'm leery; it makes me think I'm the only person who can be trusted with one-of-a-kind autograph pages.

Or maybe I'm just a control freak.

Whatever. The task is worth doing. Here is a section of text I transcribed yesterday:

August 6, 1981: I am walking through a shadowed valley and it is sometimes hard for me to see very clearly when the shadows are so dense. But this morning, He sent a ray of light.

Somewhere I read that God does not have a planned end for us, just a planned going—and for some reason I took that to mean He only cares about the kind of person we are—not the things like our jobs and so forth.

And I am so mixed and uncertain about work/job. But He does not ignore anything in our lives.

Who—and Whose—I am is more important than what I do to earn money, but He knows and cares about it all.

Nothing is too small for His concern.

And He loves me.

Thursday, March 05, 2009
Today's Posting Is Brought To You By The
Number Five,
Wal-Mart, And Smith & Wesson

Yesterday I wasted too many hours trying to understand a passage of Scripture that has nothing to do with me.

Sometimes I get on one of these kicks, chasing intellectual rabbits instead of paying attention to work or my own clear-cut duties.

While chasing rabbits is fun, neither the kingdom of God on earth nor my own happiness depends on my understanding everything mentioned in the Bible.

I refer to the book of Numbers, Chapter 5, verses 11-32, in which a jealous husband could take his suspected wife to the Tabernacle where the priest would write a terrible curse on a parchment.

He'd wash the ink off the page, mix the inky water with dirt off the floor, have the accused woman drink it, and if she were guilty her belly would swell and her thigh rot. But, if she were innocent, nothing would happen.

Is this really in the Bible?

Sounds like a voodoo ritual to me.

While the law allowed for this ritual, there is no record in the Bible of anybody actually doing it.

Commentators say this ritual was instituted to protect women from abuse by jealous husbands. In other places, the law stipulated that an proven adulterous couple could be stoned to death, both the male and the female.

In the New Testament, when a woman caught in the act of adultery was brought before Jesus and the crowd wanted to stone her, He said, "Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone" and the once indignant crowd melted away without anybody throwing anything. And Jesus told the woman, "Go and sin no more".

Numbers Five makes no sense to me.

It sounds like some sort of magic charm.

It just doesn't fit the overall tone of Scripture.

And my Bible study tools aren't any help at all; they just leave me more confused.

I'd happened to read Numbers Five in the course of my normal morning Bible reading yesterday. When I read that strange passage, it sparked a memory of what I'd read in this newspaper article from Sunday's paper:

A News Services article in the "World Briefs" section on page A-8 in the March 1st *Florida Times-Union* reports:

Chechnya: President Defends Women's Deaths

GROZNY—The bull-necked president of Chechnya emerged from afternoon prayers at the mosque and explained why seven young women who had been shot in the head deserved to die.

Ramzan Kadyrov said the women, whose bodies were found dumped by the roadside, had "loose morals" and were rightfully shot by male relatives in honor killings.

He is carrying out a campaign to impose Islamic values and strengthen the traditional customs of predominantly Muslim Chechnya, to blunt the appeal of hardline Islamic separatist and shore up his power.

Then, last night's tv news reported this news item from right here in Florida:

HOMESTEAD, FLA. - Police are investigating after a woman was injured during a shooting at a Wal-mart super center in Homestead, police said.

Homestead police said the incident happened at the garden center section of the store at 33501 S. Dixie Highway. Police said the victim was an employee at the store and the suspected shooter was her boyfriend.

Police said the man shot the woman several times and she was transported to Jackson Memorial Hospital by air rescue.

Google news says a similar shooting incident involving an estranged couple happened Monday at another Wal-Mart in Arizona.

My impression is that in modern times, all too many workplace shootings involve estranged couples when the jealous one takes a gun to settle volatile emotional matters.

In the light of what's happening today in Muslim lands, in Wal-Marts, and in workplaces all over, maybe the Mosaic Law's provision to settle domestic tensions with a washed-away curse and dirt off the tabernacle floor—maybe that odd ritual makes more sense than I first thought.

Friday, March 06, 2009

A Man For One Season

Thursday I continued transcribing for eventual publication all those hand-written diaries of Barbara White's. Their dates range from May, 1976, through 2003. My typing of the things now approaches December of 1981.

They tell me adversity is good for my soul.

They lie.

Anyhow, the last entry I transcribed speaks to my condition.

On November 26, 1981, Barbara wrote:

There is a seasonal nature in Christian experience...There is no instant maturity. Time either works for us or against us. If it rains on you and you never bring forth fruit, you haven't used your time right.

Spring—All Christian life begins in the Spring. That's the time for multiplication of the seed, blossoms, bees.

Summer—Summer is when the Lord puts the heat on—and sends the rain. It's a time of growth and maturity. Vines don't bear fruit unless there is first a Summer.

Fall—Fall is the harvest time. Thanksgiving. In-gathering. God collects fruit.

In Fall, get all you can, then can all you get.

Winter—The winter experience prepares for Spring. What happens to fruit in Winter? Don't panic. Spring is coming. Every child of God has seasons of Winter. Rest in God and prepare your tools for Spring. Fruit bearing in Winter is unusual—and probably plastic.

Every tree of God is an evergreen. No dried up shriveled up trees.

God never demands fruit out of season.

In Winter, the accuser attacks us asking, "Where is your fruit? ". The accuser accuses us of spiritual laziness, being barren, unprofitable. He questions, "Why is not God doing something?"

My job is to cooperate with God in all my seasons.

By Barbara's criteria, I'm a man of one season.

Winter hell!

I'm a walking, talking spiritual Ice Age.

A one-man glacier.

But, I'm not alone.

Wednesday *Business Week* magazine released a list of the ten unhappiest cities in the United States; their survey looked at divorce, crime, unemployment, depression, suicide, and cloudy days to determine which cities were not very happy.

Jacksonville ranks number six on that list.

Broken down in sections, the *Business Week* survey says Jacksonville is #2 in depression, #23 in crime, and

#9 in suicides. One high point—the survey lists Jacksonville as #144 in cloudy days....

Bunch of damn yankees! If that's what you think of us, stay home. Why do droves of you move here—maybe that's what makes the rest of us so miserable.

Hey, we icemen deserve a rant now and then.

Saturday, March 07, 2009

Practical Stichomancy

While digging in the back closet for a book I wanted (books clog all our closets), I ran across a gag gift a friend gave me for Christmas a few years ago

It was a plastic Jesus action figure with flexible limbs for posing.

Seeing it struck a cord.

Once when Fred and Johnny, my two older sons from my first marriage, were little fellows, they had seen numerous tv ads pushing some army soldier action figure for little boys. Looking at the tv promotions you'd think these things came with exploding bombs, a flame-throwing tank, strafing jets, and real hand grenades.

The boys yearned for this thing. It captured their imagination and sparked dreams of battle, conquest and victory.

My first wife and I entered combat with mobs of other parents at the Toyzilla Mega-Mart and in only a couple of hours shopping we acquired two of these soldier action figures.

Christmas morning the boys unwrapped their presents.

One of the guys, I forget which one, said, "Dad, it's only a doll".

When I found that Jesus action figure in the closet, I remembered that incident with my older sons because so often I've heard things about Jesus, especially when religious meetings are being promoted, that made me expect Him to walk on water.

I'd build up my hopes and expect to see tongues of flame, showers of gold flakes falling on the congregation,

souls gloriously converted, blind people walking, miracles happening, Jacksonville transformed.

But when I 'd go to the event—It's only a doll.

Other Christians seem to find edification in such an environment, in such circumstances.

I end up disappointed.

Oh well, I could not be disillusioned in religious meetings were I not operating under some illusion in the first place.

In my actually experience, walking with Jesus has been a quite affair. A slow daily progression of trial and error, failure and repentance, mini-deaths and mini resurrections of my soul.

Don't get me wrong. Jesus is Lord. The mighty God, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He died on the cross and rose, Prince of Life, from tomb. He lives and acts in today's world. But in my experience, I've been most aware of Him in Hype-free religion.

Maybe that's just me.

He meets each person at their own level. He does not run an assembly line. We each encounter Him at our own speed.

One of the ways I become aware of Him most often is through the Bible.

But reading the Bible often cramps my style.

Take the Friends Of The Library Book Sale this weekend.

Every year since the early 1980s Ginny and I have attended this annual sale where tens of thousands of books go on sale for one or two dollars each. The stock comes from old books culled from the public library's collections as well as from thousands of volumes donated by anyone clearing off their own shelves. When I cull the eleven bookcases cluttering our house, I donate most of my discards to the Friend's book sale.

When we go to the sale, we carry empty shopping bags to fill. We enter a trance-like state of coveting, materialism, book-lust, acquisitiveness, greed and glee.... Wow! Look What I Found!

It's not unheard of for us to fill the trunk of the car (and the back seat) with new-bought used books.

I've looked forward to this year's sale for months.

Yesterday, during my normal Bible reading, I ran across the phrases, "Godliness with contentment is great gain... Having food and raiment let us therewith be content... Be content with such things as ye have".

Struck a worrisome cord.

Be content with such books as I already have??? But Lord, what if I miss a real bargain? What if I miss filling a gap in my Florida History collection? What if there's a Gutenberg Bible just laying on the table and nobody else sees it first?

Be content with such things as ye have.

The Lord God can be so unreasonable at times!

I'm a book person for Heaven's sake!

Maybe I'm mis-reading the Scripture.

There's got to be a loophole.

Can these isolated phrases from the Bible be a trustworthy guide in my practical daily life 2,000 years after they were written to some Greeks who probably didn't even own eleven bookcases?

After all stichomancy is a pagan practice.

What? You've never heard of stichomancy? It's a common enough practice among Christians. Scholars call the practice by a lot of names: *sortes biblicae*, *sortes sanctorum*, *libromancy*, or *bibliomancy*—it all essentially is the same thing.

It means the practice of divination by means of a sacred text. Most commonly in modern times it means standing a Bible on its spine, letting it fall open at random, and pointing to a verse with your eyes closed.

The idea is that the Holy Spirit will make your finger land on a text which God wants you to use to guide your life for that day or to tell you the future..

This practice uses the Bible as a voodoo fetish, crystal ball, or a rabbit-foot charm.

This practice kind of snuck into Christianity, maybe because of the high regard in which we hold God's Word, but the practice is rooted in paganism.

Ancient Egyptians pointed to texts in their *Book Of The Dead*. Greeks used the poetry of Homer this same way. The Romans pointed to passages in the oracles of the Sybil. In medieval times, people used bibliomancy to detect a witch for burning.

But isn't the Bible supposed to guide a Christian's life?

Yes, but the Bible is not a rabbit's foot. No magic charms or incantations here.

But can't God use the pagan practice of stichomancy to speak to His children today?

Certainly.

When it comes to communicating His love and will for us, God is unlimited and unscrupulous; He's not above using things rooted in paganism to touch us today. Case in point—Christmas glitz and glitter and commercialism is about as pagan as you can get, yet it directs my thoughts to the manger, to the incarnation, to God's coming into this world seeking to save the lost—especially me.

Pagan, smagan. Whoever said God is fair? He does what it takes.

But the stichomancy superstition doesn't work for me.

This morning I opened my Bible at random, closed my eyes, pointed, and landed on the verse which says, "Now Korah, the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men".

What am I supposed to do with that?

On the other hand, as I consistently read Scripture in order, I get a sense of the glory, character and nature of God—information which helps me fit into His plans.... And realize that in spite of everything He loves me.

That's practical stichomancy.

Each book of the Bible was written by a specific person, at a specific time, to a specific readership, and with a specific purpose in mind. All under the breath and

supervision of God's Holy Spirit. And the Bible is a library of individual books, each originally a stand-alone volume.

Here 2,000 years later I read over their shoulders seeking the information that applies to me.

Unless, you are tracing a theme, such as women in the Bible or an overview of all the parables of Jesus, I think it's wiser to read through individual books than to pick phrases here and there.

Do we expect God to speak only in ten-second sound bites?

We are not working magic here; we're seeking the living Christ.

In my normal Bible reading Thursday morning, I encountered a phrase that struck my fancy; it was Daniel 11:32 which says, "The people that do know their God shall be strong and do exploits".

I thought that would be a neat verse to base my day on.

So, what happened?

First, I don't know any more about God than I did yesterday... As for being strong, I felt so tired that I napped much of the afternoon... And my exploit for the day? Well, I made one phone call.

Does that count?

So much for stichomancy...

"Be content with such things as ye have".

Ok, the Bible is not a magic charm... but do you suppose God could be dropping me a hint about buying any more books?

Maybe He wants me to clean out the back closet instead.

Oh well, The Lord makes sure we know what to do when time comes to do it.

The Lord is my Shepherd
He leadeth me...

Sunday, March 08, 2009
Under The Fig Leaf



On October 16, 1869, while digging a well on his farm in Cardiff, N.Y., farmer Stub Newell and a crew of hired laborers uncovered a giant stone foot.

The men's continued digging unearthed a naked giant.

The reclining Cardiff Giant measured 10 feet, 4 ½ inches tall and weighed 2,990 pounds. As word of the discovery spread, spectators flocked to Stub Newell's farm to see the wonder. The farmer pitched a tent over the giant and charged admission.

I learned about the Cardiff Giant last week while reading Scott Tribble's book *A Colossal Hoax: The Giant From Cardiff That Fooled America* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. N.Y. c.2009).

Speculation about the giant ran rampant as physicians, attorneys, ministers, teamsters, scientists, spiritualists, messenger boys, newspaper reporters, and society ladies viewed the wonder. News spread across the country.

The nation's speculations fell into three broad camps: Some argued that the giant was a petrified man. Others argued that he was an ancient statue. Others called him a humbug.

Petrified man proponents claimed the giant proved the Bible, that in antediluvian times, giants roamed the earth. Statue proponents claimed the giant showed sophistication too great to have been carved by Indians; they said he was carved in ancient times by Mound Builders, a race predating the Indians, or by Vikings, or by

refugees from sunken Atlantis. Humbug people claimed he was of recent origin.

Eventually, after over a million dollars had been collected by the giant's owners, cigar-maker George Hull, a relative and silent partner of farmer Newell, admitted that he'd quarried the gypsum stone in Fort Dodge, Iowa, hired moonlighting marble tombstone carvers in Chicago to shape the giant, shipped the statue in a crate marked machine parts, and buried it by night on Stub Newell's farm.

The Cardiff Giant was just a little over a year old when it was discovered.

Nevertheless, it continued to be exhibited on tour and it continued to rake in money.

But, another argument developed over the display of the giant. Some vocal citizens wanted his private member to be covered by a fig leaf lest women be incited to undue lust and passion; others wanted the giant displayed in his natural state.

Today, the Cardiff Giant is on display in the Farmers' Museum, Cooperstown , N.Y., if anyone cares to see him.

I laughed on reading Tribble's account of the fig leaf controversy.

That reminded me of something funny that happened to me once in the early 1960s while I worked at the Library Of Congress (along with about 3,000 other employees).

It also involved a fig leaf.

This happened 50 years ago, so my memory has faded a bit. I'll try not to embellish the incident but certain details, such as the depth of the water or how many employees bet, I just can't remember clearly.

Here's the best I can do:

A large fountain, called King Neptune's Court, decorates the outside of the main entrance to the Library.

In a semicircular pool, two tritons blowing conch-shell trumpets flank a bronze statue of Neptune. Two bare-breasted water-nymphs ride sea horses in niches to the side.

And scattered around the pool sea creatures, dolphins, turtles, sea serpents, etc. spout arcs of water.



An unsubstantiated rumor circulated among library staff members that when the sculptor originally unveiled the statue of the sea king, Neptune came fully equipped. But protestors insisted that a bronze fig leaf be attached to the statue in a strategic location.

Everyone knows that the Library of Congress is a center of learning, a place for high intellectual pursuits, and a forum for deep philosophical debate. So naturally one day during coffee break a discussion arose among busy employees about the truth of the Neptune rumor—was the fig leaf original, or was there something under the fig leaf?



Bets were placed and a gang of us trooped outside to the fountain to resolve the issue.

It was hard to see details of Neptune's statue.

I've heard it said that a Christian needs to be ready to preach, pray or die at a moment's notice... I had not placed a bet. The group identified me as a Christian likely to give an honest report to resolve the bets; they designated me to investigate.

I removed my shoes and socks, slipped into the fountain, waded across, climbed the granite rock Neptune sits on, and peeked under the fig leaf.

When I announced my findings, bet winners cheered and losers groaned.

Then we all trooped back inside to the Library's basement snack bar in a laughing, happy cluster of dedicated government workers earning our tax dollars.

Over my years as a Christian, occasionally I've been called upon to do a number of odd acts of charity; that day at the Library of Congress was one of the weirdest.

Now, I can not think of the Library of Congress without remembering another incident that happened in that same time frame.

This incident is neither funny nor happy, but it remains horribly vivid.

In fact, off and on I for a couple of years I've been writing a book about the will of God. If I ever finish the manuscript, these will be my opening words on the very first page:

Please, let me tell you about one of the times when I did not do the will of God.

Back then I worked on the religion deck at the Library of Congress, one of the most extensive libraries in the world with more than 400 miles of shelving stuffed with books on every conceivable subject.

That spring I felt in love with God. Every morning I hurried to work early so I could go to my desk before anyone else arrived and in the silence of that vast religious collection I would read my Bible and pray and sometimes even sing. I was so enamored of the love of Jesus Christ that my eyes would tear up at the thought of His exquisite perfections.

I felt that, if necessary, I could gladly die for Him.

As my workday began I rushed to meet it with a bounce in my step and love in my heart as I felt the presence of God with me in the midst of everyday duties.

One day as I walked up Capital Hill on my way for my early morning tryst with Jesus, a white-haired old lady hobbled across the street in front of me struggling with two heavy suitcases. Obviously she was laboring under the strain of her burden as she made her way toward Union Station to catch a train.

Immediately I knew that I should carry those bags for her.

Don't ask me how I knew that God wanted me to help that old woman. I heard no voice. I saw no vision. She did not ask my help or even speak to me. But I felt a strong internal conviction that I should carry her bags to the train for her.

I had plenty of time before needing to be at work; it would take just a few minutes to walk to the station only a couple of blocks back the way I had just come.

But I knew that if I did it, I would miss my precious devotional time.

I knew I should do the will of God by carrying those bags.

"Lord, I'll pray for her when I get to work," I told Him.

You carry her bags, the conviction said.

"But I'll miss my devotions," I prayed.

Carry her bags.

This is not the voice of God, I reasoned. It's just a resurgence of my Boy Scout training; A Scout Is Helpful. That's a Boy Scout law not a law of God. I'm mentally conditioned to help old ladies (yes, I really said that to myself). Obviously God would not want me to skip reading the Holy Bible and praying and worshiping Him just to be a do-gooder. This old lady is a temptation not an opportunity to do God's will.

I did not carry her bags.

I walked on to the Library. I slipped behind my desk. I opened my Bible.... and my fervent devotion turned to ashes.

The words of Scripture became dull ink on gray paper.

My prayers raddled around in my mouth.

No hymn graced my lips.

No joy touched my heart.

I had clearly known what God wanted me to do...
and I chose not to do it.

This incident happened over 50 years ago, yet to this day, when I think about the will of God, a mental picture of that old woman lugging those bags pops into my mind.

Sometimes I speculate about what would have happened if I had helped her. Maybe, those suitcases were stuffed with hundred dollar bills and she would have given me a stake which I'd have invested and become richer than Bill Gates. Maybe she was a retired missionary or pastor's wife and she would have revealed some spiritual secret to me that would have guided me through my own spiritual journey. Maybe she had a great granddaughter waiting to meet her at the train and I would have met the love of my life... Maybe my kindness and witness would have resulted in this old woman's conversion just hours before she launched into eternity. Maybe...

I have no idea what would have happened if I had done the will of God.

No one ever does.

I only know that here years later I regard this incident as one of the greatest spiritual turning points of my life... and I blew it.

Now, eventually the spiritual fervor I once had returned. The words and paragraphs of Scripture made sense again. Prayers sweetened. Songs came to mind again. Worship awed me. People responded to my witness and accepted Christ as Savior.

Nevertheless, I know that I had missed something, something eternally important that I will never regain.

I had missed doing the will of God....

It may seem odd to begin a book about the will of God with a personal example of not doing His will, but, that memory is the way I want to start off the book

What?

O, King Neptune's anatomical status?

Far be it from me to reveal hidden secrets, but I'll tell you how to find out.

Next time you're in Washington, go to the Library of Congress, slip off your shoes, wade across the fountain's pool, and take a look for yourself.

If the Capital Hill Police or somebody from Homeland Security questions what you are doing in Neptune's fountain, just tell them that John Cowart told you to peek under the fig leaf....I'm sure they'll understand.

Monday, March 09, 2009
Gene Maudlin

My e-friend Gene Maudlin died in hospice care Saturday.

Though I never physically met Old Horsetail Snake, my world is diminished.

Yesterday, when I read online of his death, I sat at my computer and cried.

Wednesday, March 11, 2009
I Suffer From Spring Giddiness

To avoid real work yesterday, I finished cleaning the pool and mowed the front yard where the amaryllis bed at our front door just begins to bloom. Some stalks stand tall; other just begin to emerge from the soil. Looks as though between 20 and 30 stalks with clusters of flowers are set to open. I photographed this first cluster:



I need to be careful working in that flower bed.

Anyone who steps in that flower bed is suddenly jerked up into the air like a hooked fish. They disappear screaming up into the sky and are never seen again.

The half-buried coffee mug and the shape of the bed explain why:



Yes, that is the Bermuda Triangle at our front door.

Yesterday also marked the 20th Anniversary of the opening of Jacksonville's Dames Point Bridge. The main 1,300-foot center span is 175 feet above the St. Johns River. The bridge is held up by 144 steel cables backed by 471-foot towers.



The anniversary is significant to me because back before the bridge opened, I wrote an article for a local magazine about the construction. Researching the article enabled me to tour the construction site and I went up to the top of the cable tower on the right in the photo. I rode up the outside of the tower in an open wire basket/elevator lifted on cables by a crane on top of that 471 foot tower.

Breezy up there.

Thrilling panoramic view from the ocean all the way across this city I love.

Then I got to ride down in that swinging basket again—not a typical day for a history writer who's mostly used to library research.

I can't believe that happened 20 years ago.

Seems more recent.

Makes me feel old.

Speaking of old, in other happy news, an Associated Press report yesterday confirms my decision about how to handle my prostate cancer.

An American Medical Association study, "reinforces the message that we are over diagnosing prostate cancer," said Dr. Len Lichtenfeld of the American Cancer Society.

The report says, "Most men who undergo a biopsy for an abnormal PSA test don't turn out to have prostate cancer; high PSAs often signal a benign enlarged prostate. Of those who do have cancer, there's no proof yet that early detection saves lives — as most prostate tumors grow so slowly that had they not been screened, those men would have died of something else without the anxiety".

I'm way ahead of the AMA.

Of course, in the nature of things, the scientists may change their findings next week; seems they come up with a new treatment (or decide that the old treatment is killing you) every other week.

However when this first came up I read the literature, prayed for wisdom, consulted various doctors, talked over our sexual options with Ginny, and decided not to treat my cancer at all.

As I told Dr. Oz, my oncologist, "It's my prostate. Don't you touch it".

I think I made the right choice.

Friday, March 13, 2009

Pet Problem

Our daughter Eve, her husband Mark, and their five cats need to move soon..

They've been hunting all over Jacksonville for a suitable apartment. Everyplace they go, they run into an obstacle as various apartment managers reveal building policies concerning multiple cats.

I've told the kids there's a way to solve that problem -- but they won't listen to me



Harrold wins as he empties his bucket of kittens first

Saturday, March 14, 2009
A Come-To-Jesus Post

In the midst of the current financial crisis with people loosing their jobs, homes, cars, retirement funds ,and their ways of living, for God only knows what reason, my first quarter book sales at www.bluefishbooks.info have been better than they have been in ages.

Odd that.

I attempted to understand what's going on by reading Jonathan Salem Baskin's book *Branding Only Works On Cattle* (Business Plus. N.Y. c.2008). Mr. Baskin runs a global branding consultancy; he has 26 years experience in the field of brand marketing.

Most of the time I have no idea what Basking is talking about. I'll never make a businessman.

However, three things he said struck a cord with me:

First, he said, "If you own a hammer, all the world's problems look like nails".

I thought that was the coolest quote.

In another place he says, “You won’t get the sale if you don’t ask for it”.

Then, in the one quote that really grabbed me, Baskin says, “The medium is not the message—the message is the message”!

How these observations fit with the increased sale of my books, I can’t figure. The books sell because readers buy them. That’s good. I like that. It gives me hope as a writer.

But, I feel that I’ve been remiss, especially in this on-line diary chronicling my own life and interests. Mostly I do what I do because I do it. That’s what I write about, and I rely on perceptive readers to pick up any deeper message than that.

I need to make a transition here and I’m not sure how to do it. Please bear with me because I want to move from books and blog to more important things. Much more important things.

Every once in a while in these postings, I write something that reveals I am not a preacher, just a common, ordinary, garden-variety Christian. I hope that Christ shines through my life—well, maybe not shines, but is at least obscurely visible behind all my foolishness.

As a result of reading Baskin’s book, I question just how much of my true message gets lost in the constant me, me, me murk of my postings.

And since the message is the message, I feel I should state it here:

Jesus Christ is Lord.

That’s it.

That’s my message.

It’s familiar.

Every Christmas we hear the Scripture—And His name shall be called wonderful, counselor, the mighty God, the Everlasting Father...Emmanuel, God with us.... And the angel told Joseph, “Thou shall call His name, Jesus, for He shall; save His people from their sin”.

Yes, no matter what we have done, no matter what has been done to us, God came in the flesh to rescue us because He loves us; it's in His nature to love.

From the beginning God had some purpose in mind for creating you and me, a purpose that would result in His glory and our happiness. But the world, the flesh, and the devil debased us, degraded us, squelched the glory that should have been. And this happened with our overt (or sneaky) full cooperation.

We have done deeds of darkness in broad daylight.

Yet we want other people to think well of us. We wear masks so we'll look good—Somehow I think of that weird masked guy in the Burger King commercials.

And behind our false fronts, behind our false deeds, behind our worse sins, our hearts yearn. Like a thirsty deer in a parched land sniffs the air for a scent of water, so we thirst, so we long for something more, for Someone More, for God. Our hunger's never satisfied with this world's bread; it leaves us stuffed but hungry still. We want to be home. How shall we sing the song of the Lord in the land of a stranger?

Sprawled and hungover and headachy, we wake amid the debris, litter and consequences of last night's party, we straighten our clothes and brush our hair and try to look presentable as though nothing had happened. We say we've done nothing wrong, nothing everybody else isn't doing too.

Even so, we fake it. Yearning for God, we continue in our addiction to self, sin and satan. We'd like to change the unpleasant aspects of our slavery, at least momentarily on the morning after, but we slip right back, powerless to quit.

And those of us who aren't party people sneak our sins in the privacy of our own homes and look down on those caught out in public. We snobs get to think of ourselves not as sinners but as superior—which compounds our own situation as rebellious, miserable offenders.

We serve a miserable master. We chose to. On some level, we like it that way.

We call it being human.

And we're right.

But God too became human. He came to destroy the works of the devil. He healed the sick. He taught the ignorant. He fed the hungry. Whatever was wrong, Jesus made right.

We tortured Him to death for His efforts. We nailed Him down hand and foot. Stuck Him in the side with a javelin like a skewered pig. Mocked. Capped with thorns. Spit on.

Killed Him dead, we did.

In due time, Christ died for the ungodly.

Now, here's the kicker.

Death could not hold the Lord of Life. He rose under His own power. He is declared to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead. King of kings. Lord of lords. The bright and morning star. The living God.

Death.

Life from death.

Jesus rose or rotted.

We also will rise or rot.

Death comes on all men because all have sinned.

You and I will spend all eternity somewhere.

If Jesus is not true, then nothing counts.

If Jesus is true, then nothing else counts.

Now comes the call to action.

St. Paul said, ""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. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation".

This is where the faith hits the fan.

Mr. Baskin's expertise in marketing tells me that I won't get action unless I ask for it. OK, I'll ask.

Is there any reason you should not make Jesus Christ the absolute lord of your life, right here, right now, today?

As you sit right there in your pajamas in front of your computer, I ask you to do three things:

1. Pray—Simply tell Jesus that you chose for Him to live His life as Lord in your heart. If some specific sin occurs to you, ask Him to forgive you; that's between you and Him.; He's more willing to forgive than we are to ask. Scary stuff this, isn't it?

2. Relax—He does the rest. This is a supernatural transaction between you and God going on here. He's alive, remember?

3. Tell—Then I ask that you tell what you've just done to the next person you meet, your wife, your husband, your kids, your mailman, the pizza delivery guy, whoever. Just say, "You know what I just did? I've asked Jesus to come into my heart as Lord. What do you think of that?"

Congratulations. You've just become a Christian, a follower of Jesus. No telling what's going to happen next! He still has in mind that purpose He created you for in the first place...Wild times. Peaceful times. Dangerous times. Fun times. Painful times. Joyous times.... Who knows? With Jesus in charge, the world's a different place and you're a different you:

If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things are passed away, all things are become new and all things are of God. Think of a scene from mythology, think of a shining dragon just hatching out of the egg, spreading glossy new wings, born now empowered to fly—that's you.

Or, it could be. Baby dragons can't choose to come out of the shell; we can.

You can never choose any time but today. Yes, this very day. There is no other time. Our only freedom is in choosing.

When I began reading about sales techniques, marketing books, and branding cattle in Mr. Baskin's book, I never expected to end up writing a post like this.

Please let me know what happened. I'm interested.

Tuesday, March 17, 2009
Some Elephants Weren't Made To Fly

Immediately after I posted my last entry, one I felt was spiritually powerful, meaningful and potentially life-changing, I crashed hard.

A bad case of spiritual blahs, apathy, and depression captured my mind. Not that I didn't believe in God anymore, it's just that I didn't care.

I've noticed this phenomena before. Back when I taught adult Bible lessons, after teaching one I thought was good, my own spiritual life would go to pot. Maybe it's a natural backlash thing, like the way you feel the morning after final exams.

I hope my admitting this will not spoil whatever good readers might have found in my testimony, but I feel that being honest about spiritual doldrums is a sort of backhanded testimony too. I don't want to misrepresent what Jesus is in my own life—and sometimes He just doesn't count for much, except as low-key, annoying, background noise. I'm not quoting Billy Graham here.

Compounding my blahs, I've been transcribing my friend Barbara White's hand-written prayer diaries for future publication and she's one of those Christians who often effervesces with praise, joy, singing, positive outlook, deep wisdom, love of God, and all that jazz.

In one place she mentions that verse from Isaiah which says, "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".

Good for the eagles. Great for them to soar.

But, as Ginny pointed out last night when we talked about such things, "Not all birds were made to fly, John. And, let's face it, you're shaped a little bit more like a penguin than an eagle".

Barbara enjoys a close personal relationship with the Lord. Her diaries talk about that a lot.

Ginny is reading a novel containing much theology, and she questions the author's view of God; she feels his view limits God. "I don't think much about my relationship with God," she said. "It's just always there".

My own relationship with God is like my relationship with the President of the United States. He lives in the White House; I live here. I acknowledge his authority and observe his laws (more or less). I'm one of his citizens; but he sees me as one voter in the polls. He bails out other people with advances—none of which get to me down here where I live.

The President and I get along fine.

Our relationship is just what it ought to be.

I'm loyal to him. He does what he see as best for all concerned including me. And we'd defend each other in a fight. But the President and I are not exactly fishing buddies.

Nothing wrong with that.

Some birds weren't made to fly.

Some of us see things differently.

Ginny reminded me of that poem about the blind men describing an elephant. One walked into its side and said an elephant is like a wall. Another felt the sharp tusk and said an elephant is like a spear. The blind man who touched the leg, said it was like a tree. The one on the trunk said it was a snake. And the one holding the tail said an elephant is like a rope.

Wrong analogy to use with me when I'm depressed in the blahs.

Today, I feel that I'm the blind man who stands directly underneath the elephant's tail...

And we all know what happens there.

But don't let my blah attitude today keep you from Jesus, perhaps God intends for you to be one of His eagles and soar.

Have a good flight.

We penguins love to watch.

You're beautiful in the air.

Wednesday, March 18, 2009
Gone To the Dogs In A Rust-colored Shirt

Ginny's office sent her out of town to a conference yesterday. It's the first time in decades we've been separated over night so I'm worried about how she will get along without me.

I'm afraid she might really like it!

What with her being gone and my own blahs and internal worries, I pulled a rust-colored shirt out of the closet and wore it all day without giving it a thought—till my e-friend at Sherri at Matter Of Fact notified me that she posted a link to *He Did Not Want To Go*, a story I wrote years ago about St. Patrick of Ireland. It's the third chapter in my book *Strangers On The Earth* and Sherri, an Irish enthusiast, had asked me about using it several weeks ago.

Since the beginning of the month Sherri worked hard proving green postings on her blog leading up to St. Patrick's Day. She included receipts, photos, jokes, limericks, and all sorts of other features leading up to her grand celebration of Irish blessings in her post yesterday.

But I blew it.

I had altogether forgotten yesterday was St. Patrick's Day.

And, for Heaven's sake, my youngest daughter is named after St. Patrick!

There's an author's note at the end of the story explaining how she came to be named, and how I came to write it while laying under a bed.

I do have a green shirt in the back of the closet, a green shirt with shamrocks on it, but I just plain forgot about St. Patrick's Day and wore my rust colored one all day.

In Ireland do they still burn people for heresy?

St Patrick himself would have understood my recent spiritual blahs; in his book *Confessions*, he wrote, "I was an illiterate slave, as ignorant as one who neglects to provide for his future. And I am certain of this: that although I was as a dumb stone lying squashed in the

mud, the Mighty and Merciful God came, dug me out and set me on top of the wall. Therefore, I praise Him and ought to render Him something for His wonderful benefits to me both now and in eternity”.

I like his image of “a dumb stone lying squashed in the mud”; it matches my current blahs. Were we to meet, he and I would have a lot to talk about.

Carol, a member of our Neighborhood Crime Watch group, phoned yesterday to talk about some situations in our area. In the course of our conversation she asked me about posting a photo of her dogs on my site.

Glad to. Here they are:



Not that these dogs are pampered but—yes, Carol does push them around in a baby stroller lest their dainty paws touch the ground.

Several years ago Carol bought a copy of my novel, *Glog*. She's the only person on our block, that I know of, to buy a copy. I think that book is my best, but Carol didn't like it. Said it was too gory when the dinosaur ate the school kids.

But, no problem. When anyone who actually buys one of my books wants a photo of her dogs posted on my site, darn right I'll post it... Isn't that how Stephen

King sells so many of his novels?

You know, that might be a fun promotional gimmick.

Tell you what, buy any one of my books (there are about 20 that I've written or edited in my on-line book catalogue) and e-mail me a photo of your dog at bluefishbooks@gmail.com and I'll post a photo of your dog on my site too. Please tell me the title of the book and the date you ordered so I can coordinate, and I'll post your dog's picture.

Not that I'm desperate to sell books or anything—and this is a crazy spur-of-the-moment idea—but what harm can it do?

Sounds like fun to me.

O, yes, make the photos either jpeg or gif because I don't know how to post other kinds of photos or videos... Let's see, I'm making this up as I type... Ok, I'll post a photo of your cat if you do not have a dog... but I draw the line at aardvarks ... or children, what with the world being what it is, I don't think it wise to post identifiable photos of children on line, do you?

What else? Ok, a time limit. What do you say to trying this for a month? Have April 18th as a cut off date? Or should it just stay open-ended?

What about downloaded books to read on your computer screen—why not? Downloaded books at bluefishbooks.info are cheaper than print-on-demand paperbacks but why shouldn't cheap books count too?

That's about all I can think of ... Not that my thinking is all that sharp recently...

O crap!

Not only did I forget about wearing my green shirt yesterday, but I also just remembered that Dave's Diner was offering a special on corned beef and cabbage. I'd told the gang there I'd come have lunch with them. Yes, I'd intended to go up to Dave's for lunch—but I forgot.

Instead, I ordered Chinese food, General Tso's Chicken.

But that's ok, I think.

General Tso ... General Tso... Tso...Mmmmmm...

Sounds like a grand old Irish name to me.

Thursday, March 19, 2009
Literary Lion,
or
A Dirty Old Man Goes To The Dogs

All readers of great literature love dogs...
(and sometimes cats).

A few years ago my daughter, who is a librarian, promoted a Read To A Dog program at her library.

This encouraged kids who are slow readers to sit on a mat with a dog and read a simple story aloud to the non-critical, non-threatening animal. Kids' reading skills improved drastically in the low-pressure environment. The kids loved to read to such an appreciative audience.

Playing around yesterday, I offered that for anyone buying one of my books, I'd post a picture of their dog on my site. (See yesterday's post if you want to get in on this).

My e-friend Amrita in India countered my offer saying that if I'd buy her dog, she'd post a photo of my books on her blog! What a hoot!

Amrita already owns a copy of my book *I'm Confused About Prayer*. So here I'll post a photo of her dog; Sheeba has just chased a mongoose out of the house and has it cornered in the back garden:



The idea for posting of dog photos in relation to my books came about in a chance conversation with my friend Carol who owns copies of my books *Glog* and *Crackers & Carpetbaggers*. Here are her happy dogs in their baby stroller:



Last week, some Jacksonville firemen (sorry, I don't know their names) bought nine copies of *Heroes All*, my history of the fire department. In honor of them, here is a photo of Lucky, a puppy rescued by firefighters from a fire at the Jacksonville Humane Society last year when over 200 other dogs died in the flames. The firefighters adopted Lucky as a mascot:



Another reader who already owns a copy of my fire history is Wendy. She and her husband, both firefighters, live in Texas. She contributed a chapter to my book. Here she is with her dog. I think it's a border collie:



Brittany's owner, here in Jacksonville, owns a copy of my book *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad*. My book weigh more than the little dog:



Maybe a good title for my diary this year when I publish it next January would be *A Dirty Old Man Goes To The Dogs*.

Of course having great taste in literature does not mean a person has great taste in pets; EQ owns a copy of my novel *The Lazarus Projects* and many of my other books—along with this window full of cats:



Cat lovers, Donald and Helen, computer people, not only read my books, they designed several of my book covers themselves and they set up my on-line book catalogue for me. They also have copies of Barbara White's *Along The Way* series of books (which I edited).

I tolerate cats, but this couple not only own books and cats, but they print pictures of their cats CC and Perl (named after computer programs) on the chest of tee shirts and actually wear them out in public.



There's no accounting for taste in books or pets. Witnessed by the fact that whenever I visit Donald and Helen, their herd of cats ignore every fawning cat-lover in the room and come rub against me and want to sit in my lap.

Yes, cats love me.

But they're illiterate.

Friday, March 20, 2009 Stiffs And Resurrection

As I age, the quality of junk mail delivered to my home changes.

Used to be, every spring Victoria's Secret mailed me their lingerie catalogue (always addressed to J.W. Cowart, never to John Cowart).

Now, I get junk mail promoting Medicare supplement insurance, retirement communities with assisted living facilities, and special offers on cemetery plots.

Yesterday the mailman handed me a letter from a funeral home trying to sell me—this is what the envelope said—FREE, PRE-PAID CREMATION.

How can it be free if I have to pre-pay for it?

Funny, but this coincides with a book I'm re-reading this week: *Stiff* by Mary Roach (W.W. Norton & Co., N.Y. c.2003). The subtitle of Ms Roach's humorous book is *The Curious Lives Of Human Cadavers*. With a light, sympathetic, touch the book examines what happens to dead bodies—fascinating. Back on April 6, 2006, I wrote about my own happy stint years ago as a security guard in a morgue. Not everyone's cup of tea, but I found that a beautiful experience.

Ms Roach explains that of the remains of whole-body organ donors 80% are used in anatomy labs to enable student physicians to learn how to treat and cure living patients. But first all salvageable parts are used for transplants. My little brother has survived for over five extra years now because someone donated healthy lungs for his transplant.

Thank you donor family.

But, Ms Roach's book also reveals that some cadavers are used as crash test dummies to teach rescue workers how best to help those injured in automobile accidents or airplane crashes. Some bodies get tied to posts and shot so police or military personnel can observe effects of gunshot wounds. Some of us will end up on "body farms" where forensic pathologists learn the stages of decomposition under various conditions; they study how insects, worms, and fly larvae do their work.

All of us end up somewhere.

It is appointed unto man once to die and after that the judgment.

Years ago Ginny and I both signed up as whole-body organ donors. Now, at my age, I doubt they can harvest many usable parts, but I like to think I'll be helpful to someone even after my death.

No rush, mind you; but no fear either.

I love the declaration of the Patriarch Job who said,

I know that my Redeemer liveth,
And that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth:
And though after my skin, worms destroy this body,
Yet in my flesh shall I see God:
Whom I shall see for myself,
And mine eyes shall behold, and not another;

Though my reins be consumed within me.

Isn't that terrific?

Of course, while we can't avoid death, we should avoid and alleviate pain in ourselves and others whenever possible. That's only common sense. If Gethsemane teaches nothing else, it showed that Jesus was not a masochist enamored of pain. He went to suffer on the cross for us knowing full well that it meant physical suffering.

Somebody important, I forget just who, said, "The whole business of the Christian is to get ready to die". This has nothing to do with acting stoic. The Christian is to face death, and life too for that matter, not with stoicism but with confidence.

Confidence?

But isn't death tragic? Sad?. Shouldn't we mourn? And cry? And feel loss? Grieve? Show respect for our dead?

Certainly.

Christ Himself, even knowing all there is to know about future resurrection, wept and mourned at the tomb of Lazarus.

Yes, Jesus knew Job's words. Yes, He knew a miracle was at hand. Yet He grieved.

Isaiah called Him, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

Jesus never soft-peddled the tragedy of death.

Yet He knew more.

He said,

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.

For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; and hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man.

Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.

Cremated by fire, buried in the ground, crumbled into dust, aborted in the womb, abandoned in a landfill, used as a crash test dummy, eaten by sharks—doesn't matter. Even the sea will give up her dead. Restored, reassembled, revived, we shall rise.

Everything that makes you you, everything that makes me me, when we hear that Voice which we've yearned to hear all our lives, we will shake off our slumber and leap toward Him. All of us together from the dawn of history to the generations in the future, from all the families of the earth, out of every tongue and tribe and kindred and nation, from the north and the south and the east and the west, we will surge toward Him like the eager crowd pouring into a stadium for a concert.

Leaping and shouting and praising God we will rise giving honor to Christ the first fruits of the grave. Our Lamb has conquered, Him will we follow.

Faces glowing with anticipation, we shall see Him and we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is. No more of this through a glass darkly business, then we'll see Him face to face.

The Desire of nations, the desire of thy heart—face to face!

Can it get any better than that?

Yes!

On the night before He was crucified, Jesus said:

Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God,
Believe also in me.

In my Father's house are many mansions:

If it were not so, I would have told you.

I go to prepare a place for you.

And if I go and prepare a place for you,

I will come again, and receive you unto myself;

That where I am, there ye may be also.

I find that thrilling!

They arrested Him the same night He said that. Crucified Him the next day. Buried His cadaver in a tomb. Three cold stiff days. Then the Prince of Life burst forth alive. Went back to where He had come from—prepare a place for you...that where I am, ye may be also.

We have so much to look forward to!

As the Scripture says, “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”.

That’s wonderful!

Unless, of course, you’ve made some other commitment.

Then, we’re talking about an altogether different ball game.

Heaven is, but Heaven’s not all there is.

As Saint Paul told Timothy, “Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men, they follow after”.

Be that as it may, for all of us the grand adventure lies ahead.

We’re moving in that direction already.

Nevertheless, I think I’ll pass on that special offer for a free, pre-paid, mail-order cremation. I think it’s one of those bulk mail senile senior specials where they’re just after my money.

P.S.: Speaking of senior specials—Victoria, if you’re reading this, I’m only 69 years old. I’m still interested. No need to stop mailing me your secret catalogue yet. Just remember it’s J.W. Cowart, not John—I wouldn’t want our mailman to get the wrong idea.

Tuesday, March 24, 2009
Dead Stick

The bed of amaryllis I photographed last week has put out a few more flowers—and it’s not finished yet! Some stalks have hardly broken through the soil.



To avoid working or thinking this past week, I've engaged in yard work. Mowing, pruning, raking, cleaning, moving stuff that I haven't touched since November.

The yard went to pot over the winter.

The yard is not the only thing.

Stifled because of age, arthritis and physical inactivity, added to just plain laziness, I find that I've grown weaker. I'm not able to sustain hard work long enough to get a job done in one push.

After every 20 minutes work, I need a 20 minute break.

Ginny and I enjoy a rest area under an awning attached to a shed. Two comfortable chairs, a side table for coffee cups, an easy-listening station on the radio, fountain bubbling close at hand, bird feeders visible, our rest area provides a panoramic view of the yard.

Problem is... the view from our rest station also provides an overwhelming view of work that still needs doing. Any direction I look, I see things that need fixing—for instance, I see that dead stick hooked in the foliage of the flamingo plant.

As soon as coffee break is over, I'm going to pick up that dead stick.

I knock out my pipe and start toward the flamingo plant...I hear the pool pump making a funny noise. I shut off the pump and bleed air from the line. Doing that I see pollen stuck on the pump housing and turn on the hose to wash it off. But the hose leaks and I need to replace a washer.

I forget about the dead stick.

Time for a smoke break.

By the time I get my pipe stoked, I look across the yard and see that dead stick sticking up in the flamingo plant.

I finish my break and walk over to get that stick, but Ginny calls me to help her move a big potted Tree of Heaven. Moving that, we see leaves trapped behind the pot need to be swept up...the broom is out front. Go get it and see the gate hangs loose...

I forget about the dead stick.

Time for another smoke break.

I sit down listening to the radio—and see the dead stick still sticking.

Drink my coffee down and walk toward the flamingo plant to move the dead stick. Step on a thorn ball. Hurt my foot. Sit down again. See the stick.

Break over, I got to get the stick.. but first I sharpen the mower blade, check the oil. Clean the air filter...

I forget to pick up the dead stick.

Break time again.... Look across the yard. That dead stick spoils the view. That thing is so annoying... but the only time I notice it is when I sit down to rest. The thing remains forgotten and invisible until I get still from all my activities. Only then does the dead stick come into view.

It's there all the time, but I just don't see it until I stop doing other stuff.

What you see depends on what you're looking at.

Ginny experiences this same process of seeing a chore she intends to do while she's at rest, then bypassing it once she starts moving.

She said, "Working together as a team, there's just no end of things which we don't get done".

Not to be irreverent here, comparing God Almighty to a dead stick, but the Scripture that comes to my mind is, "Be Still and know that I am God".

I get so busy.

Too busy.

When exhaustion overcomes me, it forces me to stop running around doing stuff and realize that the Lord has been there all along. Exhaustion forces me to notice. Weakness calls Him to my attention. I put Him on the list of things I intend to get around to... but then I forget.

That dead stick in the flamingo tells me something.

I need to voluntarily quit being busy with *important* things, and tend to the Preeminent Thing in my life....

"The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing".

That's not Scripture.

That's what the cowboy said in the movie *City Slickers*?

But it speaks to my condition.

Wednesday, March 25, 2009 Under

In my devotions yesterday I read the most horrible chapter in the Bible.

I'm trying to read the whole Bible in the course of this year and my reading program has taken me into the book of Deuteronomy. At this point the people of Israel stand ready to enter the promised land.

Moses assembles them near the crossing of the Jordan and tells them that they are to cross without him. He reminds them of how God delivered them from slavery in Egypt. "The Lord brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness..."

He instructs them that once they cross the river, they are to erect great stone pillars and plaster them with plaster. "And thou shalt write upon the stones all the words of this law very plainly".

He reviews the main points of the law, and the people respond “Amen” to each point.

Moses pronounces lavish blessings on them as they keep the Commandments:

All these blessings shall come on thee, and overtake thee, if thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God.

Blessed shalt thou be in the city, and blessed shalt thou be in the field.

Blessed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy ground, and the fruit of thy cattle, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep.

Blessed shall be thy basket and thy store.

Blessed shalt thou be when thou comest in, and blessed shalt thou be when thou goest out.

The LORD shall cause thine enemies that rise up against thee to be smitten before thy face: they shall come out against thee one way, and flee before thee seven ways.

The LORD shall command the blessing upon thee in thy storehouses, and in all that thou settest thine hand unto; and he shall bless thee in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.

The LORD shall establish thee an holy people unto himself, as he hath sworn unto thee, if thou shalt keep the commandments of the LORD thy God, and walk in his ways.

And all people of the earth shall see that thou art called by the name of the LORD; and they shall be afraid of thee.

And the LORD shall make thee plenteous in goods,...

The blessings go on and on.

Then comes the horror.

But, it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken...

Moses clearly states what happens when we break the Commandments and seek after other gods. These horrible terrors are described in detail in Deuteronomy Chapter 28.

Worst chapter in the Bible.

A real conscience rattler.

More gruesome than any Stephen King novel!

It's chapters like this that give the Bible a bad name among squeamish unbelievers.

It's not for sissies.

Shudder!

As Jon's cartoon says:



But, also in my reading yesterday I ran across this quote from Hannah Whitall Smith, a Quaker lady who died in 1911 but whose books remain in print, widely read even today. She speaks to my condition when she said:

I was once talking to an intelligent agnostic. He said, "The Christians I meet seem to me to be the very most uncomfortable people anywhere around. They seem to carry their religion as a man carries a headache. He does not want to get rid of his head, but at the same time, it is very uncomfortable to have it."

This was a lesson I have never forgotten. It seemed, as one of my Christian friends said to me one day when we were comparing our experiences, "as if we had just enough religion to make us miserable."

I confess that being uncomfortable with religion was very disappointing. I had expected something altogether different. It seemed to me exceedingly odd that a religion whose fruits were declared in the Bible to be love, joy, and peace should so often work out practically in an exactly opposite direction and should develop the fruits of doubt, fear, unrest, conflict, and discomforts of every kind. Why should the children of God lead such utterly uncomfortable religious lives when He has led us to believe that His yoke would be easy and His burden light? Why do we find it so hard to be sure that God really loves us?

The religion of the Lord Jesus Christ was meant to be full of comfort, because "eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for

them that love Him." All the difficulty arises from the fact that we have under-believed and under-trusted.

Yes, indeed, She speaks to my condition.

Thursday, March 26, 2009
My Triumph Over Temptation—after a fashion



Yesterday I meet a strong temptation and I resisted it—for all of 12 minutes.

Then, I succumbed as usual.

But for a whole 12 minutes there, I triumphed over temptation.

Won't Jesus be just tickled pink with me?

Stronger Christians exist, I know. But I'm not one of them. In fact, I don't ever recall resisting any temptation for very long. When tempted to do anything, I eventually give in and do what I know is wrong, or I avoid doing what I know is right.

That phrase in the Lord's Prayer, "Lead us not into temptation" has meaning for me. The only wrong things I've not done are the ones I've never been tempted to do.

For instance, I've never been drunk. No virtue on my part. It's just that I've never had a taste for liquor—never been tempted to over indulge.

On the other hand, resentment, bitterness, petty theft, gossip, anger, secret lust, carnal cravings, harsh words, obstinate opinions, all sorts of mental cruelty, backbiting, ambition, inordinate love of possessions, hypocrisy, vicarious enjoyment of other people's sins, and a host of other sins—those catch me every time, as well as even more squalid iniquity.

I wallow in that stuff.

See why I need a Savior?

There was a reason Christ died on that cross.

But, doesn't the Scripture say that God will with every temptation make a way to escape that ye may be able to bear it?

Funny thing that.

The few times I can recall escaping temptation, it wasn't my own doing. Like that time parked petting with that girl as we kissed goodnight in front of her house and all systems were GO, but her father came out to the car and interrupted us moments before lift off.... I was saved from temptation, but I was not happy about it one bit.

Back on July 26, 2007, I wrote a another entry about temptation, "The Most Effective Spiritual Phrase We can Ever Use".. It works but I still haven't altogether absorbed that lesson myself.

Another thing, I have trouble telling the difference between an opportunity and a temptation. Like if I'm working on one project when the chance to move on to another one comes up; is the new thing a temptation to keep me from finishing project one, or is this the sign to abandon a futile project and move ahead into a new venue?

Beats me how to tell the difference.

You pays your money and you makes your choice—and live with the consequences.

What brought up this train of thought?

At the moment I'm facing a long-term temptation. I'm torn between trusting the Lord to provide, or taking matters into my own hands. Or is taking matters into my own hands an expression of trust in God and an exercise in common sense?

This dwells on my mind gnawing at me this morning.
Bummer.

I do not know how it will turn out.

Maybe I'll triumph over this particular temptation.

I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me
—for at least 12 minutes.

Monday, March 30, 2009
Good Dogs—Small, Medium & Large

As Ginny and I worked in our garden this weekend, a flock of russet-capped sparrows swarmed around our birdfeeder. At one point Ginny counted 19 of the flighty creatures. We were happy to see the migration.

But today, I'm writing about dogs, not birds.

Back on March 18th, I explained about posting photos of dogs on this site. Not everyone who buys my books has a blog or website of their own and they get a kick out of seeing their pets displayed on the internet, hence on my site.

That's what's going on.

For instance, here is a photo of JaNene's tiny dog, Keila:



Alert little thing isn't it?

JaNene owns copies of several of my books including her purchase last week of *Heroes All*, my history of firefighting in Jacksonville.

JaNene says she is the Number One Fan of my books.

Here is a photo of JaNene's daughter Nita holding Keila:



Thinking about good dogs reminds me of the first dog Ginny and I ever owned. Walking though a New Mexico desert 40 years ago, back when we drove an 18-wheel, tractor-trailer truck over the road, we spotted this odd lump near a lonely highway. On investigation, we discovered a puppy that someone had coated with tar and thrown out to die in the wilderness.

Even the puppy's legs were stuck together with tar so it could not walk. And frostbite had taken off one of the puppy's ears.

We gathered it up and took it to a truck stop garage where the mechanics let us bathe the puppy in solvent. We had to cut a lot of fur off before ending up with a presentable looking border collie. One of the mechanics nicknamed the dog Engine, but because we'd found it near a pueblo ruin, everybody around the truck stop started saying Injune.

Here is a 1971 photo of the noble, grown-up Injune in his Dog of Destiny pose on a rock outcrop in Texas. This medium-sized dog was one of those dogs who "smile" showing all his teeth when wanted to play. Injune lived

with us for many years and traveled in the truck with us all over the country:



Later, we acquired Sheba,. a mostly Black Lab, who lived with us for 17 years. Here is a photo of her, oddly enough, it's the only photo of her that we have:



Although a huge dog which intimidated visitors on first sight, Sheba never met a stranger. She loved everybody. In fact, in all the years she lived with us, I only heard her growl once—that was when Ginny and I were horse-playing in the kitchen and Ginny squeaked as I dropped an icecube down the neck of her blouse; Sheba charged into the kitchen with bared teeth and growled at **me** as she protected her beloved Ginny.

Many, many years later, killing Sheba was the third hardest thing I've ever done in my life.

I mentioned it in a biographical speech I was once asked to give at a church.

If you like, you can read my talk—the title is *Guts, Feathers* and *All*—at <http://www.cowart.info/Gutsspeech/GutsFeathers.htm>

Tuesday, March 31, 2009

Meager Hope In Bad Times

Ginny came through safe, but Monday she found herself in a potentially explosive situation.

Her boss assigned her to a team interviewing applicants for 75 job openings. Over 300 people showed up wanting those jobs.

Extra security officers were on duty but nevertheless things got loud for a while as frustrated, fearful people vied for a job.

Now the job openings pay just above the minimum wage.

They are temporary jobs

They are only part-time.

The major requirement is that the workers be able to read, write and count.

Yet, some people Ginny interviewed hold masters degrees. Some of these desperate unemployed people drove down 50 miles from Georgia to apply.

An economic crisis grips our nation as millions of people have lost jobs, and one of every six homes are in foreclosure. The Jacksonville Sheriff's Office says crime is on the rise in all areas of the city and that domestic violence calls have increased 40% in March as tensions and frustrations build.

And there is no peace.

Ginny and I understand the frustration level of these poor jobseekers. Back in 1977 I worked for the county mosquito control board. I grew mosquitoes for test purposes, a job I intended to stay in till I retired. A budget cut forced 18 of us to be laid off.

Now, a man who knows how to grow mosquitoes can find a new job anywhere—right?

Not necessarily.

After searching high and low for work, in frustration I wrote a magazine article about coping with unemployment. It sold. But not for much. So I wrote about coping with poverty.

That launched me in my career as a free-lance writer—the next rung on the ladder of unemployment. But I've kept it up ever since.

We endured horrible times of poverty and deprivation praying for daily bread daily. Knowing every certified

letter was a final notice. Living without lights or water in the house. Living in HUD housing on food stamps. Fearing every phone ring was another bill collector...

Then the kids would bounce home from school proudly bearing class photos to be purchased at an astronomical price—and I'd see their faces when we told them we could only buy the tiny wallet sized photos instead of the big ones.

But we survived.

Battered, bruised, but we survived.

Back to back, shoulder to shoulder, Ginny and I fought the world like bears in a trap just to keep our threatened family together.

Many times I lost hope, I lost faith, I lost charity—but the Lord brought us through (In His own sweet time!) I felt useless, lazy, cast-aside, worthless.

And, believe me, when you get in that state, those feelings stick with you even when you survive. You know intellectually that the Lord knows His own and is a very present help in time of trouble, but that's a hard thing to keep believing when you're desperate and no end is in sight.

As my friend Wes says, "Sometimes when tribulation comes, all you can do is stand there and tribulate".

Yes we survived, but even today I feel shell-shocked, a disaster survivor stumbling amid the ruins wondering what happened to my life. Yes, I trust in God and praise His name, but those feelings do linger

So, I felt terrible when Ginny told me about those frantic job seekers yesterday. I understand why they might be dangerous. And I have nothing to really offer the poor bastards.

Yet, I remember one verse of Scripture that I clung to myself during our own times of tribulation:

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

Wednesday, April 01, 2009
Lunch With The King

For Sunday's lunch at the Country Kitchen restaurant, Ginny ordered ham, sweet potato, okra & tomatoes, and black-eyed peas.

I ordered a turkey club sandwich.

My sandwich consisted of three slices of toast layered with turkey, bacon, lettuce, and thick circles of tomato all nestled in a mound of french fries. To hold the thick quarters of my sandwich together, the cook inserted long toothpicks, the kind with decorative green plastic frizzy on one end.

Ginny and I talked about some problems at her office —34 contracts called for a cash advance of $1/12^{\text{th}}$ the total; then, after that was already paid, the board of directors amended the amount of advance to $1/4^{\text{th}}$ the overall total; so Ginny has to go back and re-issue those 34 checks for $1/4$ minus the $1/12^{\text{th}}$ already paid.

Ginny views this as simple math! -- She would.

I told her to drive her boss nuts by asking how much each check should be for.

Here's a 2006 photo of Ginny, the happy accountant, balancing our own checkbook, figuring our income tax, or something in her home office:



Sunday, we also talked about faith.

As I mulled over my sense of failure, frustration, and feelings of uselessness, I asked her why she always seems so content, confident, satisfied, and serene.

She said, "I have faith in God. I know He will work things out right. Honey, you need to believe your own writings more".

I'd finished all but one triangle of my club sandwich by then.

I called the attention of the fair maiden to the triangle remaining on my plate.

I grasped the green frizzy end of the toothpick and slowly tugged it out of the bread triangle. I branished it in the air and proclaimed, "I am the true and rightful king of England"!

Ginny laughed, saying, "That's supposed to be a sword from a stone".

I told her, "That's in Europe. This is the Americanized version".

She laughed harder.!

People at other tables stared.

She laughed harder and harder!

I love to talk with her.

I love to listen to her.

I love to hear her laugh.

I love to see her happy.

I love her.

And the woman is crazy about me.

I'd like to think that she married me for my legendary (and mostly imaginary) sexual prowess; but it turns out that she's kept me around all these 40 years for comic relief.

Thursday, April 02, 2009
A Book About The Book

I have not seen it myself. When he treated me to breakfast last week, my friend Wes, a master printer, told me about a blood-stained Bible he himself once handled.

It was a printed English Bible from the 1500s, a time when owning a Bible could result in persecution. Wes said the owner of this Bible had held it to his chest when a persecutor slashed him with a sword. The Bible reader's blood soaked the pages, gluing some together.

Such was the price some paid to make God's Word available to us today.

The thing that sparked this conversation between Wes and me was my current reading of Donald L. Blake's new book, *A Visual History Of The English Bible* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan. C. 2008). Dr. Blake is a founder of Multnomah Biblical Seminary in Portland, Oregon, and a past-president of Jerusalem University College in Israel. He owns an extensive collection of rare and ancient Bibles used to beautifully illustrate the text of his book.

I only own a meager shelf of modern-speech translations, hardly anything unusual except a two-volume, autographed Stringfellow New Testament—that obscure translation contains a single verse rendering sometimes cited by folks discussing the Trinity. My Bibles are just second-hand, not rare.

However, I'm proud of the fact that back in the late 1950s or early 1960s, I actually handled two of the rarest Bibles in the world.

Back then I worked as a peasant at the Library of Congress (along with 3,000 other government employees—see my March 8th posting, "Under The Fig Leaf").

Anyhow, one day at the Library I noticed bugs in the two display cases containing a Gutenberg Bible and the Giant Bible of Mainz. I called this to the attention of library authorities and when they removed these precious documents to fumigate the display cases, they let me lift the Bibles and place them on a book cart.

So I got to actually touch the most valuable book in the world, the three-volume Guttenberg Bible, and the

two-volume illuminated manuscript of the Giant Bible of Mainz.

Here's a photo of the Gutenberg I touched:



The Gutenberg Bible was the first book ever to be printed on a press with movable type. It is printed on sheets of velum, and is considered to be the most valuable book in the world.

Here is a photo of the Giant Bible of Mainz:



This illuminated manuscript was hand-copied on velum by a scribe who recorded his progress by writing the specific date when he began and finished each

particular section of the Bible. He began work on April 4, 1452, and finished on July 9, 1453.

Capital letters embellishing section headings are often gilded with gold leaf. The Library's web site says that borders on many pages "are adorned with a branch, vine, and floral pattern that acts as a framework supporting artistic renderings of rabbits, hunters, stags, princesses, bears, and the like, all exquisitely designed and painted in bright primary colors".

I once wrote a brief religious humor article for a newspaper about Bible transmission; if you're interested it's on-line here—at <http://www.cowart.info/Rabid%20Fun%20columns/Bible%20transmission/05transmiss.htm>

The main thing I remember about the Library of Congress's exquisite Bibles is that each volume must weight more than a sack of cement!

Really heavy!

But memory of my brief touch with such historic Bibles whetted my interest, so I read Dr. Brake's *Visual History* with enthusiasm.

He traces the transmission of God's revelation to us from the original autographs in Hebrew or koine Greek through scroll and codex to illuminated manuscripts to the printed books we enjoy today.

Throughout his narrative Brake intersperses textboxes filled with information drawn from his own collection.

For instance, he pictures a copy of a Bible produced during the Civil War in Augusta, Georgia, by the Confederate States Bible Society; they printed this edition because yankees blockaded Southern ports cutting off our supply of Bibles.

Brake also pictures a Bible confiscated from the Confederate blockade-runner *Minna*, and resold for profit by the yankees.

And Brake shows how during the Revolutionary War, American minutemen once used pages of a Sauer Bible as gun wads to pack their muskets in order to fire at the British...

But, I'm getting off track—that's all recent stuff—the heart of Brake's book lies in his information about how the Bible came down to us from ancient times through the blood of martyrs—more valuable than the price of a Gutenberg.

"What Bible readers want today is a translation of God's Word that is faithfully accurate to the original languages, artistically beautiful, genuinely dignified, easily readable, and crystal clear," Brake said.

Another valuable feature of the book is that Dr. Brake provides several charts of variant readings—You've surely heard that because the Bible was copied by hand for so many years, then copyists' mistakes must have crept into the text? Well, Dr. Brake details some of these variant readings in charts...

For instance:

Text
1762 Version

1611 Version

Matt. 16:18....."Thou art Christ"....."Thou art the Christ"

Luke 19:9....."the son of Abraham"....."a son of Abraham"

John 15:20....."than the Lord"....."than his Lord"

Sort of shakes your faith in the reliability of Scripture, doesn't it?

Dr. Brake supplies dozens of such comparisons between Bible versions in both English and Greek.

Most of these variant readings are just as startling as the ones in my excerpt, although Dr. Brake discusses more serious ones such as the Johann Comma in 1st John 5:7. Dr. Brake would say I oversimplify such textual matters, but I imagine that he'd agree that we can be confident that the Bible on your hotel nightstand reveals God and guides men aright.

I found the biggest drawback to this book to be the very thing that makes it strong—Dr. Brake's expertise.

For instance, in places he assumes his readers' familiarity with the multitude of abbreviations used to designate modern translations—KJV, ASV, RSV, NASB,

RNEB, KJ21, ESV, HCSB—I have no idea what most of those cryptic initials stand for. I can never keep them straight.

Dr. Brake assumes more knowledge on the part of his readers than I have.

I have only lifted a Gutenberg Bible— I’m not able to read the thing.

The writing’s all squiggly.

Friday, April 03, 2009
Once In My Life

I’m ashamed to say I only did this once.

I felt too afraid to do it again.

I’m sorry.

One time, years ago, I went to a notorious biker bar after midnight and presented a message about Jesus Christ to a rough gang of people in the parking lot.

This gang attracted my attention because one night the week before I’d been working in the area for the mosquito control board and a bunch of them threw beer bottles at me. This outraged me and I thought, “Somebody ought to tell these hooligans about Jesus”.

In my experience, anytime I think “Somebody ought to...” that means the Holy Spirit is saying, “John Cowart, you ought to...”

Whoa!

That can’t be right—Can it?

You’d have to be crazy to go into a bunch of beer swizzling, knife fighting, chain swinging, bottle throwing, bike riding, leather wearing toughs and try to present the Gospel...

I consulted some other zealous, witnessing Christians recruiting them to go with me. They agreed to meet me at a nearby restaurant at midnight and we’d all go over the biker bar together.

Ha.

Come midnight, not a single Christian witness showed up at the restaurant.

I waited and waited.

Obviously, the Lord would not want me to venture out there by myself.

In the recesses of my mind, the Spirit said, "Who will go for Me"?

Doesn't the Spirit ever notice that being a Christian might get you killed?

Now back in those days, I engaged in an unusual hobby. I worked most nights but on my days off, I'd go out in city parks with an easel and poster paints. I'd paint little stick-figure drawings which told Bible stories. I'd never say a word till some passersby would gather and someone would ask me I was doing. That gave me the opening to tell the Bible story and offer folks a chance to think about Jesus.

From about 1974, here's a photo of me (notice the long proud red beard of my youth) one day when I was telling *For Mature Adults*, the story of David and Bathsheba (see her in the bathtub?), to a group of passersby in a St. Augustine park :



Well, the night I'm talking about I carried my easel to the biker bar parking lot, set up under a streetlamp in a far corner, and began to paint.

A skimpily-clad young lady strolled over and asked, "What the hell are you doing"?

"Painting a picture to tell a Bible story," I replied.

The bar was closing and a bunch of guys and gals congregated at the entrance; the girl who'd asked me about the painting yelled, "Hey! Something's going on. Come take a look at this"!

I cringed.

These bar people had thrown bottles at me the week before.

About 20 people gathered to watch and listen. One biker complained there was not enough light to see the painting, so three of them wheeled their motorcycles over and shown their headlights on my easel. I told the parable

about the Lost Treasure, David & Bathsheba, the Frog Prince fairytale, and some other stuff.

One guy said, “You know, my grandmother used to talk like that”.

Another said he’d heard such stories before.

Another said he was into Zen.

Given that opening, I asked if we could go around the circle and each person tell about his or her own spiritual experience.

And they did!

We talked till dawn.

And they asked me to come back again the next Saturday night.

But I didn’t.

I felt too afraid.

Oh I kept practicing my hobby—but in safe places: among tourists on the Riverwalk, to kids in the park, to bikini girls on the beach, to drunks at the mission—but I never went back to that biker bar.

I remembered this incident while I worked in my garden yesterday because, as I raked, I was thinking about a mean-looking, tattooed biker I’d seen in a BBQ restaurant last week and I thought about spiritual hunger among such people.

King Solomon said that God has made everything beautiful in its time and He hath place a strong desire for Eternity in the hearts of men. Every person—biker and beauty queen, accountant and astronaut, executive and plumber—Every person feels a longing for Eternity, for something, for Someone beyond ourselves.

We can not feed on this land’s bread.

We know something’s missing.

We yearn for Home.

In our wildest—or most subtle—rebellion against God, we yet feel drawn.

Longing possesses our heart.

Desire for God.

Nothing less satisfies us.

Every one of us.

The person I think will not be interested. The person I fear. The sophisticate. The professor. The degenerate. The banker. The biker. The apathetic. The indifferent...

On some level, they await our witness.

Jesus said, "Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest".

Heavy laden with anxiety, laden with problems, laden with guilt, laden with ambition, laden with temptations, laden with worries, with troubles, with whatever.

Only He gives rest.. Only He gives peace. Only He offers salvation to the undeserving.

And Jesus also said, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me".

This he said, signifying what death he should die, but in another sense, lifting up Christ is one main job of a Christian.

I sometimes wish I'd gone back to that bar again.

But, I was afraid.

Saturday, April 04, 2009

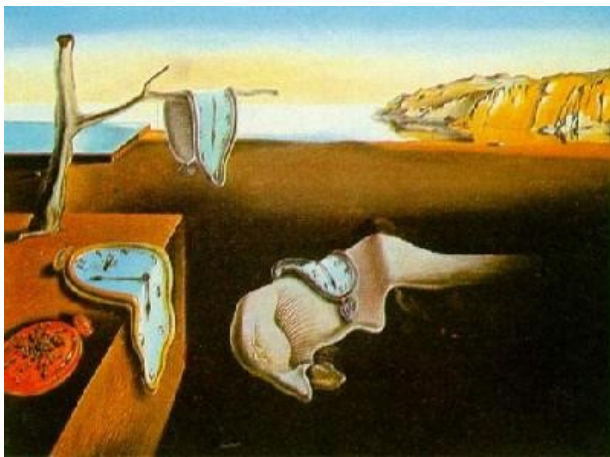
The Persistence Of Memory

Shaving yesterday afternoon triggered a memory.

Yes, I wait till just before Ginny gets home from work in the afternoon to shave. who else do I want to look presentable for?

Anyhow,
shaving
triggered a
memory.

As I
approach 70,
more and more
things evoke
memories of



times past because I do so little memorable in the here and now. Real time events, working in our garden, transcribing handwritten texts, grocery shopping, reading—those things don't call for entries in my diary, but any one of them may remind me of things past.

Trouble is, memories melt and blend and consolidate, as illustrated in Salvador Dali's famous painting *Persistence of Memory*:

Memories turn to mush.

For instance, the other day when I wrote about handling a Guttenberg Bible, I could not recall whether it was in two volumes or three. And did I move the Giant Bible of Mainz the same day? And in my post "Under the Fig Leaf" on March 8th, I not sure how many people watched me splash in the fountain.

Then, of course, there was that embarrassing incident with the chicken-headed pot holders on March 1st. (see blog archives). A lot of people said that was hilarious.

Memory sucks!

Especially as we age.

Here's a funny Bible verse—Joshua 13:1

Now Joshua was old and stricken in years. And the Lord said unto him, "Thou art old and stricken in years..."

Yes, sometimes God states the obvious.

He knows that our memories tend to melt, meld, elaborate, turn events into anecdotes, embellish, and outright lie.

That's one reason, the Lord transmitted His word in writing. "And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God..."

Yes, while God did want His people to memorize certain things, from the very start, He placed a great emphasis on writing things down:

"This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him"....

"And the LORD said unto Moses, Write this for a memorial in a book",...

“And it came to pass, when Moses had made an end of writing the words of this law in a book, until they were finished”,

One of the reasons I started my own diary about 30 years ago, was so I would not have to rely solely on memory. You see, I have a tendency to recall bad things and to forget good things. Relying on memory alone I’d think God has abandoned me again and again, but reading over my old journals I see that I am a victim of mercy.

But, be that as it may, any little thing can trigger a memory—even a simple thing like shaving.

When my two older sons, Fred and John, were little, I took them camping for a week in the mountains of western Maryland.

Out in the woods roughing it like that I did not shave that whole week.

Final night in camp, I decided to teach the boys how to roast marshmallows.

I straightened out a couple of wire coat hangers, built a roaring fire, skewered several marshmallows on the long, flexible hangers, and gave them to the boys to roast.

Freddy’s marshmallows toasted, crusted over, melted inside—and caught fire.

“What do I do, Dad? What do I do?”

“I’ll blow it out for you,” I said.

I took the wire out of his hand and lifted the flaming marshmallow to blow it out.

The hot tip of the wire snagged on a flaming log.

SPRONG!

Flaming melted marshmallow slapped into my week-old stubble of a beard.

It stuck.

Kept on burning.

Singed my hair.

Burned off my eyebrows.

Scared my nose, cheeks, and chin.

I remember that when I returned to work at the Library of Congress that next week, people kept asking me, "What in the world happened to you"?

I remember my reply—"Took the family out camping in the woods last week, and I was attacked by a wild marshmallow".

Tuesday, April 07, 2009

Old Favorites

Bears hibernate in Winter; I choose to hibernate for a week or two now in the Springtime.

Yes, I plan to step away from making blog postings for a while.

I feel depleted and need to refresh my soul.



"This hibernation thing just may be the ticket for me. Mind if I join you?"

It occurs to me that readers might want to be aware of a few of my favorite postings from the past. So I browsed through my *Dirty Old Man Goes Bad* series of books and picked out some of my favorites. You can find them in my blog archives on the sidebar; just click on the month and year and scroll down to the right date and title.

Here are a few links to entries that I particularly like:

2005—A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad—2005

All I Know About Prayer, I Learned From My Dog—June 2, 2005

Up The Creek Without A String Trimmer—July 9, 2005

Tits, Tobacco: An Odd Occurrence—July 30, 2005

Is There Intelligent Life At The Smithsonian?—August 20, 2005

Chugging Along With Joy—November 21, 2005

2006—A Dirty Old Man Gets Worse—2006

I've Been Thinking About Scruffy--January 13, 2006

A Living Saint---January 25, 2006

The Lord God Almighty and His Duck Matilda—May 31, 2006

Medical Ping Pong—June 9, 2006

America's Two Greatest Writers—June 30, 2006

Thinking Inside The Fox-- August 10, 2006

Brains In A Blender—August 30, 2006

Lost Treasure—September 6, 2006

The Funniest Blog I Ever Wrote—September 23, 2006

2007—A Dirty Old Man Stumbles On—2007

Does God Like Me Better Than He Likes You?—April 21, 2007

The Bible Drove My Computer Crazy—May 30, 2007

Double Trouble With Samuel Ward—July 27, 2007

John Cowart, King Of The Geriatric Geeks—August 12, 2007

Why Am I Troubled?—September 20, 2007

2008—A Dirty Old Man Sinks Lower—2008

The Nails Were Too Short—April 2, 2008

Lord Of The Normal—April 28, 2008

I'm Up And...--June 24, 2008

Thoughts On Lost Files—June 26, 2008

Where The Worm Never Dies—July 16, 2008

Sex Photo—July 31, 2008

Buffalo Bill In Jacksonville—August 30, 2008

Disaster Psychology—September 10, 2008

Hit—October 1, 2008

Well, I've had fun looking over my sordid past; I'd forgotten that I wrote some of this stuff. It's not terrible.

Anyhow, now I intend to take a week or two off from writing postings. I intend to sit under my awning by the fig tree, watch the birds feed, listen to the fountain, look over work that needs doing, think, pray, and recharge my batteries.



I want to step away for a bit.

While I step away for a while, try browsing in my archives on the sidebar—or better yet, check out my online book catalog at www.bluefishbooks.info and think about buying one of my books. I'd like that.

Wednesday, April 29, 2009
Almost Back From Sickation &
A historical note on plague for the Kid In
The Attic

I'm almost, not quite, back to my regular schedule of working.

For weeks Ginny and I planned to take time off to set our house in order, rearrange furniture, work in the garden, and do things around the house.

We planned not to go off anywhere, a vacation, but to stay home and relax, what they now call a staycation.

Alas, that was not to be.

Turns out that Ginny got sick (not flu) the day before her time off work was to start and she's been practically bedridden until yesterday when she was able to stay up for half the day.

She returned to work this morning.

So our time off turned out to be a sickacation.

My own plans for our time together got canceled and I've mostly played caregiver.

I'm a loving husband but I'm sick of her being sick.

This is not what I signed up for.

That "in sickness and in health" vow I though was just a pretty poetic phrase you say at a wedding before you can get on with the real business of marriage—which as all guys know is SEX!

Shows what I know about life.

Anyhow, remember back on April 7th when I anticipated my plans for this time off work?

I said, "I intend to sit under my awning by the fig tree, watch the birds feed, listen to the fountain, look over work that needs doing, think, pray, and recharge my batteries".

Ha!

Shows what I know.

Well, I did a little of praying and meditating; and I discovered a valuable spiritual lesson.

While dabbling alone in my garden I can pray and meditate and worship and praise and be a godly man—but the second I resume contact with other people, all that goes out the window and it's back to Grouchville for me.

Solitary religion, I can handle; testing it by adding someone else to the mix, I blow it.

Shame there isn't anyplace in the Bible recommending a religion of one.

A HISTORICAL NOTE ON PLAGUE FOR THE KID IN THE ATTIC:

Last Friday for the first time I heard the news mention an outbreak of flue in Mexico.

The World Health Organization monitored it as a danger of becoming a pandemic.

In a week's time the disease has spread geometrically with the number of cases and deaths increasing daily. It moved from Mexico to Texas, California and New York. It jumped to New Zealand, Scotland, and Germany.

This morning the first death in the United States was confirmed by the Centers For Disease Control. More deaths are expected.

A CDC spokesman said he'd never seen this strain of flu virus before; it combines elements of swine, avian and human influenza viruses. (Makes me wonder if it's not manufactured as a weapon of biological warfare???)

Anyhow, the United States is preparing for mass casualties.

This phenomena interests me on several levels:

For one thing, I've written about epidemic disease here in Jacksonville.

In 1888, Yellow Jack decimated this city. Here's a contemporary newspaper editorial cartoon of the Yellow Jack plague hovering over Jacksonville:



Also, I've been researching materials to someday write a book about the 1666 London Black Death plague. Just recently workers in a city church yard uncovered a mass burial plague pit:



So many people died so fast that they could not be buried individually but their bodies were quickly thrown into such pits every night.

Looks uncomfortable.

But of course, these people will not stay dead.

Remember Easter?

Jesus is declared to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the grave.

And He said, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on Him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.

“For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; And hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of man.

“Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear His voice, And shall come forth—they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation”.

Won't it be a hoot when all those people in the plague pit rise laughing and stretching and slapping each other

on the back, dancing around, and catching up on the news?

Talk about a plague party!

Bet you've never seen such a happy crowd.

And it will happen all over.

Here in Jacksonville, such a mass burial plague pit from the Yellow Jack epidemic lies under the pavement beneath a Northside shopping center parking lot. No one knows for sure how many people ended up buried at that site.

When I worked at Evergreen Cemetery I noticed one section where headstones all bore the same family names. On closer observation, I saw that dozens of family members all died within a few days of each other during the 1918 Spanish Lady epidemic.

As I recall, the first plagues mentioned in the Bible, were the plagues brought on Egypt by Pharaoh not obeying God.

But Exodus also mentions plagues suffered by God's people when they disobeyed.

Oddly enough, once when King David sinned, God gave him a choice between three punishments: famine, enemy invasion, or plague.

David could not make a choice; he said, "I am in a great strait: let me fall now into the hand of the LORD; for very great are his mercies".

As the most merciful judgment and punishment under the circumstances, God sent a plague.

"And David lifted up his eyes, and saw the angel of the Lord stand between the earth and the heaven, having a drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem.

"Then David and the elders of Israel, who were clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces".

A terrible, terrible thing!

Eventually "The Lord commanded the angel; and he put up his sword again into the sheath thereof".

The punishment was over but things were never again the same:

“David could not go before the altar to inquire of God: for he was afraid because of the sword of the angel of the Lord”.

A strange, pathetic, situation.

But, I wonder, if plague can be seen as a punishment of God, then why don't just wicked people die, why do babies, children, good people die as well as the folks who prepare for epidemic by holding an orgy like a hurricane party? Remember Boccaccio's *Decameron*?



It's the nature of disaster to sweep away the good, the bad, the beautiful, and the ugly. Fires burn bars and churches, floods flood hospitals and brothels. Earthquakes, tornadoes, eruptions, drunk drivers, plagues—none discriminate among victims.

Does that mean all hope is gone? That God hates our guts. That there is no mercy?

Certainly not.

When King David pondered the repercussions of the rape of his daughter, and one son's murder by another of his sons, a wise woman comforted him saying:

“For we must all needs die, and we are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again. Neither doth God respect any person—yet He doth devise means, that His banished be not expelled from Him”.

Yes, it all comes down to this—He doth devise means that we, His banished, are never expelled from Him no matter what—come hell or high water

So take prudent steps. Wash your hands. Buy groceries. Avoid crowds. Gas the car.

Do the same things you do to get ready for hurricane season every year.

Plagues come and go, waters rise and fall, winds rage and cease, the wicked flourish and are no more to be found—but the love of God endures no matter what.

Nothing has changed.

Live each day as though you will live for ever and as though You will die tonight. That's what we should have been doing all along.

Now that Ginny is over her bout with illness (not flu) we are all set to live or die, to live on to retirement, or to meet our earthly end in a mass burial plague pit.

Of course I have my preferences.

I hope to finish another book beforehand, and there's some more work to be done in the garden, but I'm happy whatever.



Sunday, May 03, 2009
Cleaning Pipes

I spent the first day of May in the most pleasant way imaginable—cleaning pipes.

I do not collect pipes; but I have a lot of them.

But I'm afraid I neglect their care. When I've smoked one till it clogs up with all the gunk cigarette smokers inhale, I just switch to a different pipe. Eventually after a few months I run out of smooth-drawing pipes and stage a massive pipe cleaning day.

And Friday proved perfect for that project.

I gathered materials—pipes, pipe cleaners, rags, dental probes, lengths of wire, an oyster knife, and a fifth of Jack Daniels whiskey—and spread all this paraphernalia over several lawn chairs and tables outside.

As I worked in the shade of an awning, birds feasted at the feeders, lizards scrambled over the sundial, squirrels scampered in the bushes while a neighborhood cat slinked at the gate hoping to catch an unwary bird or squirrel.

Easy-listening played on the radio as I sipped ice tea and reamed out the pipe bowls with the oyster knife (the blade is shaped perfectly to reach the bottom of the bowl). Oh, by the way, I do not drink the whiskey, don't have a taste for it, but about 15 years ago somebody gave me this fifth of Jack Daniels and I've used dots of it as a pipe cleaning solvent ever since.

The mindless task of cleaning pipes, listening to music, watching the birds, praying now and then, thinking little but keeping my hands busy---Well it was a time of peace and relaxation.

While the outside world did its thing, I did mine.

The first two confirmed cases of Swine Flu have shown up in Florida and the governor has declared a state of public health emergency.

One of the thousands of students at the university in Gainesville shows signs of flu but since this is graduation weekend with hundreds of thousands of parents, students, alumnae, and visitors in town, university

officials decided to go ahead with activities in spite of flu dangers.

Meanwhile, the tv news keeps saying--stay calm--be concerned--nothing to be alarmed about--you're all going to die--and they cite the millions of people who died in the 1918 epidemic as a comparison.

They project 50,000,000 people to die in this epidemic.

They forget that the death rate is the same as it's always been—one per person.

It is appointed unto man once to die and after that the judgment.

So, in this time of medical crisis, we need the mercy of God just as much we do during normal times...

Er, come to think of it, these are normal times.

Well, it is now that my pipes are all clean and all I have to do is fill my tobacco pouch and smoke them.

Monday, May 04, 2009
Fire History, Visit with Barbara White,
& A Letter To The Kid In The Attic On Flu
Epidemic

Sunday, May 3rd, marked the anniversary of the city of Jacksonville's burning down in 1901. In connection with commemorating the Great Fire Of Jacksonville, the Jacksonville Fire Museum revamped its website at <http://www.jacksonvillefiremuseum.com/index.html>

For sections of the new site, they used portions of my book *Heroes All: A History Of Firefighting In Jacksonville* available at www.bluefishbooks.info .

That's nice.

Unfortunately, when crediting my book as a source, they did not provide a link enabling people to consider buying a copy.

After all my years of work on that book, I find that disheartening.

Oh well, God knows.

Monday my friend Barbara White, author of the *Along The Way* series of books, treated me to breakfast at Dave's Diner and she related a recent dream:

Barbara, who is around 80 and walks with an aluminum walker, dreamed she was in a house where a murderer tried to break in and kill her. She locked the screen door. But he said, "That's no barrier" and cut the screen to unlock the door.

She slammed the wooden front door. But the killer said, "That's no barrier either" and cut his way through.

She ran out the back door through the streets of her childhood hometown. Racing to escape the murderer.

She saw a man on an odd bicycle with a boat on a little trailer—but the bicycle was pushing the boat instead of pulling it. Two other people on regular bicycles followed him. She ran to them seeking help.

The man on the bicycle smiled, took out his cell phone and called the murderer to tell him where she was!

The other two cyclists looked on with approval.

Barbara woke in a panic, heart aflutter. She remembered the tension between her and her grown son. She began to recite the 23rd Psalm, "The Lord is my Shepherd..."

She realized her own frailty and vulnerability in danger, yet she realized that she is still alive in the midst of whatever dangers.

Besides that disturbing dream, Barbara and I talked about God's act of creation; Barbara told me about St. Augustine's idea that just as God made oak tree seeds and sunflower seeds to grow and mature and flourish and die in different given time frames, so also He ordered animals, men and worlds to grow, mature, flourish and die in specific different given time frames.

I'd never thought of things that way before.

Here's a letter to the Kid In The Attic:

Hi Kid,

You are my ideal reader.

You are the person I write for.

I picture you in my mind's eye when I enter things in my diary. In my imagination, some day 50 or a hundred years from now, long after I'm dead and gone, you will be prowling around in the attic on a rainy afternoon, and you'll stumble across a dusty old box containing my diary. You'll beat off the dust and roach crumbs and read to see what life was like in the old days (that's my today).

I wish you joy, Kid In The Attic.

Mostly I write so you will see how being a Christian works for one lone individual—me. By tracing my daily entries, you may get an idea of Christian reality in the life of one guy—me. You'll see the ups, downs, sins and warts, the discouragements and elations, the problems I solved and the ones that beat me.

So, mainly this is a spiritual map of one isolated soul...

But to give you historical perspective, I think it important to mention world events now and then so you can see the context in which I lived.

Now, I'm certainly no Samuel Pepys nor John Evelyn, who both chronicled the 1666 Great Plague of London.

Nor am I a Daniel Defoe, the novelist who wrote his fictional *Journal Of The Plague Year* in 1722 (that's the same year he wrote *Moll Flanders*) but you probably know him best for *Robinson Crusoe*.

However, Swine flu is much in the news now and it behooves me to mention it now and then.

So, here goes.

Today, one Jacksonville school quarantined a coach and two students in a hotel, even though none of the three showed any sign of infection, because they'd recently been to a swim meet in Mexico .

Today also, the school board of an adjacent county closed down one school because one student may possibly have swine flu. The student is being tested and the results are not back yet. But they still shut down the whole school for at least two days and disinfected the bus that student rode on.

What's odd about this is that in the entire United States only one person has died of this disease so far.

Isn't that incredible?

Here's something odder:

"Across the country, more than 14,000 persons with AIDS died in 2006... These AIDS cases and deaths should not be happening in this country at this rate".

That's a quote from Dr. Julie L. Gerberding, Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. She made this statement in a report to Congress last September. Her full speech is at the CDC website: <http://www.cdc.gov/washington/testimony/2008/t20080916.htm> .

Now, Kid, I hope in your generation, AIDS is a cured disease of the distant past. But it is real and deadly in my generation. I do not know of a single person who ever caught it who did not eventually die of it (unless they got hit by a bus or something first). But as far as I know from having read in the past issues of the *CDC Weekly Mortality and Morbidity Report*, anyone who gets it, will die of it. The CDC issues regular reports about pediatric AIDS.

Yet, no schools close.

No swim teams quarantined.

No school buses disinfected.

I'd like to think that the difference in responding to one disease with one death and responding to another virus with 14,000 dying is a difference in timing. After all, a virulent flue virus (remember Spanish Lady?) can kill in a matter of days, that generates a sense of urgency; on the other hand the AIDS virus may take years to kill.

I'd like to think that's the difference, but I imagine that true difference is a matter of political lobbying and public relations tactics which downplay AIDS.

Of course that virus spreads through sex or blood contact.

Maybe it's just that school kids today don't get cuts and scrapes and bloody noses in fights or don't take off the band aid to show off sores.

Get real.

Dr. Gerberding projected 56,300 new HIV infections to occur each year, "Worse than previously estimated," she said.

She said it is a shame "For young Americans to grow up without the knowledge, skills, confidence and motivation necessary to protect themselves against HIV for their entire lifetimes. CDC is steadfast in its commitment to ending the epidemic; however, to achieve this goal, the HIV/AIDS epidemic in our own backyards must be met with an even greater sense of commitment, purpose, and urgency by affected individuals, communities, and by the nation as a whole".

Well, Kid In The Attic, that's what's going on in my world today.

I hope your generation has more common sense than mine.

Good luck.

John Cowart

Thursday, May 07, 2009

My Virusesissues

Say what you will about Pontius Pilate, but he never caught the flu virus.

He washed his hands.

Never mind.

The Centers For Disease Control has changed its mind.

What they are now calling—not taco flu, nor swine flu, nor H1N1—but Novel Influenza, they say this new flu is not as dangerous as previously thought.

In a May 5th directive entitled *Update on School (K - 12) and Childcare Facilities: Interim CDC Guidance in Response to Human Infections with the Novel Influenza A (H1N1) Virus* at http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/K12_dismissal.htm , the CDC says:

School closure is not advised for a suspected or confirmed case of novel influenza A (H1N1) and, in general, is not advised unless there is a magnitude

of faculty or student absenteeism that interferes with the school's ability to function.

Schools that were closed based on previous interim CDC guidance related to this outbreak may reopen.

That's good.

I'm glad our health department proved so vigilant in protecting us from this potential threat. Good job, guys.

Be that as it may, I have picked up a virus anyhow.

At least my computer did.

My firewall tells me my computer is under attack from a Deep Throat Trojan Horse virus which is trying to take over my system.

How could I get this virus?

I wash my hands.

When my virus software alerted me to the attack, I shut down the system and called my son Donald, a computer network manager, for help. Yesterday, he, my friend Wes, and I enjoyed breakfast at Dave's Diner, then they came to my house for conversation and computer repair.

It occurs to me that my computer could catch a virus in one of three ways:

Maybe it came into my machine through the remote server?

But Donald assures me that the firewall would have blocked it.

Maybe I caught it when browsing the internet looking for photos of naked ladies?

That can't be, because Wes recently caught the same virus and I assure you that Wes is not the kind of Christian who would ever browse for photos of naked ladies on the internet.

Maybe I caught the virus from a phishing site. (is that the right word?) I mean a website set up to look like it's from one source but is really something else malicious.

I think that may be the case because last week while looking for CDC information about swine flu, one link I

opened generated a pop-up box warning that it was not a real CDC site but a plishing trap.

Wes said that he'd encountered that same thing. While googling swine flu, he also encountered a plishing site claiming to be a CDC page, and he has since found a virus in his computer.

Anyhow, Donald fixed stuff by going to that black and white screen in the bios that Donald says I am never, never, never ever, never to touch.

Donald fixed it and I'm back on line now.

In spite of the Taco Flu virus scare and the Deep Throat Trojan Horse computer virus scare, we three guys had a great time smoking pipes and discussing the whole state of Christ's church and the world.

Donald is praying about perhaps going to seminary and becoming a minister in his church.

I mentioned my own belief that "Where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in the midst of them" and I said, We, the three of us sitting here, we are the church".

Wes said, "We're not a church—we're a bull session".

Donald said, "O Phooey. And here I was just about to take up a collection".

He thinks like a preacher already.

I wash my hands of the matter.

Friday, May 08, 2009 Surprised and Honored

Ever hear of Cherokee Heights?

I live in this obscure backwater neighborhood of Jacksonville, Florida, cutoff from the rest of the city by an expressway on one side and CSX railroad tracks on the other.

Our neighborhood, Cherokee Heights, was not named after the mighty Indian tribe—not named directly after them, that is.

No, long ago there was a steamboat company plying paddlewheelers along the St. Johns River; the company christened their steamboats with Indian names.

Then later, streets and neighborhoods throughout Jacksonville were named after those long ago riverboats.

Thus, I live in a tiny backwater neighborhood of an almost unknown city in the most southern of the United States.

Our cul-de-sac street ends in a circle where lost people can turn around.

Few strangers wander into the area.

This is No-where-ville.

I'd think that my little bit of work done in this obscure corner of the earth would have no effect anywhere else. I feel that most of my work disappears without leaving a ripple.

But, sometimes, I get surprised.

Yesterday as I worked cataloguing a section of my Florida History book collection for a sale, I received a snail-mail letter from InterVarsity Press.

Back in 1990 IVP published a little paperback I wrote called *People Whose Faith Got Them Into Trouble*. Hardly any copies sold and the book soon went out of print, so rights reverted to me. My writing did not leave a ripple.

I didn't give up.

I felt it was a good book.

Still think that.

So, in 2005, I revised and expanded that text and published it at www.bluefishbooks.info under the new title—*Strangers On The Earth*

Well, the IVP letter yesterday carries a request from a church in Singapore to use my book as a script in a radio broadcast which could be heard throughout the great Far East.

STRANGERS ON THE EARTH



A Collective Biography
of
People Whose Faith Got Them Into Trouble

John W. Cowart

That tickles me.

I'm honored.

Yes, the Gethsemane Bible Presbyterian Church of Singapore asked permission to read my book over the air in their 24/7 internet radio broadcasts at <http://www.biblewitness.com/webradio/index.htm> .

I feel honored that folks in that far country feel my work is suitable to be broadcast to their wide-spread listening audience.

I echo the prayer from their information page, "We pray that the Gospel of Christ will be declared throughout the world, to all nations, even unto the uttermost parts of the earth".

Of course when I tried to tune in and listen to one of their broadcasts myself, I could not figure out how to turn it on!

Next time I see my son Donald, I'll ask him how to work a computer radio thingy...

Or, maybe I'll just keep cataloguing books in silence here in my obscure backwater and let the rest of the world listen... A prophet is not without honor, except...

Saturday, May 09, 2009

Family Matters

A few minutes ago my brother called to tell me his first wife has died after a lengthy illness.

They have been divorced for years and he has since re-married; nevertheless, the news upset him when Pam, one of his two daughters, e-mailed him about her mother's death.

Coming right before Mother's Day, their mother's passing must be especially hard on the girls. And news of Charlotte's death gave rise to mixed feelings in my brother.

Damn.

Sometimes I think there's no good way to handle life situations.

My brother also informed me about the possibility of a family reunion in a couple of weeks. My heart dropped. I really don't know how to handle that.

St. Paul said that so much as in you is to live at peace with all men.

To me, that means stay the hell away from them. But I doubt if that's what Paul had in mind.

On one level, I want to be a loving man.

I really do.

But I find that contact with our huge extended family dredges up bitterness in my own heart because of long past, and probably thoughtless, cruelties and anguish these people put me through around the time of my own mother's death.

During Mama's final days, Ginny, our children, and I faced eviction because our landlord had sold the apartment building we lived in. We had to locate and move to a new house the day after her funeral or we would face living in our car.

I spoke with each person in the extended family about help finding a job or renting one of the houses some of them owned. Without exception they turned me down.

At the same time I learned that some creep in that family had raped one of my daughters months previously and Ginny and I knew nothing about it till just before Mama's funeral.

What a can of worms.

In all this, I felt as though those people had left us for dead beside the road.

The afternoon of Mama's funeral while the others were at the reception, through the intervention of my friend Congressman Charles Bennett, I found a house for us to move to the following day. And I did pay for Mama's funeral expenses myself without anything being contributed by other family members.

Tough times.

Yet, I tried to maintain a loving Christian spirit through it all.

Not very successful at it I'm afraid.

I could not feel loving. But to avoid feeling resentful, the only way I felt I could cope was to withdraw into myself.

I still feel that way.

Those people cut us off, and as far as I'm concerned, Ginny and the kids are my family.

The other relatives, I regard as just people, the same as I regard the folks in line at the grocery store. I mean them no ill, I'd help one when asked, I treat them with courtesy, but there's no need to associate with them on any other level.

Oddly enough over the years some have asked me to help 'em move, start cars, etc. and I've always done that but I maintain my internal distance. In fact, Ginny helped one get her kids into a camp once; but we see no need to initiate voluntarily contact.

Hey, I know, that's not Christian love, but it's the best I can manage.

So when David mentioned a family reunion, my blood froze. My chest tightened. My stomach churned.

I cringed as though threatened with a beating.

I don't want to get hurt anymore.

I hope their party turns out well, that the day is sunny, that they feast and dance and laugh and remember good times.

But leave me out of it.

I just can't cope.

I'm enjoying my life and I hope they enjoy theirs.

I wish them well.

I also wish I'd never answered the phone.

I'm not going back over this to edit. I don't have the heart.

Monday, May 11, 2009
Upstairs, Downstairs

Ginny and I spent much of Mother's Day talking about parenting, buying chairs, and searching for a missing goldfish..

Parenting: We did something right but we don't know what it was.

Our grown children fill us with pride, but we take little credit for the way they turned out. Each is a unique person with blessings, talents and quirks.

Fred, my eldest is steady, steadfast, brilliant, troubled and a gourmet chef.

Johnny is mature, spiritual, practical, and a ballroom dancer.

Jennifer, our butterfly, remains convinced that as a baby princess, Gypsies stole her from the palace and dumped her with this odd poor family to raise till she can assume her rightful place.

Donald grew up to become the most thoroughly Christian man I have ever met.

Eve, nicknamed Smiley in school, became a level-headed businesswoman who sets realistic goals and achieves them.

Patricia, a woman of mystery and deep dreams, follows her own star towards brightness.

Ginny and I agree that God knew ahead of time that we lacked the talents and temperament to be good parents, so He gave us such fine and easy material to work with.

Our children bless us.

Buying Chairs: The twin recliner loveseat in our tv room sprang a spring, One side would not open; the other would not close. The thing warped our backs.

To get the huge thing out of the room, I had to saw it into four pieces (we'd removed a window to get it inside years ago and I did now want to go through that again).

For a time, we brought in lawn chairs to sit on while watching watch tv.

Not a good solution.

But we could not afford new furniture. So we managed.

Yesterday we saw an estate sale advertised. The building, three stories and a basement, was a single-family home but in 1898 was divided into 28 tiny apartments and used as an old folks home. New owners closed the facility and were selling off all the furniture at bargain prices (easy chairs, two for \$25).

We prowled the maze seeking the kind of replacement chairs we wanted.

I spotted one.

Up on the third floor, I looked out a side window. From that high vantage point I could see over the hedge into the back yard of the house next door.

"I see the chair I'm interested in," I told Ginny.

"Where".

"Out the window here".

She joined me looking outside. On the other side of the hedge a young woman in her bikini vigorously polished a white aluminum lawn chair.

If the kids ever put me in an old folks home, I want a room with a view like that.

Ginny prodded me into other apartments where we chose a wall-hugger recliner and a swivel-rocker, and an end table—All out of third-floor apartments.

I stumbled downstairs to pay. Merely managing all those stairs aggravated my arthritis into flaring pain and left me quivering.

Obviously, with my cane and age (70) I could not carry these heavy chairs down by myself. The estate sale lady felt so concerned for me that she forced me to sit in the lobby till I stopped shaking. It's been years since I climbed more than six or eight stairs and here I'd been going back and forth between the third floor and the basement. The lady recruited two helpers to bring our purchases downstairs for us.

Back 40 years ago, Ginny and I drove a tractor-trailer moving furniture all over the country. We know how to do it. So it pained me greatly to see these two helpers who

obviously had never handled furniture before, cart the chairs down those steep stairs.

Suggestions surged into my mind. But I kept my mouth shut.

The Scripture came to me, "Judge not that ye be not judged".

Since I'm too weak and shaky and can not carry these chairs down from the third floor my self—then I have no right to supervise those young and strong enough to do the job. They will learn their trade; I should stick to doing things I can do and let others do things their way.

Maybe the bikini girl needs help with her aluminum lawn chair.

That one looked light enough for me to lift.

By the way, Ginny and I snaked our new/used chairs into the back room by ourselves with no trouble at all. We may not have the youth and strength but we still have the knack.

Missing Goldfish: Back home, we discovered that one of our gold fish has gone AWOL.

We searched and search for it. We have no idea where it is. We removed everything out of the ten-gallon aquarium to see if the fish were hiding under some decoration.

It's not.

We checked inside the filter--No missing fish there.

The aquarium cover would prevent any fish from jumping out. The two remaining fish swim contently (Do goldfish eat other goldfish?)

Unable to find our missing fish, we speculated:

"I know what happened to it," I said. ""Jesus took it. He had 2,500 unexpected guests to feed so He only took one fish."

(You know about the feeding of the 5,000, but do you know what He would do if He had to feed ten thousand people? He simply double the receipt).

Ginny said my idea is nonsense. She said our one goldfish was a Christian goldfish and that it had been raptured and the other goldfish left behind.

We talk about theology a lot when there's nothing good on tv.

Wednesday, May 13, 2009 In The News

It pays to read your local newspaper.

You may see your own name. That's what happened to me yesterday.

No, I did not get arrested or anything like that.

And I missed reading last Sunday's *Times-Union*, so I don't have a clipping. But there was an article mentioning me and a history piece I wrote a couple of years ago about cars; actually the piece comes from a section of my book on Jacksonville history, *Crackers & Carpetbaggers* at www.bluefishbooks.info .

I was really surprised to run across my own name in the paper. I knew nothing about it beforehand and just saw this article days later. Here's the article:

The Motown of the South

John W. Cowart has compiled an excellent history of the automobile in Jacksonville on his Web page, www.cowart.info. Among his findings:

- The first motorcar in Florida was a Locomobile, owned by Jacksonville undertaker Charles A Clark. By the end of 1903, there were 40 cars in the city.
- There were nine auto accidents in the city in 1906. Three of those involved collisions with horses.
- The first car dealer in the city opened in 1903.
- The Southern Automobile Manufacturing Co. opened a plant on Bay Street in 1906, making cars that sold for \$400 each.
- The city's first traffic jam was in 1910, when 50 cars lined up to board the ferry across the St. Johns River. The old Acosta was the first highway bridge over the river, opening in 1921.
- Jacksonville was home to a Ford plant, near the western edge of the Mathews Bridge. The plant, which opened in 1925, churned out 45,00 Model Ts a year from '25-'28 before switching to the Model A.

Vote for your favorite classic American auto in our Coolest American Car contest on Jacksonville.com.

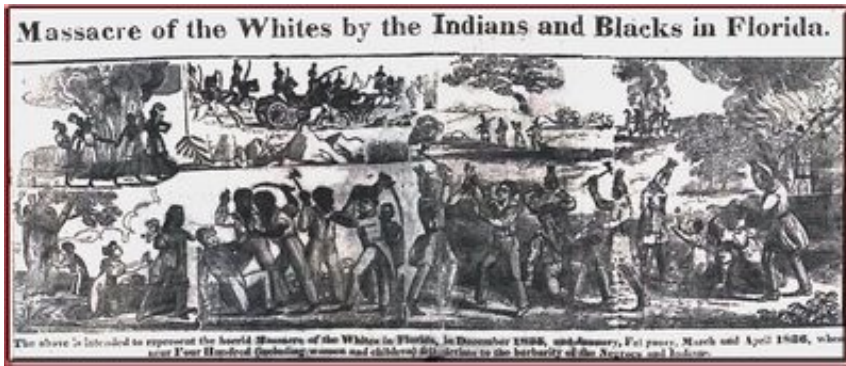
That's it.

That's my name in last Sunday's newspaper.

Oddly enough, although I often write about my walk with Christ—that sounds too grandiose—Let's just call it my stumble with Christ—although I write about matters of faith in my own life, yet most often strangers e-mail me questions about local history rather than about faith.

For instance, recently a reader asked me for information about an 1830s Indian attack near Jacksonville.

During the Seminole Wars there were many such attacks. Here is an engraving of Florida Indian attacks from an 1836 newspaper in the Library of Congress:



The reader who e-mailed me had little information; I had less.

But we batted five or six e-mails back and forth developing leads until I tracked down an old newspaper reprint of an 1836 letter telling what had happened:

"It is again my painful duty to inform you of a most shocking Indian massacre - I mean the murder of Mr. John Tippins and family.

"Mr. Tippins was bringing his wife and children out of Florida to see her parents, and when within a few miles of her father's house, was fallen in with about seven Indians, between 10 o'clock, A.M. and 12 o'clock

"Mr. Tippens was shot from his horse, the Indians then made an easy capture of his helpless family and vented their savage spleen by beating them on the heads with their tomahawks.

“Mrs. Tippins lived (senseless) about forty hours, but did not speak; her skull was smashed in many places by the tomahawk. She died in the arms of her father, Mr. David Mizell.

“Her children are not yet dead, although the skull of each is fractured in many places by the tomahawks.

“This melancholy occasion took place in this county last Monday not far from Ocean Pond”.

A nearby resident, Mrs. Elisha Green, discovered the bloody scene. She left an eyewitness account saying that Mr. Tippens “died on the spot where he fell, shot from his horse”.

His full name was John Joshua Underwood Tippens.

His wife, Nancy Tippens, was scalped, and left to bleed to death.

Their three children were “chopped in their heads with tomahawks and slung to the ground”.

The next morning, Mrs. Green found Nancy. Tippens and a three year old girl, Cornelia, still clinging to life.

Nancy Tippens died soon after she was discovered. But the three-year-old Cornelia survived; she lived till 1926 dying at the age of 88.

Not having a coffin, Mrs. Green buried the dead man, his wife and the other two children in the body of their wagon.

The place where they are buried is now called South Prong Cemetery; it was the Green family burial ground.

Legend has it that a standing wagon wheel marked the grave.

That wagon wheel has long since disappeared.

So there you have it. That is the latest news from last Sunday’s newspaper—and from 173 years ago

But my Good News, my most important news, is that Jesus loves us, and died for our sin, and He rose again from the dead.

No better news than that.

Saturday, May 16, 2009
A Good Day

Good, peaceful days prove more difficult for me to write about than bad days. The absence of conflict and aggravation does not generate dramatic prose.

Friday started with a visit to Dr. Downey. A nurse injured the radial nerve in his right hand; it's numb and bothers him. And he told Ginny and me about his medical trip to Africa where each year he volunteers help in an orphanage.

I'm ok for the shape I'm in.

The doctor froze a few cancers on my arms and gave me some grease to rub on my hip for the always-with-me pain. If that stuff does not help, the next step is an MRI.

Afterwards Ginny and I carried library books up to Dave's Diner where we munched fries and read our murder mysteries as we sat at a window booth watching light rain fall.

Back home, we continued to read in our backyard never speaking except to point out a flock of purple finch or some other bird at the big feeder.

True love enables you to sit in silence, reading, doing your own thing, making no demands, asking nothing—just being together.

Sometimes that state carries over into my devotions. When I'm just with the Lord, aware of His presence but not exactly praying nor worshiping nor singing nor even thinking much about it. Just relaxing together.

Good, the best, is not always dramatic.

Monday, May 18, 2009
Bee Rescue

Over the weekend I rescued a bee—sort of.

Our above ground swimming pool measures 18 feet across and four feet deep.

This honey bee struggled in the water far from the edge. Since bees stand scarcely $\frac{1}{4}$ inch tall, he was in far above his head. And since water clung to his body, he weighted too much to fly to safety.

Being a compassionate man, I moved to rescue the drowning insect. I cupped my hands under the water to scoop him out.

Dumb bug must have thought I was a bee-eating fish rising beneath him because he flailed away from my hands.

Do I look like a trout?

Again and again I scooped. Again and again, he evaded.

I felt tempted to let the bug drown.

The pool filter would get his body later.

But I preserved.

Finally, in a handful of water, I lifted the bee out of the depths and tossed him over the side to dry out and fly away.

Slight problem.

After a bit I peeked over the edge of the pool to see how my bee was drying out. He wasn't.

A large spider stretched a web between the metal pool wall and a plant stalk; when I dropped the bee over the edge of the pool, I'd dropped him right into the spider web.

Mr. Spider, with due thankfulness I'm sure, was busy wrapping my bee up in a bundle for a feast.

And the last state of the bee was worse than the first.

I'm not much of a savior.

The situation reminded me of that Scripture which says that because of His resurrection, Jesus, "is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him".

Although we attempt to struggle away and evade His cupped, nail-scarred hands, He persists in offering us salvation.

Yes, salvation is scary.

Yes, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

He's big.

But Jesus is not a trout.

And He never drops us into some evil web.

Saturday, May 23, 2009
Creeping Out Of Forced Seclusion

Last Monday our telephones and internet access went out.

That's why I haven't posted in a week.

Also, continuous rains are falling on Jacksonville. Anywhere from nine to 20 inches of rain has fallen in the area since last Sunday.

With outside communication cut off and with rain keeping me inside, all I've been able to do is work. And I've accomplished a bundle during this enforced seclusion; I'm cataloging my entire collection of Florida history books, artifacts, coffee mugs, tee shirts and ephemera—getting it all ready to sell.

I've collected Florida history materials for 35 years so a lot of this stuff has accumulated.

While I worked on local history things, I've also been reading the historical books of the Bible, the portion of Scripture I enjoy most. Yes, the names are hard to keep straight but the events resonate within my own life.

For instance, I've noticed one recurring phrase that gives me pause. "They feared the Lord, and served their own gods....These nations feared the Lord, and served their graven images".

What a sorry state.

For a nation—or a man.

To fear the Lord, but to serve my own.

Such double commitment makes a man unstable in all his ways. I see this in myself and I see it all around me. Too wishy-washy to rebel outright shaking our fist in the face of God in utter defiance, we pay Him vague lip-service but serve our own gods.

Anyhow, this section of Scripture causes me to examine my own life more carefully.

So, other than being double-minded and cataloguing history books, what have I been doing?

Waiting for the TELEPHONE REPAIRMAN!!!!

I'm being very Christian in writing that; I did not use any adjective at all.

If you have ever had dealings with the phone company, you can supply your own.

After spending 45 minutes on a borrowed cell phone just getting through their mechanical customer discouragement process before talking to a human being, I waited five days without service.

But I spare you my tale of frustration.

If you've ever dealt with the phone company, you could tell your own.

The repairman showed up yesterday and fixed some of our phone lines. Ginny and I decided we can live without the other line instead of going through their customer service process again. Motto: WE PUT THE CUSS IN CUSTOMER.

Once the Bell South Phone company, a forerunner of AT&T, threatened to remove all phone service from the city of Jacksonville.

Years ago, I wrote a history piece about Jacksonville's Great Telephone War at <http://www.cowart.info/Florida%20History/Great%20Telephone%20War/Telephone%20war.htm>

In 1885, the phone company increased their initial charges by 900 per cent; when residents objected, the company began removing all phones and wires from the city.

My, how customer service has improved.

But, after all this week without phone or internet, and the interminable wait for a guy who did not show up when promised, I'm sick about thinking about the phone company.

I won't write about the phone company any more.

In other news, there are also pirates in Somalia.

Monday, May 25, 2009
Vacation Weekend Happenings

Ginny and I spend much of our Memorial Day vacation planning for another vacation—Next Fall we celebrate our 41st Anniversary, so we planned for a trip, renting a cabin far out in the woods alone.

We had such fun anticipating as we discussed this site and that before choosing one and making our advanced reservations.

We did part of our planning over lunch at Georgies II BBQ where a young waitress joined us by telling about a trip she and her husband just returned from. They've been married seven years and have two children. We Old-Timers had fun giving her advice and she had fun telling us about available cabins in the state park where they went.

Different subject:

Friday when my internet came back up, I checked my e-mail and found one from that radio station in China (broadcasts at <http://www.biblewitness.com/webradio/index.htm>).

Through a complicated process, they got four of my friend Barbara White's *Along The Way* books; their e-mail tells me they plan to choose selections from her books to read over the air in their Women's Segment to be broadcast all over the Far East.

I'm delighted.

I think Barbara's writings enter the realm of spiritual classics.

Remember when Barbara brought me that flowered shopping bag full of hundreds of newspaper clippings? (See photos in my entry for August 20th, 2007, in blog archives).

At the time, I considered all that just rote donkey work. Turns out that the labor involved is worth it because now her message is reaching the far ends of the earth.

Which brings me to another topic:

When Ginny and I returned from breakfast yesterday, a message on our answering machine tells us that Barbara was admitted to the hospital Sunday morning

We called and find that her cancer has returned and she also has congestive heart failure.

Visitors from her church inundated her room at the moment.

Ginny and I plan to visit later.

Tuesday, May 26, 2009

Many Tee Shirts

Yesterday afternoon Ginny and I visited our friend Barbara White in the hospital; she does not appear to be doing well. Her doctors have scheduled more tests.

All morning long Ginny and I worked on tee shirts.

Over the past three decades Jacksonville artists often expressed their talent for design by creating tee shirts featuring various aspects of the city's culture.

As part of my mania for collecting Jacksonville historical materials I have amassed dozens of such tee shirts.



They feature varied themes from boats at the Florida Yacht Club to the mighty air craft carriers Saratoga and Kennedy—200,000 Tons Of Diplomacy. Sports team shirts

range from the long-defunct Jacksonville Bulls (football) to the Jacksonville Lizard Kings (hockey).

Organizations as diverse as Habijax, building homes and the Cummer Museum Of Fine Art, business as diverse as Dave's Dinner and LifeFlight Helicopter Rescue, events as diverse as scout hikes and Jacksonville Jazz Festivals—all in all, for over 30 years I've collected over 50 tee shirts representing the city in its varied aspects.

In preparing my whole collection of books, notes, clippings and historical artifacts for sale, yesterday we unpacked these tee shirts from their plastic containers, photographed them for the sale catalogue, fresh laundered them, ironed, refolded, and packed them away again—a massive amount of work.

These odd bits of ephemera depict my hometown as a city mighty as an army with banners...

Well, if not an army with banners, at least as a city where residents sport a bunch of colorful tee shirts.

Thursday, May 28, 2009
A Day Of Visitation

Support your local attorneys ;
Send your kid to medical school.

Know the difference between a doctor and
God?

God does not think He's a doctor.

Those are two of the jokes that rattled around our friend Barbara's hospital room when my friend Wes and I visited her yesterday.

Yes, spreading light and joy, we visited the afflicted lady. She'd expected to be told the results of the cancer tests and we wanted to be with her for support when she heard the news. Unfortunately, the results were not in yet. So we sat around sharing jokes and talking about divine healing and Christian dieing.

From preliminary information, it looks iffy that Barbara will ever make it out of the hospital and she's perfectly happy with that prospect and looks forward to seeing the Lord Christ face to face. She is not inclined to seek aggressive, and possibly debilitating, treatment.

Now Wes, Barbara and I –all of us believe in God’s ability to heal.

We also believe He is not obligated to do so.

Like in marriage, the relationship of the Christian to the Lord is in sickness and in health—neither one breaks that relationship.

Of course, we all prefer the in-health part. That’s natural. But no one stays on this earth forever and sometimes illness is one of the cards we’re dealt.

Besides, Jesus never cured anyone of old age.

In the midst of Barbara’s present bout with cancer, her biggest concern is that the only food she’s been able to eat for the past 14 days is Jello and broth. She says she’s more sick of Jello than she is of cancer.

Wes told about how the Lord healed his daughter, Sandy, as a dying infant, but let her die of cancer when she was 17 years old. His faith uplifted him in both situations.

I have no experience in divine healing, but I told about how Barbara and I became friends about 25 years ago—I wrote about this on October 23, 2007, “Two Rain Storms” in my former (2007) journal. What’s odd about that is that our friendship began 25 years ago in this same hospital.

While Barbara, Wes and I talked, a pastor from Barbara’s church came in to visit also. When I told him, he was surprised to learn about some of Barbara’s books being broadcast by that radio station in Singapore, China; she’d forgotten to mention that to him before.

In the midst of our conversation about sickness, healing and the mercy of God, I recalled an incident from my recent Bible reading. I could not remember the name of the king and called him Hazaiahwhat’sit—but Wes, ever the Bible scholar, said the guy’s name was Azariah.

Here’s the odd thing the Scripture says about Azariah in Second Kings 15:

In the twenty and seventh year of Jeroboam king of Israel began Azariah son of Amaziah king of Judah to reign.

Sixteen years old was he when he began to reign, and he reigned two and fifty years in Jerusalem. And his mother’s name was Jecholiah of Jerusalem.

And he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father Amaziah had done; Save that the high places were not removed: the people sacrificed and burnt incense still on the high places.

And the LORD smote the king, so that he was a leper unto the day of his death, and dwelt in a several house.

So, Azariah did what was right in the sight of the Lord... And the Lord smote the 16-year-old with chronic, life-long leprosy.

Let's see, he was 16 when he got it, and he reigned for 52 years—that means he was sick for... Let's see, 16 from 52 is??? And carry your six...or do you add it? **Ginny would know**. Anyhow, He was sick a long time.

And he was a good guy.

And though he were a king, he lived all his days in a pest house, not a palace.

And it was the Lord who smote him, not the devil.

And we are not told why the Lord afflicted this good young man with leprosy.

The Scripture teaches realistic life, not some magic fantasy.

Yes, God can kill or He can keep alive according to His own high purposes.

Barbara said our role is to trust Him whether we understand what's going on or not.

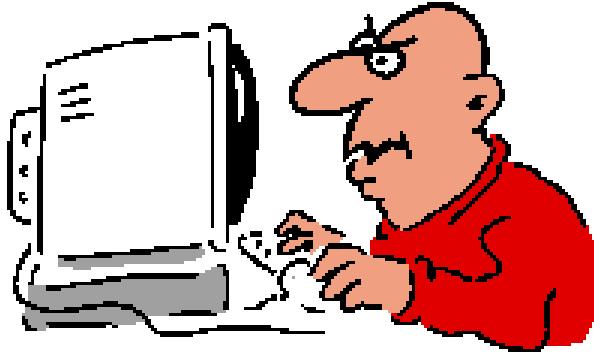
She emphasizes that God is good even when it does not appear that way to us.

And so went our day of visitation—laughing at dumb doctor jokes, trusting, and worshiping the Lord God of Heaven.

Friday, May 29, 2009 No Snake Today

Two hours ago I sat down to write about a beautiful snake I found while mowing the lawn yesterday

The computer had other ideas....



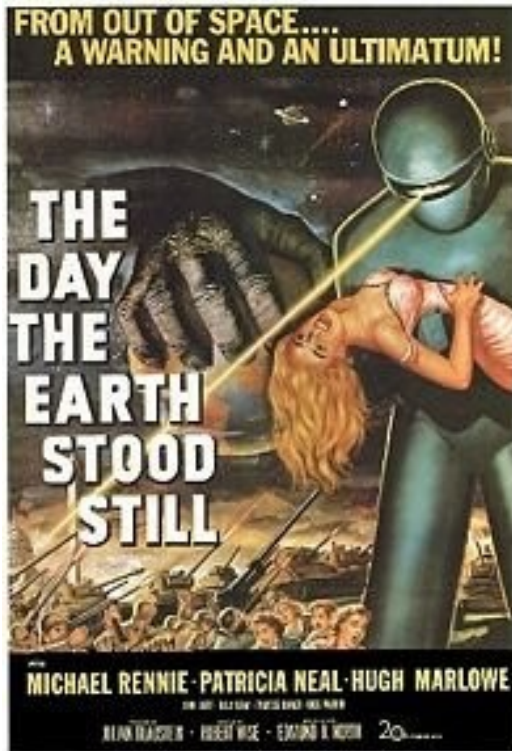
Monday, June 08, 2009
On The Beam

Lots of stuff, external and internal, going on recently.

Since the external stuff largely involves other people, I don't feel at liberty to write about it; Although they've let me in on things, they deserve their privacy.

And since the internal stuff largely involves my own bitterness, resentment, and despair, I don't want to write about that crap either. What a downer, who needs it.

I saw one recent insight. It came about through an odd juxtaposition of diverse elements: an old science fiction movie and a passage of Scripture.



From the Main Library's video collection, Ginny and I checked out the 1951 movie, *The Day The Earth Stood Still*—one of the greatest movies ever made! We cheer and clap every time we watch it.

A few nights later as I worried over my own inclination to be harsh and judgmental—especially where government or businesses are concerned—for our evening devotions, Ginny happened to read that passage of the Bible where Jesus said:

Judge not, that ye be not judged.

For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.

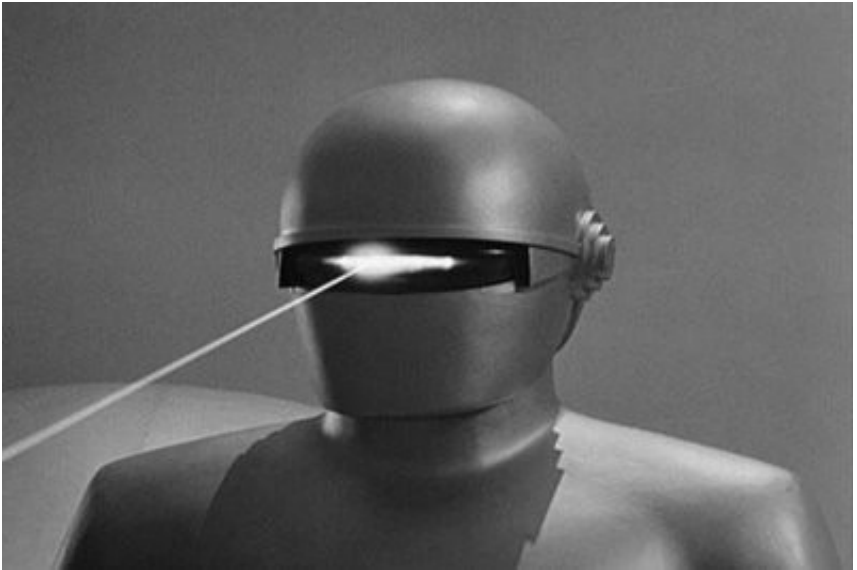
And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?

Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye

I determined that I need to repent about being so judgmental... But I don't like that idea at all.

I said that I wish the beam in my eye was like the beam in Gort's eye. That way I could zap evil-doers any time I spot them.



Ginny—who is not a Bible scholar—says I'm misinterpreting the Scripture.

I say the world would be a better place if I could beam-zap anybody and anything that bugs me.

Yes, it's easier to spot and condemn other people's sins than my own.

There's a reason God did not put a zap-beam in my eye.

He wants me to deal with the other kind.

Wednesday, June 10, 2009

Almost Important

The woman had been born retarded.

And, as though that were not enough, as a child, she pulled a boiling pot off the stove onto herself, scaring her face and withering one arm.

Kids at school teased and tormented till she had to drop out and just stay at home.

Her family coped with her affliction as best they could—but, well, you know families. It was not easy for them, or for her.

Although my friend Wes is not a clergyman, the family asked him to conduct the woman's funeral at a backwoods church last week.

As Wes and I visited our friend Barbara White yesterday, he told us about the funeral; he read the burial service from the *Book Of Common Prayer* and gave a brief sermon on "The Value Of A Diminished Life".

Afterwards, people told him it was the most meaningful funeral they'd ever attended. They had not realized *who* had been dwelling among them.

Yesterday morning I'd laid out my work on the kitchen table and just started to get down to it when Wes called asking if I wanted to go to Dave's Diner for breakfast. Ever ready to avoid work, I agreed. At breakfast he suggested we drive across town to visit Barbara—she had her first chemotherapy treatment Monday and she may not feel like visitors later in the week.

Barbara has been diagnosed with peritoneal cancer which originated in an ovary. Her doctor said that with chemotherapy she may last another year or so; without it, he recommended entering a hospice program now. Barbara, who is in her 80s, is going to see how her body handles this first chemo treatment then decide.

Recently Barbara's grown daughter Mary died of cancer after long chemo treatments. Barbara drove Mary for the treatments every couple of days for months and months, so Barbara knows what she herself faces with chemo.

Fortunately, Barbara's many friends from her church have volunteered to drive her for treatments and doctors' appointments. And I'm very pleased that my son, Donald, and his wife, Helen, have involved themselves in some of Barbara's hands-on care.

Since Barbara's apartment in the retirement home is so tiny (and so Wes and I could smoke our pipes), the three of us sat outside in the beautifully landscaped garden on benches beside Turtle Lake to talk. As we talked about medical issues, church stuff, family matters,

etc. we watched two small alligators glide through the water.

Wes and Barbara discussed reactions and the side effects to various medicines—things I know nothing about.

Two large fountains spray high in the air from the lake. Acres of flowering ginger border the waters. A waterfall near us splashed and cascaded over a waterwheel circling at the base of a dam as overflow from the lake move toward Julington Creek and the St. Johns River visible in the distance.

Our discussion turned to the movement of the Holy Spirit which Wes and Barbara detect in their respective churches.

We talked about how the Spirit falls from above. We can not “work Him up”, but He, while always present, yet sometimes, at His own discretion, He moves, “comes down” in ways that we can become more aware of Him.

Sometimes that manifestation falls with abrupt power and a mighty rushing wind like on the Day Of Pentecost; at other times, He falls from above with silent pervasive power like morning dew forming on Spring grass—unseen till it’s there.

As we talked about God’s Spirit, we also talked about revival—a wide-spread, noticeable manifestation of God throughout a community.

I think that there is nothing more important any person can do than to receive from God, even when we feel the slightest nudge in that direction. Maybe, especially then.

Problem is, we try to live ordinary lives in a supernatural world, not realizing *who* is dwelling among us.

As we talked, I felt we three stood on the verge of something important.

Our conversation was almost important.

But, unfortunately we veered into religious small talk about spiritual gifts; as the token skeptic in the gang, I’m inclined to think that in myself, what Wes and Barbara term gifts of the sprit are merely tricks of the trade.

Mid-lake a free-floating log hosted a line of large turtles sunning themselves; when a new turtle tried to climb aboard, the log rolled dumping the others in the water and all had to climb on again.

That was fun to watch as they did the same thing again and again.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “All the thoughts of a turtle are turtle”.

Finally, afternoon heat drove us inside the air-conditioned lounge and we never returned to talking about the fall of the Holy Spirit.

Instead, we talked about teeth.

Specifically the typical lack of teeth among backwoods crackers (I’m a prime example of that toothless clan). But we joked about us Florida hillbillies. And I felt comfortable about my friends’ teasing.

Then the conversation turned to baldness—which Barbara faces as a result of her chemo. Wearing a bandana, cap, or a wig concerns her.

Ever the gallant Christian gentleman, Wes, who is a trifle hair challenged himself, offered to go to her church with her and sit the two of them on the very front row so they’d look like bowling balls in a rack.

What a funny mental picture!

Anyhow, by the time I got back home, six hours after I’d left for breakfast with Wes, my files still littered the table.

I felt depleted as I always do after contact with superior Christians. I need to withdraw more.

Yes, I know no man is an island, but I should stay as close to the tip of my peninsula as I can.

I feel unfit for human contact.

Later in the evening, Ginny and I drove to the library and to a fast-food place for supper. When she checked her blood sugar, the reading was only 54—that’s close to pass out territory—the lowest reading she’s had in ages.

I’m concerned.

Ginny is the best thing that's ever happened to me.

I love her with all my heart.

The other evening she was ironing clothes singing *I Dreamed A Dream*—that song Susan Boyle sang wowing the entire world. (But, while Ginny is beautiful, she resembles Susan Boyle more in appearance than in singing voice).

Nevertheless I got such a kick out of hearing her sing.

I love to see her happy.

She is such a joy and delight.

Although, I'm not beyond teasing her....

For instance, last Friday, I knocked one of my few remaining front teeth loose.

Yes, while slurping a bowl of vegetable soup, I bit down on a chunk of carrot wrong and knocked my tooth loose. It wobbles in the socket and will soon fall out.

Yes, I broke a tooth eating soup. Not many people make that claim.

Not that losing one more tooth will make much difference in my Florida Hillbilly appearance, but I'm extremely conscious about my facial deformity (hardly any bones in my face so I can not be fitted with dentures—growing up my children teased me by calling me Gnaws after the famous shark in the movie).

I know it's my vanity, but I feel all too aware of my appearance and avoid smiling or eating in public where my sloppy eating may disgust people.

An aside: Once over 50 years ago I avoided a man who wanted to be friends because I saw he had such bad teeth. I've often wondered, since my own teeth fell out and my face fell in, if perhaps the Lord touched me with this gentle judgment to my vanity over my own teeth because I deliberately shunned that man.

Be that as it may, as Ginny and I ate lunch at the BBQ restaurant Sunday, we held hands across the table as we usually do as we talk.

I worried aloud that when this next loose tooth falls out like all those others, Ginny will not find me attractive any more, that she will be ashamed to be seen with me.

“O sweetheart,” she assured me patting my hand, “I’m not ashamed to be seen with you. I’ve never been ashamed to be seen with you. I never will be ashamed to be seen with you”.

“That’s what I like about you,” I teased. “You are a shameless woman”.

We got to laughing so hard the waitress thought something was wrong and came over to check on us.

Thursday, June 11, 2009

About Two Old Magazine Articles

The cartoon showed an apprentice watching expectantly as the master examined his work. “Of course you’ve improved greatly,” the master says, “That’s because you were so terrible to begin with”.

I thought of that old cartoon yesterday as I sorted through a box stuffed full of magazine articles I wrote back in the 1970s and 80s.

Some brought fond memories of great experiences; others made me cringe.

Did I write that?

Did I really?

One piece I wrote for the Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce magazine reminded me of a laugh—I’ve always been a bit of a devil to long-suffering editors.

Carolyn Carroll, who was then editor, called me to her office and assigned me to write an article about the warehouses of Jacksonville.

Deliberately misunderstanding her, I bounced joyfully saying, “Wow! This is right up my alley! I’ll interview all the girls. Can we run photos? This is going to take a lot of research. Can you explain to Ginny what I’m doing? This is the greatest assignment ever! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

“John Cowart, what are you carrying on about,” Carolyn asked.

“Didn’t you just ask me to write a piece about the whorehouses of Jacksonville?”

“Get out of my office! You know good and well it’s warehouses”.

“Drat! I never get any of the good assignments,” I said.

But yesterday I did find that piece I wrote extolling the warehouses of Jacksonville; it’s as boring to read now as it was back in December, 1988. I can’t believe I wrote such tripe.

What I won’t do for money!

But, as I sifted through those ancient articles from my distant past, I also came across the first article I ever had accepted for publication; Didn’t pay anything, only contributor’s copies, but it launched my career as a published author. It appeared in the March, 1973, issue of the *Hoosier Conference Reporter*. Here it is:

What Is God Like

by

John Cowart

What is God like?

This is the most profound question that either child or philosopher can ask. Getting the wrong answer to this question is the root of every error in doctrine, every doubt of faith, and every circumstance in life.

The Scripture’s main purpose is to reveal to us what God is like so that we can be completely and thoroughly furnished for every good work.

Read Psalm 145 and underline in your Bible (or make a list) the things that the Psalmist specifically tells us about God. In these 21 verses, over 30 distinct characteristics of our God are mentioned. And the Psalmist starts off by telling us that God is unsearchable. We, as created beings, cannot learn everything about our Creator, but this Psalm gives us a good start toward that end.

When I looked at a list of the qualities of God, my first reaction was “so what?”. The Psalm says that God is great, mighty, glorious, wondrous, righteous, gracious, full

of compassion, etc. "Church words," I said, "Self-evident, anybody knows these things".

However, as I began to study this Psalm, I ran across a word that I wanted to look up in a dictionary to see the exact meaning. The word was *gracious* (verse 8). A certain lawyer I know often opens his prayer with the address "Gracious Lord". What kind of God is he praying to? What does *gracious* mean? My dictionary says (among other things) "Marked by qualities associated with good taste".

We serve a God who has good taste! Obvious? Perhaps to some, but I was amazed to find this out. I look at some of my fellow Christians and wonder if God has any taste at all. But, if He's a God of good taste, perhaps He sees something in them that I don't.

This misunderstanding about one word in this Psalm made me want to go on to look up others in my paperback dictionary to see if I'd been missing anything else. I'm going to record a few of my findings, but I urge you to take your Bible and dictionary and study Psalm 145 in this way. Incidentally, I'm not going to skim off the best ones to write about, Some of the juiciest ones are left for you to discover for yourself. Taste and see that the Lord is good.

"Great is the Lord" (verse 3). *Great* is defines as "remarkable, eminent, distinguished, or first-rate". Our God is first-rate!

"The Lord is good to all" (verse 9). *Good* has many meanings starting with "Having positive desirable qualities" and ending with "Well-behaved" as in "You're a good boy, Johnny".

Our God is first-rate, well-behaved, and has good taste.

Many people returning from Disney World a few miles south of my home describe it as *glorious* meaning "delightful". Or perhaps they will describe it as *wonderful*, meaning "capable of exciting us". The Psalmist (verse 5) uses both these words to tell us about what God is like.

Our Lord is exciting, and He is delightful. How can we be bored and dreary if we have an intimate relationship with such a God?

The Lord has *power* (verse 11), i.e. “the capacity to perform effectively”. He had *dominion* (verse 13), i.e. “the exercise of control”. Do we live like worshipers of the God revealed here? Or do we find our lives ineffectual and out of control?

The Lord is *near* (verse 18) i.e. “close by, or available”. This same first-rate God, who is well-behaved, delightful, and exciting; who performs effectively and has control, is also available to us.

Now, you look up *compassion* and remember the time Jesus used spit on His own fingers to wipe the pus from a blind man’s eyes before He performed a miracle. Look up *terrible* and remember Peter’s reaction to Christ’s stilling the storm. Look up *mercy* (verse 9), *raising* (verse 14), *giving* (verse 16), *satisfying* (verse 16) *hearing* (verse 19), *saving* (verse 19), *preserving* (verse 20) and *destroying* (verse 20). In all these qualities and actions of God, remember that Christ is God come in the flesh, and He represents all these things perfectly to us.

Study this Psalm and worship our God whose greatness is unsearchable.

Friday, June 12, 2009

I’d Forgotten An Unforgettable Night

Yesterday’s *LA Times* reported that a young lady who performs in porno films has tested positive for HIV/AIDS. That newspaper article can be found at <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-porn-hiv11-2009jun11,0,2783528.story>

Yesterday also, the World Health Organization upgraded Swine Flu to a Level Six Pandemic, the highest alert stage. While the words pandemic and epidemic appear to be used interchangeably, *pandemic* refers to the world-wide spread of the disease, it’s now in 74 countries; whereas *epidemic* refers to the severity and thus far Swine Flu appears to be comparatively mild—unless, of course, you are the one who has it.

Yesterday also, as I sorted old papers from storage boxes, I ran across a pamphlet that triggered an odd memory about a time of family devotions 20 years ago which related to the above two news items..

According to Dr. Sharon Mitchell, head of the Adult Industry Medical Healthcare Foundation (AIM), an organization and clinic which sort of monitors medical ethics in the porn business, people performing in sex films are tested for sexually transmitted diseases every 30 days. When cases turn up, "What we do is just handle everything privately unless there's a widespread problem," she said.

In an Associated Press article—at http://www.mercurynews.com/ci_12572220?source=most_viewed —AIM administrator, Brooke Hunter said, "This is really not a major event," adding that the infected actress had worked "very infrequently."

I imagine the young lady who tested positive and the men and women who performed with her do regard this as a major event.

God bless 'em. They must be frightened to death.

My reading these articles on Google News coincided with my finding that 20-year-old pamphlet as I sifted through boxes of old papers in my current clean-up campaign.

In 1988, Dr. C. Everett Koop, Surgeon General of the United States, mailed an eight-page pamphlet titled *Understanding AIDS* to every home in the country.

It has long been our family custom to have a time of devotion after supper each night before anyone got up from the table.

Usually, our devotions consisted of a reading a brief Bible passage and prayer.

But we occasionally varied from that standard by having a hymn-hum—no words just humming. Or a joke night where everybody got to tell a joke. On Saturdays devotions consisted of watching the Muppet Show on tv after Donald once observed, "No sense praying tonight because God is watching the Muppets".

Sometimes we heard missionary reports and sometimes we used devotions to play High And Low—in which each person tells the high point of his week and the low point. Or we had an Ask-Me-Anything night, during which I fielded any and all questions with my most common answer, "I don't have any idea".

Then, of course, even today our grown kids tease me about TWO-SHEET NIGHT in which I gathered everyone into the bathroom for a lecture on the use and conservation of toilet paper and how to shower—we all packed, fully clothed, into the shower stall and I turned on the water while expounding on soap conservation!

Our poor kids grew up in this fanatical repressive religious household.

Scared 'em for life.

I hope.

Anyhow, back in 1988, after Ginny and I read the Surgeon General's brochure on AIDS, we determined that we should go over this information item by item with our kids. "Basic health education should be started as early as possible in keeping with parental and community standards," Dr. Koop said. "Final responsibility rests with the parents. As a parent, you should read and discuss this brochure with your children".

Ginny and I picked a night for devotions based on *Understanding AIDS*.

Now while our kids were growing up, our house was a magnet for neighborhood kids. Swarms of kids infested our house, friends of our kids from scouts, school, the corner store, wherever gathered at our house all the time.

On the night we'd picked for AIDS devotions, teens, pre-teens, and yard kids surrounded our dinner table. I'll never know how God fed all that lot at our table. Anyhow, when strangers showed up for supper, we'd give a brief explanation of our devotion practice then go ahead with it.

Ginny and I hesitated about getting into a sex discussions while neighborhood kids were present; we had no idea what their own parents might think. But we decided to go ahead with what we had planned.

In a room packed with kids of all ages, we read sections of the Surgeon General's booklet and discussed each section freely and honestly and we asked for questions. And did these kids ask questions! Anal intercourse, fellatio, condoms, mosquitoes, cunnilingus, kissing, bestiality, dating, hand holding, missionary position, doggie and can you get it from borrowing your

sister's gym shorts—How in the world did these kids know enough even half-information to ask such questions!!! Where did they learn the words???

Heck, when I was their age I thought breast was a chicken part.

Dr. Koop said, "Children hear about AIDS, just as we all do. But they don't understand it, so they become frightened. They are worried they or their friends might get sick and die". He advocated honest education on a level suitable to their understanding.

Now there was nothing salacious, nothing sleazy, about that night of devotion. But honest kids asking real questions and looking for real answers, questing to find their own place in the world of God and man.

It was an honor to serve them.

It was one of those unforgettable nights I'd forgotten all about—until I uncovered that tattered pamphlet in my box of old papers.

I wonder how many other unforgettable things I've forgotten?

Saturday, June 13, 2009
Hush Please... Librarian at work.

Librarians lead a hushed existence, quiet, low stress, serene, pressure free.

They check books out to patrons. They help little blue-haired old ladies find another Agatha Christie mystery. They read *Make Way For Ducklings* to gaggles of silent, enthralled kiddies. They watch over old men dozing over Dickens. They help with homework. They solve problems. They research. They read.

Librarians live in a bubble of tranquility—unless, of course, they have grown children.

I refrain from naming names, but I assure you I'm not making this up.

I couldn't.

It's too bizarre.

Yesterday after my appointment with Dr. Oz, my oncologist, who says my PSA is 10+ now, Ginny and I met our daughter Eve for lunch

Eve works as a librarian.

Friday one of Eve's co-librarians—let's just call her Library Mama—showed up at work looking weary. Eve asked about her friend and Library Mama told about a 3 a.m. phone call.

Library Mama is a refined lady with exquisite taste (she buys my books and says she's my Number One Fan). Once she gave me a beautiful antique edition of *Pilgrim's Progress*. She's nice. She looks much too young to have grown children, but she does have a daughter in her 20s.

At 3 a.m. Library Mama's phone rings—never a good sign when you have a daughter still out on a date.

Frantic daughter calling on her cell phone.

Angry people yelling profanity in the background.

Loud bangs.

Thuds.

Crashes.

Daughter says she's under attack by... Strippers.

Yes, Strippers.

Daughter says she was driving three guys home. Gets to one guy's house. He gets out of her car.

A woman bangs open the door of the house screaming abuse. She's wearing ... well, a traditional stripper costume. Five or six other strippers join the first one yelling at Library Mama's daughter. Apparently the strippers had been performing at a party (maybe a sleepover) at the guy's house. I don't know, maybe they were roommates living there.

Anyhow, they'd stayed up late waiting for this guy to get home.

Angry shouts as the strippers pour down the steps. They pound on the car's roof with their fists.

Shrieking, scantily clad women began throwing things.

Daughter naturally calls her mother on the cell phone.

“Mama, they’re attacking me. What should I do”?

Strippers with long, scratching fingernails try to pry the car door open.

One stripper dashes back into the house and comes back with—you guessed it—A SWORD!

She slashes the car, denting the metal, cracking the glass of the front windshield, trying to slash the tires.

“It was like Red Sonja on the rampage,” Eve said.



Somebody in the neighborhood called the cops. Upset daughter, still holding the cell phone so Library Mama can hear it all, starts yelling at the cop. The cop threatens to arrest her for abusing a police officer.

Strippers claim one of the guys in the back seat was a dearly-loved boyfriend and they thought Library Mama's daughter was trying to steal his innocent heart away.

She said she was just giving the guy a ride home.

Buses don't run that late.

Cops confiscated the sword. They separated the various factions. They sent the three guys away. They sent the strippers back to bed. They sent the daughter home to Mama.

No one was injured.

No one was arrested.

Peace again reigned.

Friday morning the battered car sits in Library Mama's drive, gnash marks across the hood, dents in the roof, gouges in the door, cracked glass from a sword slash across the windshield.

All again is calm in the librarian's house as daughter sleeps late abed.

And Library Mama goes in to her daily work.

And in the tranquil library yesterday, Eve watched as her friend Library Mama puzzled over how to fill out the insurance company incident report so she can get her car repaired.

Sunday, June 14, 2009

Thinking About The Musk Ox

The ox knoweth his Owner; and
the ass his Master's crib... Isaiah
1:3

*A typical full grown musk ox can
weigh over 400 pounds; a big
bull can weigh close to 800.*

At dawn yesterday our friend
Barbara White suffered a nasty
fall.



Earlier in the week she'd undergone her first cancer chemotherapy treatment.

Barbara pulled the emergency cord. A staff member at the old folks home got her up off the bathroom floor and back into her bed.

During warm summers, musk oxen live near rivers or marshy areas where they feed on grass or ground reeds; in winter, musk ox dig through snow to find buried food.

Frightened, bruised, hurting, with cuts on her knees, Barbara called Ginny. Since Ginny was not wearing her hearing aids, she handed the phone to me. Barbara said she was scared and asked if my daughter-in-law, Helen, could come over to assist her.

I called Helen, who had to work, but she told my son, Donald, who offered to drive our daughter, Jennifer, a nurse, over to see about Barbara. Donald and Helen's daughter Maggie had taken the car and drove off with her mother's cell phone inside.

Ginny and I relayed calls.

Musk oxen are considered to be social animals; they normally live in herds of between ten and twenty; but sometimes as many as 400 gather in one group.

Ginny and I considered going to see about Barbara ourselves but since we have trouble driving on expressways, it takes us almost two hours to make the trip to Barbara's (Have I ever mentioned that Jacksonville is the largest city in the United States as far as land area is concerned? The city encompasses over 900 square miles and Barbara's home is at the opposite end of the city from ours).

Who do we know that lives closer?

Randy and Lisa.

A phone call wakes them and Lisa "half-way" showers and leaves her home immediately. I tease her about being an unclean, dirty woman. Over the phone she sticks her tongue out at me.

Donald calls having made arrangement for Jennifer to go over later in the week.

Ginny and I plan logistics about how we can best fit in for hands-on help. I could go over; I've worked as a care-

giver and know how to do what needs to be done, but the nature of Barbara's problems and her natural modesty leads her to feel she'd be more comfortable with another woman's assistance.

Lisa arrives and does what needs to be done.

Helen goes over after her work and Lisa goes back home.

The Latin name for Musk Ox is Ovbios Moschatus; biologically the animals are more closely related to goats than to oxen.



Then, Randy, Lisa's husband called me asking directions to Barbara's house because Lisa was having him deliver some Agatha Christy *Miss Marple* dvd discs for Barbara to watch.

So, when our friend Barbara fell and had need, Ginny and Helen and Lisa and Donald and Jennifer and Randy—all jumped to help.

Not one of these people attends the same church Barbara does, in fact, they all go to different churches from each other.

People from Barbara's own church will look in her today.

Jesus once said, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them”.

Funny thing about musk oxen... when wolves attack, when one of the herd falls ill, when calves are threatened—the whole herd forms a circle around the endangered one. Shoulder to shoulder they press together in a formidable stationary ring, heads lowered, sharp horns pointed outward, ready to defend the endangered one.



As I sat around smoking my pipe and fielding phone calls and doing chores that kept me close to the phone, I thought a lot about what was going on.

On one level, the lot of us are responding to herd instinct. Like dumb oxen we circle when one of ours is in trouble. We too are social animals.

Besides, we all love to be drama queens, a phone call at dawn, emergency response, fluttering around, being useful, feeling important—powerful ego strokes.

Wow! They could make a tv docudrama out of such material. Brad Pitt could play the part of me...

Or maybe not.

And besides, were I not manning the phones, I'd have to be out mowing the grass. What fun is that?

Yes, even musk ox must get a charge out of staving off the wolf pack.

Makes the ox feel empowered and in control.

Heady stuff.

But on another level, I think a different dynamic also works.

As Jesus also said, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another”.

Monday, June 15, 2009
Nobody Is Pissed At Me

Sunday, Ginny went over to help our friend Barbara shower and dress in fresh clothes.

Some other friend of Barbara’s bought her a new robe.

Barbara feels the prescriptions related to her first chemotherapy treatment are the thing making her so weak and wobbly.

Yet in the midst of her pain, weakness and illness, Barbara remains gracious.

While Ginny helped Barbara bathe and dress, I sat outside on the patio smoking my pipe, fielding phone calls and watching a raccoon on the roof of the apartment across the garden.

And I thought about how things would be if I were a patient.

I doubt that I would be a patient patient.

Yes, I’d be on that nurse call buzzer like a teen playing Frogger in a video arcade.

And the ghost of Florence Nightingale, herself would finally stomp down the hall in exasperation to press a pillow over my face to shut off my incessant whining and demands.

As I watched that raccoon, I thought about getting old and needing help to dress, and about Saint Peter....

Shortly after Jesus rose from the dead, He was talking with Peter—you know, the *If you love Me, feed My sheep* conversation—when Peter got to worrying about what one of the other disciples was doing.

Peter, seeing the other disciple asked Jesus, “Lord, what shall this man do”?

Peter's nosiness seems typical of Christians ever since; we spend an inordinate amount of time worrying about what other people are doing – or not doing.

We are born busybodies, meddling in other people's affairs.

We call it witnessing.

The Lord's reply to Peter applies to the rest of us as well when we get concerned about what other people are doing; Jesus said, "What is that to thee? Follow thou me".

Not one word in the Bible tells me how somebody else ought to treat me.

It only tells me how I ought to treat them.

The commandment is not They Shalt Not Steal—it's You, John Cowart, Shalt Not Steal.

Nothing at all about what somebody else ought to do.

Following Christ is an individual matter, not a spectator sport. Yes, there is some place for corporate, group worship, but I fear we confuse individual responsibility to God with collective bargaining.

Were you or I stranded on a desert island, not another soul in sight, altogether alone in the wide ocean, your role as a Christian is no different than if you stand in the middle of Times Square—to worship and serve our Creator.

When we focus on others, we say, "Lord, look what that guy's doing".

And the response comes, "What is that to thee? Follow thou Me".

In fact, in this section of Scripture, Jesus emphasized individual following.

He said to Peter, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, 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". ... And when He had spoken this, He saith unto him, "Follow me".

When you're young you can dress yourself, go where you want, do what you please—you are capable of doing acts of charity and kindness for others.

But when you get old, you stretch out your arms so somebody else can help put your clothes on—you become an object of charity.

This galls.

I think it would drive me nuts!

I want to be the one giving charity, not receiving it.

I want the active ministry, not the passive one.

I resist changes in my self-defined role as a Christian. I get comfortable in my role, I adjust my life to one way of being Christian, and when God calls me to another, I balk.

I define what I'm willing to do for Christ and how I intend to do it. I want to call the shots. To tell God just how He is to be served.

While I say I'm a follower of Jesus, I want to lead Him around by the nose.

I see what this man and that man is doing, and from my high vantage point of superior righteousness, I want to control their actions...

But Jesus says, "What is that to thee? Follow thou me".

What is that to thee?

Follow thou Me.

After we left Barbara's. Ginny and I drove back by a different route; she driving, me navigating.

There was some confusion about directions. Actually, there was a lot of confusions about directions. She thought we were driving to one place; I was giving her directions to another.

Eventually we ended up at Dave's Diner which was crowded with folks enjoying lunch.

The place buzzed with conversations. The staff scurried here and there serving customers.

Gin and I landed in a corner booth near the radio which was turned up so folks far off could hear the music.

Since things seemed a bit testy between us I asked Gin, "Are you pissed at me"?

She muttered something I couldn't hear.

I asked again.

Again she said something, but the radio and the conversations around the room drowned out her words.

I asked again... right that moment there was one of those silent dead spaces in dozens of conversation around the restaurant as Ginny shouted, "NO!"

Everybody looked at us.

Right then, the whole restaurant staff, Nichole, Billy, Robin, Chris—all turned toward our booth and shouted, "No, John!"

I yelled back at them, "Do you know what I'd asked her?... I asked her is she were pissed at me".

The whole lunch crowd broke up laughing.

For the whole rest of the time we were there, people, even strangers, going up to the cash register would pass our table and say, "No, John".

It's good to know that nobody is pissed at me.

Sunday, June 21, 2009 New Shirts & Old Doldrums

Back in February some idiot gave away all my shirts.

Well, not all....

Since my normal working attire, like all successful writers, consists of swimming trunks and tee shirt, my closet abounds with those.

But real shirts, the kind with collars and buttons, they are all gone because I donated slews of them to a mission for the poor.

Well, not all...

Some of my more formal "real" shirts proved too shabby to give to the poor. Being a clumsy pipe smoker, I managed to burn holes in many of my better shirts, so those ended up in the rag bag. Or I kept those to keep wearing myself; they are still perfectly good.

However the shirts that shrank too much to button around my middle (they must have shrunk bad because I haven't gained that much weight—have I?)

Anyhow, I gave a bundle of shirts to the poor.

Poor poor. They must be in dire straights to wear something I'd discard.

Thus, in February I ended up with four "real" shirts left in my closet.

Fine.

I figured four shirts is plenty for my wardrobe.

Who wears more than one shirt at a time?

Thing is, that was back when the weather was cool; it never occurred to me that the weather might change... Several days this past week the heat index rose to 105 degrees and I sweat like a pig.

No longer can I wear a shirt more than once before it needs laundering... So yesterday morning I looked in my closet to find that I only have one single wearable shirt left.

Some idiot gave away all my real shirts.

Ginny first laughed at my dilemma, then she drove me to the store and bought me an armload of new "real" shirts. She'd prefer I not burn holes in them.

Once again my closet runneth over.

I am fashionable.

Recently I have also been apathetic.

Back in the days of clipper ships when movement through the ocean depended on wind currents, sailors sometimes reached places where there were no wind currents; they called these mid-ocean spots the Doldrums.

My dictionary defines the Doldrums as "A part of the ocean near the equator, abounding in calms, squalls, and light, baffling winds, which sometimes prevent all progress for weeks; -- so called by sailors; the state of boredom, malaise, apathy or lack of interest; a state of listlessness ennui, or tedium".

That describes my life the past week or two perfectly.

The old time sailors tried two tricks to get out of the Doldrums: They'd haul buckets of sea water to the top of the masts and wet down the sails hoping that the wet canvas would catch the slightest breeze. Or, they tried a bit of sympathetic magic by whistling up the wind; by

standing the youngest crewmen on deck and making them whistle tunes at the flat drooping sails, they'd hope to trick the wind into blowing also.

My way of wetting my sails and whistling up the wind has been by reading continually the past couple of weeks hoping to generate some spark of enthusiasm in myself.

I've read six or eight of Sally Spenser's Detective Charlie Woodend novels—I've been devouring these things. Love 'em!

And I've re-read some of Donald E. Westlake's John Dortmunder tales of this master criminal for whom everything goes wrong—*Hot Rock*, *What's The Worst That Could Happen*, *Drowned Hopes*, etc.

Since I'm stymied in my own work by computer problems I can't solve without help (And Donald is tied up in real life) I'm whistling up the wind by reading the fine work of other writers.

I have not posted much in my diary recently because the most significant thing to impress me recently was phone news of the friend of a friend of a friend's husband and a messy suicide, and I have not felt comfortable writing about this tragedy in the life of near-strangers—although the incident drove me to the library to read a copy of Alan Emmins's book *Mop Men: Inside The World Of Crime Scene Cleaners*—a book not for the squeamish.

So, essentially I've been doing nothing but floating in tepid waters recently, no mighty rushing wind of the Spirit (haven't even cracked open my Bible in a week), no refreshing breeze from on high.

I've just been laying up reading novels.

But now I can do that in my new "real" shirts.

The weather may be hot, but now I look so cool!

Wednesday, June 24, 2009

Me Feeling Sorry For Me

Somewhere in the *Book Of Common Prayer* occurs the phrase "Miserable Offenders". I identify with that phrase.

While other Christians of my acquaintance talk about feeling happy, joyous, and prosperous, my own experience tends more toward Christian misery.

I don't know if this is an accurate perception or merely a quirk of my own psyche, some imbalance of chemicals in my brain, some morose hereditary defect, some buried childhood experience, some vile sin—or if my own spiritual/mental state reflects reality.

Or maybe I just overreact to external circumstances.

More likely than any of the above, maybe I'm just a bitter, grouchy old bastard given to whining and bemoaning my state.

So, when in misery, I turn to devotions and Scripture hoping to see some glimmer of light. That's what's supposed to work for other Christians. Again and again I've heard others gush about the promises of God and the comfort of bible reading.

Good for them.

Feeling low yesterday I turned to devotions:

Nineteenth Century revivalist Charles Finney wrote, "If we do not enjoy the service of God, it is because we do not truly serve Him... Always remember that whenever you lose your enjoyment of serving God, you may know you are not serving Him right".

Whoopee!

Isn't that a comfort?

I turned to another devotional book to find that the reading for today deals with the sin of impatience. ... Impatience? Who me? After all I've been hounding Donald for six months to fix whatever computer glitch has been blocking me from my website... And he came over tonight to fix it and now I have no internet access at all.

My internet was down for eleven days last month, and now it's gone again. So yesterday I called AT&T Fast Access to be told by some girl in some foreign country who does not speak much English that the company will not send out a service man because I have the wrong equipment. The line repairman says the fault is in the DSL system; the DSL repairman says it's in the phone lines.

Bottom line: I have no internet again.

A pox on all their houses.

Impatient? Who me?

Anyhow, I turned to the Holy Bible and my scheduled reading takes me to that place where God tells King David that he's not qualified to build the temple but that he's welcome to gather materials so one of his descendants can build it.

Ever wonder why I hate having devotions?

Why am I writing this stuff? If I want to win readers to Christ, shouldn't I be upbeat and positive?

Well, maybe so. But I think Christ places a certain value on honesty. And this is where I am in my spiritual life right now. I may not be right, but I try to be real.

To me it seems that for decades I've been molding bricks without straw and I'm really tired of it.

I feel the game's not worth the candle and I'm ready to cash in my chips. If I were working a job, I'd retire. I feel as though I've worked and worked as hard as I can and ended up with nothing to show for it. I'm just weary to the bone. Gone down in utter defeat.

And it's not that I don't believe there is a resurrection, it's that I just don't care.

What about my writing?

Who cares.

Again and again over the years, editors and readers have told me that I'm a good writer—so long as they can use my stuff for free. Hardly anyone anywhere thinks I'm a good enough writer to pay for anything I write. Were it not for Ginny's working at a real job, we'd starve. My work has no value.

I've heard it said that if you are doing something and it doesn't help you, then you can stop doing it and it won't hurt you.

I feel as though I've pissed away my whole life fiddling around with things that are not quite right, that I've taken up space and wasted time.

But, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, and all that crap.

That's what I hear anyhow.

Somehow I've missed out on that part of the Christian life. The fact that I've missed out does not make

Christianity any less real. It just means that I miss out on that element in it.

Maybe I'm just a trifle down today.

Maybe I should read Ecclesiastes to cheer up.

Monday, June 29, 2009

Chain Shot

Back in the days of fighting sail, fighters would weld a length of chain between two cannonballs.

When fired from the cannon barrel, the two balls stretched the chain between them and whirled through the air; the two balls circled round each other, gaining force and speed.

When chain shot hit the enemy ship, it scythed down everything—masts, rigging and men.

Vicious, lethal stuff.

To my mind, depression and frustration circle together like chain shot, each feeding the momentum and strength of the other.

I feel as though I've been under such an attack recently.

Hardly any fun at all.

I'd like to attribute my state to just aging, I'm a few days short of 70, but, let's face it, I've been subject to cycles of depression all my life. It's just a thing I deal with—with varying degrees of success. Or failure.

Some folks mellow as they age; others sour.

I curdle.

But, mellowed, soured or curdled, I'm still here and, by the grace of God, kicking.

Thanks to the efforts of Donald, Helen, Ginny and the telephone guy, my computer is back to working; it was down since Monday night. Of course I called at&t (we put the cuss in customer service). I went through their recorded voice phone tree, waited for ages to speak to a real person (who spoke little English) and...

Chain Shot!

For the first time in my life that I can ever remember, I hung up the phone on someone who was still speaking! Hey, as part of my southern upbringing, I'm even courteous to telephone solicitors.

But like chain shot, frustration and depression cut right through my manners.

I told Donald to rip out the whole computer system and haul it off!

A few days later, he called at&t and eventually got a repairman dispatched on Sunday... so my computer is back working so that I can continue to spread light and joy to all readers throughout the world.

On the good side, my current fit of depression began to lift last Friday as I mowed the grass—for me, physical work often helps depression better than prayer times (which I turn into mope sessions). Better yet is to pray while engaged in physical work.

While the computer was down, I continued to write in my journal and at the end of this post, I'll copy last Wednesday's diary entry... the chronology of this post wraps around several days.

Back to Friday as I did yard work... I must be the only person in Jacksonville who did not see it!...The Saint Johns River flows north, one of the few rivers in the world, like the Nile, to do so. In Jacksonville the river curves to the northeast as it bisects the city into neat halves.

Right at 5 p.m. Friday as everyone left work, a tornado touched down in the river in downtown Jacksonville. Everybody with a cell phone camera snapped photos of the resulting water spout; here are two photos from the *Times-Union* newspaper:



By the grace of God, the whirlwind stayed midriver. Had it moved a few hundred yards to either bank, it would have devastated downtown Jacksonville and caught thousands of commuters in the open. I hear it stayed in the river for over ten minutes.

As it happened, there were no people injured and hardly any property damage—although drivers caught on any of Jacksonville's seven bridges did get a thrill.

Now, although this happened just blocks from my house, I had my head down pushing the lawnmower and I

never even heard the tornado—didn't know a thing about it till Saturday morning.

If I did hear an odd noise... I probably wrote the roar off as just more chain shot passing overhead.

Wednesday, July 01, 2009

Looking Fabulous

My friend Wes and his best buddy J.J. just got back from a long weekend in Charleston, S.C., where they worshiped the Lord in a Jewish synagogue, an Episcopal church, and a cigar store.

A few weeks ago the guys got a wild hair about taking this trip. The purpose of the trip was for them to buy brand new tailored suits, dress up, and “walk around Charleston's historic district looking fabulous”.

This whim grew and grew.

What the heck. The guys decided to do it. They bought new suits, reserved rooms, arranged time off work, and drove to Charleston.

What a lark!

While visiting the city as tourists, wearing linen suits, looking fabulous, they chanced upon the oldest American synagogue in continuous use.

Kahal Kadosh
Beth Elohim (Holy
Congregational
House of God)
founded in 1749,
is renowned as
the fountainhead
of Reform
Judaism.

Someone
invited Wes and
J.J. in for a service
and to hear a
special speaker
extol the virtues
of Abraham



Lincoln. Wes said the format of the service resembled the liturgy of his own church as he and J.J. followed along in the Hebrew prayer book.

Then Sunday, in tailored suits, looking fabulous, they worshiped at the 258-year-old St. Michael's Episcopal Church, the oldest church building in Charleston.



In the photo, notice the sounding shell above the lectern. In the days before microphones were invented, the sounding shell reflected and magnified a speaker's voice so everyone could hear him clearly.

Wes said that from this high pulpit, so tall it puts the speaker on a level with the balcony, the pastor declared a powerful evangelistic message.

In the evening, Wes and J.J. ,still sporting their new duds and looking fabulous, relaxed at a gentlemen's club...

No, not that kind of gentlemen's club.

Not the kind we have here in Jacksonville with ten new nude dancers performing continuously.

The gentlemen's club the guys went to resembled the kind of club you see in 1920s British films where

university professors and retired colonels discuss the state of the Empire. This club—sorry, Wes told me but I’ve forgotten the name of it—stood above a refined tobacco shop/cigar store.

There Charleston’s elite gentlemen assemble of an evening to lounge in brass-studded leather easy chairs and discuss intellectual topics. Besides a regular clientele, tourists of refined taste, especially those wearing tailored linen suits and looking fabulous, engage in stimulating conversation for hours on end as smoke from pipes and cigars floats in foggy layers under the ceiling.

In that atmosphere, Wes and J.J. encountered a young man, a former cordon bleu chef, who’d had some spiritual experience and was training for the ministry...

But now that he’d made this decision, doubts and questions arose. In bewilderment and confusion, the young man’s faith was shaken. He explained his crisis of faith to these two oddly dressed strangers.

Again and again Wes and J.J. answered the young man’s questions and encouraged his reliance on the Lord Jesus. Again and again they saw his face light up as comprehension dawned after discussing some knotty problem.

You can’t get disillusioned unless you’ve been operating under an illusion in the first place.

So Wes and J.J. pointed the young man back to basic, foundational spiritual truths.

Toward the end of the evening, Wes and J.J. simultaneously felt compelled to lay hands on the young ministerial student and pray for him as he reached a new level of commitment to Christ.

As Wes and J.J. left the cigar store, they simultaneously felt that their trip to Charleston had had one divine purpose which they had not realized till that moment—to meet that young minister and minister to him. They’d begun their road trip on a near frivolous whim; they returned, feeling that God had sent them even though they’d not realized it beforehand.

I’ve noticed in reading my Bible that sometimes people do things without realizing why they are really doing those things.

We are physical beings living in a supernatural world.

We walk among wonders unaware. Reality eludes us.

But sometimes, some rare times, we catch a glimpse of purpose beyond the mundane. We glimpse reality. That's a good thing.

Well, most of the time it is. Sometimes, on the other hand, we can bob along happy under an illusion while completely out of touch with reality.

Case in point—when I think of Wes and J.J. dressed up in new tailored linen summer suits, one white, the other pale blue, strolling Charleston's historic district... sporting panama hats, wearing dark sun glasses, puffing big black cigars, feeling cool, feeling proud, thinking they look fabulous...

Well—and I'm speaking entirely with a sense of objectively reality about this—godly men they may be, but I think they look like dorks.

Thursday, July 02, 2009

Another Kid In The Attic

I remember the first book I ever stole.

I justified stealing the book with simple human logic—they had it. I wanted it.

It was a copy of *Dracula*, the quintessential vampire novel by Bram Stoker. Another Boy Scout recommended the book when I was about 12 years old. Reading it captivated me for two reasons: one, I'd seen the Bela Lugosi movie; and two, Stoker wrote his novel in the form of journal and diary entries.

Never before had I ever heard of anyone keeping a diary. The idea enthralled me. Just imagine, someone's life could be so exciting, so interesting, that it was worth recording.

Wow. My 12-year-old mind imagined how I'd conquer vampires if I ever ran across one. Therefore, I'd better begin keeping a journal so there'd be a record of my brave deeds. I began my first journal that same day...

Trouble was my life was a dud.

I dutifully recorded things like *Mrs. Powel made us do page 174 for homework.*

Jonathan Harker never had to do homework.

I gave up on keeping my first journal... and my second journal... and my third...but the idea stayed with me.

Since my own life proved so unexciting—no vampires, no mummies, no zombies, not even a stupid ghoul did I encounter—but I began reading other people's published diaries. I found the everyday lives of people who lived generations before me fascinating. They didn't fight vampires either, but they did struggle against the hardships and problems and villains of their own times.

I drew courage to fight my own hardships and problems and villains from reading about how diarists of former days coped.

They inspired me.

So I kept reading their old diaries and I grew more faithful about keeping my own. Off and on for 40 years I have kept an almost daily record of my life... Let me qualify that a bit. For instance when I drove an 18-wheeler over the road, I kept a daily log for inspection by government inspectors. And everyone knows that all truck drivers are scrupulously honest truthful men; therefore when my log records that I loaded a 40-foot trailer in half an hour then drove 580 miles and unloaded it all within the ten-hour legal limit—my logs, like all truckers' logs, accurately tell precisely what I was doing and where I was that day...

Be that as it may, I have tried to be honest in my regular daily journals.

I lost all my earliest journals through moves, re-marriage and a house fire, but I still have between 30 and 35 years worth of the things stuffed in a back closet. If anyone is interested in reading my more recent ones, I've published them in my *Dirty Old Man Goes Bad* series at www.bluefishbooks.info .

Sorry, don't be disappointed to find that I never did turn in page 174 to Mrs. Powel and I still haven't conquered a single vampire.

One thing that I've noticed in my reading is how often some teen has found an old diary in an attic somewhere, read passages out of curiosity, and had his life changed.

I think of the experience of A.B. Simpson, who grew up to found the Christian Missionary Alliance, an organization which sent thousands of missionaries to all parts of the world. Or I think of Charles Finny, who found an old book in the attic and grew up to become the Billy Graham of his generation.

I often put notes addressed to The Kid In The Attic in my own journals; I want the far future kid who finds one of my dusty diaries in his folks' attic to know that this is what one Christian's life is really like. I want him to make a commitment to Christ, but I want him to know what he's getting into when he does. He will see my sins and faults and faith—in real time so to speak...

Please be patient. I am going somewhere with this.

Last Saturday for lunch Ginny and I went Kosta's in Five Points, our favorite Italian restaurant. Afterwards we browsed in the Fans & Stoves Antique Mall next door.

In one booth I ran across an old leather-bound diary.

On investigation it proved to be a pocket diary from 1854 kept by W.L. Short of Bloomington, Illinois.

Here's a view of the cover:

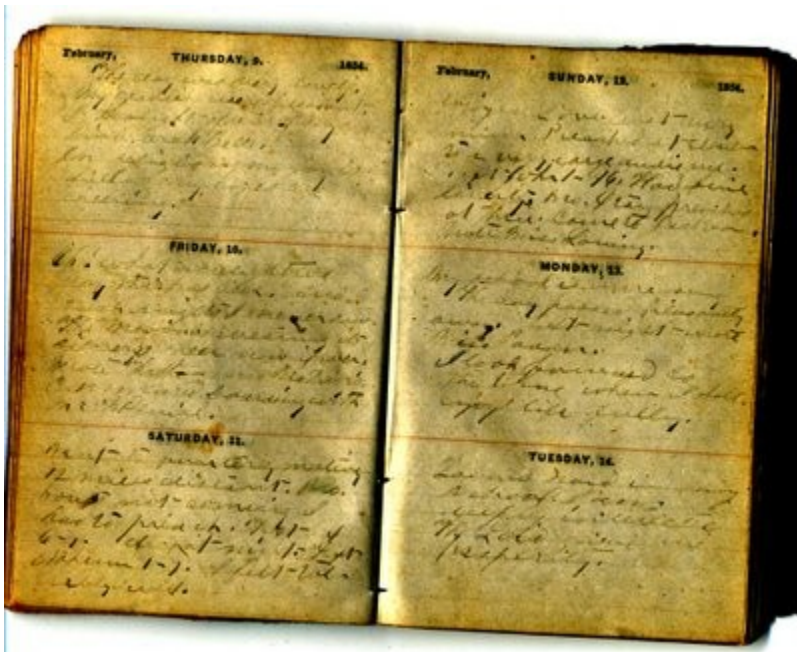


Short's diary measures 3 by 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. The leather covers fold to protect the pages from getting wet. I have no idea how this diary ended up in Jacksonville.



Short likely wrote using a crow quill—crow feathers were cheaper than goose quills and they sharpened to a finer point for the tiny print needed for the book's small size.

Short wrote in clear Spencerian script, but he used various grades of ink, some of which faded the text to illegibility—even when I scan some damaged pages into my computer and enhance the text adjusting brightness, contrast and mid-tones, I still only come up with this:



I paid a trifle for the diary, and when I got it home to read the pages that can be read, I discovered that I'd bought a treasure. Mr. W.L. Short was a Christian recording the faith, temptations, sessions of depression, moments of elation, and the tedium of his days.

As I read, I found my own spirits uplifted.

Here was a yankee teacher/attorney/lay preacher (hard to tell which) who struggled with the same sort of thing I do.

Some of his days, such as Wednesday, April 19th, 1854, he could only write, "Nothing of special interest today".

Other days, such as Wednesday, January 11, 1854, he said, "Feeling better. Took the morning train for Bloomington. ...Received letter from Miss. Laning. ... An important day in my history".

That's an understatement.

The diary reveals that the young man was juggling three women: Sara Belle Laning, whom he describes as "My dearest"; Miss. Amanda of whom he writes, "She is a good girl"; and another woman whom he describes as "My temptation".

Each lady held attractions and this young man sought God's guidance as to which one to marry.

Talk about suspense—*Dracula* has nothing to match it!

Yet in almost every entry Short records his prayers for direction from above; he lived daily in the presence of God.

In one place he says, "O Lord, I will praise Thee; my heart shall rejoice in Thy salvation. Suffer not the tempter to have no power over me. My heart, my life, my all be Thine... I here record a vow to live altogether for God. Lord, help me to keep it".

When I browse through such entries of a life lived in real time through Mr. Short's diary, it strengthens my own feeble faith and inspires me to press on ...

Say, do you suppose that I—That I am the kid in his attic?

Saturday, July 04, 2009
Short Made Long

O but Ginny and I had such great fun Friday!

At least one of us did.

You see I've decided to transcribe and publish that 1854 diary by William L. Short that I found last week. So I set up templates and formatting. Then I recruited Ginny to type the text as I deciphered it and read it to her. How exciting!

What fun!

Trouble is, over the last 155 years the tiny pages got wet. In places ink blotches obliterate the text. In other places exposure to sunlight fades the ink. And even when the writing is visible, the ancient Spenserian script with colloquial abbreviations...

Have no fear, John Cowart is on the track of diary writer, William L. Short...

Ginny observes my obsession with this project and laughs at my glee.

I feel like the cartoon bloodhound, Officer McGruff, a figure which the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office used to use to teach school children about safety and crime prevention. The trench-coat wearing hound tracked clues with a magnifying glass like Sherlock Holmes. He always got his man.

Ginny observed as I checked the Library Of Congress Prints & Photographs Division for possible pictures to illustrate the diary.

She watched as I groaned my way through the Illinois State Archives till I discovered Short's marriage license.

And, I may have uncovered his burial place and I'm hot on the track of his Civil War records...

Say, could the diary have ended up here in Jacksonville, Florida, because he was one of the damnyankee invaders who overran my hometown during the war? I'm looking into that possibility.

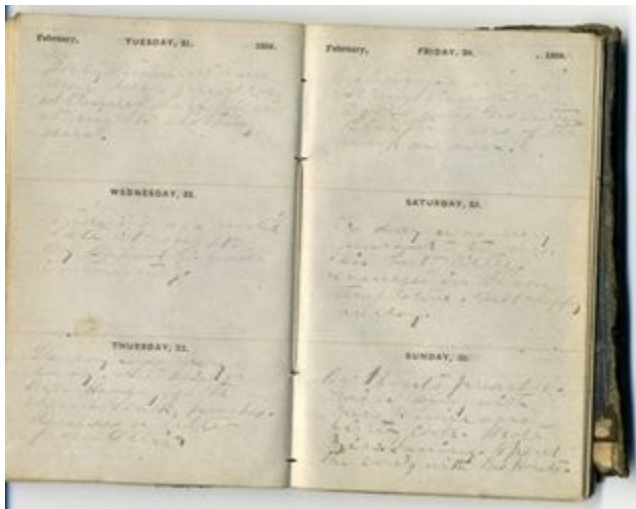
Ginny said I show more enthusiasm about transcribing Short's Diary than I've shown for any project in months.

Anyhow, as Ginny and I played History Detective, my search for clues may have gotten a little out of hand. And she may have gotten a tiny bit exasperated with my obsession.

She doesn't love fun as much as I do.

Here's the process I followed after she gave up being amanuensis on my quest and sulked in her rocking chair for a while then went into the bathroom ...

First, when I scan one of the little book's 3 by 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch pages, say the section for February 21 to 25, 1854, it looks like this:



I scan each page three times—in color, in black & white, and in gray scale. By enlarging the scanned page 200 times, and by adjusting contrast, brightness and mid-tones while zooming in and out on a single word, and by comparing the three versions, I come up with something like this:



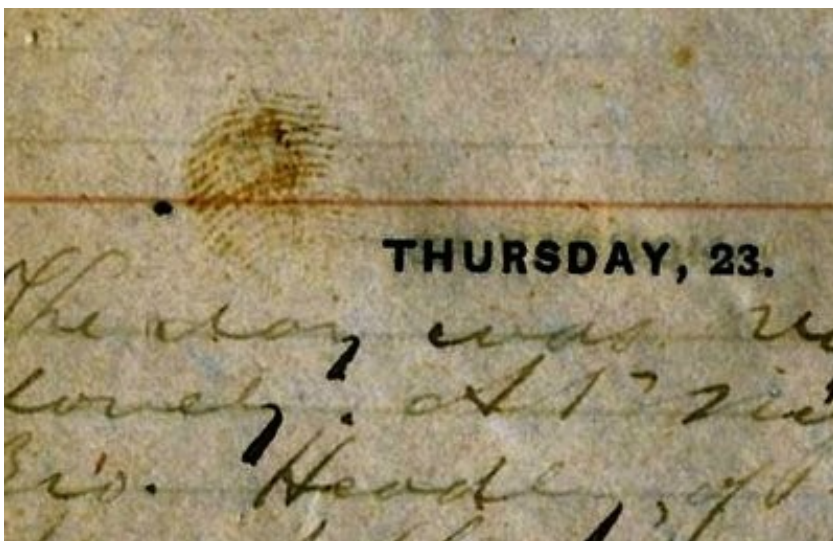
With a bit of guess work I can decipher much of that text....

But, what's this?

I see a clue!

Look carefully to the left of that red line between February 22nd and February 23rd—Do you see it?

Yes, William L. Short got ink on his fingers that day—that's his thumbprint on the page!



Wow!

Isn't that exciting!

Wow!

Those wimps on *CSI-Miami* can eat their hearts out with envy; I retain my title as King Of The Geriatric Geeks!.

When I saw the fingerprint, gleefully I ran and got Ginny out of the bathroom. I pulled her into the living room to show her the enlarged thumbprint on the computer screen.

"You drug me out here for THIS!"

Well, my project is not exactly like piecing together the text of the Dead Sea Scrolls but I find it exhilarating.

Other women get to marry men who only drink and chase bar girls, Poor Ginny had to marry one who obsesses over old diaries!

But she only acts exasperated.

From the way she looks at me, kisses me, and hugs me, I think that even after 40 years of marriage, I still amuse her.

I'm so thankful that God put me into her life; and that He let this little diary fall into my hands.

Wednesday, July 08, 2009

Memories & Understanding

Sorry for the delay but my internet has been down again—for the fifth time in the past six months—but here is the information Jellyhead asked about in her comment on my last posting:

William L. Short and Sarah Belle Laning married in Bloomington, Illinois, on August 23, 1854, Illinois State Marriage License # 801.

Here is a copy of a typical 1854 Illinois Marriage License:



As Ginny and I worked transcribing the Short diary over the weekend, when we found this marriage license we got to talking about weddings.

Earlier in the week someone had asked me if Ginny were a sentimental person.

I assured them that she is not.

That shows just how much I understand the woman I've been married to for almost 41 years now. Because as she and I talked about weddings... Well, here is a photo of Ginny in her wedding dress, one she'd sewn herself for the occasion:



As we talked, she revealed that even after all these years she still has that dress!

She also has the hat she's wearing in the photo. And the gloves. And the turtle pin, the first piece of jewelry I ever gave her. She even pressed that orchid I bought her in a book—but she can't remember where that flower is now.

She still keeps her wedding paraphernalia in a box marked "Memories".

I don't understand.

Who keeps old cloth?

It's a girl thing I guess.

Ginny went on to reveal that in her memory box (which I never knew she had) she also keeps: a baby cap she knitted and a baby dress we bought in Mexico for Jennifer; an outfit she knitted for Donald; a tie-dye tee shirt made by Ginny's brother for baby Eve; and a baby blanket for baby Patricia knitted by a 90-year-old lady at the church we used to attend.

Baby Patricia, our youngest, turns 30 this year...

And, just in case, Ginny saves in her box, if, God forbid, we ever need them again, several Maternity Dresses!

Maternity dresses she wore all those years ago.

Yes. Maternity dresses.

I never knew she'd treasured up all these cloth things in her Memory Box in her closet.

Just goes to show how little I understand my wife.

Of course, understanding is not all it's cracked up to be.

A psychologist in a novel I read last week observed that sometimes our quest to understand something is an avoidance mechanism; it's a subterfuge to avoid commitment. Instead of diving into the water, we test it and analyze it and look for contaminants.

By getting bogged down in trying to understand, we miss out on enjoying.

Yet, we appear to be respectable by saying we're seeking to understand.

King Solomon once said, "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not to thine own understanding, and He will direct thy paths".

But I don't understand Jesus. How could He be God and man at the same time? How could His dying on a cross 2,000 years ago be related to my sin yesterday? How could this dead guy, skewered by a Roman spear in his side, walk out of that grave under His own steam? How can He hold the universe together on one hand and be inside me on the other? And if He knows all there is to know, past, present and future, how can my prayers have any bearing on anything?

And why is it that that glorious Being who holds nebulae in the palm of His hand, makes Himself available for a relationship to every human person?

I have no idea.

I don't understand.

I don't understand God any more than I understand Ginny.

Both remain inscrutable to me.

But, how about this!

It does not matter whether or not I understand in order for me to be loved.

Yes, God loves us even when we do not understand Him.

And yes, Ginny loves me in spite of everything...

And though I don't understand why she'd keep old cloth for ages, I adore her.

Although I do have to admit, that trying to transcribe a 155-year-old diary together—I read text, she typed my dictation into the computer—transcribing an old diary together, places a certain amount of strain on our relationship...

Especially when I repeated the same line after line again and again and again only to realize that she was not wearing her hearing aid!

She said she didn't want to wear them.

She refused to wear them.

Why was that?

I have no idea.

I'll never understand that complex woman.

No, I'll never understand her.

Thank God, I don't need to.

Thursday, July 09, 2009 **A Bit Of An Odd Prayer**

Heavy rain Wednesday. I tried to talk Ginny into staying home from work because of flooded streets; she wouldn't hear of it. Too dedicated.

Barbara White and I had planned to go to breakfast but she called saying that bone pain incapacitated her.

Apparently her chemotherapy kills all fast-growing cells, cancer cells, hair, etc. But it also kills white blood cells (her immune system needs those to block infection) and to combat that, her doctors give her some kind of shot to stimulate growth of white blood cells in her bone marrow.

As a result she's in a great deal of pain. And it looks like all she can do is suffer with it.

If she gets to feeling any better, we'll try for a breakfast at Dave's Diner later this week or early next.

I continued work on William Short's 1854 diary—at the moment, he and his new wife are on a paddlewheeler steamboat stuck on a sandbar in the Mississippi River 25 miles south of St. Louis.

Ginny came home from work early, bringing with her a roasted chicken for our supper. Delicious!

During our regular little devotional time after the meal, Gin read a passage from the Gospel where Jesus healed ten lepers but only one thanked Him. We discussed that incident a bit and read a written prayer as we usually do.

Then, almost as an afterthought, I added a single line of prayer about Barbara's pain. Immediately, Ginny added another phrase. Then I did. Then she did... It was almost as though we spoke with one voice.

Yes, our two prayers for our friend blended into a single petition. Each adding phrase after phrase—sometimes in unison, some times in sequence. Never overlapping, but in order.

It was a type of prayer that I'm not sure we'd ever experienced before.

Certainly not planned nor rehearsed—just a natural flow and outpouring of our two hearts as one. As though Something beyond ourselves was praying through us.

To be frank, it was a bit scary.

Friday, July 10, 2009 **The Elusive F Word**

Should you ever chose to write your diary by dipping a quill pen in inkblack, for the sake of readers a hundred years from now, please blot the page or let the ink dry BEFORE you close the book!

In 1854 William Short didn't believe in that practice. When he closed the little diary without letting the page dry first, the ink smeared or bled onto the opposite page—or both.

Didn't the guy believe that anybody'd ever want to read his stuff?

If I make it into Heaven myself, I plan to have a talk with this old-time Methodist preacher and he'd just better hide his quill beforehand lest I do something with it that he won't like.

I have a bone or two to pick with him.

For instance, there's the matter of his name.

He signed inside the front cover of his 3 X 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ inch diary thusly:



When I scanned and enlarged the man's signature, I came up with:



OK. The last name is Short—in Spencerian script writers did not cross the final T in a word. In fact, in the middle of a word they often placed the crossbar of a T above the upright so it looks like an I with a line above it.

The writer of the diary uses the initial W for his first name. I guessed that would stand for William, that being a more common name than Wolfgang. Searching via Google I discovered many William Shorts alive in the 1854 time frame.

That left the middle initial—is that a capital G? or a T or an L?

Spencerian script encouraged the use of decorative curlicues and with my macular degeneration I have trouble distinguishing between a flourish and an actual letter.

My Google search led me to a William Lawson Short who lived in the right area at the right time.

I thought I'd pegged him.

From diary content I knew the date of Short's wedding, so I traced marriage records and found that he is listed in court records as William L. Short, who married Sarah Belle Laning.

That locked it in for me. I had identified my man.....

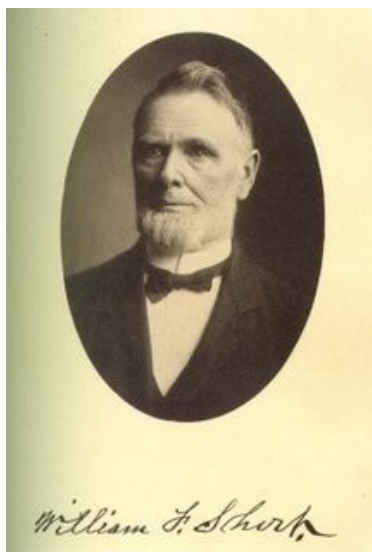
HA!

Even his marriage license has his middle initial WRONG! The court clerk in 1854 couldn't read Short's writing any better than I can!

Further research led me to a 1906 *Historical Encyclopedia of Morgan County, Illinois*. Guess what? William Short was still alive in 1906 and he wrote a biographical sketch of himself, his marriage to Sarah Bell Laning and his time teaching at the Methodist Seminary in Jackson, Missouri, the year he kept this diary.

The encyclopedia even has a photo of him in his later years.

It even tells how in those later years, in 1893 he and Sarah Bell established a school for the blind in the town of Jacksonville, Illinois.



All well and good.

But the rascal gives his name as William Fletcher Short!

Fletcher!!!

That letter in the middle of his name is an F!

And here I'd been tracking William Lawson Short all this past week.

Not L, but F.

That's what I said when I found out.

In other news, the at&t repairman (the third one in the past five days—Sunday, Tuesday & Thursday—came here to fix the same ongoing internet problem). Each one says, "It's not my job..."

Well one came again Thursday. He said that our internet trouble is caused by our electric telephone wires outside the house being round instead of flat... or maybe he said flat instead of round.

I'd stopped paying attention by then.

Anyhow he told me that I need to pay another \$110 to get whatever fixed. That's an extra \$110 in addition to the

monthly maintenance fee we already pay—and have paid for years.

When the repairman told me that...

Alas, the F word that sprang into my mind was not Fletcher!

Saturday, July 11, 2009

Cupped

Last night my beautiful Ginny again helped me research and transcribe Short's 1854 Diary.

Wow! But we had fun... Er, at least one of us did.

The woman is crazy about me!

Picture a teenage girl hanging out under a shade tree while her boyfriend works on the exhaust manifold of his jalopy. Know how fascinated she is with the intricacies of the exhaust manifold? Then why is she hanging around there for hours?

Picture that girl and you have a pretty good picture of Ginny helping me research and transcribe a 155-year-old diary.

It fascinates me—and I fascinate her.

Ain't love grand!

It thrilled me to run across this passage in the diary:

Sunday, October 22, 1854

This has been a very gloomy day. Attended S. School. Dr. Klepper preached at night. Retired feeling perfectly well but at twelve awoke a sore throat that approached almost to sufferation.

Monday, October 23, 1854

Sent for Dr. McFarland. He cupped me and left medicine. At night felt some better.

Tuesday, October 24, 1854

My throat continues very painful. Did not leave my bed during the day.

Wednesday, October 25, 1854

Felt some better to-day. Was up a little. Took medicine. Hope to well soon again. My duties are very urgent.

Thursday, October 26, 1854

My throat is much better to-day . Did not get to prayer meeting. I hope soon to be able to attend to my duties.

Yes. The physician cupped his strep throat—that means the doctor bled him.

In museums I've seen old medical kits which contained cups for bleeding patients. The glass or metal cups look like little whisky shot glasses to me. The doctor would make an incision over the afflicted area, press the right-sized cup over the wound, and drain off that amount of blood.

I hope my doctor doesn't read this. He might try that treatment on me. You wouldn't believe some of the things he's wanted to do to me in the past!

But being cupped must have worked for William Short because he lived at least another 52 years after this. Yes, being cupped made him feel better.

Speaking of feeling better, at 7 this morning, my friend Barbara White called. Although feeling bad sick from cancer and chemo Tuesday, she is feeling so much better that she felt like driving over here herself and going to breakfast at Dave's Diner—where the staff hugged and greeted her enthusiastically.

When Barbara arrived at our house, she told me that the physical therapist at the retirement home where she lives had brought her a gel cushion for her chair. "It was miraculous," she said. "I was so miserable with bone pain—absolute agony—that I couldn't get comfortable in any position. Then I fell asleep and woke up feeling fine. That cushion worked wonders".

Barbara said she felt relief from her pain suddenly. One minute it was there, the next minute it wasn't.

Isn't that odd.

I asked Barbara if she had read my blog entry for July 8th (An Odd Bit Of Prayer). She said she has not turned on her computer for a week or so.

She feels so much better. You'd think she'd been cupped.

At Dave's she said that with her hair falling out in patches and tufts, she must look weird.

I comforted her saying, “Barbara, you don’t look any weirder now than you’ve always looked”.

See, I do spread Christian light and joy wherever I go.

After talking about her chemo treatments and symptoms for a few minutes, Barbara said, “That’s enough of that. I am not my cancer. There’s more to me than cancer. I don’t want to talk about that all through breakfast”.

So I talked about my diary project and she told me about a novel by Josephine Tey, *Daughter Of Time*, a mystery involving a museum researcher.

And we talked about Christ being the propitiation for sin.

I don’t run across the word *propitiation* in everyday conversation often.

My dictionary says it means to regain the lost favor or goodwill of an offended party.

Paul uses that word in his letter to the Romans:

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: *Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood,*

The Apostle John uses that same word referring to Jesus:

He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world...Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

The Son of God dying on the cross for us regains the lost favor and goodwill of God.

But aren’t we God’s favorites? Isn’t He just tickled pink that we do what we do?

Not necessarily.

The Scripture also says the wrath of God is revealed from Heaven against all unrighteousness.

We are what we are and we do what we do, and as Paul said above, everyone of us has sinned and fallen short of the glory God intended us for.

Unrighteousness generates wrath.

The white-hot purity of our holy God does not co-exist with degrading sin.

Not only have we done wrong, unrighteous, wicked, sneaky, low-down, sinful, nasty things, we relish them. As a dog returns to his vomit to lick it up again, we go back and do the same things over and over again—that's Paul's image, not mine.

We fester with sin.

We need to be cupped.

Well, if that's what it takes... "*Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood*".

God loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

We lost it.

The Lord Christ came to earth so we can regain what we lost.

Didn't mean to get to preaching, but this good news is thrilling.

Oh, speaking of getting cupped, how much blood did it take for Christ to take on our sin and be our propitiation?

All of it.

He held back nothing that would benefit us.

Yes, being God in the flesh and Lord of life, Christ rose from the dead. But that resurrection came later.

He hurt first.

After breakfast, Barbara hung around in our garden talking for a couple of hours. That gel cushion must have indeed worked wonders because she's feeling so much better.

I told her one of Donald's jokes:

Anthropologists found this tribe in the Amazon who worship the numeral Zero... That answers the age-old question, "Is nothing sacred"?

Barbara groaned.

Do you suppose that's her pain coming back again?

Tuesday, July 14, 2009
Still Transcribing

Ginny and I spent much of the weekend still studying and changing William F. Short's 1854 diary from manuscript text into typescript.

My daughter Jennifer said, "You people really need cable tv"!

Her idea of fun is a bit different from ours.

We puzzled long and hard over one entry that has us stumped. In spite of every trick we knew to enhance the text, we finally admitted defeat. I'll mark that entire half page as illegible and leave the mystery of its pages unsolved..

This dairy resonates with me in that so many of Short's entries could well be ones that I could have made myself.

I've never heard anyone use the word before but every reader in any generation understands what Short meant when he wrote that May 29, 1854, "Felt very Mondayish".

By the same token, even if we have not seen an eclipse, we all understand, "I am so glad Friday night has come! Saw the grand eclipse".

And we all have boring days when we, like Short, say, "Nothing of special interest".

Or we understand the feeling of worry when Short wrote, "My mind is greatly occupied about the future. Lord, direct me aright".

And, like Short, we've all had bad days, "This has been a day of great toil and weariness to me. Was greatly tempted. Made some good resolves. Hope to keep them. Lord help me".

And every male reader knows exactly what Short is talking about when his diary records, "In the evening called on Miss Connor. Had some temptations, but was sustained. Oh, I want to be more holy".

I like editing old diaries because as the writers record the things uppermost in their minds, they often strike a

cord inside me. Their thoughts often echo things I've thought about myself.

Short's concerns resonate with honesty. In his confusion and conflict over which girl to marry, he prays for direction no less than 22 times in these few pages.

And at times, his words reveal a heart-hunger for God that virtually all of us could well have written down ourselves:

O Lord, I will praise Thee. My heart shall rejoice in Thy salvation. Suffer the tempter to have no power over me. My heart, my life, my all be Thine. Nor would I divide the gift. I will keep back no part of the price. Unloose my tongue to tell my (illegible) of the cross—and its victim and spread Thy fame abroad. Thou, O blessed Savior! Thou doest know the love I would express. Pardon, sanctify, and save me. I am thine. I here record a vow to live altogether for God. Lord help me to keep it”.

Ginny and I finished our initial transcription Sunday afternoon. Now, all I have to do is edit, proof and format the text we developed.

The rendering of initials and people's names concerns us. Short often refers to people by their initials and these are difficult to make out. Is that R.K. Jones or K.R. Jones or P.K. Jones... or that a K at all?

Remember that the pocket diary is tiny with five entries per page and Short's wrote in miniscule Spencerian script. which would challenge modern readers even if it were full sized.

Oh well, in editing I'll do the best I can to render these names and initials consistently—if not accurately.

Another week or two should get the job done—unless, of course, we do get cable tv.

Wednesday, July 15, 2009
Camp Meetings And Short Bible Verses

The Clerk Of The Court summoned me to begin jury duty soon.

That puts the pressure on.

It means I need to get on the stick editing William Short's 1854 Diary because a break in my work's tempo may torpedo the whole project and I'd never get back to it.

But it does not pay for me to rush.

I need to carefully examine each word, otherwise....

For instance, yesterday as I checked back over the transcript comparing it with the original autograph I realized I'd made a slight mistake in rendering Short's miniscule and badly faded Spencerian script.

I missed seeing the letters *stu*.

So my transcript read: "So-and-so died late last night".

That sounds dramatic.

But when I examined the autograph manuscript closer, I saw those three initial letters—*stu*—I realized that "So-and-so studied late last night".

A slight difference in meaning.

Who's to know?

I want the dramatic rendering. If I let it stand as is, who else is going to get a magnifying glass and track down those three missing letters?

But, you can't write Christian unless you live Christian.

Our Lord is not too keen on dramatic effects.

I changed my transcript. Under duress, you understand.

As I compared the typescript which Ginny and I made with the original, I also inserted the text of Scripture references Short cites.

William Short worked as a teacher, a professor of language and mathematics. But his 1854 Diary also records 59 sermons he preached in that year. Not only did he preach himself, but at times he acted as an exhorter when other preachers preached—especially at camp meetings.

I've never attended a religious meeting where an exhorter served, but as I understand the practice, the exhorter acted sort of like a cheerleader for the preacher.

The exhorter walked amid the crowd encouraging the sinners to repent and the saved to live godly lives.

And at times, William Short served as an exhorter in the ministry of the famous frontier preacher Peter Cartwright.

Years ago I read the legendary Peter Cartwright's autobiography/diary. A physical giant, this preacher challenged the rough and tumble frontiersmen of his day.

As I recall, once when a drunken blacksmith heckled the preacher, Cartwright strode into the crowd, punched the blacksmith out, and finished preaching his sermon standing on the unconscious heckler's chest.

Billy Graham hardly ever does that.

Yet, Cartwright drew the same comparative crowds in his day. His effective preaching gleaned over 12,000 recorded converts at the camp meetings.

An online copy of Peter Cartwright's autobiography can be found at <http://www.cblibrary.org/biography/cartwright.htm>

William Short attended and exhorted or preached at many camp meetings.

Don't worry, I'll get back to citing Scripture references in a bit; but first, I want to talk about camp meetings.

Since the sparse population of the American frontier lived in small family groups spread over vast geographic areas, few church buildings existed. But periodically, word of mouth spread the news of a camp meeting being called.

These religious gatherings drew Christians of all sorts; Short's Diary specifically mentions Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians all involved—the emphasis was on winning hearts to Christ, not on denominational issues.

People abandoned their farms and log cabins to trek to the announced meeting place. Thousands gathered to camp in tents, in huts, or to live in the open air as they listened to marathon preaching. The camp meetings also proved a social phenomena as folks who seldom saw their nearest neighbors met together to share not only faith but news, politics, recipes, and gossip.

But religious fervor was the main order of the day.

I've seen reports that in fits of ecstasy, worshipers wept, fainted, rolled on the ground, saw visions, or developed the "jerks"—a convulsion so violent that the women's long hair would crack like a horsewhip. (Hence, according to some sources, comes the term Florida Cracker—of which I am one).

The camp meetings gave rise to a particular rhythm and cadence in preaching. In those days before microphones had been invented, to speak to crowds of thousands, the preacher would line his remarks; i.e. he would say a line. Then a man at the far limits of his voice would repeat that same line to the people behind him. Thus the message was relayed deeper and deeper into the crowd far away from the platform.

Preacher and repeaters fell into an antiphonal cadence of line after line. You can still hear this rhythm and cadence in Florida's rural churches today.

Here is an old engraving showing a camp meeting scene from a date a few years earlier than Short's diary:



These camp meetings went on for weeks with people coming and going as the Spirit moved them. But, here's a strange thing, on the American frontier these loud and roudy camp meetings gave rise to social responsibility. Prison reform, slavery's abolition, care for the insane, care

for the handicapped—these humanitarian endeavors are rooted in the camp meetings.

OK. I'm back off that tangent.

What I did yesterday was to insert footnotes with the text of Scripture verses into places where Short cites the text references in his messages.

You can tell a lot about a man from the Bible passages he seems familiar with; and yesterday I discovered a lot about William Short, and about myself.

For instance one of my own favorite passages is I John 3; And this is a text from which William Short preached often:

I John 3:1— Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons 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. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.

Short also spoke on a text I've spoken on myself:

Galatians 6:8— For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.

Another favorite text of Short's is:

John 12:26— If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honour.

But Short seemed to preach from the Prophet Amos more than any other Scripture:

Amos 5:6— Seek the LORD, and ye shall live; lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, and there be none to quench it in Bethel. Ye who turn judgment to wormwood, and leave off righteousness in the earth, Seek him that maketh the seven stars and Orion, and turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day dark with night: that calleth for the waters of the sea, and poureth them out upon the face of the earth: The LORD is his name:

He also favored:

Amos 4:12— Therefore thus will I do unto thee, O Israel: and because I will do this unto thee, prepare to meet thy God, O Israel. For, lo, he that formeth the mountains, and createth the wind, and declareth unto man what is his thought, that maketh the morning darkness, and treadeth upon the high places of the earth, The LORD, The God of hosts, is his name.

He also expounded a text from the Prophet Nahum:

Nahum 1:7— The LORD is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in him.

And from the Apostle James:

James 4:8— Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.

Yes, William Short was a man who knew his Bible and his diary reveals that he was a happy person (He uses the word happy 44 times in his diary entries) who lived in daily, serious contemplation of religion.

And, I thought it interesting that for his last message of the year 1854, Short chose his text from the sad book of Lamentations:

Lamentations 3:21— This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him. The LORD is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD.

Yes indeed, I want to finish up this initial work and get the pages of Short's diary to the printer so I can begin correcting proof pages before the Court Clerk sequesters me in some dungeon with a bunch of 12 strangers.

Maybe I need to take to heart another of Short's texts:

Galatians 6:9— And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.

Thursday, July 16, 2009
He Being Dead...

When nasty weather struck the American frontier, pioneer farmers glanced out the door and repeated a familiar proverb:

“There’s nobody out to-day but crows and Methodist preachers.”

Of course the Methodists were not the only Christians to inspire itinerate evangelists; Baptists, Congregationalists, Adventists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and even Quaker George Fox (in England a bit earlier), urged by God’s Spirit, did all possible to bring about the religious movement which history books call the Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening

While William Short’s role was that of a teacher and he was not exactly a circuit rider, yet he contributed to the mind set of his day in promoting daily, deep dedication to Christ out of a grateful heart.



Circuit Rider on the cover of an 1867 Harper's Magazine

That's one of the things that attracted me to his diary.

I feel my own heart so cold. Weariness overwhelms me and a spirit of apathy guides my activities. Therefore, this man's words speak to my condition.

Yesterday, my friend Wes called. He invited me to go with him to breakfast and to visit our friend Barbara at her

retirement home. She is off chemotherapy this week and feels well enough to have visitors.

I chose to pass.

That may have been a mistake—people are more important than projects—but I feel time constraints to finish editing Short's diary before I'm whisked away for jury duty.

In another marathon yesterday, I worked 20 hours editing the text. Now, with another such session, all I have to do is format, set headers and footers, insert illustrations (making sure they are public domain), set gutters, pagination, addendum, proof again, design covers, make pdf files, and submit to the printer for proof pages to correct.

Is all this stuff worth doing?

Commercially, no.

I doubt if this publication will make anybody's best seller list.

On a commercial level, I've been wasting my time.

However, on a personal level, engaging in this project, seeing Short's problems with decision making, watching him try, fail, and try again—all this encourages me in my own Christian life.

Or, at least, as Ginny says, it keeps me off the streets.

I found this diary which has been hidden away for 155 years, and I rush and push and labor to get it published as though it were hot news—that's odd.

I've often hoped that someday some kid blundering around in a dust attic will chance across a copy of my own diary and be inspired to follow Christ fully. I wonder if that sort of hope ever crossed Mr. Short's mind? I see no indication of it in his diary.

Yet whether he intended it or not, William Short proved an inspiration and encouragement to me...

As the Scripture says of Able, "He being dead yet speaketh".

Friday, July 17, 2009
Christian Guys In Love

Yesterday brought an e-mail from a Christian brother in another country saying his wife threatens to leave him.

This arrived to touch me at an opportune time because I'd just finished uploading my PDF file to the printing company; proof pages of Williams Short's 1854 Diary should come to me for correction in a few days.

Describing the Short Diary, I had just written:

In 1854 William Short said more between the lines of his diary than he did in its pages. Back home in Illinois, he'd proposed marriage to Miss Sarah. But when he traveled to Jackson, Missouri, he was smitten by Miss Amanda. Then at a Methodist camp meeting he met Martha, "My Temptation". Suspense builds as the young minister decides which girl to marry while at the same time he feels a deep heart hunger for God. His mix of confusion about love and dedication to Christ still appeals to readers after 155 years.

Yes, when hormones flow and life aggravates and religious views regulate, tensions build. And in life, especially in marriage, nothing is harder than to get along with someone you love.

Now my e-friend from a far country wrote to inform me of the situation; he did not ask for my advise.

To me, he comes across as a very religiously minded young man; In his half-page e-mail, he cites six Scripture references. He mentions his wife's duty to submit as being taught in Scripture. He says the devil is attacking her mind to make her think of leaving. He says it is his duty to instruct her in the five guidances of the Holy Spirit.

His letter also says, "I have informed her that without pressure we will nevertheless next week review where she apparently ignored my regular teaching of the six thought patterns for the Christian's mental health at Philippians 4:8".

Now he wrote to inform me of the situation; he did not ask for my advise—nonetheless, I gave it:

Dear Bubba,

Sorry about the trouble you two are having. That has to hurt.

One thought: It's not polite to read someone else's mail. When the Scripture says, "Husbands..." that's addressed to me and to you.

When the Scripture says, "Wives..." Right off you and I can see those words are addressed to women only and you and I should leave that text alone! It's not addressed to us.

The only way for a couple to get along is to assume the goodwill of the other person, give 'em roots and give 'em wings.

And mind your own business by not reading her mail; those Scriptures are not addressed to you or me. Jesus never tells me what somebody else ought to do; only what I ought to do.

Hope this thought helps.

I am so sorry you two are in pain.

Love, John

I identify with this young couple's problems, (they've only been married a few years) because even after 40+ years of marriage, Ginny and I each can see the speck in the other's eye but we each remain oblivious to the beam in ...

Well, you get the idea.

Some wise Englishman, I've forgotten which one, (Churchill? Chesterfield?) said, "The chief end of all human endeavor is to be happy at home".

Yet, when we are at home, we tend to "Be ourselves" which equates to dropping all the courtesies we normally extend to complete strangers.

When Jesus promoted charity and said, "When ye do it unto the least of these, ye do it unto Me", I wonder if He referred to the people I hold as "least"—and that often means my wife, my children, my closest neighbors.

Oh, I don't have to worry about them, they're always there.

And they live close enough to me that I can see the tiny speck in their eyes; but I can't see the beam in my own eye.

In his own eyes no man is an asshole.

I think that's one reason the Scripture encourages individual religion, a personal encounter with God, a one-on-One relationship with the Almighty.

Yes, the Scripture does say stuff about wives—but not being a wife, those passages are none of my business. I need to concentrate on what God says about how husbands are to act because I am a husband.

Then there are also portions of Scripture addressed to both Ginny and me collectively. Here are two verses, for instance:

“And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you”.

“Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye”.

Heavy stuff!

To forebear means to put up with it while it's happening.

To forgive means to put up with it after it's happened and move on from there.

Tenderhearted means to recognize that hearts are fragile, they can be broken. And it means that I should give Ginny as little to forbear and to forgive as possible.

But what if Ginny offends my religious scruples and does not conform to my five guidances of the Holy spirit or my six thought patterns? I have no idea what those things are, but I know that in marriage arguments among Christian couples, one or the other brings out the Big Guns by citing Scripture to show that offending ME equals offending God Himself.

I've seen husbands harp on how she is to submit; and I've seen wives browbeat that sinner they married about going to church on Sunday and relish telling all and sundry to pray for his conversion.

Yes, the couple that prays together stays together—and often make each other miserable in doing so.

St. Peter said, “Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs

together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered”.

In other words, Guys, it’s no good calling on God if we can’t dwell and get along with the wife.

To me “Giving honour” means I am to never put Ginny down—not in public. Not in private. Not even in joking. Never. The whole damn world is out there to put you down day after day and nobody needs that crap at home.

Compliment her on every possible occasion. There’s always something positive to say. Great tits, Babe. That was a fine meal you cooked. I feel safe with you. I need you to listen to me for a while. You picked a great place to come to. I love the way the light hits your hair. You make me feel good.

Hell, if she looks a mess and she knows it, you can always fall back on, “You have such beautiful eyes”.

And, screw flowers; Say it with words. You have not married a mind reader. You need to say it out loud. Every morning when we part for work, I make sure the last thing Ginny hears me say is “I love You”—because, who knows, that may well be the last thing she will ever hear me say.

OK. Nobody asked for my advice, but I’m on a roll here so one other thing:

Personal hygiene—lets face it, guys smell like goats because we are goats.

A little honest sweat from work smells like love. You’re doing right. But there are limits, and observing those limits comes under the heading of “dwell with them”.

It’s an eccentricity of mine, but since I work from a home office and Ginny goes out to work, I shave at 4 in the afternoon, shortly before she gets back home from work—Who more important do I want to look nice for?

Well, I’ve rambled on and on. Hope some of it makes sense. It’s almost 5 a.m. (I start work early) and for a guy who was not asked for advice, I’m full of it...

And you can take that either way.

Saturday, July 18, 2009
An Important Relayed Posting

My e-friend Sherri at <http://matteroffactsite.blogspot.com/> wrote this yesterday and asked that it be relayed:

This is a photo of my youngest son's friend Tyson Serles. A private first class serving our country in the US Army.



I remember the night of the Senior Awards, My son Jon and Tyson shared an award for their achievements in Art. Tyson was also honored when he and a few other boys from Jon's class, received large bonus checks from the different branches of service as they signed on to protect their country. When he and the others walked on the stage to receive their awards, I said a little prayer for them, for their protection and wisdom and guidance for whatever would lay ahead of them.

I watched Tyson accept his check with that contagious mile long grin of his, and he practically skipped back to his seat and he was applauded by those in attendance.

Last week we received news that Tyson had been critically injured in a roadside bombing. Sadly, his entire group of soldiers he was traveling with, except for his Sergeant, were either killed or critically injured. Tyson bravely tried to pull his fellow soldiers from the wreckage and witnessed one friend take his last breath.

Tyson is 19 years old, and has already lost an entire group of buddies. One soldier who past away asked Tyson to start the prayer chain before he passed on.

What a load for a young man to carry. He is without family , in a foreign land (Iraq) , with no familiar faces to be by his bedside while he recovers and grieves for his friends and fellow soldiers. What if this were your son, or brother or friend?

According to Tyson's father Tim, his condition has now been upgraded to stable. Tim is asking for cards or letters to be sent to Tyson to encourage him as he recovers.

What a small task for us...what a large impact it can make on Tyson.

Would you please send something to this precious young man who has already sacrificed more than most of us will ever be asked to give. He bravely moved out of his comfort zone on behalf of others. Let's do it for him.

It will take 5 minutes for you to fill out a card, and a very small amount of money to mail it.

Please do this small gesture. I'm counting on you. I'm hoping he gets a room full of cards and letters from all over the world!

Feel free to re-post this, pass it along in an email, put it in a church bulletin, or pass along to any other group that would be willing to take five minutes to help lighten someone's load.

Start your weekend off by doing something for someone else. Whatta' ya' say? Can I count on you?

Mail to:

PFC Serles, Tyson
FOBTF Sparta
HHT, 1-40 CAV (ABN)
FOB HEIRERA
APO AE 09354

Sunday, July 19, 2009
The Ghost At # 33 and The Cowart Family
Birthday Party

If you watch tv soap operas, then my entry today should not be too hard to follow even though it involves events about 300 years apart—a ghost in the year 1760, and our birthday party last night.

Follow closely now:

In 1756 in London, William Kent married a woman named Elizabeth Lynes. She died eleven months later. Afterwards, William Kent took a fancy to her sister, Miss Fanny Lynes.

Since it was considered incest to marry your wife's sister, William and Miss Fanny Lynes could not marry.

Instead they shacked up.

In January, 1760, the happy couple rented a house at # 33 Cock Lane from a man named William Parsons.

One William loaned the other William some money.

William did not pay it back.

Still with me?

One month later, on February 2, 1760, Fanny Lynes died of smallpox. She was buried in a vault in the church of St John's Clerkenwell.

But within a year, people at # 33 Cock Lane began to see sights and hear sounds. Thumps against the walls, and a haunting rapping sound, and a scratching sound that seemed to be some kind of intelligent code.

James Franzen,, owner of a nearby pub, and William Parsons, landlord of # 33, set up system of yes/no questions to communicate with the unseen entity through these spooky, scratching sounds.

News of communicating with the dead spread throughout London. Crowds mobbed Cock Lane. Traffic could not get through the street. People wanted to hear the dead woman scratch out answers to their questions.

The ghost revealed that she was indeed Fanny Lynes and that she had not died of smallpox, but that William Kent had poisoned her with arsenic.

Newspapers went crazy reporting this news and giving the ghost a name which lives on in history...

But how do those events in the 1760s have anything to do with the Cowart Birthday last night?

Four people in our family—Ginny, Helen, Donald, and me—we all four have July birthdays. So family and friends gather for a community celebration and cookout on July 18 (which is not anybody's birthday). We splashed in the pool, gorge on good food, catch up on gossip—Helen's Dad gave her and Donald a new car. Randy and Lisa brought Barbara White over for the party.

And we talked theology—mostly about Christians we admire and churches we don't.

But, while some of us floated in the pool, one young lady received an urgent phone call from her mother, Mrs. V. A could-be-crisis was developing at her house.

Being an upstanding, hands-on Christian gentleman, I offered to go with the daughter to Mrs. V's house—and I tried to convince Donald and Randy (short for Ransom) to go with me.

Seeing their reluctance, I assured them that, "There is nothing to feel guilty about if you do not help me. No need to feel guilty at all. I mean just because I'm going over there with only a few girls to help me, there's no cause for you to feel guilty. You go ahead home. I'll be alright".

Knowing that I'm an honest man, the rascals took me at my word and left for home.

Anyhow, Ginny and I followed the daughter across town through dark streets overhung with beards of Spanish moss to her mother's house.

Here's the problem:

A sound.

A mysterious scratching, thumping sound.

It was coming from inside a huge cast-iron Franklin Stove—a massive wood-burning, free-standing fireplace with three huge, heavy, locked iron doors, two in the middle, one at the end.

Some unknown something was inside her Franklin stove.

Scratching.

Well, the mother and daughter and Ginny supervised as I crept up on the iron monster. I speculated that it was only a trapped squirrel that found its way down the chimney.

But what if it's a rat?

I'm deathly afraid of rats. Could it be a rat in there?

By the way, Donald and Randy, no need at all to feel guilty about letting me do this by myself, just wanted to be sure you know that.

What if this is a raccoon? They bite. They carry rabies.

But what if it's only a baby bird lost and alone scratching the iron walls?

Hell, it could be a buffalo in there for all I know!

The daughter got a flashlight, a small sledge hammer, and a pillowcase for me. I extended my arm deep into the pillowcase so I could grab the animal then fold the pillowcase back over my hand trapping the creature—the way you'd put a snake in a bag..

The three ladies backed up.

Then I eased the iron door open a just a tiny crack and shown the light inside... couldn't see a thing. I closed that door and cracked open one on the other side... I could hear some creature moving in there, but I couldn't see it.

I snaked my arm in through the cracked door feeling around for some furry unseen something.

Ain't it great to be a hand's-on Christian?

Couldn't feel a thing in there.

I hammered on the sides of the stove thinking I'd drive the unknown creature up the flu. I could still hear scratching.

I suspect the unseen scratcher had climbed up out of reach onto the smoke shelf at the back of the stove.

Time to open door three—nothing but soot and ashes from last winter's last fire.

That gave me an idea.

I closed and locked all the doors, I shredded newspaper and stuffed them through the crack in the double doors. The daughter opened the damper. I struck a match.

“Nothing to it,” I told the women, “The smoke will drive the creature back up the chimney. It will go out the same way it got in”.

Unless its fur catches fire and it jumps out the door on top me and runs flaming through the house like one of Samson's foxes.... Er, do you have home owners insurance?

That didn't happen.

The flames died down.

Guess what we heard from inside the iron fireplace?

Silence.

At First.

Then more scratching.

Scratching, Scratching. Scratching.

I'd done all I knew to do. I gave up. I sealed up the doors and propped the sledge hammer and some fire logs against the door. I suggested that Mrs. V. go spend the night with her daughter then call animal control in the morning.

As Ginny and I drove home through the dark night, I could not get that scratching noise out of my mind. Where have I heard about that sort of thing before? Then I remembered the tale of the Ghost of # 33 Cock Lane.

I'd run across it years ago while researching a book I never got around to writing.

I remembered that the incident was proved a hoax—one William seeking revenge against the other William over that borrowed money. William Parsons was sentenced to stand pilloried with his neck in stocks at the foot of Cock Lane. He went stark raving insane.

But some people still believed in the ghost at # 33. A huge controversy arose between those saying it was all a hoax and those believing the scratching was caused by a real ghost .

The press of the day gave her a name.

She became a tourist attraction.

And, oh yes, the name those newspapers of yesteryear called the phenomena, that name stuck.

It was ever afterwards called—The Ghost Of Scratching Fanny!

Tuesday, July 21, 2009 In The Pages Of My Bible

I wrote a note to myself so I wouldn't forget—then I forgot where I put that note.

Not in my inbox. Not taped to the refrigerator. Not in my desk drawer.

I know. I must have stuck in my Bible. I do that. Stick bits of paper in the pages of my Bible because I don't what else to do with them.

Hunting my lost note, I opened my Bible.

The first thing I found was an envelope of seeds from three years ago that I never got around to planting in our garden.

And I found the car rental papers from when Ginny and I went on vacation in 2003.

I found a batch of lesson notes from a class I taught, and some of those little paper things they give you when you go to somebody's funeral that say the name and date of the deceased and you'd feel guilty to throw that sheet away because it would seem disrespectful, but you really have no reason to keep it.

And I found this brochure:

THE REWARDS OF HAPPY PIPE SMOKING



DIGNITY - CHARM - CONTENTMENT

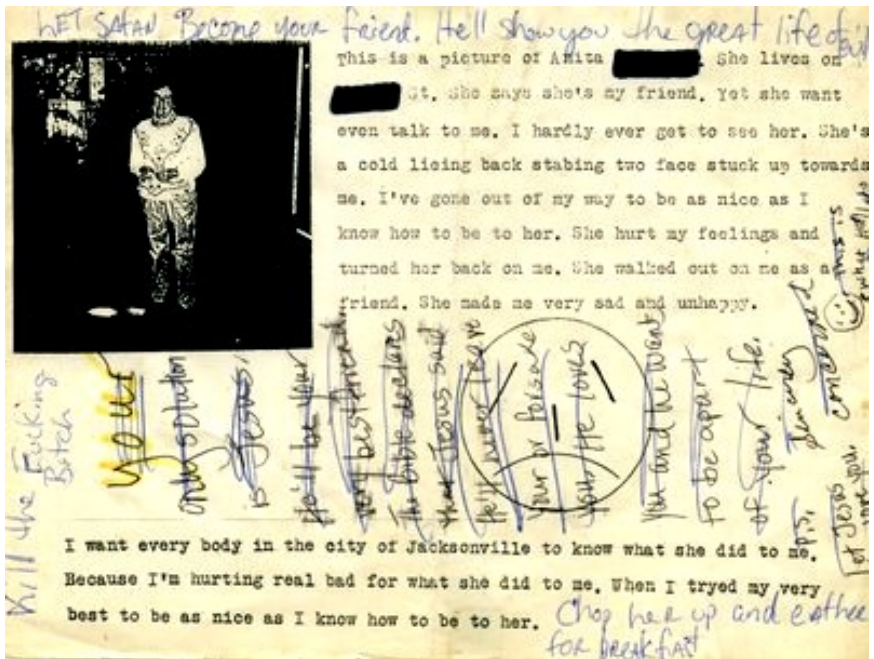
*This pamphlet provided by F.G.T. Enterprises
9430 Lucy Lane Tampa, FL 33614*

It's dated 1965!

Can it possibly have been in the pages of my Bible since then? Yes, I've carried this Bible around for a long time. And yes, I have newer copies in a lot of different versions, but I'm comfortable with this one and I consider the tattered old thing, "My Bible".

Digging deeper in the pages of my Bible, I found a hand-drawn map of how to get to somebody's house—I have no idea of who these people were or why I'd need a map to their house....

And then I found this sad, sad thing, a crude, Xeroxed flyer once taped to a telephone post at the corner bus stop:



Back before we had a car, about seven years ago, Ginny rode the bus to work. Because we live in a rough neighborhood, each morning I'd walk her to the bus stop, and meet her bus and walk her home in the evenings.

One morning this crude flyer appeared on telephone posts up and down the street. I have blacked out Anita's name and address.

As you can tell the writer of the flyer felt unhappy with Anita and wanted the world to know about it. Therefore, she typed this notice, Xeroxed dozens of copies, and posted it on telephone posts up and down the street.

Various people waiting for the bus took out pens or pencils and wrote their own comments on the flyers:

Commenter One said—"Let satan become your friend. He'll show you the great life of evil".

Commenter Two said—"Kill the fucking bitch"!

Commenter Three said—"Chop her up and eat her for breakfast".

Commenter Four said—" Your only solution is Jesus. He'll be your very best friend. The Bible declares that Jesus said He'll never leave you or forsake you. He loves you and He wants to be apart of your life—Sincerely, Concerned".

Commenter Five said—"This is what He'll do—☺"

After a few days I removed this poster from the phone post and took it in to pass around an adult Bible class I was teaching; we talked about bitterness and forgiving and being forgiven.

I believe the Bible is the word of God. It may not tell me everything I'm curious about, but it tells me all I need to know about life and godliness. It does not answer all my questions about history, but what it does tell me is true. It does not tell me everything there is to know about God, but it tells me more than I want to know about John Cowart.

And one thing I find in the pages of my Bible is this statement: "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".

Defiled by bitterness.

Bitterness besets me. When I feel a slight, real or imagined, I let resentment well up inside me. I dwell on that trespass to my dignity. It festers inside me.

I feel troubled as I chase the incident around and around in my mind. My complaints take over my mind. Prayer becomes bitching.

" Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us ... as we forgive..."

What a kicker!

And Jesus elaborates saying, "When ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses".

Without the help of the Holy Spirit we can't forgive others.

To be honest with you, WITH the help of the Holy Spirit, I still find it hard to forgive someone who has crossed the line—that's what trespassing is, to cross the line defining someone else's property, to break through some proper boundary.

One thing that sometimes helps me is to recall times when I have crossed the line myself, when I have done the same sort of thing to someone else that I am so upset about someone now doing to me. And I don't have to search my memory very hard before the Spirit reminds me of that time when I...

Well, you get the idea.

There has no temptation taken you but such as is common to man... They did it. And I did it too.

Now I have never posted a notice about my own resentment and grudges against someone on a telephone pole for all the world to see—that's what blogs are for. But I have cherished slights inside my heart and go over them again and again as though they were My Precious.

Heck, I just observed my 70th birthday and I can still remember the names of kids in elementary school who did me dirt!

No wonder I published my recent diaries under the title *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad.*, etc.

So, how can I get out of this morass?

When Jesus healed a man sick of palsy, He said, "That ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins".

Yes, forgiving is serious, costly business.

Jesus died because of our sin. He rose again because He is God, the source of life.

He does not excuse us. He forgives us. There's a difference.

And the Bible tells us about such things.

It behooves us to know what's in the pages of our Bibles.

Oh, by the way, I did find the note I'd started out searching for. I had tucked it in the pages of my Bible. Unfortunately it did not say what I thought it said.

Drats!

However I enjoyed browsing in the pages of my Bible and I was especially pleased to find that quote about how we pipe smokers are men of dignity, charm and refinement.

That quote must be true—I found it in the pages of my Bible.

Thursday, July 23, 2009

List Of 1901 Great Jacksonville Fire Dead

Yesterday a young woman e-mailed me requesting the names of the seven people who died in the 1901 Great Fire Of Jacksonville, Florida.

She said she can find no such list anywhere on the internet—I can fix that.

Last night Ginny and I drove downtown to the fire memorial at the foot of Market Street, the old ferry landing. We thought we'd once seen a plaque there listing the dead—but someone has removed it.

So we also checked the periodical room at the Main Library but my sight is now too poor to read microfilm anymore.

Of course, after all that running around, where should I find a list of 1901 Fire dead this morning, but on my own book shelves!

This list of those who died in the 1901 fire comes from Davis, T. Frederick. *History Of Jacksonville Florida And Vicinity 1513 To 1924*. © 1925; reprinted by San Marco Bookstore 1990. Page 226:

Henry D. Bounetheau
Mrs. Waddy Thompson
William Clark
Mrs. Solon Robinson
Mrs. Grace Bradley
March Haynes
and one unidentified person.

William Clark is the young man who died in the Market Street Horror while saving a number of other people; I wrote a little about him in my book *Heroes All: A History Of Firefighting In Jacksonville*.

But now there is a list of fire dead on the Internet.

After running around downtown chasing history, Ginny and I ate supper at the Jacksonville Landing. It being a Tuesday night, hardly anyone was there. We found a table outside on the balcony overlooking the river and enjoyed delicious Bourbon Chicken.

Not another person was up there.

We dined and smoked and sipped tea and held hands talking about books as we watched the lingering sunset over the St. Johns. Yachts, motorboats, sailboats, and tugboats pushing barges moved sedately over the river while sea gulls drifted on updrafts by the Blue Bridge.

Occasionally, other couples strolled by downstairs around the Landing's fountain and across the river we watched the waters dance in the mighty Friendship Fountain on the Southbank.

A peaceful, luxurious, calm, romantic evening.

We could get used to living like this—but, alas, one of the books Ginny checked out of the library is titled *Retiring On a Budget*.

Do old folks really have to eat cat food?

Tuesday, July 28, 2009

Sick Days

Ginny returned to work today after having been ill all weekend.

I've played nursemaid.

She came in from work last Thursday saying she felt "a little off".

On Friday we went to her doctor for a scheduled routine appointment and he said she checked out fine. Her diabetes appears fully under control and all her blood chemistry is in an acceptable range.

But she woke Saturday night ghastly sick—to the extent that we considered going to the hospital emergency room. But, being of the old school of folks who don't deal with physicians for anything short of a chainsaw accident, we put it off and she toughed it out.

Besides, we were poor for so long that, although we now have hospitalization insurance, we still have the mindset of the poor who only have the traditional Get-Well-Or-Die insurance policy.

So, I fed her chicken soup and ginger ale all weekend and nursed her through her downtime by showing her movies on my computer screen. We watched back-to-back movies all weekend and Monday because she was too down to do much else. In fact she slept through many of the movies.

We went to the Hulu site (at http://www.hulu.com/browse/alphabetical/feature_film) where I played old Carry Grant movies from the 1940s for her amusement. And we watched a few Disney movies as whitenoise background. And, of course we could not resist some Elvira horror films. And we saw *Bad Girls From Mars* (my choice).

Last week Donald and Helen gave us some vcr tapes of long-past Superbowl games and we also slept through a number of those.

While Ginny napped, I did our grocery shopping and I worked correcting the proof pages of William Short's 1854 Diary (It will be ready soon). Then I'd watch more movies with her when she woke up still too ill to even read..

All this lounging around and my fine cooking cured Ginny enough for her to sit up a while yesterday to supervise my activities. This led to some tensions.

For instance, she thought my cooking curried chicken was splurging, though it cost less than a meal at McDonalds. And when she asked me to water her plants and I started, she started a load of laundry which cut off my water supply.

Ever notice that men and women have different ways of washing clothes?

I mean you put the cloth in the machine, sprinkle it with soap, close the lid and push the button.

But Ginny magnifies this task into a project requiring 18 steps so complicated that they would daunt the astronaut pilot of the space shuttle!

Yes, she began feeling better and I began feeling grumpier.

I took her suggestions and comments as devastating criticisms of my care for her.

Getting along while living together has little or nothing to do with love. Living in peace has more to do with courtesy, and forbearance, and assuming the goodwill of your partner.

Although we are deeply in love, we do sometimes snap at each other; this is just one small part of life together. It's not wise to make more of it than there really is.

And just where was Jesus during all this?

Same place as always.

Yes, we feel blessed in times of great prosperity; and we feel comforted in times of great tragedy. But God is never more present with us than in the ordinary, mundane, boring days of common life. He is Lord of the Ordinary.

So, watching movies, cooking curry, washing clothes, snapping, making up, being together—in all this we live in the hollow of His hand. He is a daily God.

In Him we live and move and have our very being.

But, boy am I glad Ginny's back to work today. I'll hurry and do up the laundry and have it hanging in the closet before she gets back home—before she sees how I do it.

Wednesday, July 29, 2009

Killing Dogs

Last night when Ginny and I drove to the main library, we noticed a large police presence in the streets around City Hall, which is just across Hemming Park from the library.

Last night the Jacksonville City Council scheduled a vote about increasing property taxes. A large crowd of protestors, observers, and interested citizens surrounded City Hall spilling out into the street and into Hemming Park.

I immediately thought of killing all dogs.

I hope I'm misinformed or just plain wrong, but this is the way I see what's going on:

Recently, to meet the current budget crisis, city government has juggled property assessments and added various "fees" which they say are not taxes but still cost most citizens more cash out of pocket. At the same time our state government decreased property taxes for some people saving the wealthiest among us and the real estate developers thousands of dollars yearly. Ginny and I benefited; we got a property tax bill for seven dollars (\$7) less than last year.

These issues distress people as our city government threatens to curtail library hours, to close homeless shelters, to reduce fire fighting so your home will burn, to stop sending ambulances when you have a heart attack, to collect no more trash, to leave potholes unfilled, to close parks, to stop controlling mosquitoes—and to kill every dog in Jacksonville.

Yes. I exaggerate—a little.

But the dire predictions I hear from City Hall make the Prophet Jeremiah look like a standup comic.

I think I'm seeing a political process my friend newspaper columnist Poke McHenry, God rest his soul, once explained to me.

Poke said, when government wants to do something, say a councilman's neighbor has a white poodle that digs in his yard, the council first proposes killing every dog in Jacksonville.

Dog lovers rise up in protest. Write letters to the editor. Print tee shirts. Paste bumper stickers on their cars.

What about seeing-eye dogs for the blind?

The council grants an exemption to seeing-eye dogs.

Then they exempt hounds used to search for missing children. And show dogs with pedigrees.

The dog lovers begin to calm down.

But still they hand out flyers and post SAVE OUR PETS notices on phone poles.

Hunting dogs gain an exemption. All black dogs gain exemption under affirmative action clauses in existing laws. Then brown and yellow dog owners demand equal status. Then white pit bulls are exempted; even though dog fights are supposedly banned.

By this time, the fear tactic, smoke screen has worked. The call to kill all dogs diverted people's attention from what's really happening. Pet owners feel relieved that city government is listening to them. Our system works. Now that emotions have been damped, folks go about their daily business feeling disaster has been averted.

And that damn lawn-digging white poodle gets the ax—and hardly anybody notices what's happened.

Looking at the current tactics of our state and local government, I can't help remembering what Poke said about killing dogs.

Poke said when a volatile emotional issue, no matter what it is, generates a lot of publicity, it's wise to look around at what else may be going on.

I have no problem paying fair taxes—across the board taxes that apply to everyone without exception—but I think our city's budget shortfall lies not in how taxes are raised but how they are spent.

Since the Civil War, Jacksonville has earned a reputation as being a sucker town. Carpetbaggers flocked here and took over after the war. That set the tone for Jacksonville's pouring cash money into foolish projects.

We actually pay businesses to relocate here! That's supposed to good for our economy. If Jacksonville is really such a good place for their business, why don't those companies pay us an impact fee?.

We allow highrise offices buildings to sit on land taxed as greenbelt property for dairy cattle. Our city government paid cash money for vacant lots to be developed into the Shipyards condominiums. Money spent. Lots still vacant. No wrong doing found although \$34 million is gone with nothing to show for it. And the city subsidizes the football team—for the prestige of having a team. And the city lost money for HarborMaster's restaurant. And Jacksonville Landing.

And don't forget, Off Shore Power Systems—a company dedicated to the bright idea of floating nuclear power plants in the ocean in spite of hurricanes—our city sank money into that project before it went belly up.

The city just installed mood lighting on streets around the Gator Bowl (except the carpetbaggers don't call the stadium that any more). That's a good use of tax money. It will light the way for football fans—if anybody bothers to buy a ticket to games blacked-out on tv because of lack of ticket sales. But, no fear; the city government also pays for stadium skyboxes for dignitaries.

Then here in Jacksonville, politically appointed city workers get paid thousands more than civil service employees doing the identical job.

Our mayor and others in government found money in our direly distressed city budget to travel to Paris earlier this year to an air show—a hot air show?.

Our city paid contractors to build a Northbank Riverwalk, rushing to complete it before Super Bowl only four years ago, and now that portions of the structure are collapsing into the river, the city pays anew. And the roof in the newly constructed Children's Commission building leaks, as does the roof of the Willowbranch Library on which the city recently spent \$3,000,000. But the original builders are not held accountable for their shoddy workmanship.

And then there's the \$64 million dollar courthouse being built while dozens of derelict downtown buildings sit empty within blocks of City Hall. These could be renovated so that every judge could have his own floor. So although core Jacksonville is a donut of empty buildings, a new courthouse just must be built.

It's not tax money the city lacks but common sense.

Oh well, this is the way the world works.

I think that when Jesus told a minor government official, "My kingdom is not of this world", the Lord saw the way things worked in government and was issuing a disclaimer.

So amid the protesters and politicians and smoke and mirrors and corruption and irresponsibility and pettiness

and dullness of our government, it amazes me that the system works as well as it does.

I'm confident it will all work out.

Nothing for me to rant about.

Besides, my dog is black.

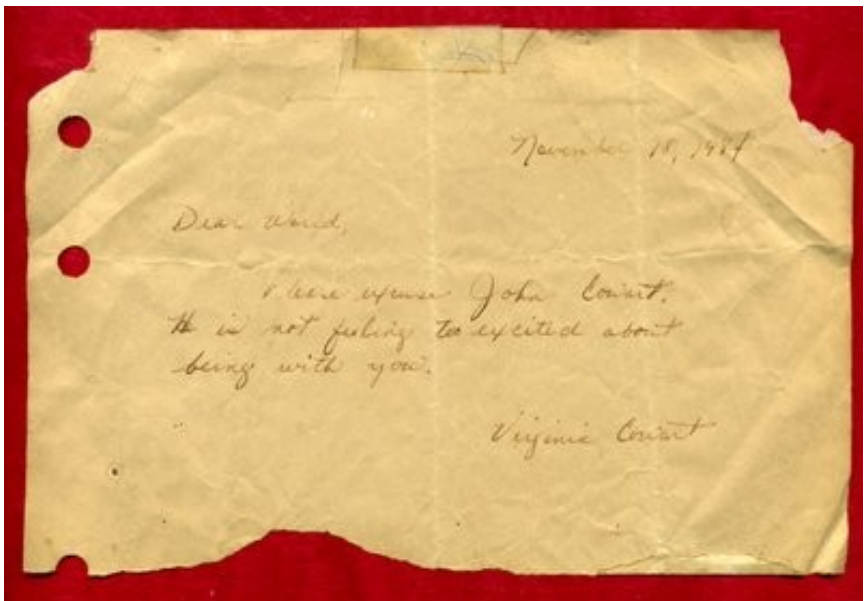
Thursday, July 30, 2009
Excused?

I am excused.

I have a note from my wife:

Ginny wrote this excuse note for me back in November of 1984. While she was writing excuse notes for one of the kids' teachers about missing some school function, she gave me this one to cover any contingency I may face in life.

I treasure my excuse note. It's comforting to have an excuse ready at hand to use when I need it. It's been taped to a shelf in my office for years. When I need an excuse, I'm covered.



Yesterday I applied to be excused from jury duty; within minutes, the court excused me so I do not have to serve.

This has been a source of brain-eating anxiety for me since I first got the summons.

In Florida, a person 70 years old or older who wishes is automatically excused from jury duty unless they chose to serve.

At first I looked forward to serving. I have some minor sense of civic responsibility. I've voted in every election since I was 21 years old, the legal age back then. I served a stint as president of our neighborhood watch. I planted trees along a public right of way. I trained as part of a civilian emergency rescue team. And I was prepared to act as a juror.

I checked out my one suit, which I haven't worn since Mark and Eve's wedding 18 months ago. I've grown fatter since then so I bought several shirts large enough for me to button the collar so I can wear a tie. I polished my shoes. I gathered stuff to cut my hair...

Yes, I've cut my own hair for decades to avoid being touched by a barber. Due to some quirk in my make up, when touched, especially when I don't expect it, my body shudders and stops breathing. I avoid being touched.

Even when I go to church I chose to sit beside a big stone pillar with Ginny on the outside so that no "friendly" person can garb at me. God save me from friendly churches! I think that going to church should be like going to a movie—you go in, see the show, and go home without speaking to others who happen to be in the audience.

I do understand that other Christians feel differently about church functions. Good for them. I'm just stating my own preference. I am that shy.

Incidentally I don't go to movies or football games either because I choke up bad in groups of people.

And the closer the time came for me to report for jury duty, the more tense I became. The thought of being closed in a room elbow to elbow to elbow with other people overwhelmed me.

I thought I might overcome my idiosyncrasy enough to perform my civic duty. I steeled myself to do it. But the prospect overwhelmed me, so yesterday I applied to the

court for the automatic senility option on the basis of my tottering old age and the court excused me.

A sense of peace came over me. I felt I'd done the right thing.

Sometimes it's good not to do a good thing.

I'm glad I was excused.

Funny thing excuses—every time we use one, we unconsciously admit God's existence as the Giver of moral law. Every time we accuse someone else of something, we admit that same thing.

Listen to school kids in the lunch line:

"Miss Thompson, Miss Thompson, he broke in line"!

"No, I didn't! I was here first"!

The accuser appeals to a moral law that it is not right to break in line; that people who break in line are law-breakers.

The excuser also appeals to moral law with his excuse—I was here first, so I do no wrong.

Our sense of right and wrong is engrained.

The nations of the world act just like school kids:

"You broke the treaty!"

"Did not. Our people occupied Gaza for generations. We were here first".

We accuse and excuse because we know that somewhere God's absolute moral law exists and that it matters whether or not His law is broken.

As saint Paul wrote to the Romans,

There is no respect of persons with God.

For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law;

For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified.

For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also

bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another.

Even before Paul talked about the meaning of accusing and excusing, he'd already concluded we are all without excuse before God:

For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse:

Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened

No wonder we need Jesus, the only Savior!

So, it may be that the local court excused me

But there will come a day before a Judge when no excuse will hold water.

Not even my note from Ginny.

Friday, July 31, 2009 Hounded!

First, my eldest daughter came through her surgery fine and the biopsy showed nothing untoward. She'll be up and around in a few days.

Next, my friend Barbara White is up and around. After this third course of chemotherapy, she has bad days and worse, but Friday morning she felt well enough to drive to my house and treat me to breakfast at Dave's Diner.

Over breakfast we talked about the 23rd Psalm and dogs.

Barbara noted that the Psalm starts off with the Shepherd leading: "He leadeth me beside the still waters". Here we see the Lord Jesus going in front of us.

But the Psalm ends with : "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me". *To follow me* means to come behind me.

In one sense the whole picture is that of the Lord compassing us about on all sides—but there's something more here.

Barbara's pastor recently showed a video of two sheepdogs herding a flock. The dogs ranged back and forth behind the sheep, barking now, laying low then, rushing in, backing off, nipping flanks—dogging the sheep toward the safety of the corral.

The sheep would not ever name a sheepdog, *Goodness*.

Sheep would not name one, *Mercy*.

Goodness and *Mercy* are the names the Shepherd gives to what follows us yapping and nipping at our heels.

Among the sheep, these harassing herders-of-sheep are more likely to be called by names like Trouble and Aggravation, or Problem and Pesteration, or Misery and Frustration—any name but Goodness and Mercy.

But the Lord surely sets them to harry us all the days of our life till we're hounded safely Home.

Those are spiritual observations that Barbara made as we talked.

But I made a contribution to our conversation too:

Heard about the dyslexic agnostic who suffers from insomnia?

He stays awake all night wondering whether or not there really is a dog.

Barbara groaned.

I wonder if the pain of her cancer is coming back?

**Tuesday, August 04,
2009**

Christmas Eve



Our daughter Eve, a librarian, has won the Mayor's Rave Review Award "for showing initiative, doing more

than expected, focusing on quality, excellence, and customer satisfaction”.

Of Jacksonville’s 10,465 city employees, only a handful have earned this honor.

Mayor John Peyton will present Eve the award she earned at a ceremony at City Hall later in the month.

Meanwhile, Eve is preparing a Christmas In August program for the kids and teens who come to her branch library. Eve’s been getting her Christmas program ready for weeks now. She’s baking cookies and wrapping presents for all the kids who come to her library. (I’m pretty sure she pays for all these extras out of her own pocket). And, a few days ago she called asking Ginny about borrowing musical Santa Claus toys for a display.

Alas, Ginny and I forgot all about it. Christmas In August is not high on our list of things to think about (Ginny stubbed her toe on a chair leg over the weekend and I’ve focused on that over the weekend because with her being a diabetic that could prove serious).

Eve showed up at the door yesterday to pick up Santas for her display. So I began pulling boxes of Christmas decorations out of storage.

About 40 years ago, someone gave Ginny a battery-operated, musical, mechanical Santa that waved its arms ringing a bell. The present delighted her, so every year since the rest of the family and I have often given her additional battery-operated musical Santas.

She owns Santas that climb ladders, Santas that walk, Santas that ski, Santas that fly, Santas that sing calypso music, Elvis in a Santa suit, Santas that drive racecars, that catch fish, that beat drums—and one that drops his pants to moon the world.

A couple of years back, being inundated with musical Santa dolls, Ginny asked for a moratorium on anymore gifts of Santa dolls—she has scores of the things.

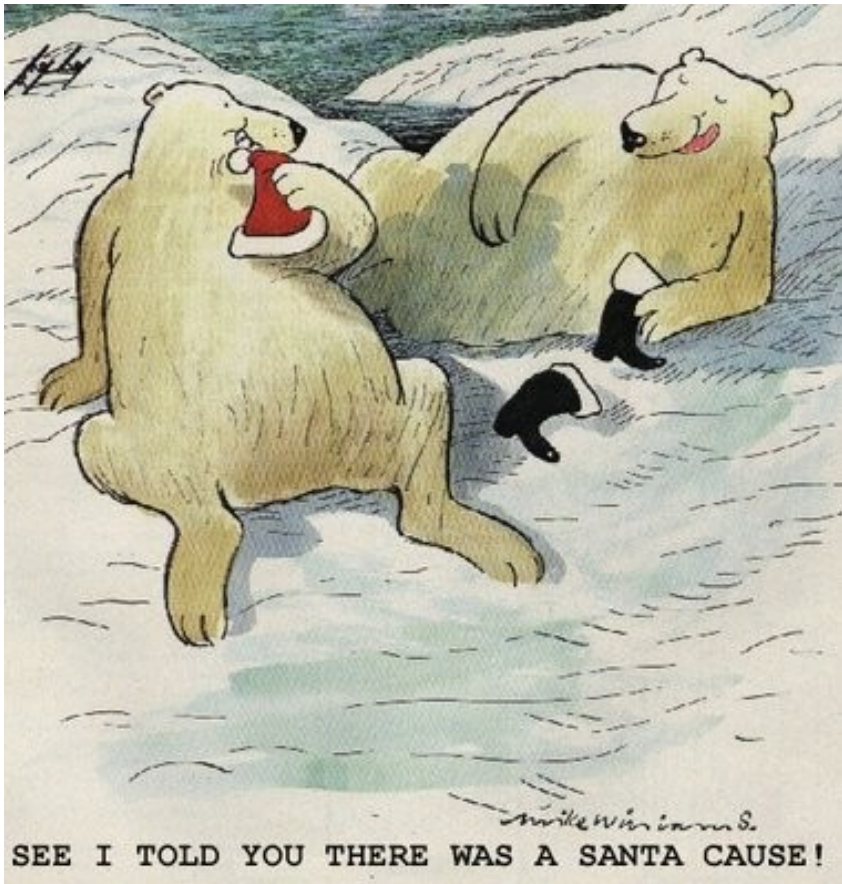
In fact, before it became too much of a burden, each year we used to have a Christmas party featuring the annual Running Of The Santas in which she would set every one of the things to playing at the same time!

We spent a fortune on batteries for this spectacle.

Anyhow, yesterday Eve borrowed eight or ten of Ginny's Santas to show the kids at her library; she says she will take photos to e-mail back to me later this week.

On the down side, at the same time Eve is celebrating and showing initiative and going beyond the call of duty so the Mayor is recognizing her outstanding efforts in community service—at this same time because of the city's budget crunch, they propose shutting down the library she works at, or at least cutting the hours it is open to only 16 hours a week.

Merry Christmas, Eve.



SEE I TOLD YOU THERE WAS A SANTA CAUSE!

Wednesday, August 05, 2009
Rejoice! William Short Is Published And Put To Bed

Yesterday our postman delivered my two sample copies of *William F. Short's 1854 Diary*, a book Ginny and I

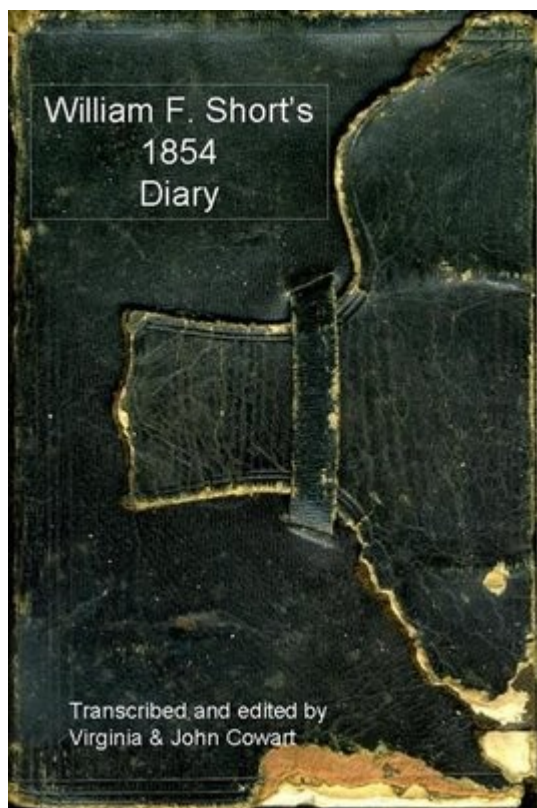
transcribed and edited together. It really proved a challenge for us. The saga of our struggles to produce this book are recorded in my July 2nd posting and following.

The cover of the published book, pictured here, reproduces the old leather cover of the manuscript diary—enlarged many times. It's now available at www.bluefishbooks.info.

I urged Ginny to carry her copy in to work with her to show off to her co-workers, but she seems reluctant to—doesn't want her name associated with mine in her office, I suppose. But I'm proud of the work we did on this. I could not have published this one without her help.

I added my own copy to my vanity shelf.

And there it sits.



Recently I have seen myself as a preservationist. This tattered old diary, record of a man's life and loves from 150 years ago, would have moldered in a dust bin, had I not rescued it and published it.

Now, thanks to my efforts, it can molder on a much wider scale.

Who reads this stuff anyhow?

However, finally putting Short to bed means I have to move on to the next project—whatever that is. Again, I face the dilemma of deciding what to do next.

The space between finishing one book and starting another pains me.

I despair.

The rush of getting one book finished, the thrill, the sense of accomplishment, dims when I contemplate what to do next.

Of course, the only question for a Christian is, “Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do”?

Nothing else matters.

But I find the process of finding the will of God and answering that question unsettles me. I make lists of book ideas, I wallow in indecision. I weigh factors. I consider marketability. I ponder whether or not readers will be helped. I pray and worry and question and reconsider and worry...

And the time factor overshadows all.

I’ve just turned 70. I’m unlikely to have time to finish writing about all the ideas on my lists. And I wonder if I haven’t run my course. Do I have anything useful or uplifting to say.

And considering the financial success of the twenty or so books I’ve already written or edited, is it time now to recognize my failure, admit defeat, and stop pissing against the wind?

Be all that as it may, once again I enter the doldrums of writing, adrift between one project and the next....

Now, look what I’ve done. I started writing this to celebrate the publication of my latest book and I’ve turned it into a pity party for John Cowart! Woe is me! Woe is me!

Ginny says that were I to win the Lotto jackpot, I’d view it as a problem.

Alright already. I've published *William F. Short's 1854 Diary*. Today it goes on sale. Buyers line up on the right. No shoving. There are plenty of copies for everybody.

Today, poor J.K. Rowling frets and weeps and wrings her hands knowing that my book will bump that Harry Potter wimp of hers off the best seller list. Don't cry, Joanne, maybe someday 150 years from now some guy will find an old copy of your book in a dustbin and publish it for his generation—like I did with *William Short's Diary*.

See there, I can too rejoice over my latest publishing triumph.

I'm rejoicing, damn it, I'm rejoicing.

Thursday, August 06, 2009 Atop Casa La Brea

Local forecasters predicted that Wednesday's temperature here in Jacksonville, Florida, would top 100 degrees. So where did I spend that sunny morning? Crawling around on my hands and knees atop my son's house helping him tar a roof leak.

Tuesday I'd worried about what my next writing project should be. But Wednesday when I called Donald just to ask about a computer problem (he's a computer network administrator) he told me about his leaky roof and I volunteered to help him spread tar. I'm sure that's how Stephen King spends his time between writing one book and another.

The scorching heat on the housetop made our tools almost too hot to touch! And tar gets sticky; there's a reason they tarred and feathered criminals back in the good old days.

But Donald and I enjoyed many a laugh up there doing our repair job.

For instance, when Donald asked me why I pressed an oak leaf into the hot tar, I told him that I was creating a future fossil for Casa La Brea. If we had a mastodon handy, we could have imbedded him in the roof too. But, since Donald and Helen only have ten or twelve cats, I offered to create a unique fossil on their housetop. He wouldn't let me have even one spare kitty.

Even though we wore kneepads, the rough grains of asphalt shingles scraped and stung us as we joked about the words of Jesus in Luke 17—you know the place, “When the Son of man is revealed, in that day, he which shall be upon the housetop...one shall be taken, and the other left”.

When the Lord comes again, both Donald and I will be left on the rooftop—because we’ll be stuck up there in tar!

Hey, it sounded funny while we were up there troweling tar into cracks between shingles.

Finishing the messy job, we sat in the shade sipping ice tea and talking about Donald’s inclination to become a minister; he plans to enter seminary later this month.

He also said that he and Helen have tentative plans so that if Ginny and I (or Helen’s parents) get too old and feeble to take care of ourselves, the kids plan to partition the back of their home to make an apartment for us decrepit old folks

Lovely thought but it will be a cold day... er, on the roof, before I’d want to live with any of our children. Love ‘em, yes. Live with ‘em, It’ll be a cold day!

Besides, their daughter Maggie enters college toward the end of the month and it looks as though she’ll live at home and commute for a while yet instead of moving to the dorm. She and her boyfriend had checked out our activities on the roof before they took off to an exercise class. Wow! She is gorgeous! I mean fashion model beautiful.

Donald drove me home to pick up some theology books I’d saved for him, and we went for a swim to cool off.

As Donald left my house for his, he said it was his turn to cook for a supper at his church; he planed to make meatballs in a special sauce. To make the meatballs, I suppose you take meat and squish it into balls; but for his special sauce, Donald heats barbeque sauce and melts in grape jelly to give the sauce sweetness, zest and tang.

His meatballs are a favorite at church suppers.

Incidentally, just yesterday Donald and Helen opened a brand new website called Cowart Cooking Wiki. It’s at <http://www.whenwilltheburningstop.com/index.php?>

title=Main_Page . Please check it out, sign on, and add your own favorite receipts.

But before Donald left, I proudly showed him a copy of *William Short's 1854 Diary*—the book that I just published yesterday—See my online book catalog at www.bluefishbooks.info.

As my son compared my transcript with the original autograph of the 155-year-old diary, his sharp eyes spotted two things that had escaped my notice:

First, Donald spotted some numbers faintly written inside the cover. I'd seen them there but discounted them as unimportant. "Dad, he was trying to solve an algebraic equation here," Donald said, "And he was going about it wrong". Donald was a physics major in college and solves (or is the right word *proves*?) equations with ease.

I knew that in 1854 William Short was a professor of language and mathematics, but I had not recognized the numbers he'd written inside the cover of his diary were an equation.

Then, on examining the original diary's back cover, Donald noticed that the layers of leather in the binding had separated sometime in the distant past, probably due to the diary getting wet in Short's pocket. By tilting the little book to catch the light at just the right angle, Donald saw a distinct impression where Short had hidden several coins inside the cover slot created by that separation. The coins had been there so long they embossed their imprint on the leather.

But alas, somebody somewhere sometime in the distant past had removed those ancient coins.

I'll bet they were gold coins Short had tucked away in this secret compartment...

Long gone before I ever got hold of the diary.

Nothing left but a faint impression of the coins.

Story of my life...

Saturday, August 08, 2009
On Being A Barbwire Christian



Looks like after writing or editing twenty-something books, I should have known it was coming.

But I didn't.

I expected to go bouncy bouncy from finishing Short's 1854 Diary project right into a new writing project. I'd even made a list of five likely title to work on. But what I'd forgotten is that every time I finish a book and move the notes and final draft into my DONE file, a fit of dark black depression falls on me.

Oh, there's that first giddy feeling of elation when I hold "my book" in my hands and gloat over having produced it. That lasts from 20 minutes to two hours—then comes the let down.

I look at the work of my hands and say, "What a piece of crap". I see mistakes that spoil the whole work. I think that this garbage isn't going to sell any better than the last book I wrote. I realize that I've wasted time on a useless project—Again!

Everything sours on me. I feel I've been a loser all my life. My own one-line diary entries say, "Another wasted

day in a wasted life". Depression paralyzes me. I say, "It doesn't matter" about everything—shaving, mowing the lawn, reading—why bother?

It's all I can do to look at pictures of naked ladies on the internet. And even that feels useless and not worth the trouble of clicking on another nipple.

But should a Christian feel so low?

Probably not.

But that's the way I am.

And shouldn't a Christian hide such feelings out of a sense of "testimony" because we're supposed to be joyous people?

But the big let-down is a common human experience; we all know the backlash after psyching ourselves up for finals and the end of semester comes and we crash. And after even joyous experiences, say preparing for a wedding, or sad experiences, making funeral arrangements, there comes a letdown, a period of enervation, an overwhelming weariness—these feelings are real.

And they are our common lot.

This is a place where raw dogged faith kicks in.

I really do feel lower than whale shit, but I still believe that Jesus Christ is Lord.

My lord.

He is what He is, regardless of what I feel or experience.

He is true whether I believe that truth at the moment or not.

And, yes, I feel I should write about these things to be honest.

I want the Kid in the Attic and anyone else who might read my diary to know the reality of Christian experience as it works out in the life of one morose, grumpy, dirty old man—me. That way they'll know that the Christian faith is real. Jesus doesn't just save winners.

Ginny and I were talking about my depression the other night and I expressed my faith that in Heaven I will

be given a cheap seat in the nosebleed section with a ticket stamped Saved-But-Useless...

She said I'm wrong, that the Lord will run to meet me with arms wide open to hug me home.

She would say that.

She likes me.

I'll show how my thoughts about the coils of barbwire entanglements fit in just a moment.



In some research the other day, Ginny encountered a site I'd never run across before, Dr. Donald J. Mabry's *Historical Text Archive* at <http://historicaltextarchive.com/books.php?op=viewbook&bookid=70&cid=2> .

Dr. Mabry, Professor Emeritus of history at Mississippi State University, pioneered in introducing historians to the use of the Internet for professional purposes. His *Historical Text Archive*, the first Internet-based file storage and retrieval site for historians, has won over sixty Awards. The Archive had published 70 books and over 687 articles in electronic form. It has eleven million unique visitors a year.

In a well-researched, scholarly E-Book entitled *World's Finest Beach*, Dr. Mabry tells the fascinating history of northeast Florida beach communities.

In investigating Dr. Marby's footnotes Ginny found that he cites such eminent Florida history authorities as Bill Foley, T. Frederick Davis, and James R. Ward.

Among these names in the footnotes, she found three references to articles I wrote.

What a shock!

These guys are really good. They are authorities. They qualify as legitimate historians. I'm not an authority on anything; I'm just a guy with an interest in the past of my hometown. Yet, there I appear in three different footnotes.

Yes, I am a footnote.

Here comes the barbwire thought:

While I feel that my writing and my life per se is useless, somebody got a footnote out of it.

Back in the 1950s I met a soldier just returned from the Korean War. He'd been a machine gunner over there as United States troops fought their way up the peninsula, then the Communist Chinese army poured over the border in hordes to push our boys back .

The soldier told me that our guys set out massive entanglements of barbwire to channel rushing Communist fighters into firing lanes covered by machine guns. He said some of the enemy soldiers were armed with nothing but sharpened bamboo spears as they charged the machineguns.

To break through the barbwire entanglement and make a way through for the soldiers behind them, the first waves of Communist soldiers would run forward and throw themselves on the barbwire. The combined weight of thousands of them eventually flattened the wire.

By stepping on their bodies, the Communist troops following could charge the machine guns without being entangled in the barbwire. The first wave of men's function in the scheme of things was to keep others from getting entangled in the barbwire.

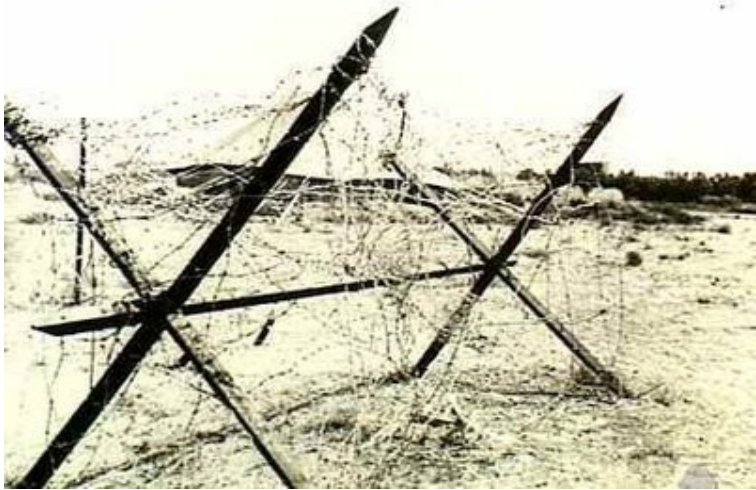
These barbwire soldiers were nonentities.

Bodies for other soldiers to step on.

Expendable.

Footnotes.

I find the example of these men comforting.



Ginny read over this just before I posted it online to Blogger and she began singing.

She sang that tune from the musical *Annie*.

You know the one—*The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow!*

I live with an interesting woman.

Sunday, August 09, 2009
Pain, Suffering, Problems, Troubles,
Aggravations, and Tribulations

I forgot my brother's birthday.

Yesterday when I abruptly realized that I'd forgotten, I called David to apologize, and I asked, "How did you spend your birthday?"

"Doing nothing but sitting by the phone waiting for my brother to call," he said.

He also spent an inordinate amount of time in a surgeon's office getting 20+ shots, having a cancer cut off, and enduring a skin graft to patch where the cancer had been removed.

Sounds painful.

No fun at all.

Yesterday also, our friend Barbara White treated Ginny and me to lunch at a restaurant in downtown Yukon, Florida. Yes, there is such a place ander, make that the restaurant in Yukon, there isn't any other.

We've been meeting with Barbara for lunches or breakfasts regularly for more years than I can remember.

This time we met in Yukon because the tiny town lies about half way between Barbara's house and ours. Barbara felt up to driving halfway; she goes in for another round of chemotherapy Monday so this was the last day of her "good" week between treatments.

The three of us talked about pain.

Barbara's been reading the book of Job for her devotions. And she reads articles and thinks a lot about finding meaning in her pain.

She said that pain does not make us good. Nor does it make us worse. "I am what I've always been," she said, "The difference now is that I'm what I've always been—with cancer".

Of course, like any of us who has ever suffered any pain or problem—even having a flat tire—she asks, "Why me". She says that she's asked that same question about her many blessings as well as about her pain. She concludes that it's not a case of her deserving either pain or blessing. The just shall live by faith—not by racked up merit or demerit points.

Pain, trouble, problems—it's all just part of living in a fallen world. As sure as smoke drifts upward, so man born of woman is few of days and full of trouble.

She observed that God does not remove life's curses, He redeems them; it's His trademark to lower Himself to lift us up. She mentioned a Stephen King tale about a prisoner who escaped to freedom by crawling through a sewer.

Barbara said that one of the most difficult things about suffering is the feeling that you've been forgotten (like when your brother forgets your birthday), or that while you get adequate physical care, you still feel neglected, put aside on the shelf, forgotten.

She finds comfort knowing that our God never forgets; He remembers even the most obscure and forgettable among His children. Every hair on your head is numbered—which in Barbara’s case is not as hard to do as it once was.

The trouble with going to lunch with Barbara and Ginny is that the two women gang up and shut me out. Why, when I tried to tell them the joke about the cat and the soccer team, they shouted me down and wouldn’t even let me get to the punch line.

That hurt.

Ginny told about an e-mail she’d received from our daughter Jennifer:

It seems a pastor visited a terminal patient to talk over her funeral arrangements, which hymns she’d like at her service, which Scriptures to read. And the woman requested that she be buried with a table fork in her hand and she explained her reason for the request.

During the viewing at the funeral parlor everyone noticed the fork in the hand of the body and wondered about it.

In his message the pastor told how the woman had grown up in her grandmother’s house and at the end of family dinners Grandmother would clear plates from the table saying, “Keep your fork. Something good’s coming”. Then she’d bring out fabulous deserts—pecan pie, chocolate cake, Peach cobbler.

To keep your fork meant you anticipated something wonderful ahead.

“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”.

Resurrection—the historical resurrection of Christ, the eventual resurrection of us—that’s what it’s all about. We are all temps down here.

As Job said:

I know that my Redeemer liveth,
and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the
earth:
And though after my skin, worms destroy this body,

yet in my flesh shall I see God:
Whom I shall see for myself,
and mine eyes shall behold,
and not another;
though my reins be consumed within me.

Yes, Jesus rose.

We too shall rise from our graves eventually.

But God cares when we hurt right here, right now..

And the Scripture says, "He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds".

Personally, I don't know much about pain. In fact, last week helping Donald spread tar on the roof, I scraped my knee. When Ginny brought out the first aid kit to apply ointment on my wound, the tube bore the use-by date of 1994! Obviously, I have not suffered a great deal in the way of wounds.

Seems odd to me that God has this double standard about pain:

On one hand, when we encounter pain in others, we are to do all we can to alleviate it; remember the Good Samaritan binding the victim's wounds?

Reminds me of the cartoon where this guy is praying, "God, why do You allow so much pain and suffering and misery to go on in the world"?

And God answers, "Funny, I was about to ask you that same question".

Then, on the other hand when we suffer ourselves, the Scripture says, "Endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ".

Help others; endure yourself.

In other words, at some points in my life I am to help folks who are objects of charity; at other points in my life, I am to be an object of charity for others to help.

I'd rather do than be!

But God may have other ideas....I'd better keep my fork.

I have no satisfactory answer to why God allows pain—especially the pain of the innocent, or of sinless animals, or of babies, or why good people suffer.

I just don't know.

My own ointment hasn't been needed since 1994.

I thank God that I don't hurt anywhere at the moment.

But there is that man born of woman thing...

As my friend Wes said, "When tribulation comes, sometimes all you can do is stand there and tribulate".

Tuesday, August 11, 2009
Christmas Eve—Part Two

Back on August 3rd, I wrote about how our daughter Eve borrowed a few of Ginny's Santas for a Christmas In August library program.

Here is a copy of an e-mail that Eve sent me this morning:



Dad,

Here are the pictures of the various Santas including the display I made. We even played them all at the same time as I told them to listen to them and multiply it by 20 :) and that would like Christmas at my house. The kids had a blast and every time I would turn around to explain a craft or help a kid, I would hear Christmas tunes going off behind me.



We had a massive turn out of about 30+ people. Everyone got school supplies and toys to take home and we made paper bag stockings and edible Christmas trees. I will get the Santas back to you soon... probably before Christmas :)..maybe.

Thank you for blogging about me. It always make me feel good to know you are proud of me. I am proud of you too. Everytime I had someone check out a Jacksonville history book, I get to share with them about your books and how they are written by this wonderful author I know. I wish just once you could see you like I do. You are a great father with an amazing heart. Mark always tells me how lucky I am to have such loving and supportive parents.

I love you, Daddy.

Eve

Wednesday, August 12, 2009 A Romantic Weekend Torpedoed

Even after 40+ years of marriage I can still make Ginny squeal.

Unfortunately, when I kiss her nowadays the way I do that is by cupping my palms over her ears so the feedback shriek of her hearing aids makes her...

Well, you get the idea.

However, in my own mind, I'm still one of the World's Greatest Lovers.

For instance, in a conversation over coffee a couple of weeks ago, I asked Ginny to tell me about some times in her life when she has felt happiest (that's a good question to ask). She listed six or eight things in her life which brought her particular joy.

Oddly enough, only one or two involved me in any way; but I latched onto one thing she said and I thought, *Hey! I can re-create that.*

So I began secretly plotting to take her for a romantic getaway weekend next Friday. I wanted this to come as a surprise to her, so I hid my planning under various subterfuges. On the target Friday I intended to pretend to drive her to work, but instead I'd sweep her off to a luxury resort for a long weekend of lust, love and joy.

I intended to call her boss and set up days off for Ginny without her knowing about it beforehand. And to make arrangements with a pet lover to watch Fancy while we were away. And to have our mail picked up.

I checked to see our prescriptions were up to date. I compared resort prices on line to make advanced reservations...

The package I intended included a dozen roses for her, champagne, king-sized bed, adult videos available, a box of chocolates, a moonlight carriage ride, a balcony overlooking the water, breakfast in bed, candle light dinners...

I envisioned the kind of resort hotel James Bond would check into—if 007 were on our budget.

I intended to secretly pack Ginny's suitcase with lacy, frilly negligees, and to pack her comfortable walking shoes for strolling through the historic district.

For weeks I have plotted and planed and schemed to bring about all my intentions.

Well, Hell's paved...

Yesterday the wheels came off.

Snag after snag turned up suddenly. Obstacle after obstacle arose. I could not figure anyway to overcome scheduling conflicts, reservation cancellations, work duties, finances, bridge closings, construction, and a host of other problems. The whole world conspired to keep me from our romantic weekend!

Discouraged, I broke down and told Ginny about my intentions so she could set her sharp mind to solving the problems involved. Heads together we huddled over the computer trying this ploy and that.

We grew frustrated and finally gave up.

We just can't make it happen.

Not next weekend, but in November, God willing, we'll have our romantic weekend—at a cabin in the woods; our reservations are already confirmed. It won't come as a surprise to Ginny, but between now and then we'll have the joy of anticipating.

I'll wait.

As the Scripture says, "The best plans of mice and men to get laid often go astray".

Actually, that quote is not really in the pages of Scripture—but it would be if I wrote the Bible!

Thursday, August 13, 2009 Secret Identities

When I was a kid, my father got paid on every Friday. He always gave me my allowance of 25 ¢ when he got home. Right after supper I'd run down to the corner drug store to spend it; I'd buy two comic books, 10¢ each, and a fountain coke, 5¢, no sales tax in those days.

Ah yes, I lived the good life.

My favorite comic book Hero was Mighty Mouse!



But I also read *Tales From The Crypt*, Captain America, Superman, Green Lantern, Aquaman, Captain America, Little Lulu...

Alas, my story is the same one told by every man growing up in America—When I went off to college, my mother...

I had that first edition comic that now sells on E-e-bay for \$100,000!

Yes, every guy tells that same tale.

But we guys also stoically agree with St. Paul, who said “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things”.

Paul only said that because of sour grapes. His mother has a lot to answer for. Just think what one of St. Paul’s comics would sell for on e-bay!

The reason I got to thinking about this subject is that the Lord answered an odd prayer of mine.

You see, while I stagnate between writing one book and another, I devote my time to transcribing my friend Barbara White’s Prayer Diaries.

Barbara retired after 15 years service as religion editor of the *Florida Times-Union*. Among other duties she wrote a column, *Along The Way*. Her work won numerous awards and helped thousands of people in their spiritual quests.

My posting on August 20, 2007, “Shuffling Paper” tells how I turned a flowered shopping bag full of Barbara’s newspaper clippings into a four-book series, aptly named *Along The Way*, available at www.bluefishbooks.info .

About that same time, Barbara entrusted me with another bag, a canvas bag filled with her hand-written prayer diaries. Powerful stuff. I think her writings are destined to become spiritual classics; they have that potential.

Off and on for months, I've spent spare time transcribing these diaries.

In her duties as religion editor, Barbara covered every variety of religious event, happening, scandal, and activity. Pastors, rabbis, priests, bishops, singers, televangelists, gurus, and every sort of religious personality sought her attention. She treated people from each faith, denomination, and persuasion with respect, courtesy, honesty and fairness—while maintaining her own dedication to Christ.

Because of this loving attitude, religious leaders of all sorts became her friends and in crisis they sought out her council and input. So did non-professional Christians, Jews, agnostics, and just plain folks.

All sorts came to her for comfort, council, and hope in hurt.

My problem is that when she prayed for them, she often noted her prayers and concerns for them in her private diaries.

Sometimes just by their initials.

But sometimes by name.

How am I to handle voicing their problems which may help modern readers who go through the same sort of life issues—without breaking confidence?

I have no intention of betraying private things in publication of Barbara's prayer diaries. Yet I want to maintain my own integrity in honestly transcribing these diaries.

On one hand, I think, *This stuff happened 25 years ago; Barbara herself forgot she ever wrote about it, who's around to remember that incident?*

On the hand, some things were revealed in trust. That's sacred.

Off and on the past couple of days I've prayed about how to handle this problem.

I'm up to May, 1984, in my transcribing—I've hit a place where the young married pastor of one congregation is being eagerly tempted about leaving his wife and taking up an affair with his secretary.

As I prayed this morning, the image of Mighty Mouse sprang into my mind.

I hardly ever think of Mighty Mouse when I pray.

Then it came to me...

Secret identities!

Virtually all comic book characters had a secret identity.

So when you read in Barbara White's Pray Diary (if I ever get it published) about the triangle between Archie, Betty and Veronica. Or where Joker embezzled church funds, or where Scrooge McDuck tried to take over the church—Well, that's how I'm disguising the real names of people who I feel need a secret identity.

Some of the life situations religious professionals get into! Well, they remind me of *Tales From The Crypt*.

But, thank God, such goings on only take up a few pages in the many volumes of Barbara's diary.

Mostly her prayer diaries served to remind her of God's faithfulness and glory in daily life. Thus most pages of Barbara's diaries are taken up with private meditation.

For instance, Here is the day in the diary I was working on yesterday, it's a section from Barbara's Diary on May 27, 1984:

Being faithful is being strong in a broken world.

The breaking of big things:

Jesus slept through the storm in a floundering boat.

Does God sleep in my storm?

The disciples were following Him too! But they forgot two things:

(1.) They forgot His word. God always has a word. Jesus said they were going to the other side. Every word He says is to be trusted...

(2.) They forgot to focus on Jesus. We've got Jesus with us. He can handle it.

Jesus said, “Why are you afraid”? He wants us to look at the storm—but not the one we are looking at—the storm in our hearts.

Why afraid?

I used to be in control of things, now I’m not in control. I don’t know what to do and, Lord, I don’t find You very helpful in my boat at the moment.

It’s like playing musical chairs—faith doesn’t get here first. It may be anger or jealousy, or whatever. God wants me to see what gets there first in my heart.

Certain wonderful things can only be born in us through suffering. This is the reason Jesus slept so long. We have to see what needs to be crucified.

Jesus’ Second Question—Where is your faith?

We don’t ask that; we ask, “Why is this happening to me”?

So we start looking and we find our faith is in something else—boats, self, etc. It’s important for me to see how small my faith is.

The prolongation of pressure is a critical factor in the way God deals with us.

Storms are going to hit us. What are we going to turn to? Jesus said, “Peace. Be still”

And guess what—They got to the other side.



Oh, by the way, I don’t know yet if Barbara ever mentions me or Ginny in her prayer diaries, but if you

read about Mighty Mouse in trouble... Please don't reveal my secret identity.

Friday, August 14, 2009
In Deep Stuff—A Rant!

At 2:30 Thursday morning I rushed through my initial chores of the day so I could get out to the pool before sunup to watch the Perseid meteor shower. Astronomers predicted that over 100 shooting stars would burn through the earth's atmosphere each hour.

I floated on an air mattress in the pool watching the sky.

I have a bone to pick with astronomers.

They lie.

Bet they were all snug in warm beds chuckling about that idiot floating around in a pool on an air mattress in Florida freezing his ass off without seeing a single shooting star.

But, I'm a Christian. I forgive them.

To me to forgive means that I will not feed them feet-first into a wood chipper machine.

I mean, how much more Christian can I be than to forgive?

Unfortunately, yesterday afternoon I read the words of a respected Christian author who advocates a "Deeper Christian Life".

This author punctured my air mattress.

My own Christian life is already so deep I'm drowning in it.

This pool has no ladder.

I'm sinking.

Reading this stuff makes me think I feel I'm hardly a Christian at all, especially when it comes to forgiving others.

The Deeper Author says, "Forgiveness has unbelievable power, but it's not easy. Superficial forgiveness can deceive us. We can "forgive" to feel superior. I forgive—it's over and done with, but the pain

is still there—I'm just acting. Words can't end grief and pain. I forgive, but nothing will ever be the same between us.

“But real forgiveness must involve reconciliation and the restoration of relationship.

“In real forgiveness I must recognize we are both in pain. I must stop blaming (Forgive, they know not...) In Isaiah 44, the man with the idol feeds on ashes. Trust the other person even if it means getting hurt again. Value the relationship more than being right, more than grief and hurt.

“When you forgive, you entrust yourself to God, not to the other person...”

Bull!

Reconciliation. Restoration. Relationship.

I just don't see it.

My attitude is, “OK. I forgive you. Now go away”.

If I forgive you, then go get on with your life while I get on with mine.

I mean I'll treat the person I forgive just like I'd treat anyone I see in the grocery store—What relationship? They just happen to be there at the same time I am. I wish them well and mean them no harm. If one of them needs help reaching a can of beans on the top shelf, I'd reach it down for them. I'll stand to the side and let them get their cart through. If the guy ahead of me at checkout is a couple of dollars short, I'll hand it to him... But there is no “relationship” with these people.

Nor should there be.

The subject of forgiveness came up again for me earlier this week—not worth going into again, I've written about the same thing before, But somebody this week pushed an In-Your-Face forgiveness situation on me.

I replied polite but distant.

I have forgiven them. I did not feed them into the wood chipper. What more can they want? But the situation aggravates me.

The shallow Christian life is all I can handle.

And that life swamps me.

I'm floundering in the kiddie pool of faith.

Reminds me of the old story about the guy who painted his mother's kitchen for her. He feels he's done well.

She looks around the finished work and says, "A dutiful son would have lined the shelves with fresh shelf paper".

He says, "Mama, I guess I'll never be a dutiful son. Every time I try, you raise the standards".

The way I see it is that I forgive you—but don't bother me while I'm running the wood chipper.

(P.S. From Ginny - He really is a nice guy.)

Tuesday, August 18, 2009
One Picture Is Worth... Zilch!

Some recent kink in my computer set up refuses to allow me to post pictures.

I've written three diary entries which hinge on the graphics that go with them, but I can't put them on-line so I have to rely on words.

The most important entry involved our youngest daughter's announcing her engagement. She and Clint plan to marry next Fall or spring. I intended to post some photos of Patricia. But I can't.

Another entry involved how last weekend Ginny and I revisited some of the places where we honeymooned 40+ years ago. Took lots of photos. Can't post 'em.

The third entry I wanted to post involved funny signs. Without the photos, they aren't funny.

This is one heck of a fix for a writer to be in—no photos. I have to rely on words.

And I've got nothing to say.

Wednesday, August 19, 2009
41? ... 42? ... 44!

It's safe to say that Ginny and I have been married for 40+ years. We honeymooned in the oldest continuously

occupied city in the U.S., St. Augustine, Florida, about 35 miles south of Jacksonville. Although it will not be our anniversary for a couple of months yet, we spent last Sunday driving to St. Augustine to revisit some of the places we remember from our honeymoon.

Great fun!

We arrived in the Old City in time for breakfast at a restaurant overlooking Matanzas Bay. Here's a photo of Ginny at our table; she looks so beautiful, fresh and happy:



After breakfast we sneaked out for a smoke into a walled private garden courtyard behind the place. Ginny posed by a misplaced lamppost where once a street may have crossed the property. While there, a young man came out for a smoke. He revealed that he's been married for only a year. He's already feeling some tensions of married life and was amazed that we remain

romantically in love after 41 years. I told him one secret is to simply learn to tolerate each other when that's the best you can do.



Gin and I, along with scores of other tourists, strolled the length of St George Street and paused to rest at the old slave market. There some lady snapped a photo of us together as we discussed the question of exactly how long we've been married.

We strolled browsing amid shops and paused for ice cream and coffee near the old city gates and I took this photo of her with the old fort in the background:



We toured the Lightner Museum, an exquisite collection of Victorian stuff and other stuff that took the fancy of Otto C. Lightner, a wealthy collector who housed his collections in the lavish mansion of the old Alcazar Hotel.

We saw a number of exquisite inlaid—well, I call them writing desks, but there's a fancy term for them—that had belonged to Napoleon. One of these desks has over 200 secret compartments and pigeon holes.

And we saw a gold gilt, two-person, swan rocking chair, the kind that tempts you to cuddle:



I enjoyed seeing the stuffed lion, the shrunken head, the Egyptian mummy and the bronze or marble statues of naked women.

Ginny enjoyed browsing through collections of old buttons (like from dresses and shirts), crystal bowls. She enjoyed the polished ballroom and the spiral staircases of the old hotel. And she admired a tiffany lamp with a glass shade formed in a dragon fly pattern:



One room intrigued us both. Mr. Lightner collected stained glass windows. Many of these were created by Louis Comfort Tiffany; they are displayed back-lighted in a dark room. Ginny posed beside windows portraying two other beauties:



She photographed me beside this Tiffany window showing St. Augustine, the man, not the city, the names are pronounced differently although I think the city was named for the man—who is shown reading. I'm sure it must be one of my books he's reading:



Downstairs, a museum staff member played some of the antique music machine which long predate the phonograph. One of the tunes one machine played was "When You And I Were Young, Maggie".

In the museum gift shop I asked the museum lady what Otto Lightner did for a living that he could afford to buy such a collection of treasures. She said he was a publisher!

That broke me up. I'm a publisher and it was all I could do to afford to buy our admission tickets to the museum!

I suppose there are publishers, and then again there are Publishers.

However, be that as it may, I splurged and bought Ginny an umbrella which replicates Tiffany's Dragonfly lampshade:



Hot, tired and hungry by now, we walked to the bay front where US Highway A1A crosses the Bridge Of Lions. We stopped for lunch at the A1A Aleworks and Cuban Restaurant; The last time we were in this restaurant, it had been a French bakery.

When we mentioned that to the young lady who served us, a girl I imagine to be in her mid-20s, she was amazed that we've been married so long. She misheard us and thought we said we've been married for 44 years. To celebrate, out of her own pocket, she bought me a

beer called Red Brick Ale. The place brews their own beer and I told her this Red Brick Ale was the best I've ever tasted.

So she brought me several small glasses of other beers to sample. Now the last beer I tasted was during half-time of the 2007 Super Bowl so I accused her of trying to get me snookered. The samples included the girl's own favorite, Porpoise Point, some Honey Mead, and a beer brewed from bananas—ghastly stuff! But the Red Brick Ale tasted heavenly.

And our food also tasted heavenly. I had coconut shrimp with a black bean and rice dish cooked with a touch of jalapeno pepper. One of the best meals I've ever eaten anywhere.

And the girl kept marveling that we've been in love for 44 years.



After lunch, we crossed the street into the Slave Market park. There Ginny snapped this photo of the building which now houses the Wachovia Bank.

That's cool because many years ago in a dump I found a piggy-bank shaped like this building, but then the name was the Exchange Bank Of St. Augustine, an institution which lasted till the mid 1950s. I gave that white-metal coin bank to Ginny as a reminder of our honeymoon.

Ginny's coin bank looks like this:

The shape of that tower reminds us of something related to our honeymoon.



Ah yes I remember now, from our motel room window 40+ years ago, we could see that tower silhouetted against the skyline across the bay; for some reason they were setting off fireworks from the top of the building. St. Augustine is always celebrating some event or another with fireworks.

Here's that photo a passerby took of Ginny and me sitting in the Slave Market park.



As we sat in the park watching people walk past and remembering the days of our honeymoon, we chuckled over the girl in the restaurant thinking we've been married 44 years—we're not that old!

As we talked, we disagreed on the matter. I said we've been married 41 years; Ginny says we've been married 42 years.

I said it's only been 41 years—but it they've been so hard on her that it seems like 42 years.

She said it's been 42 years—but that I earned a year off for good behavior.

Tuesday, August 25, 2009
Moving From Here To Where

Where am I headed?

And why am I in this hand-basket?

Yes, I'm moving ahead again. After a lull. After I finished editing and publishing *William F. Short's 1854 Diary*, I experienced a backlash, a letdown, which put me in a stupor—that is, more of a stupor than usual.

This always happens at the end of a difficult project. I go to afterburners to complete the task, and I fool myself into thinking I can maintain that pace permanently, then like a calf roped by a cowboy, or like a thief on the scaffold, I hit the end of my rope, and swing in the breeze, not going anywhere.

Short once said in a diary entry: "Today I thought much; did little".

I can go him one better, "Today I thought little; did less".

That describes many of my recent days.

After a lull, during which I kick myself for being a lazy, useless, sorry, no-account, I slowly recover and begin to function again on a low level until the mania for writing builds up steam and I start the process all over again.

And here's the thing: during all this I'm a Christian seeking the will of God for my life from where I stand at the moment. Yet, I am victim to the cyclic effect of my own work habits and psyche. I know this letdown happens, but I fall for it every time. Some folks never learn.

So, at the moment, I'm moving in three similar directions:

First, off and on I continue to transcribe Barbara White's prayer diaries—a long term task which is essentially clerical.

Second, my e-friend Sherri, who is knowledgeable about marketing, recently stimulated my thinking about promoting my books. Although I resist self-promotion, she pointed out the value of certain steps I can take—and she made a lot of sense. So, last week, when a newspaper

reporter called, I agreed to an interview and was quoted in last Saturday's paper.

See, Sherri, I do listen.

In the same vein as Sherri suggested, I'm investigating uploading 20 or so books into Google Books—a daunting task. I asked my son Donald, a computer whiz, to help me with this, but he's deeply involved with more important projects.

Not only is Donald working full time as a computer network manager, being active in his church, supporting his family, and getting his daughter into college, but in a couple of weeks he enrolls in seminary to study becoming a Christian minister.

Full plate!

I'm proud of him.

But, his busyness means I'm on my own navigating the intricate shoals and rocks and PDFs and Java™ Platform SE Binary and Co-Branded Search and APIs and spreadsheets and territorial rights and 10 or 13 character ISBNs with leading zeros and HTMLs (whatever they are) of Google's complex process... Oh well, if God wants it done, I'll get it done; if not, it's all Donald's fault.

Third, I've decided on which book idea to pursue next.

Years ago, I defaulted on a book contract to write a book about knowing the will of God. The working title of my book was to be *If God Leads Me, Why Do I Run In Circles?*

I took the publisher's advance money and pocketed it. Then things came up. Disturbing things which made me realize that I know virtually nothing about the Lord or His will. I made many false starts and wasted hundreds of pages of text trying to write this book.

I just couldn't.

The publisher exercised great patience again and again, moved deadlines several times, then gave up on me, and forgave my debt.

Yet, this book idea haunted me off and on for all these years.

After finishing the Short Diary, I made a list of some book ideas I want to do. Six of eight topped my list as I sought God's will about what I'm to work on next. That defaulted book kept rising to the surface as I weighted pros and cons about my list.

While I pondered what to do, I did common everyday chores, mowed grass, cleaned the fish tank, read library books, washed dishes, watching the *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed* video As I did these mundane things, a slow conviction grew that now is the time for me to finish writing *If God Leads...*

I know less about finding the will of God for my life than I did when I was cocksure and younger. In fact my faith wobbles like a kid's spinning top running down. I feel less confidence than ever before in my life. Yet, I suspect *If God Leads* should be what I should write next.

Yes, I used to be indecisive. But now I'm not sure about that.

Wednesday, August 26, 2009

Practice Run

In my diary entry yesterday (posted about 4 a.m.) I said I'm planning to write a book about following God's will and my working title is *If God Leads Me, Why Do I Run In Circles?*.

Then, I spent all day yesterday practicing for that book—not the God leading section, but the running in circles part.

I drove Ginny to work so I could keep the car. I made her late so she had to dash into the building but one of her co-workers sat outside in the smoking area with me and we talked about her dogs and about good places to go camping.

By then it was time for me to go to the Jacksonville Fire Museum. For the past 35 years I've accumulated a bunch of books, artifacts, and stuff related to Florida history focusing on Jacksonville, and I'm talking with the curator about selling my collection to the museum. We'll see what happens.

Leaving the museum, I drove to an antique store only to find the item I'd seen there two weeks ago had already sold to somebody else.

Waterhaul!

(That's a local curse word, an old shrimper's term for when you cast your net but it brings in nothing but water).

Then I stopped to visit a cancer patient. There was no chair by his bed so I stood while he talked my ear off. Beginning with vicious racial remarks then moving on to rant about taxes, insurance companies, city government, and Social Security, he raddled on and on. My feet ached so bad, burning and stinging from standing so long. I had other business I needed to attend to—but the old guy talked in a panic as though I were the last audience in the world...

Then the thought occurred to me, *I just may be his last audience in this world. It behooves me to stand here and listen.*

Do you suppose God's feet hurt while He's hearing me ramble on and on about the same old things He's heard me say a million times before? Remember, He does have nail scars.

Breaking away, I drove to the bank to pay our mortgage. And speaking of feet... A nun was in the bank ahead of me. I mean the old fashioned kind of nun with white bib, a wimple (is that what you call the huge fancy head-gear with wings?) and long black skirts...

And peaking out from under the edge of her floor-sweeping skirt, I saw she was wearing electric, day-glow, blue flip-flops!

Immediately I thought of that Scripture, "How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!"

I doubt that either Isaiah or Paul had blue flip-flops in mind when they penned those words, but that's the Scripture I thought of.

From the bank, I drove home to pick up some papers I'd forgotten before leaving this morning. Then to Dave's Diner for a late breakfast, then to Wal—Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here—Mart Super Center. Where I walked miles to the aisle where they always keep the product I

came for. And as I walked, I impulse bought a basketful of other stuff that struck my fancy. And I got the aisle to find the stuff I wanted had been moved—to make way for Christmas toys! (I mean it is still August, isn't it?) So a helpful employee directed me back the way I'd come, but the stuff was not there either.. So another helpful employee ping-ponged me back thataway. And I finally found the aisle I wanted—only to find they no longer stock the stuff.

I said a bad word.

It wasn't waterhaul.

I was a bad boy. I left my full shopping cart sitting right there in the middle of the aisle and I walked out of the store without buying anything. I'd spent over an hour, but not one penny, in that store.

Waterhaul!

Then I drove to a pool supply store where the young man thought I looked too old, decrepit and feeble to carry a bucket of chlorine tablets out to my own car.

He was right, but he didn't have to let me know it!

Young whippersnapper!

Then I drove to a plant nursery to buy Ginny a flowering Crown-Of-Thorns cactus—but they tell me it's not a cactus. It may not be a cactus, but I'll bet it cost a whole lot more than the original Crown of Thorns it was named after.

Then I drove home to unload things.

Checking my e-mail, I found a note from a lady named Betty about a story I wrote back in the late 1970s or early 1980s. Betty said, "I remember this story, almost word for word, from maybe 20-25 years ago ... It had a huge impact on how I lived my life and I've recalled it as a favorite modern-day parable many times in different conversations...over the years".

I feel that so much of what I write disappears without a ripple. So Betty's note certainly gave me a lift.

Oh, the story she found online and mentions is "The Boomerang Food Basket" at <http://www.cowart.info/Monthly%20Features/Boomarang/Boomerang.htm> .. I've included

it as a chapter in my book *Gravedigger's Christmas* (available at www.bluefishbooks.onfo).

Anyhow, by then it was time to pick Ginny up from work, so I drove downtown. Then we drove to the Main Library. Then we drove to a restaurant for supper where Ginny ran into a friend of hers whose husband, Billy, suffered a bad fall and is undergoing surgery today.

Finally we drove back home—full circle to where the day started.

Thus I ran in circles all day.

Did God lead me?

Does He lead us in mundane run-around-chores?

Is He Lord of the Ordinary?

Does the Almighty God, Creator of the Universe, Lord of Lords, King of Kings, Savior of the World, Risen Lord of Life—does He preside over times when the highpoint of the day is seeing a nun wearing blue flip-flops?

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet...”

Thursday, August 27, 2009 Computers, A Piece Of Cake

I, John Cowart, by the Grace of God, King of Geriatric Geeks, do hereby issue the following proclamation concerning computers in general and Google Books in particular:

%&(*##!!!

Well, other Royals hardly ever use that kind of language—except maybe the first Queen Elizabeth when she saw the sails of the Spanish Armada in the English Channel.

Yes, yesterday I braved the intricacies of Google Books' perimeters trying to format about 20 books I've written or edited for inclusion. I flat gave up on the ones in other languages. The folks in Germany, Indonesia and the Philippines, if they want my books listed on Google Book Search, will just have to register the texts themselves.

But, with my books in English, all I had to do was reformat the Word documents, scan in new photos of the

book covers, rename scads of files, create pdf documents, resize and transfer stuff to new, renamed (in 13 or so digits without spaces) folders.

Challenging work considering my level of computer skills.

I know how to cut.

I know how to paste.

I know that if you click on a thumbnail photo of a bikini girl, her attributes grow large enough to fill the screen.

Nevertheless, armed with this knowledge, a prayer, and a blissful, confident attitude, I undertook to prepare my books for wider distribution via the Google Books simple 82-step process.

Worked fine till I got to book # 17. I prepared that file in exactly the same way I'd done the previous 16 files, but an error message appeared. It said, "Failed For An Unknown Reason". Then a little box appeared which said I could click "OK". Nothing else. Just OK.

Why OK? What unknown reason? If the computer could not figure out what went wrong with that file, how am I supposed to?

A Scripture came to mind—from St Paul's first letter to the people of Corinth, Chapter 14, where he said:

"God is not the author of confusion, but of peace,... But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant....Let all things be done decently and in order".

That's one Scripture I can obey—the part about staying ignorant. I'm good at that.

If God is not the author of confusion, then just who do you think it was that set up the Google Books system? Answer me that.

But, I press ahead.

I think I can solve the problem. Piece of cake.

Like that high-tech bakery that utilizes a computer/ cum laser/ cum inkjet thingy to decorate and letter their cakes with precision...

Precision that is if you type in the right Hyper Tense Markup Language.

If I don't, my books may come out looking like Aunt Elsa's Birthday Cake:



This photo comes from the Cake Wreck Blog at <http://cakewrecks.blogspot.com/> ; they are worth a visit.

Meanwhile, I join with that other king, the one who wrote the Psalms, in praying, "In thee, O LORD, do I put my trust: let me never be put to confusion".

Er, make that more confusion.

Piece of cake.

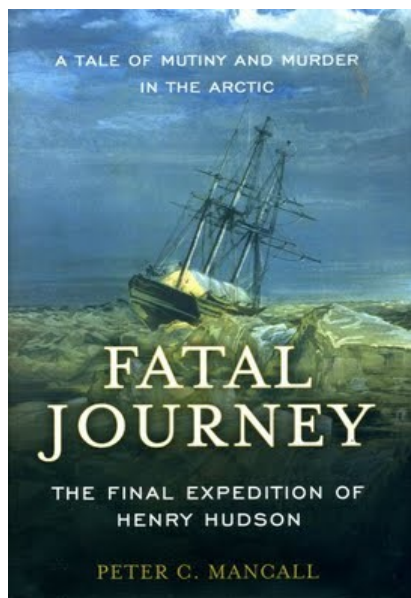
Friday, August 28, 2009 Cool August Reading

When Ginny and I go to the library, which we do almost weekly, I gravitate to the horror, action/adventure, or mystery shelves. I seek favorite authors and familiar types of literature; Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Sally Spencer, and Connie Willis hook me. Books with black spines with red lettering attract my attention.

To avoid a one-track mind, in addition to "my books", each week I try to check out a book in a subject area far afield, some book to do with a subject I have little interest in.

Yes, an intellectual diet of blood, guts, gore, and mystery, fun as these elements are, stagnate the mind.

Since August temperatures here in Jacksonville, Florida, hover around 90, give or take a few degrees, I've been reading about Henry Hudson's explorations in the Arctic. I'm reading Peter C. Mancall's *Fatal Journey: The Final Expedition Of Henry Hudson* (N.Y. Basic Books. ©2009. 303 pages. Illustrated. Maps. Indexed).



In the space of five years, Captain Hudson voyaged to the Arctic five times in three different wooden sailing ships; *Hopewell*, *Half Moon*, and *Discovery*.

Backed by merchants in London, and once in Holland, he sought to find a Northwest Passage, a quick route to the spice lands of the Orient. Spices could preserve food in those days without refrigeration. Spices acted as medicine and were widely regarded as the Viagra of the times. Spices made men wealthy. Contenders for the spice trade fought wars. If England could find a way to the Orient without having to sail around Africa or South America, King James would rule the world..

Yes, Henry Hudson's last voyage was in 1611, the same year the King James Bible was first translated and published.

Ice. Whales. Ice. Walrus. Ice. Seals. Eskimos. Ice. Narwhales. Ice. Sheet ice. Ice flows. Icebergs. Glaciers.

"Fierce winds racing up to 30 miles per hour across the water made the average temperature ...30 to 40 degrees below zero," Mancall wrote.

Hudson discovered New York's Hudson River, giving the Dutch, claim to the place, and Hudson's Strait, and Hudson Bay—but he could find no way through the ice to the lands of spice.

Two of Hudson's crew, Abacuk Pricket and Robert Juet, kept brief written accounts; much of Hudson's story comes from their records.

On Hudson's final voyage, when food began to run short, crew members rebelled.

Mutiny.

Ringleaders forced Captain Hudson, his son, and all the sick men aboard the *Discovery* into an open boat called a shallop. To keep control, the mutineers told their captives it was only temporary while the crew looted food stores—They lied.

They cut the rope letting the shallop full of sick men drift off into the ice never to be seen again.

This happened in the southern reaches of Hudson Bay at a place named James Bay. Mancall reasons that the marooned sailors in the shallop may have made landfall and tried to winter there.

As to the mutineers, as they tried to find food ashore, Eskimos attacked them harpooning several. Survivors, who claimed to just be along for the ride, swore that all the insurgents had been killed. They would. They were tried for murder once they returned to England. Of the original 23 men who sailed from London, only eight returned.

What happened to Hudson and the loyal men adrift?

No one really knows.

But Mr. Mancall speculates:

They probably died one after another, succumbing to a brutal chill that never ceased to freeze their bodies. Or scurvy could have killed them if they had failed to lay in enough cockle grass to ward it off. If they fell victim to the disease, their gums would have bled, their teeth might eventually have fallen out, and any bones broken earlier could have fractured again; the men would have become dehydrated from diarrhea, sunk into depression, and eventually expired. Some might have suffered frostbite, leading to gangrene and death. If they chose to burn sea coal, which could have washed up on the shore and was a common

source of heat in this era when wood was not available, they might have died of carbon monoxide poisoning, a fate that possibly befell an earlier shipload of English men sailing in search of the Northeast Passage in 1553. Animal attacks, especially by polar bears or wolves, could also have taken them.

At first, the ill or injured could have been tended by those who remained healthy. But eventually, the men still able to nurse others also would have grown so weak that they could do no more than haul the corpses of their companions into the snow. If they lacked the strength to bury the dead, they could have put off the task until the next summer's thaw. One can imagine the bodies dragged out of the hut, their clothes increasingly shredded by wind. Eventually, scavenging bears, wolves, and foxes would have gnawed off the frozen flesh, ultimately obliterating any sign of the men's existence.

Yes, it is good for me to read non-fiction, to read history, to read something instead of my standard horror fare. Keeps me cool and keeps me from getting morbid.

P.S.:

Yesterday I maligned Google Books in my rant.

I apologize.

Although I had to learn how to do a spreadsheet this morning, uploading those 22 books proved much easier than I expected. The botheration came in preparing my own files to meet Google Books' strict prerequisites.

Once I uploaded my files, the Google Books site tells me that it may take their experts several weeks before my books actually show up in the Google Book Program.

There's a reason for that.

I think it's because the gurus at Google Books are much smarter than I am—they don't use computers to process this stuff.

Saturday, August 29, 2009

Was It Something I Said?

Friday, for the first time in ages, I checked my website statistics. Google Analytics tells me that in the past month

3,417 readers from 88 countries visited my site. My writing so fascinated these readers that they each spent an average of 39 seconds on my site.

Wow! Isn't that cool!

As I passed my cursor over the Analytics world map, I wondered why anyone from this nation or that one would visit my site—then it occurred to me that they may be checking me out because of my site name, **The Rabid Fundamentalist** at www.cowart.info.

Funny why I chose to name my site that:

Back when I was young, for about ten years I worked part-time at a local newspaper as an Editorial Assistant—that's the job title for a mail clerk who can be blamed for a lot of things that go wrong at a newspaper. Like the time I authorized renting a helicopter without asking a boss first.

Because of my night and weekend hours, about 80 per cent of the time I was the only person in the building while I worked.

When the team of editors became aware that I am a Christian, they began to tease me and called me "that rabid fundamentalist, Cowart". The nickname stuck. I thought it was funny and when I passed along copy or notes, I signed as Rabid Fundamentalist. That's how I was logged onto the computer.

Once, I decided to try my hand at writing by submitting a column about being a fundamentalist Christian; my first column was titled, *Fun With Fundamentalism*. A copy of that first column is at <http://www.cowart.info/Rabid%20Fun%20columns/Rabid%20Fundamentalist/01rabid.fun.htm>.

The editorial committee thought it was funny. They asked me to write a weekly column of religious humor.

I felt I was on my way. For a couple of months as I wrote that Rabid Fundamentalist column I dreamed of syndication, fame, and untold wealth.

Then one week I wrote a column titled *The Party At The End Of The World*. A copy of that column is at <http://www.cowart.info/Rabid%20Fun%20columns/Party%20at%20End/Party%20at%20the%20End.htm>

This column outraged some local clergy. I never saw them myself, but I understand that a delegation of eight angry clergymen visited the managing editor to protest.

The *Rabid Fundamentalist* column was yanked that same afternoon.

Through this circumstance I did not lose my job as mail clerk, but it seems that through this incident God called me to write obituaries for my next few years at the paper.

This pained me, but I suppose the Lord knows what He's doing.

I think the Lord God is more interested in my walk with Him and in developing my character than He is in what I happen to be doing to earn a living.

As Saint Paul said, "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".

So then, let me tell you about the time when I...

Oh. Never mind.

You can stop reading now.

Our 39 seconds are up.

Sunday, August 30, 2009

I Question God

I have something important to say but I don't know how to say it.

I've made a couple of starts on this post but deleted every one.

That's because I don't know what I'm talking about.

I need to think this through more.

I'll try next week.

The question I'm worrying is why awful tragedies befall people, good people, bad people, indifferent people, guilty, innocent babies... If God is love, why do hateful things happen?

I don't have an answer. Not one that satisfies me.

Only some isolated thoughts, and they seem ineffectual clichés .

Let me get back to you on this.

Meanwhile, Saturday morning Ginny and I enjoyed a lovely time in our garden. While working on the Google Books and William Short's Diary, I neglected our yard shamefully. It was good to get out there again.

While Ginny re-potted flowers, I edged and mowed. Then we spent the rest of our workday sitting under the awning, sipping coffee, smoking and talking about other work we could do—if we were a-mind to.

Without moving from our chairs we watched a hummingbird, a woodpecker, scores of dove, cardinals, bluejays, titmice, chickadees, a thrush, a pair or wren, and a bunch of LGBs—that means little gray birds, meaning we don't know what they are.

All so pleasant. All so lovely. All so peaceful.

Why did God let this happen to me?

Tuesday, September 01, 2009

My Thoughts On Theodicy And Mosquitoes

In April, 1915, a mosquito bit poet Rupert Brooke.

Brooke—widely acclaimed as the handsomest man in the world—died of septicemia when that mosquito bite became infected.

Mosquitoes will also bite the ugliest man you've ever seen, the most beautiful woman, the babe in the cradle, Mother Teresa, Adolph Hitler, Billy Graham, President Obama, Attila the Hun, and they'd bite Bart Simpson if he were not a cartoon character.

A mosquito buzzed around my own head Sunday as I vacuumed out pool thinking about theodicy. Of course I didn't know that's what I was thinking about; I had to look the word up.

Theodicy refers to that branch of theology attempting to reconcile the existence of evil and suffering with belief in an all-powerful, loving God.

How can a God who loves us, let terrible things happen to us?

Can't He do something about it? Have I misread His nature? Is He sadistic, tormenting people and watching them squirm? Is He powerless to stop the pain? Does He just not give a damn?

Just what's going on here?

The mosquito gave me a clue.

Not an answer, just a clue.

I have two friends who feel comfortable with their own answers to this problem.

One quotes Scripture saying, that all humanity rebels against God and all of us are under sin "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one... All have sinned and come short of the glory of God".

According to his view every last one of us deserves misery in this world and eternal damnation in the next.

He feels that the grace of God is shown in that God selects some people, through no merit of their own, to save. Although God is under no obligation to save anybody.

Therefore to the question "How can a God who loves us, let terrible things happen to us?", my friend replies, "Why not?".

God is love but there are no good people.

Hence, no problem to reconcile.

Another friend also quotes Scripture, "All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose".

According to her view, nothing really bad happens; it all turns out to be good—eventually.

Of course it may seem bad while it's happening—like when you break your arm and it's healing wrong and the doctor has to re-break it to set it right. No fun at the time it's going on, but it's part of the healing process. It's all part of God's plan to bring us eternal joy.

Therefore to the question "How can a God who loves us, let terrible things happen to us?", my friend replies,

“There are no bad things—not really bad, permanently bad, things.”.

So, both friends let God off the hook. If there are no good people, or if there are no bad things, then what’s the problem?

The problem is that I smell a skunk.

I believe in a loving God. I see a world full of suffering. I would not treat an enemy as bad as God sometimes appears to treat His friends. Surely God is better than I am. If not---Head for the hills!

Then there’s the matter of consequences.

Actions have consequences. It seems reasonable that good actions should have good consequences and bad actions have bad consequences. Looks like it ought to work that way.

But it doesn’t.

Not all bank robbers get shot by the security guard. Some murderers never get caught. Some CEOs make off with the pension fund and live in luxury the rest of their lives.

On the other hand, consider Joseph in the Book of Genesis. Accused of rape by a shunned woman, Joseph spent years in prison although he had never touched her.

Fall-guys take the consequences for things they never did. Secretaries go to jail for money the boss embezzled. Professors take the credit when they publish a paper a grad student wrote.

Consequences do not necessarily match actions. It’s easy reasoning to blame someone’s trouble on some sin they committed—but that’s not always true.

My e-friend Pete reminded me of the time when Jesus mentioned a terrible construction accident:

“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,” Jesus said.

In our sinful world, while a lot of aggravation is self-generated, not all our troubles are a consequence of our sin.

Later in Joseph's story it turned out that God had put him in prison so he could save the tribe of Israel from a famine. And he told his wicked brothers who initiated his slavery in Egypt, "Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive".

That's another reason I've heard advanced for "How can a God who loves us, let terrible things happen to us?" Perhaps God let it happen to you, so you can minister to others who also suffer.

Paul seems to say something like that:

"Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God".

Does Paul really say that disasters befall us because God is training us to help somebody else?

Does my home have to burn down just so I can console those folks in California wildfires today? Are all those people losing their homes because they are vile nasty sinners? Is God training them to be comforters?

Or, do they just happen to be in the path of disaster?

They suffer what they suffer because they are where they are.

Remember the mosquito that bit Rupert Brooke?

Rupert got bit because mosquitoes bite.

St. Peter warned his readers to be sober and to be vigilant because the devil, like a roaring lion, walketh about seeking whom he may devour. The evil one spreads trouble, anxiety, pain, misery, war, famine, sickness and credit card debt to all and sundry.

God's mosquitoes teach us that no one is immune from bites and troubles. It's not because we are bad or because God hates us or because we sinned or our parents did—although all those factors may enter into why we suffer bad stuff.

We live in a fallen and wounded world.

Believer and non believer alike live in the same physical world. Both get bit by mosquitoes. Either may become parents of a retarded baby.

Like God's good rain fertilizes the fields of the righteous and the wicked alike, so troubles fall on righteous and godless people. In speaking of troubles Peter reminds us "knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world".

I mean if Rupert Brooke, the handsomest man in the world, got bit, is it any surprise that I do?

Of course, he was only the handsomest man in the world back in 1915.

I hadn't been born yet.

Thursday, September 03, 2009

"Don't Let" Prayers—Thoughts For Felisol

The other night after Ginny and I visited the library, we sat in the park across the street talking and she began laughing. "I prayed the most ridiculous thing in the library," she said.

"I was looking for a specific book and as I walked along all those yards and yards of shelves, I prayed, "Dear Lord, don't let my book be on a bottom shelf because my knees feel so stiff that if I get down there I won't be able to stand back up again".

We laughed about the fact that the prayers of us old folks are different from the prayers of young people.

But, are they?

Doesn't everyone pray "Don't let" prayers?

Dear Lord, don't let me run out of gas before I get to the station.

Dear Lord, don't let the check I wrote get to the bank before my deposit clears.

Dear Lord, my teenager is driving again tonight. Please don't let her get hurt or hurt anybody else.

Dear Lord, please don't let that be the last Pamper in the package!

Dear Lord, don't let the biopsy show cancer.

Dear Lord, don't let me be lead astray.

Deal Lord, please don't let the bus leave till I get to the stop.

Dear Lord, don't let her give us that test on intransitive verbs today. I haven't studied for it.

Deal Lord, don't let the kids wake up tonight of all nights; I've already poured the wine and put on the mood music. Keep 'em asleep. Keep 'em asleep. Please keep 'em asleep! Don't let 'em wake up!

Dear Lord, don't let...

When Ginny and I got home from the library last night, I found an e-mail question from Felisol, a lady in Norway who takes magnificent photos of ancient churches. She said:

Dear John C,

I have a question, passed to me yesterday, by my girl friend for 55 years.

"How come we have to pray lead us not into temptation. Can God willfully do that to his beloved children. Why do we have to pray it over and over again in Our Lord's Prayer?"

I think it kind of touches your mosquito answer, but not entirely. Problem is, my friend she's in great pain, she's lived a life of a tormented saint, by just now I feel I have to come up with an answer, I do not posses.

I'm turning to you, and will return, to see if you can help me.

From Felisol

I'm so sorry the unnamed lady is in pain, feeling tormented, and troubled about that phrase from the Lord's Prayer. Sounds as though she has a heavy load to carry. I'm glad she has Felisol for a friend to care about her.

I asked Felisol for a little time to think about this.

I'm the worse person on earth to ask about temptation. I doubt if I've ever been tempted to do anything that I haven't eventually done it. So I'm hardly qualified to address this question, but I'm the one she asked, so here goes:

First, God never tempts us to do evil.

The Apostle James said, “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither he tempteth any man. But every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust and enticed”.

So, what does the Lord’s Prayer actually say:

After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.* For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Whenever I’m interested in some problem concerning the Scripture, I turn to the best Bible study tool I know of—the common ordinary dictionary on the corner of my desk. What is the definition of temptation?

The first of several definitions my dictionary lists is **test**—an adversity, affliction, trouble: sent by God and serving to test or prove one’s character, faith, or holiness.

In that light, when I beg God “don’t let me be tempted”, I’m admitting my utter weakness. I don’t think I can stand being tested. I think I’ll fail the test.

Sometimes God lets me avoid the test; sometimes He doesn’t.

Testing me shows God nothing He didn’t already know. He is, after all, omniscient. So, if the test does not prove anything to God, what’s the purpose of it?

It proves something to me.

It shows me that in my weakness, I can function in His strength.

Paul said, “There hath no temptation taken you but such as in common to man: but God is faithful who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it”.

Another definition of temptation my dictionary offers is: A cause or occasion of enticement.

I think of Mrs. Job.

Mrs. Job lost her children; Mr. Job lost those same children.

Mrs. Job lost cattle; Mr. Job lost those same cows.

Mrs. Job lost camels, crops, mules, donkeys, home, security—she lost everything that Job lost.

Both suffered alike, God sent their troubles, through the devil, as a testing, as an occasion to react.

Job said, “Shall we receive good at the hand of the Lord and not the evil?”.

Mrs. Job yelled at him, **“Curse God and die”!**

She was in no mood for philosophy or positive thinking; she’d lost her children and she stood for no pious nonsense from the old man or his buddies.

However, notice that at the end of the Book of Job, she received the same rewards that he did.

James said, “My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him”.

Joy?

That’s hard for me to see. And Mrs. Job didn’t see much joy in the situation either. She endured their temptation in an altogether different manner from her husband, but when all was said and done, “In all the land were no women found so fair as the daughters of Job; and their father gave them inheritance among their brethren”.

Mrs. Job’s daughters, her pride and joy after all the tribulation, fairest in the land, equal to their brothers—a reward for having endured temptation.

I’ll bet Mrs. Job beamed.

Concerning temptation my dictionary also says:

To lead astray from one’s true course; Tempt implies the presenting of an attraction so strong that it overcomes the restraints of conscience or better judgment. Seduce implies a leading astray by persuasion or false promises. Lure an inducement to pleasure or gain; a decoy for attracting animals to capture, an artificial bait used for catching fish.

I think one reason we are to beg God to don't let us be tempted is because we never know what life is bringing at us next.

In the Gethsemane, the olive garden of prayer, Jesus "said unto them, Pray that ye enter not into temptation".

Why?

Peaceful garden of prayer in the cool of the evening.

Good place for a nap.

What could happen?

And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

And when he rose up from prayer and was come to his disciples, he found them sleeping for sorrow. And said unto them, Why sleep ye? Rise and pray, lest ye enter into temptation.

And while he yet spake, behold a multitude, and he that was called Judas, one of the twelve, went before them and drew near unto Jesus to kiss him.

Yes, we can not foresee the future. A truck may be rounding the corner. The ringing phone may be the State Lottery Board letting you know you've won millions, or the State Highway Patrol regretting to inform you about the accident.

I think that when I pray "Lead me not into temptation" I'm acknowledging my position and God's. I appear before His majesty as a beggar, a supplicant, powerless, weak, afraid of being diverted from my purpose in life, leery of being led astray, of screwing up, of falling for false promises. I admit I am gullible and that I don't think I can take any more. I admit I'm attracted to evil, that my judgment is skewed, that my heart is weak.

Thus I pray, "Dear Lord, don't let me be tempted".

My dictionary further relates temptation to "the desire to have or do something that you know you should avoid; bait: something used to lure fish or other animals into danger so they can be trapped or killed".

Sportsmen regard my home state, Florida, as the fishing capital of the world. Our waters abound in trout, red bass, large-mouth bass, marlin, cobia, king fish...

Sport fishermen tempt the fish with lures, an artificial bait with treble hooks to snag the fish, drag him from the water, let him flap out his life on the deck, filet him to devour, or skin him to stuff as a trophy.

When I pray “lead me not into temptation”, I’m praying that I will recognize the false promise of the many lures in the water.

I’m praying, “Dear Lord, don’t let me take the bait”.

Saturday, September 05, 2009

A Book Of Chocolate

There’s a chocolate bar buried on top of the world.

When Sir Edmund Hillary and his Sherpa guide, Tenzing Norgay, climbed the world’s highest mountain, Mount Everest, in 1953, Norgay buried a chocolate bar in the snow as an offering to the spirit of the mountain.

I learned this bit of trivia while reading the book *Chocolate: History, Culture, and Heritage* edited by Louis Evan Grivetti and Howard-Yana Shapiro (John Wiley & Sons Inc., Hoboken, N.J. © 2009).



I’ve mentioned before how on my weekly library trips I try to pick up at least one book of serious reading in addition to my normal diet of shoot-’em-up-bang-bang mysteries. Thus, recently I’ve read a book about an 1878 bank robbery in New York; a book about the last days of the Roman Empire; one about a U.S. Army chaplain in Iraq; and one about building a space ship in your backyard.

This reading discipline is supposed to sharpen my mind.

Can't say that it's working.



Anyhow, the editors of *Chocolate* recruited over 110 researchers from 30 countries who worked 11 years to produce the 56 chapters of this book telling everything there is to tell about chocolate.

The 975-page book is printed on high-gloss paper and weighs more than your college physics textbook did; and in places this book reads just as smoothly.

Yet I found parts fascinating.

When the Spanish arrived in the New World, the natives offered them

chocolate. The Conquistadors regarded it as a treasure—sort of.

By the year 1571, the Inquisition in the New World began examining sinners about their use of chocolate. This *Chocolate* book examines 21 trials and provides transcripts of testimonies involving chocolate and witchcraft.

Did I mention that this book is thoroughly documented with illustrations, extensive footnotes and bibliographies for each chapter?



I confess I did not read all 975 pages; I zeroed in on portions I found most interesting.

I learned a bit about the travels of chocolate to the South Pole with the Scott and Shackleton expeditions; and about the use of chocolate on New Bedford sailing ships as they hunted sperm whale; and about an 1779 English law that banished chocolate smugglers to a penal colony for life.

I learned about how a 1641 Spanish galleon, damaged in a hurricane, landed at St. Augustine, Florida, just a few miles from where I live. To save his ship in the storm, the captain had thrown overboard rigging, cannon, and cargo to lighten his dismasted ship. But he saved the chocolate.

After months of bickering between merchants, and after several letters back and forth to the king of Spain, the chocolate was auctioned to people in St. Augustine. The transaction was so important that a detailed inventory was kept of the 222 citizens who could afford to buy that chocolate. That inventory provides historians with information about St. Augustine's colonial population.



I also learned about medicinal properties of chocolate, which has been used to treat everything from hangover to smallpox.

The *Chocolate* book's chapter about the 1764 Smallpox epidemic in Boston contains an interesting prayer that appeared in the June 18th *Boston Gazette* newspaper:

O Strengthen and support me during this alarming Trial; soften the Pains and abate the Violence of the Disorder; Let Thy good spirit suggest the most proper Means for my Preservation and Recovery...

But, O Lord, while I am preparing my mortal Part for this dreaded Trial, let me not neglect to prepare my Soul for Eternity. The utmost I can hope from Success in this Pursuit is to prolong my live, perhaps for a few transient Years; let me not fail then to make Provision for that immortal State which will continue when Time shall be no more, beyond the Reach of Disaster or Casualty...

O grant all this, and whatever else is needful for me through Jesus Christ our Lord! AMEN.

Considering that a September 1st report released by the Florida Department of Health says that today one out of every 123 men in Florida now has HIV/AIDS, it might be a good idea for newspapers to begin printing such prayers again.

Another thing the *Chocolate* book also taught me was about chocolate trade cards, a fad which swept the world of the 1800s. When you bought chocolate in the store, your package came with colorful cards, lithographs

depicting cute kids, reclining ladies, Dutch windmills, World's Fair exhibits, bright birds—people bought, traded, collected and hung these cards in their parlors.

Beautiful things!



“A substantial body of chocolate trade cards survives today documenting the assertive marketing strategy of foreign and domestic producers alike,” one author says. “These cards may have survived because of their high production numbers, or because the popular sentiments they expressed appealed to customers. But they may have been saved simply because people like chocolate”.

**Tuesday, September 08, 2009
And Time Shall Be No More**

McHUMOR by T. McCracken



"I hate changing to Daylight Saving Time."

The timer on our pool pump broke.
It would not turn on. It would not turn off.
I wanted one that would turn on and turn off.

So I drove to Home Depot and I bought a new one.

A digital one.

It should turn on. It should turn off. HA!

Opening the instructions I saw I needed to set the present time by pushing a Mode button, then a clock button. But first I needed to remove a plastic tab which separates the two lithium batteries. So I unscrewed the battery housing and pulled the red tab as per the instruction sheet.

Sprong!

One little battery jumped out and ran screaming across the yard. It yelled, "You'll never take me alive" as it dove into a pile of leaves around the pump housing.

I could not see it. I got down on hands and knees to search... what's that in my hair? A spider web. And a spider. A black spider with a red hourglass mark. A black widow spider. Two black widow spiders... There's another one. And another.

I stood up and prayed, "Lord, please help me see that battery".

And a Voice I hear falling on mine ear saying softly, "Coward, you idiot, you're standing on it".

Moved my foot. There it was. "Thanks, Lord".

Put it in the battery housing and screwed the plate back in place.

To set the clock you have to hold the Prog button in while inserting a wire through a tiny hole in the front of the timer and it should flash 12.

It didn't. It flashed 1,212.... Wrong mode. Pushed the Mode button and it still flashed 1,212. Close enough. All I want it to do is turn on and off.... But first you have to set the year, month and day. Hit the Mode button, turn the dial—and I get the year 2112, The Space Odyssey.

I read the instructions again and they tell me—and this is a real quote. Really, I'm not kidding you, this is what it said—"Digital timer switches at incorrect times. The Astronomic and exact switching times are in conflict. Complete the steps for setting the Time and Date, then temporarily change the date to June 21st".

Isn't that the date Druids gather at Stonehenge?

It has something to do with Daylight Savings Time.

Ok.

I did that. Then the instruction sheet tells me I must enter which state of the United States where I live. I entered Florida. Then it says I must give my exact location in the state by pressing the Prog button and the Mode button and turning the dial till I arrive at North. But that is not enough; I have to keep fiddling till it also says East. Then the display screen says I have to enter the exact times for sunrise and sunset...

Could I make this up?

The exact times for sunrise and sunset, Dawn and Dusk...

So I punched buttons and dialed dials and the display screen went back to 1,212 and I had to start over because the display screen asked me for the DOW! Really, It does!

I have no idea what the DOW is this week; I think the Stock Market is closed for the Labor Day holiday...

Thanks Be To God, Ginny arrived. She's an accountant. She should know what the DOW is...

She did.

She said that in digital language DOW means Day Of The Week.

Oh.

She also informed me that the reason I kept getting the year 2112 and the time of 12:12 is that the clever people who designed this timer pasted a clear plastic tape over the display screen and on that clear plastic tape are printed words and numbers to make it look like the display is turned on when it is not. So all the numbers and stuff I was seeing were doubled ...

Nobody ever told me that.

I'd been trying to get the numbers permanently printed on that clear plastic tape to change! I thought they were real numbers on the display screen.

No wonder the Druids told times and dates with big rocks.

They were smarter than me.

Now, I'm ready to tell the timer to turn on and turn off... Not so fast. The instruction sheet says, even without the clear plastic tape with printed numbers over the screen, "You may program the digital timer for up to 28 events".

"Press the Prog button to view the first event screen. If all programming has been cleared, the timer will display SKIP above the event display".

Event One means On.

Event Two means off.

I have no idea what the other 26 events will do... How many of those big stones are there in the Stonehenge circle anyhow?.

Now, finally my timer will turn on. My timer will turn off.

John Cowart, King Of Geriatric Geeks, once again has conquered technology.

In the Bible, in the Apostle John's vision of the last days, he says, "The angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven, And swore by Him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein, that there should be time no longer".

There's a reason for that.

God has the universe on a timer.

It's still ticking.

For now.

But you and I will spend all eternity... Somewhere.

Now is the accepted time. Today is the day for salvation.

Thursday, September 10, 2009
Cowart Family Matters

Lots going on in my family:

First off, Ginny fell ghastly sick on Labor Day evening as we drove home from our daughter Eve's house warming party.

I nursed Ginny as best I could over the next couple of days. That meant staying awake close to 24 hours at times and ordering in a lot of Chinese carryout food (which she couldn't eat anyhow) and brewing chicken soup for her, and cleaning things up a bit.

Heart attack was the first thing I figured and tried to talk her into letting me call rescue or drive her to the emergency room, but she's a Cowart. She wanted to tough it through. I'm the same way. So I worried over her a lot and kept checking to see if she were still breathing. She says I'm a pest.

As best we can figure, she's suffered a reaction to one of her diabetes medicines. But she is now recovered and returned to work this morning. It was hairy there for a while. I made many unnecessary mental funeral arrangements.

I always do that when she's down sick, or even five minutes late getting home from work.

You know me, for such a morbid cuss, I'm always looking on the bright side of things.

In other family news: Donald and Helen were too sick with flu to attend their sister's party. So was Clint. They stayed home; he stayed in Orlando.

Donald enters seminary next Saturday to begin studies to become a minister in the Anglican Communion. A huge step for him to move from computer network administrator to preacher.

Eve's party proved a resounding success. Delightful. It's so good to see our children getting along together so well. Eve's party combined showing off the new apartment she and Mark just moved into. The party was also to celebrate his birthday—and Patricia's. He's an attorney and our son-in-law; Patricia, our youngest, is a lab technician. Both have September birthdays.

Eve, a librarian, is concerned about changes the City Counsel is making in library budgets. Her husband, Mark, still relishes his triumphs in D.C. last month.

Jennifer, our eldest, recently earned Best Seller status for her E-Bay business. She gets a blue ribbon by each of her postings showing efficiency in reliability, good customer service, and prompt shipping policies.

Patricia's big news is that she and Clint have set a date, January 1st, for their wedding. She bubbles about gowns, sites for the ceremony and reception. I have never seen her looking better; she's positively elegant in poise, beauty, and maturity. She showed off her heirloom engagement ring given her by Clint's aunt who wore it during her own 35 years of happy marriage; she wishes for Clint and Patricia to know the same joys she has known.

I'm sure I'll be posting more about wedding plans as they careen toward us.

My own big news is that on Labor Day, Google posted nine of the books I've written or edited in the Google Books Partner Program. I've written a lot about my struggles to get onboard that recently. I'm inordinately proud of this accomplishment not only because of the fine presentation of my books, but also because of how I navigated a minefield of computer stuff successfully—almost.

I uploaded 22 of my books to Google, but only nine are listed so far. I did them all the same way so I wonder what the holdup is with my other books??? I'm scared to ask. They might want me to do that spreadsheet thing all over again and I don't think I can stand it.

My friend Barbara White just called. Her oncologist's tests indicate the chemotherapy is working. Her blood markers for cancer have dropped from close to 4,000 when she started treatment to only 104 today! Thanks be to God.

While my poor wife lay sick abed Tuesday too sick to eat, I went off to breakfast at Dave's Dinner with my friend Wes. We talked about God's self-interest, anger,

and love. Wes still deeply grieves for his 17-year-old granddaughter who died in 2006 (see my postings for September 15, 2006 and October 14, 2006).

Though Wes aches terribly, he tenaciously holds on to his faith in God's character.

God's character is all any of us have to hold onto. Personal accomplishments, blood markers, budget worries, wedding plans, annoying illness, tragic death, ordinary daily activities—God's character is all any of us have to hold onto.

Clinging to anything less than Him, is clutching at straws thinking they will keep us afloat.

Saturday, September 12, 2009

Worthless Work

Ginny returned to her office Thursday—she only lasted there till noon then fell ill again and had to return home. I've nursed her, after my clumsy fashion, since then. She finally decided that if she is not better by Monday, she'll consent to seeing her doctor.

Typical.

We Cowarts tough it out.

Thursday also, Jennifer, Patricia, Rex, and Terry visited me. I took the girls to brunch at Dave's Diner and we got back home just as Ginny, Rex, and then Terry arrived.

The group crowded in our living room discussing air conditioner repair, wedding plans for Patricia, ministry, family stuff, and the meaning of work.

The question of whether or not my writing constitutes work or goofing off with a hobby arose.

In our Southern tradition, unless a man has a shovel in his hand, what he's doing is not work; work pays money and a real man supports his family by the sweat of his brow.

Since my writing generates so little cash income and is subsidize by Ginny's income and our children's contributions, I do not qualify as a working man.

I feel like crap.

The workman is worthy of his hire. And since our society defines success in terms of cash income, I feel I am not a workman and therefore not worthy.

No hire given means no work done.

Producing 22 books and seeing several foreign translations come out over the past 35 years should leave me with some sense of accomplishment. But I feel I've labored under false colors, that my stuff is just typing words on air.

Lots of readers and editors seem to like my writing—so long as they get it free. Hardly anyone feels it's worth paying for.

Career-wise, I'd have done better if I'd spent the last 35 years collecting stamps, playing golf, flying kites, going fishing. These activities would cost a whole lot less than writing and publishing my books; and these activities would have produced just as much income to support my family.

I've spent my life pissing against the wind.

I also feel guilty that so much of what I've done recently is clerical stuff, self promotion and rehashing stuff I wrote years ago.

Just feeling weary today.

Like most days.

Monday, September 14, 2009

Objective Faith

A Christian's car can get a flat tire.

A Christian can get a toothache.

A Christian can go as crazy as an outhouse rat.

A Christian can feel blue, down, weary, depressed.

Case in point—my latest entry last Saturday about “Worthless Work” reveals me at a low state, down, sad, discouraged, wallowing in self-pity.

When I wrote that I questioned in my mind whether or not I should post it because I might scare off people on the outskirts of faith who were looking for some ray of bright hope. Knowing that

honey attracts more flies than the stuff I wallowed in, I wondered if I should fake some happy thoughts I rarely feel.

After all, aren't Christians supposed to be light and salt and joyous?

That ain't me.

My internal temperament inclines toward the morose.

Neither light nor joy play a big part in my life—although my vocabulary does tend to get salty at times.

What I'm getting at here is honesty.

Every person at times feels low down, sad and blue. Angst grips us all.

To paraphrase Saint Paul, There has no temptation or trouble or problem taken hold on John Cowart that is not the common lot of all men. John is not unique (a bit strange maybe, but not unique). Therefore, If I reveal where I really am and where I'm coming from, and what I worry about, and how I feel—that honest record of my pathetic spiritual life may strike a cord in readers and help them know they are not alone.

So, when I reveal that I am down, morose, discouraged and lower than whale shit, does that mean I am not a real Christian? That Christianity does not work?

The thing is there are two elements to Christian.

One is the subjective, how it makes you feel. This element focuses on spiritual experiences. Happy, happy, happy. Feeling faith becomes addictive. I want to repeat things that make me feel warm fuzzy.

God is good and I want Him to be gooder.

I expect Him to do miracles, make me prosperous, and happy, healthy and wise.

And when He doesn't, I pretend He does. I lie about my deeper-than-yours experiences. I position myself as a Prayer Warrior, a Healer, a Miracle Worker.

I attribute to God things God has not done.

Oh yes, Christians can lie.

On the other hand, there is objective faith. Little feeling is involved. I mean, who spasms with an orgasm over historical fact?

And historic fact forms the basis of Christian faith.

Jesus Christ rose from the dead because He is God come in the flesh.

Well-attested historic fact.

The only reason to believe the Gospel is because it's true. Not because it gives warm fuzzies, though it may. Not because many Christians are nice people, though some may be. Not because of any feeling but because of fact.

Therefore, I don't fear when my life seems empty and meaningless and when my work appears futile. I don't fear because regardless of how I feel at any given moment, the fact remains that Jesus Christ is our risen Lord.

God came in human form on a rescue mission. Born of a Virgin, while totally God and upholding all things by the word of His power, He became totally man. He healed the sick. He taught the ignorant. He fed the hungry—whatever was wrong, Jesus made it right. And we tortured Him to death, nailed the Rascal down hand and foot, for His trouble because men love darkness rather than light.

You can kill the living but you can't kill Life. Under His own steam Jesus returned to the living with nail prints still in His body. Neat, as you'd expect God to be, Jesus folded up the grave clothes and put them to the side.

Then He went fishing.

Unpredictable, as you'd expect God to be.

He enjoyed a cookout on the beach with His buddies. And when one asked about another man's experience, Jesus said, "What is that to thee? Follow thou Me".

Later, He temporarily went back to where He'd come from in the first place

Historic event. Not feeling.

So, what advantage is there to believing in Christ if as a Christian we still get flat tires, toothaches, discouragement, and sad days?

None.

The only reason to believe the Gospel is because it's true.

Tuesday, September 15, 2009

Watch This Spot

Rats!

I miss out on all the good stuff in our neighborhood.

In all the years Ginny and I have been active in Neighborhood Watch I've only called the cops once.

That was a few years back when I witnessed a young man climbing in the back window of a nearby house. I called 911 to report a break-in in progress and two patrol cars came immediately. The patrolmen apprehended the suspect youth.

Turns out that he lived in that house. But he's snuck out to visit some girl and was trying to creep back in without waking his parents when I saw him.

Trouble in the camp!

I bring this up because of a phone call I received Monday concerning our Neighborhood Watch... But I'll come back to that call in a minute.

First, I want to digress to our week just past.

Back on Labor Day Ginny fell sick. Her blood sugar fluctuated all over the place. Unpleasant symptoms accompanied that. And my poor beauty felt so lethargic that she could not even hold up a book to read for a week. When she was able to read, she chose *Miss Pickeral Goes To Mars*, a child's book Ginny first read when she was nine or ten years old. Last week she took comfort going back to her childhood favorite.

While she was down, her normal home duties fell on me. I had not realized how much she does around here besides her work at her office. I had to deal with banking, and the insurance company and grocery shopping as well as nurse her with ice/hot bandages and chicken soup.

She tried to go to work Thursday, but got too sick at the office and had to come home. But by Sunday she felt better, her blood sugar stabilized and Monday she returned to work.

Our youngest son, Donald, entered seminary last week to study for the ministry. We took him out to lunch Sunday afternoon to hear all about it.

He's taking a systematic theology course and an introduction to the Old Testament class.

His professor began class by talking about allegory and typology—the school of thought that sees a foreshadowing of New Testament events in the Old Testament.

For instance, the professor used the example of the Israelites passing through the Red Sea as a type foreshadowing baptism.

Donald raised his hand saying, “Then none of God’s people got baptized. Only the Egyptian army got immersed. The Israelites never even got wet”.

Yep. My boy’s going to go far in that seminary.

Then Ginny got to telling Donald and teasing me about that pool timer (see my Sept. 8th posting, “And Time Shall Be No More”).

The two of them laughed at me.

I told Ginny, “I liked you better when you were too sick to talk”.

We all laughed so hard I spilled my tea.

Donald’s heart seems inclined toward work in a rescue mission among the bums. When he was still in high school, one summer he won a scholarship in physics to work at the Los Alamos Nuclear facility in New Mexico for six weeks; when he returned to Jacksonville—without having blown up the world—he moved into the Circle Of Love mission to serve 24/7 for six weeks at their soup kitchen in a Northwest Jacksonville slum.

My son impresses me.

He’s real.

Anyhow, Ginny’s back to work now, Donald’s tormenting seminary professors, and I mowed the grass today before I got that Neighborhood Watch phone call.

The caller told me all about a problem house in the area. There are 57 houses in our cul de sac and I can see this one from my living room.

It seems that some young people, renters or maybe just squatters, have moved into that building and live an alternate lifestyle.

Very alternate!

The phone caller explained how several folks have complained to the cops, to the City Counsel, to the Zoning Board, and to the Code Enforcement Agency.

Rats in the offending yard is one major problem.

The caller sent me e-mail copies of correspondence with the various agencies and gave me a blow-by-blow account of political actions taken.

Then the caller casually mentioned the two young women who've been sunbathing naked on the roof of the house in question.

I looked out the living room window.

No one up there.

"Why did you call me about all this stupid political stuff and not call me about the girls on the roof naked?"

"I didn't think—you being religious and all—that you'd be interested," she said.

Rats! Once again I suffer for my Christian faith.

I never get to see any of the good stuff that goes on in my own neighborhood.

Where are my binoculars?

That might be a tufted titmouse on that branch.

I'm going to sit here and bird watch for a while.

Wednesday, September 16, 2009 **An Old Conversation**

Tuesday, as I prowled through my files gathering materials for the book I'm writing about finding and doing the will of God, I came across this undated entry from one of my old diaries. As best I can tell this conversation between Ginny and me took place back in the mid-1980s:

We enjoyed a long conversation about God's will and our own life; she contributed a number of excellent ideas which clarify matters for me somewhat. I am still missing some key element which I can't put my finger on.

There appear to be three levels related to God's will.

(1). Some events which we tend to call "natural" are revealed in Scripture to be God's will. Things like earthquakes, hurricanes, tornados, freezes, volcanic eruptions—things over which mankind has no control, are brought about by the will of God. Included in this area are conception and death. Psalm 29 declares that the Voice of The Lord causes each of the above:

PSALM 29

Give unto the LORD, O ye mighty,

Give unto the LORD glory and strength.

Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name;

Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.

The voice of the LORD is upon the waters:

The God of glory thundereth:

The LORD is upon many waters.

The voice of the LORD is powerful;

The voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

The voice of the LORD breaketh the cedars;

Yea, the LORD breaketh the cedars of Lebanon.

He maketh them also to skip like a calf;

Lebanon and Sirion like a young unicorn.

The voice of the LORD divideth the flames of fire.

The voice of the LORD shaketh the wilderness;

The LORD shaketh the wilderness of Kadesh.

The voice of the LORD maketh the hinds to calve,

And discovereth the forests:

And in his temple doth every one speak of his glory.

The LORD sitteth upon the flood;

Yea, the LORD sitteth King for ever.

The LORD will give strength unto his people;

The LORD will bless his people with peace.

Man has no control over most of the above. We can encourage conception with fertility drugs and such but we

can not cause it if it's is not there; the creation of life is solely in the hand of God.

Natural death and the length of life is also in God's hand. Again, man is able to cut short life by murder or suicide, but death is inevitable and under the control of God. The life-extending techniques of modern medicine can not prolong life beyond a certain point and most of these techniques would have been considered torturing a victim in former ages (Look what happened to our friend Joel).

(2). The general will of God is manifest in His revealed moral law. This refers to the will of God for all men everywhere. Thou shalt not steal, murder, commit adultery, lie—moral commands incumbent on all human behavior. For us, these thing boil down to a simple matter of obedience. When I am tempted to steal something, a choice confronts me. I know better, but I am going to do it anyhow; or this is wrong and I am not going to take that item. While I may try to circumnavigate the issue and justify my behavior (I didn't really love Evelyn, my first wife, or she me, and we should never have gotten married in the first place). Nevertheless, I know the standard, and deep down I know when I offend against it.

(3). The third level related to me and to God's will falls into the category of my individual choices in matters where there is no revelation of God's will. Most of our questions and mental turmoil falls into this area. Should I buy a Ford or a Chevy? Marry Joe or Bill? Become a plumber or a preacher? Live in Florida or New Jersey? Go to Yale or Harvard? Such questions concern us most.

Now some Christians believe that God's will and plan for our lives is so detailed that He has a definite preference between my buying a Ford or a Chevy. "God has a wonderful plan for your life," these people say. They cite Scripture to the effect that the very hairs of my head are numbered and that God knows every sparrow that falls, therefore, if God has an interest in hair and birds, He must also have a vested interest in whether I order chocolate or vanilla. And, If I pray and seek His will, He will somehow show me whether to marry Betty or Veronica, etc.

Other Christians believe that God's detailed will for an individual stopped with the revelation of the moral law,

that God has given us common sense as well as internal interests and preferences and therefore it is up to us to choose as we wish and take the consequences of our choices.

If I like vanilla and choose vanilla, that choice is perfectly ok with God.

Whether I chose to be a plumber or a preacher is of no great concern to God as long as I am an honest plumber living for Him and worshiping Him there beneath the house where nobody but Him can see me. Or I can be a preacher as long as I preach His word honestly and care for my congregation with love. My living for Him is His concern, not the minor details of how I earn that living.

If I am at Harvard, live for Christ there; If I'm accepted at Yale, then I'm to live for Christ at Yale. There is no divine cheering session saying, "Go Gators, Go!" Neither Florida State nor the University of Florida have a lock on the divine will. No voice from Heaven tells a prospective student to go to one or the other.

Does the will of God for us ever change?

Certainly.

Ginny used the illustration of a person who is cold and wears a sweater and a coat and a blanket and comes inside to a room where a fire blazes in the fireplace.

She said that, at the door, she may shrug the blanket off her shoulders. As she moves closer to the fire, she takes off her coat. Then the sweater comes off. As the warmth prevails, the lady may end up stark naked on the bearskin rug toasting in front of the fire. Ginny used this example to show that the closer we move to God's warmth, the less we are concerned about things which were once important to us.

Outside, we clutch the blanket, the coat, the sweater tight around us. Our very survival may depend on whether or not we have a coat. But as we move closer to God, these things drop away naturally, almost unnoticed. Therefore, while at some point in our life, choosing a nursery for the kids was the most important thing in our minds, now that is of no concern at all. Such decisions are only of temporary importance.

At an airport, Ginny said, the time to be concerned about checking your baggage and whether or not you will get a window seat or who will sit next to you on the flight, is not when the plane is landing; then, the important thing is Who will meet you at your destination.

She also reminded me of the C.S. Lewis Narnia story *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* in which Eustace, as a dragon, tried and tried to scratch off his scales and only succeeded in flaking off a few which grew right back. Then Aslan ripped him open and skinned him to restore him to humanity.

All Eustace could do was lay there, belly exposed, and submit to the treatment.

That is the hardest posture to maintain. We want to up and do, to scratch and claw, to bring about the desired results immediately. God's will is often that we be still and know that He is indeed God.

Ginny said, we need to wait and pray with our bellies exposed...

We talked a whole lot more about such things.

We never finish talking together.

Friday, September 18, 2009 If The Shoe Fits...

Bad day Thursday!

Our air conditioner died. Thermostat in the hall read 85 degrees. Higher in the living room and kitchen.

I had all sorts of trouble trying to upload my book files to Google Books. The server kept going down. I kept trying to get the job done. Finally my account showed 23 books in it.

Trouble is, I only uploaded 21 books!

All this followed a bad night of disturbing dreams, cramped legs, raging thirst—that's four nights running of this stuff.

And the receipt I cooked for dinner turned out bland and over-cooked.

All this stuff frustrated me.

I fumed.

Where is the loving Christ who is supposed to be with me, even on days like this?

On vacation? Gone fishing? Standing to the side like some sadist chuckling at a bug stuck on fly paper?

Then I tried to tie my shoes. Couldn't do it; my arthritis hurt so bad I couldn't reach my own feet. (not that I'm *that* fat).

Where is God when I can't tie my shoes?

Very present Help in a time of trouble, the Scripture says.

Does than mean only Big Trouble? A hurricane, nuclear attack, IRS audit?

Do I have to ride out little stuff on my own?

When He said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" does that mean only for major events?

Do I have to tie my shoes on my own?

Sure.

I'm the father of six children, all grown now, but I remember watching them learn to tie shoes. I recall how Freddy's tongue would stick out as he concentrated intently on this insurmountable task. I remember how frustrated he would get trying to master this skill.

And what did I, a loving father, do?

I stood there and watched him deal with it.

I did not intervene.

That's what dad's do.

There's a line in an old hymn I recalled as I struggled with Google and broke air conditioner and spoiled dinner and stiff-necked shoes. And the absence of God from my bad day...

And behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadows,
Keeping watch above His own.

Monday, September 21, 2009
Was His True Love's Name Writ In Mud?

Got a bad scare Friday.

After Ginny left the house for work, I continued work on that book I'm writing about finding and doing the will of God.

About 9 o'clock the air conditioner repairman, Kyle, arrived to fix our broken unit.

I opened all the house doors and unlocked the back gate so he could get to the inside cooler, the outside unit, and have access to the tools in his truck.

When he began work, his cell phone rang and he began an extended conversation with someone while he unscrewed panels from our air conditioner. Kyle had worked on our system a couple of months ago and impressed me with his skill and efficiency.

Since he was occupied with his task, I left him to it and returned to work on my manuscript.

So far, my manuscript runs about 300 pages—mostly of notes and small sections I've pre-written over the years. So my work at the moment involves a lot of cutting, pasting, and shifting bits of text here and there.

It's like assembling a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle of short snippets of writing into a coherent flow of ideas. It requires focus.

I focused.

One of my chapters involves various ways people in the past have tried to discern divine guidance for their lives.

For instance, Roger Lowe, an apprentice shopkeeper in Ashton-in-Makerfield, Lancashire, kept a diary between the years 1663 and 1674. A devout Puritan, Lowe, prayed about finding a suitable wife. He courted a young lady named Mary Naylor in an on-again/off-again relationship.

Was she The One?.

On September 24, 1663, a rainy day, he visited Mary. As he walked home, he leaped over a puddle and splashed mud on his clothes.

“When I came home,” Lowe wrote, “There was a direct N and halfe of an M providentially made upon my breeches, plaine to view in any man’s sight made of mire with (my) leapeing”

A sign from God?

The letters M and N spelled out in mud on the seat of his pants.

What else could it mean but Mary Naylor?

“I looked upon it to be from Providence, and fortold somethinge in my aprehension. The smallest of God’s providences should not be passed by without observation,” Lowe wrote.

Time went by.

Problems arose.

Roger felt an interest in other girls; Mary attracted the attention of other young men.

On May 11, 1664, Roger records the breakup between him and Mary Naylor—M.N.

He went to her father’s house to visit. “He was from home and I spoke Roughly to Mary and she seemed to be very effectionate, but I little matered it. I cald her a false dissembleinge harted person. She tooke it heinously”.

Later Roger married a young woman by the name of Emma Potter—his diary refers to her by the affectionate diminutive—Emm.

Makes you think, doesn’t it?

M.... humm.

Of course God is not limited. He can direct and guide us by any means He chooses, but I suspect, like Roger Lowe, we often mis-read the signs or see signs where there aren’t any.

In one of the conversations in the Book of Job, Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, said,

“God is greater than man. Why dost thou strive against Him? for He giveth not account of any of His matters.

“For God speaketh once, yea twice, yet man perceiveth it not.

“In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon men, in slumberings upon the bed; Then He openeth the ears of men, and sealeth their instruction, That He may withdraw man from his purpose, and hide pride from man. He keepeth back his soul from the pit, and his life from perishing by the sword”.

As I focused on cutting, pasting, inserting files into the manuscript body, re-writing snippets, moving blocks of text and...

Suddenly there was a man standing at my elbow!

Scared the breath out of me!

Who the hell was this and how did he get into ...

Oh, it was Kyle, the air condition man.

I'd forgotten he was in the house.

I live in my own little world when I'm working.

I'd completely forgotten he was here.

Apparently he'd walked through the room several times going back and forth to his truck and I just had not noticed.

He'd come back in to give me the repair bill.

Now, that was a real scare!

Wednesday, September 23, 2009

Rapid Response

When my friend Wes treated me to breakfast at Dave's Diner yesterday, he told me about an unusual incident that happened on his back porch Monday:

His friend, a businessman, had stopped by Wes' house feeling down.

When Wes asked him what was the matter, his friend said that he desperately needed \$2,000 before the end of this week.

"I felt as though the Holy Spirit gave me a shove in the back," Wes said. "I said the first thing that popped into my mind—'Lord, You know where that money is, please walk Sam to it'".

The man's cell phone rang.

He talked for a few minutes. Wes could only hear one side of the conversation but when he hung up, Wes asked, "Was that your money"?

"Yes, I'm supposed to go pick it up now".

That's not quite the way prayer works for me.

Wes also told me about an incident that happened a few years back when he was near broke. He was driving his old blue pickup to help his granddaughter with her after school homework.

He knew the little girl was having trouble with her studies and feeling frustrated but this happened right before a payday and Wes had nothing to give to cheer the kid up.

As he stopped for a red light behind a white pickup, Wes said, "It wasn't even a real prayer. I just sort of sighed saying, 'Lord, I sure wish I could take Sandy some flowers'".

The door of the white pickup ahead opened.

A man got out and walked to the back of his white pickup and lifted out a big bunch of marigolds. He walked back to Wes' truck making motions for Wes to roll down his driver's side window. He handed the flowers to Wes saying, "Here, give these to your girl".

As the light changed, the man ran back to his own truck, jumped in, and away he drove leaving Wes dumfounded.

Spooky.

That's not quite the way prayer works for me.

When I pray, I feel as though the Lord says, "Not now, Cowart. Take a number. Get in line. You'll be number 87; I'm taking care of number 14 right now. But, don't worry, I'll get around to you".

What's the difference between Wes' prayers and mine?

I think it's a matter of the Lord knowing that I have much more of the blessed virtue of patience than Wes has.

That's what I tell myself anyhow.

Thursday, September 24, 2009
What A Day!

NEWS FLASH.... There's late-breaking hot news about our youngest son, Donald, at the bottom of this posting.



What A Day!

Up at 4 a.m. Wednesday to post yesterday's diary entry and write a couple of e-mails to my e-friends in Russia. I feel guilty that my letters were harsh. I've thought for days and days about how to respond. But gentle does not seem to have helped their situation. I would not have butted in at all but they approached me and I wanted to advise them as best I'm able.

Those e-mails started my day as a downer.

My friend Barbara White treated me to breakfast at Dave's Diner. In talking with the waitress Barbara said that the medicine is working so well because of the prayers of God's people. When her cancer was first

diagnosed, her blood markers read over 3,000; with only one chemo treatment left to go, those markers are now under 200.

Thanks be to God.

Barbara, who is a tad over 80, said, "John, now that it looks as though I'm going to live a while longer, I need to decide what the Lord wants me to do with the rest of my life".

No one is too young or too old to think about God's will.

We talked about her writing other books (her four Along The Way books are at www.bluefishbooks.info). Or continuing her painting. Or leading retreats and giving lectures

We even talked about her going to Africa to help a missionary couple she has long supported. -why not? Corry Ten Boom was about Barbara's age when she started out.

We went back to my house and sat in the back garden talking.

We concluded that when you do not know the will of God, you should do the closest thing to it that you do know.

When you do not know the will of God, sometimes it is the will of God that you not know.

When I asked about the seeming absence of God in tough times and the silence of God when we feel we need to hear Him most, Barbara reminded me of how things are in a class room:

The teacher instructs before an exam, and may critique the material afterwards...

But the teacher never talks during the test.

As Barbara left my house, a neighbor walked over to tell me about a police raid in our block last night with six patrol cars and a helicopter overhead—Ever alert as a member of our Neighborhood Watch, I had not noticed a thing. Missed the excitement altogether.

Another neighbor joined us to tell us about Bubba—God bless him. He had an attack last night and stopped

breathing for about 20 minutes. He's on life support and his many children are gathering to decide whether or not to turn off the machines.

Damn!

I hate that.

The old reprobate was my friend.

Remember the time Bubba and Dolly and I conquered technology with that cell phone? I still laugh about that.

Ours is a strange friendship. I'm a writer and my world revolves around books and reading and writing; Bubba can neither read nor write. But for some strange reason we hit it off and he stops by to talk fairly often. I find it difficult to carry on a conversation with a person who does not read, so I mostly listen and prompt him with questions. We both enjoy our talks.

In the year 2006, I wrote about Bubba and Dolly, his wife, in my February 7th post (200 Minutes), and about Dolly's death in my June 27th posting (A Pain In The Neck and Listen To Your Heart) in my blog archives.

As my neighbors left, an air conditioning man came in to give me an estimate. He chatted happily about heat panels, kilowatts and spines—things every real man ought to know.

I'm an A/C expert too.

I can tell hot from cold.

And I know part of the thingy is inside the wall, and part of it is outside in the yard.

Sometimes an 18-inch garter snake coils up underneath the part outside—Ha! I'll bet the A/C expert didn't know that. But, if we go with his company, he may find out.

By the time the A/C man left, I knew I was not going to get any work done on the book manuscript today. Tried to read a library book but it just did not click. Did a few household chores. Ended up with a small odd block of time, so I killed it browsing porno sites for a while.

Ginny arrived home bearing a request that she and I (as a duty for our being on a Civilian Emergency Response Team) help out in a massive Swine Flu program to

vaccinate every person in the Jacksonville metropolitan area—population one million plus.

Having seen the 1918 Spanish Lady graves in Evergreen Cemetery and having written about the 1888 Yellow Jack epidemic, I feel this vaccination project may be an important investment of our energies. Not sure about that, I'll ask the Lord.

I cringe around groups of people. Just freeze up and shrink.

I think I'd be really good with crowd control—"Alright, you sickies, line up. Anybody steps out of line, I'll cough on 'em!"

Loving Christian service is my forte.

Ginny has this huge, enormous, big, massive, thick report she's preparing for auditors at her office. I advised her to submit it "As Is" with a yellow post-it note on the front cover saying, "I coughed on this report".

That way the auditors will rubber stamp the report without opening it so she does not have to worry about checking page after page after page of numbers.

Seriously, yesterday a friend who works in a major area hospital told me that she has three Swine Flu—shouldn't we call this thing Porky?—cases in her intensive care unit. All three are in bad shape and she expects one to die today.

The State of Florida maintains a Weekly Swine Flu Surveillance Report at http://www.doh.state.fl.us/Disease_ctrl/epi/swineflu/Reports/reports.htm#map1; there were seven flu deaths in Jacksonville during August, and 22 down in Dade County.

This is just getting started.

Ginny and I are not sure how we can help in the Porky vaccination program, or if we're so feeble that we'd just be in the way. God knows.

After dinner, we drove to the grocery story.

I felt so peopled out that I sought solitude in a little park area with benches near the front door, while Ginny shopped. I felt I needed to be alone and quiet for a time to smoke a pipe and recharge my batteries.

Along came nine church people—with cupcakes.

They settled in.

A young man, Lenny, sat on my bench and explained they were on a prayer walk through the neighborhood. He enthusiastically told me about their new congregation, which only formed recently. He graciously invited me to attend their services and worship with them. And he asked me questions about my own background and beliefs. And he listened courteously as I floundered around trying to justify myself.

Their church is called the Riverstone Community Church and they meet in the Five-Points Theatre at 10:30 on Sunday mornings. Their website is at <http://riverstonecommunitychurch.org/index.html>.

I joined them in open air prayer until Ginny, having finished shopping, rescued me.

I know nothing at all about their church services...

But their cupcakes were sure good.

Got home. Unloaded groceries. Began working. Phone rang—Donald will not be able to come over tomorrow to help me through that Google Books Partners Program; he promises to come Friday. I'm stymied without his help.

However....

NEWS FLASH: This Just In...

My Son, The TV Preacher...

Donald just told me that he's launched a new video website called Morning Seminary.

When I hung up the phone, I watched it.

It's a hoot!

First thing when he gets up, he staggers out and talks about the Lord before he's even had morning coffee...Er, Donald, that is. The Lord has already had His. So, half-asleep, my son explains points of theology that he's been thinking about.

This is great.

My books partnership on Google can wait. Who reads that stuff anyhow?; Donald's doing something much more important.

Please go over to Donald's You-Tube site at <http://www.youtube.com/user/dzcowart> and leave him a wake-up call comment.

Anyhow, Good night from Donald's dad.

Two more A/C guys are scheduled to come here to my house tomorrow...I'm worn out...Maybe one of them will see the snake.

Friday, September 25, 2009

Three Things:

First off, in case you missed the link to my son's Theology In His Sleep videos on YouTube, the site address is at <http://www.youtube.com/user/dzcowart> . I get a real kick out of it.

I'm proud of him.

Second, I wasted four hours Thursday.

In the morning I received two e-mails, both long and strongly worded, attacking me and something I wrote recently.

That both hurt and raised my hackles.

Immediately I jumped in and wrote a reply defending myself and what I'd written.

I took a firm stand and declared, "What I have written, I have written".

Didn't somebody in the Bible say that?

Like him, I did not want to back down.

My defense appeared powerful and witty in my own eyes. I worked writing this thing for hours, then I sat down to smoke a pipe and gloat over my clever response before I posted it online.

As I puffed my pipe, a phrase of Scripture popped into my mind—"He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth".

Yes, when accused, the Lord Jesus offered no defense.

St. Peter even said, "Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth:

Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree”.

These thoughts brought me up short.

Why was I so riled and so quick to jump to defend and justify myself?

Don't I have a Defender who's a little better at the job than I am?

So what if someone thinks ill of me? So long as I'm accepted in the Beloved, what does it matter what anyone else thinks of me?

I'm very glad I did not post that witty stuff I wrote. I would have regretted it. Now, all I have to regret is the time I spent writing a reply, a reply which said, in all Christian charity, “Tough Tit”.

Thus, my lesson for today was not how to defend myself, but why not to.

Third thing—Now for the fun stuff!—Gold! Lots of Gold!



That photo shows only a small sample of a gold treasure from Anglo-Saxon days uncovered in Staffordshire recently.

Using his metal detector in a field near his home, Mr. Terry Herbert, discovered over 1,345 gold items dating back more than 1,300 years.

His find is told about in two articles with photographs in yesterday's *London Daily News* at:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1215723/Staffordshire-hoard-Amateur-treasure-hunter-finds-Britains-biggest-haul-Anglo-Saxon-gold.html>

This is the largest hoard of gold items ever discovered in Great Britain. Experts have not placed a cash value on all of it yet, they say it could take years to evaluate the collection, but it's worth millions.

The *Mail* says, "Many of the items in the hoard are warfare paraphernalia inlaid with precious stones, including sword pommel caps and hilt plates"



Sixth Century artisans inscribed a Latin Bible verse on this gold fixture from a sword scabbard; it says, "Rise up, O Lord, and may Thy enemies be dispersed and those who hate Thee be driven from Thy Face".

To me, an amazing thing about this find is how the golden artifacts lie buried so close to the surface:



Wow! Think of it! An incredible treasure just below the surface. When you hear your metal detector beep an alert, all you have to do is scratch the surface, and there you see the most valuable thing you've ever found in your life!



Jesus said, "Again, 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".

Humm... Of course Jesus said that before metal detectors were invented.

But, still I wonder...

In ancient times someone folded up this jeweled gold cross—perhaps because they did not like what it stands for, or perhaps to make it small enough to fit into a leather bag.

The *Mail* says, "The hoard is currently being held in secure storage at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery but a selection of items are to be displayed at the museum from tomorrow until October 13".

I used to have a cheap metal detector, one step removed from a toy. It beeped whenever it passed over anything metal. I took it out in my yard... Beep. Beep. Beep. I found a coin from Bahrain! How did a coin from that far country end up buried in the sand of my back yard, I'll never know.

Beep. Beep. Beep. I found my yard is full of roofing nails from old construction, bottle caps, tab tops, stuff like that just under the surface. I was disappointed so often, I began to ignore the beeps.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Do I believe that alert? Is that a real treasure or just the metal spring from a lost clothes pin? Or is this beep just a false reading?

The only way to find out is to scratch the surface.

The kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure buried in a field...

Every once in a while the Holy Spirit says Beep, Beep, Beep to the human heart. We hear His alert and we decide whether or not to believe His call or to disregard it. We chose whether or not to investigate what's just beneath the surface.

Again and again and again, He says, "Beep. Beep. Beep".

"What do you mean sell all that I have!"

That's crazy.

What's God trying to pull here?

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Saturday, September 26, 2009 **Two Fine Young Men**

In two hours Friday night our son Donald fixed some computer challenges I've struggled with for two weeks.

What a blessing!

He added a new feature to the sidebar of my blog—a Bluefish Books search box right under my Bluefish logo. Now readers can search my books for any subject I've ever written about and be taken directly to one of my books that addresses that topic....Er, at least that's the

way it will work once all 22 books have been processed by the Google Books Partner Program (only nine books have been processed so far, but they are working on the others).

I'm tickled.

Donald told us that he updates his early morning video Morning Seminary talks each Monday, Wednesday and Friday. It was so funny to see one of his cats climb on him while he talked about dispensationalist ideas in today's clip.

The church he and Helen attend has a building fund in progress. But recently the congregation became aware of a woman living in a dilapidated trailer. They decided that getting this person decent housing was more important and withdrew money from their building fund to buy her a decent newer mobile home.

I'm impressed.

Another thing impressed me as Donald took Ginny and me to a Chinese restaurant for dinner. Ginny often tells me about office problems when she gets home from work. But, over supper, she unloaded her heart to Donald. I think they forgot I was even at the table. I think Donald has a pastor's heart and his mother was responding to that at a deeper level than she could respond to me.

That really makes me happy.

The other young man I encountered Friday was Reggie, the air conditioning man, who came out to give us an estimate on replacing our 19-year-old system. He is the fifth repairman to give me an estimate on the work.

He explained technical things to me that the others glazed over. It seems that one reason so many companies offer low prices and specials this month is that next year government regulations will phase out the use of freon coolants because of ozone layer damage and replace that gas with another substance. Therefore some companies are pushing the old-style systems to clear their stock before the new regulations appear.

I've picked up hints of this from the other estimators which made me suspect something, but I was not sure why they kept encouraging me to look at the 13 seer

machines when the tax credit only covers 15 seer and above.

But, aside from air conditioner stuff, Reggie and I talked about local history, gardening, and God. I dug up some bromeliads, firecracker aloe, and pineapple lilies for him to take home to his wife. And we talked a bit about prayer and price.

Reggie's company charges more than any of the others I've talked with.

That may prohibit us from buying from them.

Ginny and I have gathered all the information we can. We've prayed about our decision—and even about whether or not we need to make a decision. We are evaluating the various offers and looking at our finances to determine what, if anything, we can reasonably afford within our perimeters, budget and plans for Ginny's retirement.

Price is a big factor for us.

I told Reggie about how driving to a restaurant one evening we stopped at a light and read the bumper sticker of the car ahead:

If You Die Tonight, Will You Be In Heaven—Or In Hell?

I asked Ginny, "If we die tonight, will we be in Heaven or in Hell"?

She said, "John, if we die tonight, we'll still be in debt".

Monday, September 28, 2009

Sea Of Tranquility

The best days of my life are the most difficult to write about.

Saturday Ginny and I took our coffee into the backyard, sat in lounge chairs and resumed the same running conversation we've been enjoying for the past 40 years. We chatted about yard work that needs doing, but we didn't lift a finger to do any of it.

We talked about lizards and birds and flowers and sex and news stories and friends and children and books. We

anticipated our upcoming vacation and remembered ones from years past.

That's it.

We spent the whole day sipping coffee and chatting about pleasant things.

Sunday our conversation turned to decision making in three areas: installing the new air conditioning system, life insurance, and our role in Porky flu inoculations.

All of this is so complicated, you can see why we seek the Lord's guidance in such mundane decisions. Anything more high-tech than an on/off light switch loses me.

Of course the first thing we had to decide is whether or not we need to make a decision. And, if so, do we have to make it at this time?

We did not initiate this situation. Our heat/AC system is 19 years old and has broken down three times in the past 18 months. Of course we can live without AC but in the culture and climate of northeast Florida, it only makes sense to keep our home a step above Cracker houses.

Decision making and seeking God's will makes me long for the good old days of Urim and Thummin.

Having gone through the process of deciding about A/C companies, I find the idea of examining the entrails of a goat (or preferably a salesman) and reading the caul of the liver appealing.

It's a shame we can't do that anymore.

Druids had it easy.

I'm working on a book about finding and doing the will of God, So it may help me to explain the process Ginny and I are going through in the A/C matter:

The only Scripture that occurs to me remotely related to A/C home improvements is the one about the guy who started to build a tower but had to quit because he didn't have the cash to finish the job and everybody mocked him.

Earlier this summer, Ginny sent out a blanket e-mail to everyone in her office asking about their experiences, good or bad, with A/C contractors. The replies warned us

away from some companies and inclined us toward some others.

Having prayed for guidance beforehand, over the past week I've gathered information from five A/C companies. One company we eliminated out of hand because their estimator showed up at our house three hours after he said he'd be here; if that company proves so unreliable on first contact, we want nothing to do with them.

Another company offered a brand of machinery we'd never heard of, and another company appeared to be misrepresenting their services. We checked online with the Better Business Bureau, The State Consumer Affairs Division, Complaints.Com, and Rip-Off Reports. All the companies we considered came through with clean bills of health. But we eliminated one because their pricing seemed hazy.

We finally chose one company that felt right even though they cost more than the others. Now, with a \$4,000 variance between high and low bids of the different companies, we are looking about how to finance and we prayed as we discussed options in that area. One option we briefly considered is a home equity loan...

No, we do not want to gamble on any chance of losing our home.

That decision was confirmed when on Sunday afternoon, our little sea of tranquility rippled.

I had not checked my e-mail for several days and when I did I found a note from my two older sons who live up in Maryland. The bank foreclosed on their home, a home where they have lived for over 45 years. The guys lost their home and have had to move to an apartment.

That news makes me heartsick.

I knew they had refinanced a while back and had had a bout with unemployment for a while, but I thought they found new jobs and were doing fine.

I'm so sorry for them.

Funny, one of the things Ginny and I discussed Saturday was whether or not God, who is complete in Himself, ever got frustrated. She cited the time when Jesus wept over Jerusalem. "I would have gathered you like chicks under my wings. But you would not". And I

cited the case of the Rich Young Ruler; when he walked away, Jesus gazed after him sorrowing.

Incredible, that puny human beings can frustrate Almighty God!

Yet, somehow, I think He will manage.

Our choice of weekend movies to edify our souls were *Frankenstein's Daughter*, *Batchelor Pad*, and a DVD disc of *The Sopranos*.

Tuesday, September 29, 2009

Views Of Philology

My back aches when I sit too long at the computer.

After every hour or so I spend writing, I break to smoke a pipe and read for a bit in a different chair. Sometimes I just read murder mysteries, but to justify to my own mind that I'm really working, I often read books related to my profession as a writer.

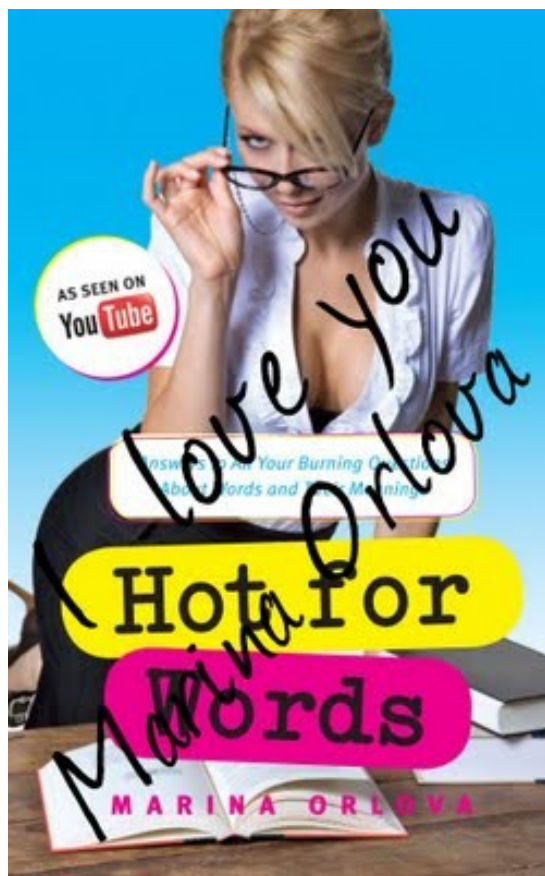
Yes, reading enlightens the soul and refreshes the mind.



For instance, yesterday I finished copyright declarations for the 22 books I'm listing in the Google Books Partner Program, a tedious task. During my break I could have read a mystery, but virtuously I chose to read a book related to philology, the study of words.

Dr. Marina Orlova, arguably one of the world's foremost philologists, holds two degrees related to linguistics and etymology. Her book, *Hot For Words* (N.Y. HarperCollins. ©2009. 183+ pages) examines word and phrase origins in the light of phonetics, phonology, syntax, and semantics.

Exciting reading.



After my break, I returned to formatting the 278 pages of the book I'm writing on finding and doing the will of God. My working title is *If God Leads Me, Why Do I Run In Circles?*

After a couple of hours, I took another break to read Dr. Orlova's book. The subtitle of the book says it contains, "Answers to all your burning questions about words and their meanings".

Words covered in the text include nicebecetur (a dainty, fashionable

woman), mathmatics, and skinny-dipping.

As I prepared my own books for submission to the publisher, I had to reformat much of my text because over the years I've been working on this one, I used several different computer programs and needed to make them all conform to a consistent format.

Time for another break and back to my intense study of philology.



I learned that Dr. Orlova holds degrees in both Russian and English language instruction. Her website, is named the same as her book *Hot For Words*. Her site index lists words and phrases she covers in brief video presentations at <http://www.hotforwords.com/words/> . The site draws over 170,000 subscribers.

I did not know that many people were interested in philology.



Dr. Orlova's book is also lavishly illustrated.

Oh, did I mention that she teaches most of her lessons in philology while wearing bikini-like outfits?

But, of course, I only read her book for the articles.

Wednesday, September 30, 2009
The World Around Me

I view my diary as an archive of events taking place in my own little world, but occasionally I raise my head to look around at what's going on in the world around me and I leave a note for the Kid In The Attic.

I envision the Kid In The Attic as a young person who will happen across my old diaries in a box in some dusty attic a hundred years from now. I want him to know how a Christian life was lived by one lone guy in the past; he will see good and bad in my life with little varnish. That way he'll know what he may be getting into if he chooses to make his own commitment to Christ.

"The only thing that keeps an archivist going is the thought that what he's doing today will be appreciated a hundred years from now when somebody who can really make a difference to society uses the materials".

—Charles A. Goodrum
Director of Research
Library of Congress

So, Kid In The Attic, here's a brief overview of the world around me at this moment:

World

This morning's news tells of an 8.2 earthquake and tsunami that hit Samoa and Indonesia overnight leaving hundreds dead.

My diary archives for May 29, 2006, tells about how one of my Christian books was translated into the Indonesian language. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population of any country on earth. I hope my tiny voice of witness comforts some of the people in that suffering nation.

The enemy in Afghanistan killed five Americans yesterday. That war continues. TV news hardly ever tells of enemies killed by American troops.

In Great Britain, a couple inherited an old farm. Good news. Immediately the couple was presented with a bill for 230,000 £ for renovations to the parish church. It seems that in the 1530s, when King Henry VIII granted the farm to the couple's ancestors, the King made a law stipulating that whoever owned the Glebe Farm must pay for any upkeep to the local Parish church, St. John The Baptist, Ashton Cantlow, Warwickshire.

Shakespeare's parents were married in that church.

Here are photos of Glebe Farm and that ancient church from the Daily Mail at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1216730/Couple-forced-sell-farm-500-000-pay-repair-church-Shakespeares-parents-married.html>:



The couple protested the bill for church repair to Parliament but the ancient law was upheld. Bad news. The couple must sell the farm to pay the church's expenses.

I'm sure glad that here in this country we have separation of church and state. Of course, I also believe that churches and other religious organizations should not be exempt from property taxes. Churches ought to pay taxes like everyone else without exception. God is not broke, He can afford to render to Caesar.

The National Weather Services reports that no hurricanes are likely to form in the Atlantic in the next two days. No hurricane has threatened Florida this season—so far.

Archaeologists in Rome have uncovered the gears of a huge revolving dining room in the remains of Nero's Palace, *Domus Aurea*, "The Golden House" on Palatine Hill. Apparently the room revolved giving diners a different, ever-changing view of the gardens. The gears were turned by water pressure. Long ago I wrote a piece, *The Ugliest Picture In The World*, which tells about an early antiChristian graffiti found in the *Domus Aurea*. It's the earliest pictorial representation of Jesus Christ.

National

Politicians are doing political stuff.

Congress continues to bat the issue of healthcare around. I imagine that final bill will spell out that it includes coverage for every citizen except John Cowart.

The nation is gearing up for a massive Porky Flu inoculation (more about that locally).

The current economic crisis continues.

The recent floods are receding in Atlanta, Georgia.

Jacksonville

After months of bickering like kindergarteners, and threatening to beat us up and take our lunch money, yesterday the City Council finally passed a budget. Libraries will stay open. Garbage will be collected. An ambulance may come if you have a heart attack. Police will still patrol our streets. And city money will still subsidize gravy businesses like the Landing and that football team.

After year after year after year of delay, the new court house is being built. When Ginny and I drove by the site last night, we saw construction workers busy—earning overtime pay.

Because of Porky Flu, yesterday, five area Baptist hospitals limited visitation to only immediate family members who must wear masks. As of last week, there have been 91 H1N1 deaths in Florida, including eight in Jacksonville—so far.

Our Neighborhood

Our Neighborhood Watch meeting Monday night drew 22 people, our best attendance in ages. Police officers said JSO has only responded to ten calls here in the past month, which makes us one of the most crime-free areas in Jacksonville. Our Neighborhood Watch is working. Lisa, Carol and Warren put an enormous amount of work into making this meeting successful.

The home mortgage crisis hits our neighborhood hard. Carol reported that on our block of 57 houses, 14 now sit empty because of foreclosures.

Lisa is putting together a local newsletter to keep all posted. I encouraged people to sign up for the next Citizens Emergency Response Team classes.

Personal

Ginny and I continue to seek the Lord's guidance about heater A/C repairs.

Yesterday, I proofed the first 40 pages of the book I'm writing about seeking and doing the will of God.

Ginny and I volunteered to help out with the massive, city-wide Porky Flu vaccination for every person in Jacksonville. We have to take an Incident Control class to orient us to serve. This is related to FEMA's bioterrorism section.

Our youngest son, Donald, continues to teach theology to his cat. Yesterday, he uploaded another video for *Morning Seminary* at <http://www.youtube.com/user/dzcowart>.

Thinking of Donald, I contributed this to our Neighborhood Watch newsletter:

John's Joke

Dinner At The White House

To foster goodwill, President Roosevelt invited some ordinary citizen to each state dinner at the White House.

When Joe received his invitation, he panicked. He'd never been to a state dinner before and did not know how to act. Had to rent a tuxedo.

His wife reassured him. "Just watch the President," she said. "Do what he does. Use the same kind of fork he picks up. Use the same kind of glass he drinks from. If you do just what the President does, you'll be fine".

At the formal dinner Joe watched the President. He used the same kind of silverware, the same kind of crystal all through the meal.

When coffee was served, the President placed his right in the middle of the table in front of him. Joe placed his right in front of him.

The President removed his cup from his saucer and set the cup on the white tablecloth. Joe removed his cup from his saucer and placed it aside too.

The President picked up a silver creamer and poured milk into his saucer. Joe took a silver creamer and poured milk into his saucer.

Setting his saucer on the floor, President Roosevelt said, "Young man, I don't know what you're doing, but I'm giving some milk to my cat".

Friday, October 02, 2009

More On Porky

News comes that since I posted on Wednesday, Porky Flu killed three more people in Jacksonville.

Ginny and I have volunteered to help with the city-wide vaccination of every person in the city so Thursday I put off work to take three required classes preparing me to combat the deadly disease—

Actually my job will be to stand at the door of a POD site and tell people to keep in line.

But in training for this vital, responsible task, we drove into Southside for one class. First time we've crossed the river in about a year. As usual, I played the role of class clown to provide comic relief to serious business.

A friend of mine once criticized me for devoting energy to humanitarian social service stuff instead of evangelism. At that time, Ginny and I were planting flowers to beautify a slum community. He said that I'm trying to make the world as nice a place as possible for people to go to Hell from.

Yes, I believe the salvation of souls is of primary importance, but it would be nice to keep folks alive until they have a chance to accept the Gospel.

If you help folks with something they know they need, then maybe they'll listen to you when you tell them about something they don't realize they need. And our generation's eyes have been clouded, our minds distracted, and our hearts dulled to the reality and result of our sin.

Daily we teeter unaware and off-balance on the sharp edge of Eternity.

One of America's foremost evangelists, Jonathan Edwards—His message *Sinners In The Hands Of An Angry God* is the classic standard for presenting the terror of Hell and the loving grace of God—died helping fight disease.

On one hand, Edwards proclaimed that the only thing keeping any of us from dropping feet-first into Hell, is the pleasure of God.

On the other hand, Edwards, President of Princeton University, died when he volunteered for one of the world's first small pox vaccinations; he volunteered to be a medical guinea pig as an example to encourage people frightened by the new procedure to be inoculated. Unfortunately his own inoculation went bad, but eventually the new medical innovation saved the physical lives of millions of people all over the world.

In my work on divine guidance book I ran across these words from Isaiah:

Feed the hungry! Help those in trouble! Then your light will shine out from the darkness, and the darkness around you shall be as bright as day. And the Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy you with all good things.

Helping others, bringing light, being guided by God, and being satisfied with life seem to link in the Prophet's mind.

In his 5-minute video this morning our youngest son, Donald, continues to teach theology to his cat. Yesterday, he talked about this sort of hands-on humanitarian/Christian service at <http://www.youtube.com/user/dzcowart> . I get a lot out of his disheveled first-thing-in-the-morning talks. Hard to picture him as a slick tv preacher. I think he's found his true niche.

Don't tell Donald, but I don't think any cat can ever be saved.

But, all dogs go to Heaven.

Saturday, October 03, 2009

Here, Miss, Let Me Help You With That

Friday I finished my training classes preparing me to work in the swine flu (H1N1—Porky Flu) vaccination program. I received three certificates and a laminated badge featuring a picture of Porky Pig himself....

Wait one minute here.

That's not Porky Pig.

That's a photo of me on the badge!

Easy case of mistaken identity because the main thing I learned in the bioterrorism section of my training is that I'm a goner because I'm too fat to fit into a HAZMAT suit.

But, no problem.

Dr. Elena Bodnar's wonderful invention could save my life from any germ or poison gas attack.

Saving life is what this is all about.

I'll come back to Dr. Bodnar's invention in a minute but I want to think about life for a moment first. Life is both tough and fragile.

For instance, back on September 24th, I mentioned my friend Bubba's had a heart attack and stopped breathing for 20 minutes, and being on life support. Thursday, his family decided to remove the tubes and machines. They expected him to die right then.

Bubba is still hanging on.

The life spark within us is tough and tenacious. We cling to life. It's as though we know we were originally designed to live forever somewhere and that death is an anomaly.

On the other hand, life is fragile.

We can lose it in a second. Without warning. Between one breath and the next, we can step into Eternity.

Yesterday I mentioned Jonathan Edwards. When I was younger I read a lot of his writings. His high view of the beauty and splendor of God touched me deeply.

I recall him using an illustration of life's fragility. He pictured us as walking through a field and stepping on the rotten wooden cover of an abandoned well. The spongy wood sags and creaks, too weak to bear our weight. Any second it may give way and drop us feet first into the darkness below. But we stroll on unaware of our danger.

Edwards said that we are kept from falling into darkness only by the strength of God's grace. He keeps us up by His good pleasure.... And His fingers can drop us as easily as He can drop a brick. Nothing stands between life and darkness but His mercy.

Life is tough and life is fragile. This week over 4,000 people died without warning in the earthquakes in Indonesia and Peru. Scores died in Samoa when the tsunami swept over a mile inland in four minutes. Here in Jacksonville, a guy riding his bike to work, hit by a car.

Fragile life can be snatched away from us in a second—the ten-year-old girl reading her library book in bed when the druggies began shooting outside in the street and a stray bullet came through the wall of her house and hit her in the head. The far-away dam breaking. The pregnant-looking young woman in the supermarket with a dynamite bomb strapped ... The list of such life-snatchers can be endless.

The key in the ignition. The heart flutter in our breast.
The sneeze of a stranger....

That thought brings me back to my biohazard class and Dr. Bodnar's invention of a unique protective device. Yesterday at an awards dinner at Harvard University's Sanders Theater, Dr. Bodnar received her 2009 IgNobel prize in Public Health.

According to numerous news articles and photos in the Daily Mail newspaper, Dr. Bodnar invented a brassiere which can double as a protective mask against germs or gas.



It lifts and separates and filters.

Yes, her brassiere detaches to become two gas masks—one for you and one for a friend.

'You have to be prepared all the time, at any place, at any moment, and practically every woman wears a bra,' she said, noting that a bra cup, no matter what size, is the perfect shape to fit over the human mouth and nose.

Here is a photo of Wolfgang Ketterle, 2001 winner of that other Nobel Prize for Physics, (I'm not sure what he invented) as the good sport steps up to breath through



Dr. Bodnar's bra.

FEMA does not issue such protective equipment to volunteers, and I doubt if Ginny has one of these in her lingerie drawer. So, what I'll do, is at the next training class, I'll ask all the pretty

nurses if I can...

Is there a protective device for getting slapped?

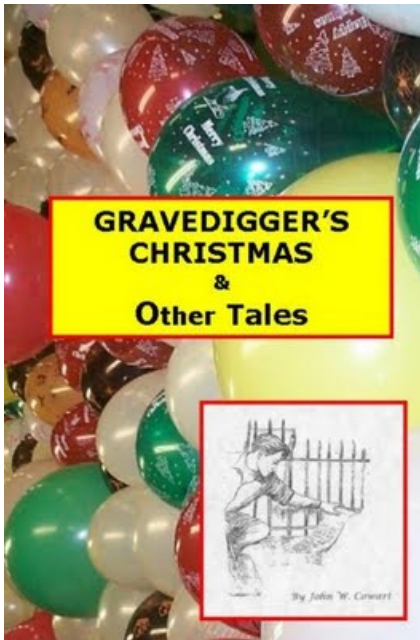
Monday, October 05, 2009

My Fame Spreads

Over the weekend, while Ginny and I raked leaves in the back yard, unbeknownst to me, I became famous.

Yes, Google Books added my book *Gravedigger's Christmas* to their online catalogue. All you have to do is go onto the Google Book site and enter *Gravedigger's Christmas* in the search box—and a photo of that book cover automatically appears complete with a synopsis of the contents, sample pages, and links of places to buy a copy.

The title story of my book tells about an odd but true incident that happened to my family one Christmas Eve when I was working at a local cemetery.



Gravedigger's Christmas also collects various other pieces I've written touching on other holidays—yes, even April Fool's Day—as well as things I've written just to inspire and help readers make it through the normal daily grind.

I think it's a good book.

I'm just as tickled as can be that this book made the Google Books listing for outstanding, literary merit as a contribution to western civilization and a source of enlightenment for cultured, refined readers of superior

good taste...

Actually, Google Books will list just about any book ever published anywhere, but nonetheless I'm tickled to be included.

Yes indeed, while a search for Stephen King only brings up 81,763 listings, and a search for Charles Dickens only brings up 759,588 listings, a search for my books brings up 9 big listings.

I am catching up with those other famous authors.

At least now I'm on the same list with them.

Hey, when you have any victory in this life, it's good to celebrate it.

In the same vein, Sunday I received an e-mail notification that several of my books now appear on a book club site called WeRead at http://weread.com/iread_index.php. I tried to check it out, but unfortunately I can not figure out how to view my own books on that site. Apparently it lumps me in with any author named—John!

Win some. Lose some.

Maybe I'm not that famous an author after all.

But I try.

On his latest early morning video, my youngest son, Donald, a seminary student, explains the Trinity to three of his cats. I love to see the wheels spin in Donald's head as he thinks things through as he gives these unrehearsed talks. Please check out his five-minute Morning Seminary devotional site at <http://www.youtube.com/user/dzcowart#play/uploads>.

I tried to leave a comment to encourage him but the sign in process defeated me.

I can't figure out how to see my books on weRead, I can't comment on my son's video site...

Am I that incompetent with computers?

I don't think Bill Gates has ever read one of my books. I'd bet that he wanted to buy one once, but he couldn't figure out the computer order form either.

Wednesday, October 07, 2009 Me, As A Modelist & As A Husband

Tuesday at breakfast my friend Wes and I discussed the trinity. Wes accused me of modelism (I think that's the word he used, can't say I've ever heard it before. I think it's a philosophical term).

Viewing my youngest son's Sunday video sparked this conversation. Donald, with his cats, had talked about the trinity and Wes seemed pleased that he avoided modelism in his video.

Apparently modelism is a way of thinking about the trinity as showing three aspects of one being. Thus, I am one me, but I am husband to my wife, father to my kids, and son to my parents. Or, I sometimes think of the trinity (should that word be capitalized?) as ice, water and steam—a solid, liquid and a gas but all the same substance. Or, I try to imagine a diamond with three sparkling facets.

Wes says I limit God by such modelistic thinking.

Wes tried to explain how modelism falls short of the glory of God, but I'm not sure I'm smart enough to followed his explanation, or to do it justice by trying to repeat it. Maybe someday he will address his view on his website.

The problem is that God is unique. There is nothing like Him, not exactly like Him, anywhere.

To start with, He is Creator. All else is created. Thus everything from archangels to cockroaches (with me being somewhere on the scale in between, probably closer to the cockroach end of the chart) –Angels, roaches and me all have in common that we are created beings.

Therefore God is incomprehensible to our finite minds. Except, as He chooses to reveal Himself to us.

Over my pancakes, I quoted the Scripture, “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known”.

Wes emphasized the “Now we see” part of that verse; I emphasize the “through a glass darkly” part.

Wes also pointed out to me that sometimes in Scripture the word *God* is used as an adjective, it’s not always a proper noun.

That’s something I’ll really have to think about.

I love our talks. They encourage me to think about the majesty and mystery of the Lord God Almighty and His care for the creation He made.

Makes me so glad I’m a Christian.

Then Wes and I drifted into talking about church stuff which is of no interest to anybody else.

I really enjoy these talks with Wes. He whets my mind.

After Wes left, I tried to look up the word he’d used to describe me in my dictionary; Maybe it was *Modalist*. My dictionary says *modality* is, “the classification of logical propositions according to their asserting or denying the possibility, impossibility, contingency, or necessity of their content”.

Well, that certainly clears that up.

Wes did alert me to the fact that one guy who attends the same church as Wes does, wanted to telephone me but didn’t because he feared I might mention him in a blog posting.

That bothers me.

I thought I evidenced a little more discretion than that.

Honestly folks, I do not even mention anything or anybody I suspect might want confidentiality. Nor do I mention anything vital related to our Neighborhood Crime Watch or CERT, or MRC, etc.. And even one of my own family members requested that I not mention him—so I don't.

I have enough sins, foibles, goofs, and stupid ideas of my own, that I never need to tell about things people tell me in confidence.

I may be a modelist (whatever that is) but I know when to keep my mouth shut.

Oh, now I get it.

When my eyesight was sharper, I constructed model ships—a modelist. Here's a photo of me building a model sailing ship in a beer bottle, one of my proudest accomplishments in life:

I use this photo as my avatar.



In the evening, after a trip to the library, Ginny and I ate dinner at Kosta's Italian.

Met a lady in tears.

Her husband (boyfriend?) had taken her there and ordered food. They got into an argument and he stalked

out leaving her without money to pay the bill. Ginny loaned the lady her cell phone so she could call her dad or someone to bring her cash for the meal.

Sad.

Ginny and I talked about our own relationship and I foolishly said, "Well, you knew what you were getting when you married me".

"No. I didn't," she said. "I had no idea. But I'm not too very disappointed".

We talked about what our expectations were 40 years ago and realized that the culture pattern we expected to follow in marriage was conditioned by the '50s tv program *Leave It To Beaver*!

June Cleaver vacuumed wearing a stylish housedress, high-heels and a string of pearls. Ward came home from work dressed in suit and tie, put on his sweater and slippers, picked up his pipe and evening paper, and relaxed while June served up supper. Their table always sported a white tablecloth.

As Ginny and I compared what we'd been led to expect when we first married with the reality of what our first 40 years have been like, we got a huge laugh.

Ward and June on *Leave It To Beaver*—not exactly.

More like Onslow and Daisy on *Keeping Up Appearances*.

But such a joy. Such a blessing. Such delight.

Besides, Ginny paid for our eggplant parmigiana

Thursday, October 08, 2009 **A Bad Day For Bad Guys**

The Kid In The Attic, my imaginary reader a hundred years from now, is going to love this news.

My reports come from two sources: The London Daily Mail newspaper, and WEJZ Radio's Morning Show news.

The *Mail* regularly carries articles about thug attacks. Bands of roving gangs beat up innocent targets—retarded kids, old folks, the weak and alone. Such problems are not confined to London; I heard a report that this morning

some citizen shot at a school bus right here in Jacksonville.

But anyhow, these thugs in London spotted two men dressed as women walking down the street. They rushed the supposed transvestites.

But it turned out that the two “ladies” were cage fighters on their way to some costume party.

The cage fighters did not take kindly to being attacked and called names.

Poor thugs.

They ended up in jail... after being released from the hospital.

Closer to home, a mother in Texas heard two men trying to break into her front door late at night. She armed herself as best she could, slipped out her back door, climbed a tree to get on top of her roof, and quietly walked across the rooftop to the front.

How did she arm herself?

As she had crept out of her dark house, she filled her son’s bicycle helmet with billiard balls.

Positioning herself above the thieves, she hurled billiard balls at their heads screaming like an avenging harpy.

Scared the crap out of ‘em.

They ran away hurting.

A policeman responding to her 911 call asked why she threw billiard balls?

“It was dark and I couldn’t find my crossbow,” she said.

Nothing like that going on in my own life. Wednesday Patricia, our youngest daughter, and Clint, her fiancé, drove up from downstate to met me and make wedding plans. At the moment, they are thinking of an outdoor ceremony at Treaty Oak, a beautiful and ancient Jacksonville landmark.

We drove over there and checked it out talking about chairs and restrooms and parking and hotels and football

—all in the rosy haze of young love. “Why would we need restrooms? We’re in love”.

Old drudge Dad in the gray haze of aching feet kept things practical—the killjoy.

It was such fun to see them together. I’m happy for them.

Back home, Patricia fell asleep in the big chair while Clint and I got acquainted. Our talk ranged from faith, work, education, and the military, to murals, movies, baking cupcakes, and the art of Salvador Dali.

I look forward to talking with him again.

Late news just came—my dear friend Lloyd Dixon Sr. finally died this afternoon, a week after being removed from life support...

Rest in peace, Bubba.

It was a bad day for good guys too.

Friday, October 09, 2009 **A Request For Your Input**

I am writing a book about divine guidance, and I’d like your help please.

My book examines how we find and follow God’s will.

My working title is *If God Leads Me, Why Do I Run In Circles*. It’s about how God leads and guides people.



I need help.

I’d like your input.

Please comment below about some incident in your own life where you feel God has led you. Or, some occasion when you feel you’ve been guided. Or how you feel you have come to know the will of God for yourself today.

Whether your own experience involves a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, or a still small voice, please tell me your story.

I'm bogged down and I really need your help.

I'm sure your input will inspire me—and maybe I'll be able to use some of your material in the book.. Thanks,
---- John

Monday, October 12, 2009
A Word Of Guidance From Columbus

Know what the cannibal Indians said when they saw the *Pinta*, the *Nina* and the *Santa Maria* approaching shore?

"Ut Oh, here come boat people".



I once wrote an article about Christopher Columbus; It forms a chapter in my book *Strangers On The Earth* (www.bluefishbooks.info). It's based largely on diaries he kept. I have this thing about old diaries.



Anyhow, one thing he said pertains to the book I'm writing now about divine guidance:

Years after his first voyage, Columbus said:

"It was the Lord who put into my mind to sail from here to the Indies. There is no question that the inspiration was from the

Holy Spirit, because He comforted me with rays of marvelous illumination from the Holy Scriptures, encouraging me continually to press forward.

"No one should fear to undertake any task in the name of our Savior, if it is just and if the intention is purely for His holy service".

In other words, Venture out in Christ.

Go ahead, sail off the edge of the earth!

What a ride!

It's fun!

Today, new worlds lie ahead.

PS: You may not have guessed it, but I had a great weekend.

Tuesday, October 13, 2009

Dave's Diner Closes Its Door

Monday my friend Barbara came over to take me to breakfast, but when we got to Dave's Diner, a sign on the door announced that the restaurant is closed.

Thus ends an era.

Ginny and I have been going to Dave's a couple of times a week for the past 15 years, since back when it was called DeLoache's. Our family has celebrated birthday parties there, Father's Day, Mother's Day, and a party when Ginny's brother and his wife adopted two orphan kids.

Once, our kids even bought me a Dave's Diner tee shirt:



Last night at devotions Ginny and I prayed for the staff of Dave's—Ed and Chris and Nicole, and Billy, and

Robin and Jesse and Big Will; and, from the old days, Alex, Homer and Mark—people are put out of work by the restaurant's closing. They have been like extended family to us and we grieve for their loss.

We also prayed for customers we know by sight but not by name: the battle-wounded marine, Chuck, One-eyed Sally, the librarian, the clergy couple, the homosexual couples, the feeble old lady, and so many others for whom Dave's was a fixture in their lives.

Also last night I searched my old diaries to see references to Dave's and remember all the happy times we've had there—one diary posting I found was from ten years ago.

Surprise! Back in '99 I was in a slump of depression and I was concerned about how God guides us... A lot of this old post could have been written yesterday!

I'm going to repeat it here:

Caution: the following contains profanity, adult, and religious content; if you are offended by such things, you may want to skip this posting:

Wednesday, April 14, 1999:

This morning I biked to the Murray Hill Library to return books. The building had not opened yet and books overflowed the external book drop.

A train across the tracks had delayed me before I got to the library and I puzzled over why I appeared to be held in the area. The thought of leaving my books on top of the book drop tempted me, but a large number of high school students clustered around the library waiting for a school bus to show up and since one of my books was the latest Stephen King, I felt reluctant to leave it in plain sight.

I rode down the street to see if anymore goodies had been put out from the closed Greyhound Bus Depot but the fence was locked and the pile of trash/treasures out of reach. Nothing for it but to hang around till the library opened; so I decided to eat breakfast at DeLoache's (now renamed Dave's Diner) — where something odd happened.

I had almost finished my eggs, sausage and grits when a trio came in, two guys and a girl. They sat near my table and their conversation grew loud enough to overhear. One guy appeared to be a bystander but the other spoke cruelly to the woman. At one point he said, "Just because I fuck you doesn't mean you can hang around my apartment while I'm at work".

He threw some money on the table to pay for the meal and he and the other guy stomped out.

The woman sat there smoking cigarettes and looking miserable.

She sported enormous tits unencumbered by a bra. She was quite pretty but with an aura of roughness. A woman who has been around... but she was obviously very unhappy.

None of my business...

Now I don't readily speak to strangers. I went to the cashier and paid my bill and returned to my table for my library books. I felt a compulsion to speak to the young woman. I sat back down sipping coffee and thinking of reasons I should leave; but the nagging feeling that I should talk to her about Christ persisted. Given my current low spiritual state, I'm in no way qualified to speak with anybody about eternal matters.

Besides, I have things to do, plans for the morning. Her boyfriend may return. She might think I'm hitting on her. I'm no preacher. I have nothing to say. I'm empty. Depressed...

"Miss, are you OK? You look so unhappy over here. May I sit with you for a minute?" I said.

She nodded, on the verge of tears.

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"The problem is that I am a whore," she said.

I said, "Whore is not what you are. It is something you do. And you can change that anytime you want to".

She explained that she sold pussy to buy drugs for herself and this guy she'd been with. He is not exactly a full time pimp but he does take her money and beat her, and this has been their off and on relationship for a year

of so. She has done exotic dancing and whoring on the side but she's stopped dancing and just whores now, picking up guys on street corners. She's sick of herself and some of the things she's done. For instance, recently some guy at the beach had her push the spike heel of her high heel shoe up his ass while she sucked him off. He later pissed on her breasts as she masturbated.

Glamorous life, no?

She told me that she suffers from chronic depression (no wonder), and that she is bi-polar as well as manic-depressive. She also takes crack cocaine and drinks to excess.

"My life is in a deep, dark hole and there's no way out," she said. "I want to change but I can't. I just stay in this hole".

"Good," I said.

That got her attention.

"Jesus Christ knows all about holes. He was tortured to death for our sins and they put Him in a grave, the deepest, darkest hole there is. But because He is the Prince of Life, He came out of that hole. He knows what it's like. He knows where you are, and He cares about what happens to you".

I again emphasized that *whore* is what she does, not what she is. "You are a woman created in the very image of God Almighty. He treasures you. He cares about how other people have treated you and about how you have treated yourself. He values you. He actually loves you no matter what.

"If you ever decide to change what you are doing, He will help you. And there are other people who will help too."

I wrote down phone numbers for Liberty Center for Women, Hubbard House, WSCO, and Laurel (a Christian counselor I know). "If you want to go on doing what you have been doing, you can. No one is going to stop you. If you ever decide you are sick enough of the life you are leading and really want to change, then Jesus will help you. It will be tough but it is possible. You don't have to

keep on doing what you are doing and feeling the way you are feeling. The ball is in your court."

"Mister," she said, "I think God sent you here this morning."

Her name is Cindy.

When I got home, I called Hazel. "Oh John, I think God had you call me this morning," she said. She is upset about Medicare problems and prescriptions.

Later, I called K.K at church. "The Lord must have had you call," he said, "I've been thinking of calling you all morning".

Thus three times today it appears that God's hand has been directing my activities and using me... yet I am not conscious of being any more devout or spiritual than at any other time recently. I still feel empty, dried up and useless... Perhaps these three contacts have been sent from Heaven to encourage me not to give up altogether. The three incidents were not for the benefit of the other people involved, but for me because I am so low and discouraged and depressed.

Thursday, October 15, 2009

Family Support

While my name alone appears on the covers of the books I write, my family contributes as much to their production as I do.

They make my work possible with every level of support.

Recently I have been working on a manuscript about God's leading and guiding us and how we find and follow the will of God. If I recall correctly, I began work on this book back in 1986, but I dropped it as too hard for me, and came back to it, several times. And quit work on it several times.

Not a good practice.

For one thing, over the years I used a bunch of different typefaces, and formats as I graduated from one computer to newer one.

For another thing, my notes stink.

I've forgotten what footnote goes with which quote and now I have to look references up all over again.... And why did I save this quote anyhow?

I drive me nuts.

Anybody know who Stoddard is, what book he wrote, and why I left a manuscript note to be sure to include his ideas from page 387 in my text?

Me neither.

Frustrating work to turn this rat's nest of notes, quotes, and half-ideas into consistent book chapters. I knew so much more about the will of God 20 years ago than I do now. Lord, but I was cocksure of myself back then. I'm tempted to give the project up—again. But I know that if I give up again, I'll never get this book written.

I've been stewing over the thing.

Then yesterday afternoon came a happy note from my son-in-law Mark. Without my knowing anything about it beforehand, Mark created an author's profile in *Wikipedia*. He created dozens of links to my books so that I appear much more important than I am. Mark put a massive amount of work into promoting me and my books.

I'm tickled.

You can read Mark's entry about me at :
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Wilson_Cowart .

I have an encyclopedia entry. That tops a WANTED poster at the post office.

I'm somebody.

Thanks Mark.

In a similar vein, last week—purely out of vanity—I googled Bluefish Books, my online publishing company. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that you can buy a clock, a coffee mug and a bunch of shirts with my Bluefish Logo on them:

I did not know that.



Never heard of it before.

How did that happen?

I imagine that Donald or Helen created this site; but I don't recall anyone ever mentioning it to me. It came as a pleasant surprise to me to find this website—Although it will be a cold day, before I spend that much for a tee shirt! —even one with

my logo on it.

The stuff (gear?) can be viewed at <http://clothing.cafepress.com/item/golf-shirt/17321602>

However, my point here is that my family is wonderful. They are so kind to me. They surprise me all the time in all kinds of ways.

I am blessed.

Thank You, Lord.

Monday, October 19, 2009 Happy Hay Days

The St. Marys River separates Florida from Georgia.

The city of St. Marys, Georgia, lies at the mouth of the river in Camden County about 30 miles north of our home in Jacksonville, Florida.

Indian tribes occupied the area in prehistory.

The French and Spanish fought over the territory in the 1560s.

Then in 1663, the English claimed Georgia until the American Revolution when Georgia's representatives signed the Declaration of Independence.

This past weekend Ginny and I had business in St. Marys, the second oldest continuously occupied city in the United States.



We found the city occupied by scarecrows.

Yes, in celebration of Happy Hay Days, a harvest festival, city residents erected scores and scores of scarecrows in the median of the main street, in front of homes and businesses.



Anybody and everybody seems to have a hand in decorating the scarecrows. Businesses, civic organizations, clubs, police, firemen, schools, and even

candidates running for office constructed scarecrows with a theme related to their interests.

Here is a photo of me and a friend (in pantyhose) front of Orange Hall:



The windy day blew the purple hat off the Mad Hatter, but I replaced it:



Even the town's churches took part in the community's display. A scarecrow dressed in a priest's robes greeted folks at the door of one church. Another church arranged dozens of bronze chrysanthemums around a notice saying—Worship The Lord Of The Harvest.

Ginny made friends with a lady scarecrow from a local barbershop:



Naturally, the girls discussed how the wind made for a bad hair day:



Being a history buff, I discussed how local history sites are vanishing with the Invisible Man scarecrow:



Of course no day's outing for us would be complete without a lingering visit to a secondhand book store where I browsed among old diaries and journals in one room while Ginny looked at mysteries in a room through the arch:



With unusual and admirable restraint, we only bought two books!

We strolled along the waterfront watching fishermen, and crabbers tending their traps and shrimpers casting nets, hikers boarding the Cumberland Island ferry and Coast Guard boats patrolling the river, a three-mast schooner at anchor just offshore:



Worn out from all our walking amid 200-year-old homes, we enjoyed a magnificent lunch at a restaurant

overlooking the waterfront as the end of a happy, happy day.



On that happy note, I'm shutting down this blog for a couple of weeks. My well has run dry and I need to replenish myself before I'll have anything worth saying for a while.

Please check back now and then, or browse in my archives, if you're interested in what I think. But for right now, I feel a time of silence is appropriate.

John Cowart's Daily Journal: A befuddled ordinary Christian looks for spiritual realities in day to day living.

Thursday, October 29, 2009
Momentarily Out Of The Teapot

Like the dormouse stuffed in the teapot at the Mad Hatter's Tea Party, I'm sticking my head out to make a comment before the lid goes on again.



Thomas A'Kempis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Christopher Columbus, John Calvin, James Dobson, Jonathan Edwards, Francois Fenelon, Charles Finney, King George IV, Soren Kierkegaard, Adolph Hitler, Seth Hubel, Ignatius, Saint Jerome, C.S. Lewis, Martin Luther, Dwight L. Moody, Florence Nightingale, Obadiah, Peter Lombard, Charles Spurgeon... John Wesley...

As I work writing a book about God's will and how the Lord guides us, I'm reading books by all the above folks.

Actually, I'm not reading all their books,
I'm skimming for quotes.

Looking for stuff that helps me know how far off track my own ideas are when compared to the ideas from authorities of the past. But more than that, I'm quoting these guys to make myself sound as though I'm a thorough researcher, and an authority in myself.

I'm such a fucking fake!

I cull ideas from spiritual giants and quote them because I'm so shallow and devoid of devotion myself. I read and read and read but by and large I have no idea what these guys are talking about.

I think John Wesley states the thrust of my book better than I can myself:

Servants, as they must do their Master's work, so they must be for any work their Master has for them to do: they must not pick and choose, this I will do, and that I will not do; they must not say this is too hard, or this is too mean, or this may be well enough let alone; good Servants, when they have chosen their Master, will let their Master choose their work, and will not dispute His will, but do it.

Christ has many services to be done, some are more easy and honorable, others more difficult and disgraceful; some are suitable to our inclinations and interests, others are contrary to both: in some we may please Christ and please ourselves, as when he requires us to feed and clothe ourselves, to provide things honest for our maintenance, yes, and there are some spiritual duties that are more pleasing than others; as to rejoice in the Lord, to be blessing and praising of God, to be feeding ourselves with the delights and comforts of Religion; these are the sweet works of a Christian.

But then there are other works wherein we cannot please Christ but by denying ourselves, as giving and lending, bearing and forbearing, reproving men for their sins, withdrawing from their company, witnessing against wickedness, when it will cost us shame and reproach; sailing against the wind; parting with our ease, our liberties, and accommodations for the Name of our Lord Jesus.

It is necessary, Beloved, to sit down and consider what it will cost you to be the Servants of Christ, and to take a thorough survey of the whole business of Christianity, and not engage hand over head, to you know not what.

First, See what it is that Christ expects, and then yield yourselves to His whole will: do not think of compounding, or making your own terms with Christ, that will never be allowed you.

Go to Christ, and tell Him, Lord Jesus, if You will receive me into Your house, if You will but

own me as your Servant, I will not stand upon terms; impose upon me what conditions You please, write down Your own articles, command me what You will, put me to any thing You see as good; let me come under Your roof, let me be Your Servant, and spare not to command me; I will be no longer my own, but give up myself to Your will in all things.

I come nowhere near that level of devotion or dedication.

It's hard for me to write a book about what I don't live.

One chapter may come easy. Did you notice that I include Adolph Hitler in my list of authorities to quote?

Yes, I'm writing one chapter entitled, "Kooks And The Will Of God"—it's about people who have committed atrocities or did kooky things while claiming God told them to.

That's a chapter I think I may be able to handle.

Changing topics:

One day last week I pulled a 24-hour shift as caregiver for a family member who is seriously ill and in excruciating pain.

I feel so helpless to see her suffer so.

It's frustrating on a couple of levels.

First, it infringed on my personal comfort. I did not feel free to smoke my pipe in her house so I had to stand outside in the rain to smoke. No place to sit without getting my ass soaked. And to stand causes my feet to swell, burn and sting. Besides, I could not sleep so I stayed awake for the whole time in the unfamiliar surroundings; and I did not want to sit on the furniture because they have two inside dogs and a cat and I feared getting fleas from those creatures.

The sick patient complains less than I do.

Another thing on a more serious level. Some well-meaning Christian spent \$50 to buy her a tape-player from some tv preacher who says God will cure her if only she believes hard enough and eliminates any person who sends off negative vibrations.

Negative? Who me?

If I did not have negative thoughts, I'd be a walking carrot.

Hardly ever have any other kind.

But I bit my tongue and said nothing about the \$50 tape worm preacher. Hey, if it gives the patient some comfort in her misery, who am I to douse hope. She even plays this thing in her sleep for subliminal reinforcement.

I doubt if a sickroom is the best place to combat heresy.

Is a false hope better than no hope?

Or maybe I'm just a wimp who did not speak out when I should have.

In one of our conversations she told me something that frightens me—she's two payments behind on her mortgage. Still owes more than three times the value of our home when it was new!

Because last month my two elder sons lost the home they'd lived in for 50+ years to foreclosure, the thought that my daughter is behind on her house payments scares the hell out of me.

If it can happen to them, it could happen to Ginny and me—I fear this even though we have never missed or been late with our mortgage payment. Besides that, another scary thing happened: a director at Ginny's office found her job abolished without notice last week. And this came the day after a major triumph in that lady's department.

One day celebrating, the next day on the street.

While none of these things directly affect Ginny and me, yet to see trouble to people close by terrifies me.

While John Wesley and other spiritual giants relish full commitment to Christ and resolve to follow His will at any cost, I covet comfort.

I want my chair, my pipe, my coffee mug at hand, my book in my lap while I nap.

I'm 70 years old and I want my own way.

I fear the troubles of this world.

And I fear that following Christ fully may rock my boat.
I'm a Christian scaredy-cat.
But, for all that, I hold on.
Christ is my Lord.

I can't claim a lot of faith, but I hold on. I think that for me it's more a matter of pig-headedness than religious faith. When I read the Scripture, it more often condemns me than comforts, but I hold on. As Job said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him".

Nevertheless, faith makes me nervous.

I walk by faith—on eggs.

But, what say the Scriptures?

"Even to your old age I am He; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you". —Isaiah 46:4

"Those that be planted in the house of the LORD shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing to shew that the LORD is upright". —Psalm 92:14

I don't know about the fruit and flourishing part of that verse, but I qualify as being fat.

But the interesting phrase in that verse is why the Lord deals with the aged—"To shew that the LORD is upright".

OK. Now I'll go back in the teapot till after Ginny and I get back from our 41st Anniversary trip out camping in cabin in the deep piney woods. Maybe walking in the deep woods will get my head more attuned than reading more Whats-Hz-Name.



NOVEMBER

Sunday, November 01, 2009

The First Day Of November

Were she still alive, my mother would be 93 years plus one day today.

Yes, she always lied about her birthday.

She said it was November First.

But in going through her papers after she died in 1985, we found her birth certificate showing that she was actually born on Halloween. Not even her sisters knew this. We figure she was ashamed of her birthday because people might think she was a witch or something evil.

I refrain from further comment.

During the day yesterday, Ginny and I divided forces in preparations for our anniversary trip. She took the car to the mechanic for a checkup—which ate grievously into our vacation cash—while I blew accumulated leaves off the roof and cleaned the rain gutters.

We met for lunch at a BBQ place where our waitress wore a skimpy devil costume. Her cleavage was so deep you could lose a whole side of ribs down there.

I noticed.

Then, in the evening Ginny and I set out our Halloween display and prepared huge packets for trick-or-treaters. I didn't take photos this year; pretty much the same set up display as for previous years except we included more candy in the packets this year. (See October 30, 2005 for photos).

I wonder if this is worth the effort but we do what we can and give the best we've got.

You can never tell what counts and what doesn't.

For instance, a neighbor came over to sit outside with me to talk seriously for a time last night as we handed out the candy, tracts, and toys. He's seen something or another that made him want to talk with me.

Funny thing that because Friday night Ginny and I ran into a young couple we haven't seen in ten or 12 years and they went on and on about how much of a testimony

we were to them. In fact they'd been talking about us on Thursday.... Funny thing, is how I see this "Young" couple as young when they were out with their grandbaby!

I'm really getting over the hill when I think of grandparents as young.

A happy encounter.

All day Ginny and I have enjoyed happy, serious conversations ourselves—talking about our vacation plans and sex and history and art and joy and Christian witness.

Last week my friends Barbara and Wes treated me to breakfast at someplace that wasn't Dave's and we talked about these same sort of issues. Odd, Barbara is in her 80s and has just finished chemo treatments for ovarian cancer, yet she's planning an evangelistic/Christian growth outreach at the retirement home where she lives. She's forming a discussion group to think about basic Christian living issues.

And here I am, ten years younger and in good health—doing nothing to advance the Kingdom of Christ... Ginny and I talked about this quite a bit yesterday.

I'd like to think that writing this book I'm working on about finding and following the will of God may be a bit of a witness. But judging from the way my books have circulated in the past, I don't have much hope for this one making much of an impact either.

Here's an interesting note about that:

Martin Luther wrote a book named, *The Bondage Of The Will*; Jonathan Edwards wrote a book named, *The Freedom Of The Will*. I've been reading excerpts from both books as I research my own tome... Any wonder that the more I research the subject, the less I know about it.

I'm examining the thoughts and lives of great thinkers and Christians of the past to see how they found the will of God in their own lives.

I'm looking at Scripture to see how God leads. The one passage just about everyone knows begins, "The Lord is my Shepherd...He leadeth me..."

And I also look at various pagan practices from hepatoscopy to oneiromancy to see how people have sought the voice of God (Hepatoscopy is seeking the will

of the gods in the liver of a sacrifice; oneiromancy is seeking the will of gods in your sleep). I even examine the practice of listening for the voice of a god by holding a sea shell to your ear.

But besides looking at Scripture and the lives and thoughts of other Christians, I'm also going back through some of my old diaries to detail how I think God may have led me in various practical situations such as buying a car, home repairs, treatment for my prostate cancer, Everyday stuff like that.

One thing I find in all this study is that God often leads us by applying the pressure of circumstance.

He places us under tremendous tension and stress to bring about His will.

Think of God as an archer.

Think of His message as an arrow.

You are the bow.

The more strain on the bow, the more power of the arrow's impact.

No archer wants to break His bow; he wants it to function under maximum stress.

That might explain a lot of stuff that happens in life.

Barbara tells me that when she was first diagnosed with ovarian cancer, she thought that just might be her ticket out, but as her body responded positively to the chemo, there came a point when she said, "Looks like I'm going to live. What does the Lord want me to do with the rest of my life?".

So she bought the video tapes and began setting up the life-issues discussion group.

We all want to know God's will—even if we only want to know it so we can perhaps consider it as one of our options.

We'd like to see a big bush that talks and burns at the same time—but that's only happened to one guy.

God's guidance for most of us is a bit more subtle.

For instance, as I think back about how 42 years ago Ginny and I decided to get married, it boils down to this:

She was horny.

I was horny.

That settled the matter.

You mean God can lead by purely human appetites of the flesh?

Worked for us.

Monday, November 16, 2009

Our 41st Anniversary Trip—Part One

For our vacation observing our 41st anniversary, Ginny and I traveled to a cabin at Lafayette Blue Springs, a Florida state park about ten miles southwest of Luraville, a place so far out in the deep woods there was no cell phone service and our radio could only pick up one station.

Locals pronounce the county name as *Lafate*.

The radio station played country western music and told jokes, but never did say where they were broadcasting from. I reckon they figure if you can hear them, you know where they are.

One guy says, "Shot my dog yesterday"

"Was he mad"?

"He sure weren't too happy about it".

As we drove over there, we passed through one small town where we saw a bunch of people standing around a shade tree beside the road. Getting closer we read the sign announcing it was a site for swine flu shots being given in the open air clinic.

We'd never been to Lafayette Blue Springs before; we'd reserved our cabin back in March or April, so in this rural area we expected we might see a cabin like this:



But that was not our cabin; that's an old cracker house beside the road. It looks a lot like the homeplace—the house where my grandparents lived. On arriving in the state park, we found that our cabin to looks like this:



It's built up on stilts because of the nearby Suwannee River's frequent flooding. (Stephen Foster misspelled the name in his famous song). Ginny and I really rough it when we go camping. Here are three photos of the cabin's interior





Hunting season opens in November, so a car dealer advertising on the radio offered this incentive—

This month, if you buy a pickup truck from him and go hunting and shoot a deer, then tie it on the hood and bring it by the dealer so he can take a picture of it, then he will pay a taxidermist to mount your deer head so you can hang it on your wall at home.

If the big auto makers in Detroit offered buyers that kind of incentive, they would not need government bail out money.

Ginny and I did not go hunting, but we did swim in Lafayette Blue Spring, one of Florida's first magnitude springs.

Because the water flows from underground caverns at a constant temperature of 72 degrees year round, and

because the air temperature was only a little below that, November swimming in Florida is a joy.

Here is a photo of a water nymph posed to dive from a limestone outcropping above one spring pool:



But, she chickened out.



Here is a photo of me wearing my form-fitting Senior Citizen Speedo on that same outcropping:



Hey, it fits my form.

Blue Springs flow directly into the Suwannee through a series of pools. In places, the spring run undercuts the limestone forming a natural stone bridge. Here's a photo of Ginny standing on such a natural bridge:



A stone ridge at the mouth of the spring run creates boiling rapids:



The rapids foam. The spring's current flows swiftly into the Suwannee. The rocks are slippery. Be careful or... Never mind.



The radio announcer told about this guy who takes his wife deer hunting for the first time.

They are still-hunting so he sets her up in one spot while he climbs a tree-stand a few hundred yards away. BOOM. He hears a shot and thinks his wife has bagged one.

He goes over to find her holding her rifle on this man with his hands in the air.

“What’s going on”?

Irate, she said, “This guy wants to steal my deer”.

The guy said, “Lady, you can have it, just let me get my saddle off first”.

God willing, I hope to write more about our wonderful anniversary adventures, relay more radio jokes, talk about spiritual implications, and post more photos tomorrow and Wednesday.

Stay tuned to this station.

Tuesday, November 17, 2009
Our 41st Anniversary Trip—Part Two

Heard the one about the Florida sinkhole?

These two guys were out hunting in central Florida's sinkhole country. In the woods near the edge of a field they came across a deep hole in the ground.

It was so deep they could not see the bottom, so they threw in a rock and listened to hear it hit... Not a sound.

They tried a bigger rock.

Over the edge. It disappeared in the darkness without a sound.

They wanted to try something bigger, so they lugged over an old railroad tie from the edge of the field and toppled it into the deep hole. Down it went. They still could not hear it hit bottom.

But, as they stood on the edge looking down, they heard a crashing noise in the woods behind them. This goat came dashing through the bushes. Lickety-split, it ran to the edge of the deep hole and leaped.

Down, down, down it sailed and disappeared out of sight.

This behavior amazed the hunters. They'd never seen an animal act like that before. They picked up their rifles and headed back to where their pickup was parked.

As they crossed the field they met the farmer who said, "You fellows seen my goat back there in the woods? I know he cain't have got very far 'cause I had him just over yonder tethered on a long chain hooked to a railroad tie".

During our 41st anniversary vacation, Ginny and I explored a sinkhole.

While other people hunted deer, wild turkey, and bear, Ginny and I hunted Indian arrowheads and fossils around the Lafayette Blue Spring.

Sinkholes make a good place to seek such treasures. Spring waters flowing through subterranean caverns for years and years, wear away the living rock forming larger and larger underground rooms. Eventually the roof wears too thin to support the weight of the ground above and the whole thing falls in creating a sinkhole.

Hardly a year goes by without news reports of houses or even sections of interstate highway being swallowed by a sinkhole.

The sides of the sinkholes abound in fossils. The exposed rock sometimes reveals giant shark teeth over six inches long. The saber-toothed tiger, extinct bison, the ground sloth, and even mastodons once roamed Florida and the paleoIndians hunted such creatures.

Here's a photo of me half-way down a sinkhole near the springs:



I found a few fossil bone splinters and shells. Ginny found a bit of Indian potsherd; but she was more interested in plants we found in a gully:

She took photos of this Resurrection Fern growing on an oak in the sinkhole:



When we reached the bottom of the sinkhole, we found deer tracks and an otter's slide. Certified cave divers explore the depths of Florida sinkholes and springs; they say the underground, underwater caverns extend for miles under the earth.



One day, our radio told about the old farmer who asked his little boy if he wanted to grow up strong and healthy and live for a long time.

The old man told the boy the way to live long, is for everyday at breakfast, to open a shotgun shell and pour the gunpowder on your oatmeal.

The boy did this.

Must have worked. That boy lived to be 96 years-old and when he died he left 14 children, 43 grand children, and a 15-foot hole in the ground at the crematorium.

Enough about holes in the ground.

One day of our anniversary trip, Ginny and I drove over to Troy Springs about 20 miles from our cabin. The overcast day and glare on the water stopped me from taking photos at Troy Spring, but I found some others with a Bing search.

Before The War, in 1854, Capt. James M. Tucker build a steamboat which he used as a floating general store servicing towns along the Suwannee River.

When the invaders came, Capt. Tucker outfitted his steamboat with cannon, and his *CSS Madison* joined the Confederate navy.

Here's a 100-year-old photo of the *Madison*:



Four times, the *Madison* darted out the mouth of the Suwannee into the Gulf to successfully attack enemy ships. The enemy wanted to capture the *Madison* and turn her guns against the South. But in 1863, as the enemy chased, Capt. Tucker scuttled the *Madison* in the mouth of Troy Springs. And there she sits today.

Here is a recent photo of the ship's remains on the sand bottom in shallow water at the juncture of Troy Spring run and the Suwannee River:



When I was a Boy Scout during the 1950s, I dove on the wreck and plundered some iron spikes and boiler

plate for our troop museum. (This was years before Troy Spring became a state park). So I particularly wanted to show the site to Ginny because of my happy memories of that place.

Here's a recent photo of a diver on the *Madison* wreck



Scuttled.

Deliberately sunk to keep the valuable ship out of enemy hands.

The thought occurs to me that sometimes God scuttles my perfectly good plans... He even scuttles perfectly good people. Perfectly good organizations and churches... Sunk. Vanished beneath the waters.

Couldn't God preserve them?

Sure. But He chooses to scuttle good parts of my life to keep them out of enemy hands.

Things I once felt proud of, effective ministries, good jobs, happy relationships—you know the drill—are now only curios.

And tourists take pictures—if they even care.

But, and this is the important part, the enemy never got his filthy hands on them to turn them against God.

I've seen a lot of my dreams sink. If I regard them as senseless, arbitrary loss, regret overwhelms me. But if I

think of them as scuttled, I still feel loss, but it's an understandable loss.

Even an acceptable loss.

Tomorrow, God willing, I plan to write about more adventures of John and Ginny still in love and still exploring each other and the beautiful world around us..

And I've got the best preacher joke ever.

Stay tuned to this station.

Wednesday, November 18, 2009
Our 41st Anniversary Trip—Part Three

During the 1890s Charlie Edwin Turlington built a log cabin in Lafayette County, Florida, near where Ginny and I vacationed..

We visited the pioneer cabin one day during our anniversary vacation; and as we toured the structure, I reminisced about my grandfather's cracker home place near Graham, Florida. The footprint of the Turlington cabin (and of my grandfather's place) displays typical Florida Cracker architecture.



Turlington built his log cabin with two equal rooms separated by an open porch. A kitchen/eating building lay behind, away from sleeping quarters in case of fire.

Another open porch, called a dog trot, connected the kitchen building with the front rooms.

I have no idea why it was called a dog trot.

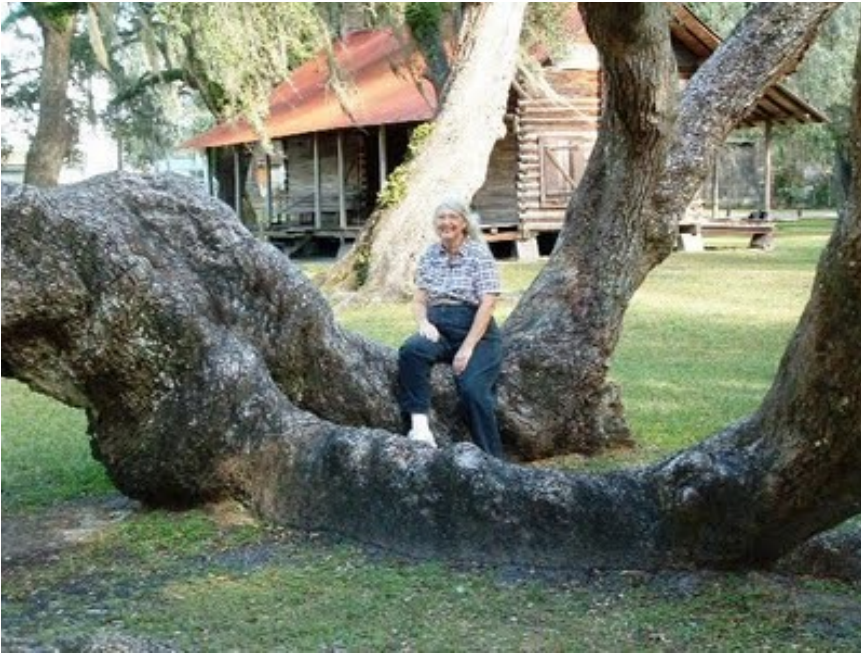
I imagine that originally the present corrugated tin roof was made of split cypress shingles. My grandfather had a tool called a froe which he used to make such shingles.

Here's a photo of Ginny which shows how Turlington notched the logs together:



Notice how Turlington caulked outside gaps by splitting saplings and wedging them bark-side-in between the logs. Inside, he sealed the rooms with clay plaster.

In 1919, Senator Fred Parker bought this log cabin from Turlington for \$50. The Parker family kept the cabin till 1926 and eventually the cabin came to the town of Mayo, Florida, where it now sits on a lovely town park shaded by majestic oak trees.



As I pointed out log cabin features to Ginny, we imagined how blissful life might be in simpler times—HA!

I remember some of the human relations that went on around my grandfathers place. Think *Desperate Housewives* by kerosene lamp—

The sister who stole away the other sister's husband. The brother who rescued a baby from off the railroad track, a hero till suspicions arose that he was the one who put the kid on the tracks in the first place.

Anything that goes on in a highrise condo today, might have gone on in a log cabin way back when.

Well, most anything.

Once, back during the Depression, this lady came trudging down the dirt road to Granddaddy's house. She pushed a wheelbarrow with a cripple boy in it. In the front yard she tipped the barrow dumping the kid out into the dirt—

Like all cracker farmers, Granddaddy hoed out every blade of grass around the house to make snakes visible when they came into the yard. At the turn of the previous century, even in metropolitan Jacksonville people kept grass down using the dirt-yard as a barrier against snakes. Green lawns are a modern innovation in Florida.

Anyhow, this woman said, "Mr. Moody, I caint raise no cripple youngun. Just caint take it no mo. I'm leaving him here. I hears you's good Christian people. You can take him in or leave him to starve in the dirt. Makes me no nevermind".

With that, she hefted her barrow and walked away.

Granddaddy and Grandma added that crippled boy to their own 16 or 18 kids and raised him up to adulthood as one of their own.

That's all the adoption there was in those days.

I don't see that happening often around a highrise condo.

Maybe there's something to be said for log cabin days.

But, of course there was the time a panther got into the house, attracted by a crying baby, and my great-grandmother Effie swacked it with her broom and chased it out of her cabin.

Our rented vacation cabin in Lafayette Blue Springs State Park hardly resembled the pioneer cabin of my Cracker ancestors.



Yes, in true pioneer spirit Ginny and I know how to camp in the rough. For instance, heavy rain from Hurricane Ida confined us to our cabin for two days—two days in which we spent in wonderful conversations and in reading.



Ginny read a biography of mathematician and Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal, and she enjoyed reading an armload of murder mysteries. For fun, I read four books on archaeology; and for work I read....

I hesitate to talk about this. But one of the things I took a vacation from was the book I've been writing for years about finding and doing the will of God. Yet, to keep my mind focused while in the woods, I read a book by an imminent preacher and internationally acclaimed author and speaker. His 1971 book is about divine guidance.

Reading it was like getting swacked on the head by great-grandma's broomstick.

Right off, the author starts telling me about the nine symptoms which prove I am out of God's will. By his criteria, I have never been in God's will and I hardly even qualify as being a Christian.

I contrast the harsh way the author addresses my confused life with the words of Jesus Christ:

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden,
and I will give you rest .
Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me;
for I am meek and lowly in heart:
and ye shall find rest unto your souls.
For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

I hope the books I write make life and godliness easier and lighter for readers. I hope my work reflects the attractiveness of Jesus Christ.

Yes, the Cross is hard and heavy. No doubting that. But I feel the preacher whose book I read on vacation seems to make life harder and heavier than it needs to be.

I'm thinking about this.

Oh, that reminds me—Today, I promised to tell a great preacher joke from our vacation:

Way out in the deep piney woods of panhandle Florida was this little town with a Bible college where young preachers learned their trade. To give the boys experience, sometimes the local undertaker would let a student preacher conduct a funeral.

One inexperienced young man faced giving his first funeral.

The undertaker explained that the deceased was an old farmer being buried far out of town on his own farm land; because the farmer had no family and because he was so elderly all his kin had already died, no one would be at the burial.

Only two gravediggers would be there.

The undertaker gave complicated directions to the young man.

The young preacher drove down the state road to the county road and turned off on the shell road, then turned onto the dirt road and finally drove along two ruts through the forest.

He got lost and had to backtrack again and again.

He was over an hour late when he saw a weathered farm house where two workmen leaned on shovels over a hole in the ground and a pile of dirt.

The preacher braked to a stop, grabbed his Bible and ran to the hole. Looking down he saw the cement lid of a vault already in place. Hating to keep those gruff workmen waiting any longer, he began to pray and read Scripture as quickly as he could.

Finally finished, he moped his forehead with a red bandanna, breathed a sigh of relief, and drove off in his car.

As he pulled out of sight one workman said, "That preacher boy sure gives a good funeral, don't he"?

"That he does. That he does. But I think we might ought to have told him that we're here putting in a new septic tank".



After 41 years of marriage Ginny still laughs at my jokes.

I love her so!

She's the best thing that ever happened to me.

Tomorrow, God willing, I plan to write about sex.

Readers with tender sensibilities about explicit sex may want to skip

that posting.

Thursday, November 19, 2009
Our 41st Anniversary Trip—Part Four

Here's a photo of our queen-sized bed at the vacation cabin:.



Yesterday, I'd promised to write on the subject of sex and I did. Of course, you know me; I would never overstep the boundaries of good taste. Nothing I write would ever be inappropriate or insensitive. Nonetheless, I asked Ginny to read and review what I'd written for today.

She said it made her uneasy. She is humor-impaired and lacks my refined sense of good taste, but she does have a certain feel for things.

So I chose to scrap my writing on this subject for now.

In other news...

Back at work this afternoon. I'm swamped. While we were on vacation in the deep woods, Lulu Press, the company I use to print the books I publish, began offering a program to turn print books into E-Books.

The three main advantages of E-Books are that they cost less; you can download them immediately; and you have no shipping and handling charges to pay.

Sounds like a winner to me.

I'm beginning to restructure some of my books into an E-Book format so readers will have a choice between a print copy, an E-Book, or a downloadable copy. Given my computer skills, this project looks to take me forever. We'll see how it turns out.

Saturday, November 21, 2009
At Silver Star

Thursday my friend Barbara White treated me to lunch at Silver Star Chinese Restaurant—great food!

Hadn't seen Barbara since before Ginny and I went on vacation so we had lots of conversation to catch up on both at my home and at Silver Star:

Barbara's chemotherapy seems to have taken. Hardly any cancer markers left in her blood. But she feels bone weary and lethargic.

I said that feeling is natural. After all, when Jesus brought Lazarus back from the dead, He did not tell him to go hoe corn; He said to loose him from the winding sheets and give him dinner—relaxation before activity.

Ever notice that Jesus has common sense?

Barbara's doctor tells her that her cancer may reoccur; statistically this kind often shows up again in three to six months after a first round of chemo. Barbara feels well at the moment and is still thinking about starting the evangelistic/Christian life meetings we talked about last time.

Barbara, an award-winning newspaper columnist, is the author of the *Along The Way* series of books at www.bluefishbooks.info.

I told her about my continuing frustrations over writing the book on the will of God, (haven't touched it since before vacation) and that led us into an interesting discussion of Scripture.

Barbara is a groupie. She meets with a bunch of different groups. Yesterday she'd joined nine other ladies in a tea room for a two-hour discussion of whatever a group of nine ladies discuss. (Do nine ladies with tea leaves make a quorum or a covenant?).

Barbara also attends a Bible study at her retirement home, church functions, and she faithfully goes to her Tuesday Night Group—which for the past 15 years has met on Thursdays.

In one of these groups the discussion touched on Luke Chapter Eight, where Jesus claimed kinship with “These which hear the word of God and do it”.

(Mathew, Chapter Eight; and Mark, Four and Five, cover more or less the same series of incidents.)

“Now it came to pass on a certain day, that He went into a ship with His disciples: and He said unto them, ‘Let us go over unto the other side of the lake’. And they launched forth”.

Jesus went to sleep in the bow and there arose a great tempest in the sea.

“Lord, save us! We Perish,” the disciples yelled as water filled the boat.

He woke up, and first rebuked the disciples “Why are ye fearful?”, then He rebuked the waves, and the sea obeyed Him.

They may have been afraid of the storm waves, but now they were even more afraid of Jesus!

“The men marveled saying, “What manner of Man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him”?

The boat no sooner landed in the country of the Gadarenes, than a wild man raced from the tombs screaming and frothing. The demons in him made him cry and cut himself with sharp stones. He broke the chains when people tried to control him... “But, when he saw Jesus afar off, he ran and worshiped Him”.

Jesus cast the demons from the man into a herd of pigs which ran off a cliff.

When the villagers came out to see—they “see him that was possessed with the devil and had the legion, sitting, clothed, and in his right mind: And they were afraid”!

They begged Jesus to—Go Away.

As Jesus got back into the boat, the man that had been possessed with the devil prayed Him that he might be with Him.

Jesus would not let him come.

“Go home,” Jesus said, “To thy friends and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee, and hath had compassion on thee”.

Barbara noted how many things people were afraid of in this passage: The storm, the sea, Jesus stilling the storm, the demon-possessed man, Jesus casting out the demons, the loss of the pigs...

This Jesus is one scary dude. Strange things happen around Him.

And in a letter addressed to Christians, the Scripture says, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”.

Barbara said the Gentleman Formerly Known As Legion did the will of God. He did not go with Jesus. He did not get in the boat. He did exactly what Jesus said. “He departed and began to publish in Decapolis how great things Jesus had done for him; and all men did marvel”.

I don’t know the reference, but Barbara said that at a later time Jesus visited that same territory and a crowd of 4,000 people gathered to hear Him—perhaps as a result of the obedient, healed wild man who did the will of God.

What a cool conversation we had over egg foo young.

Barbara also mentioned that in one of her groups, one guy began talking about the return of Christ quoting Thessalonians, another man waded in with verses from Revelation...

With a groan, I put in my own two cents worth.

“I go along with Paul,” I said. “Wherefore, beloved brethren, confront one another with these words”!

Cancer will never get Barbara—she’ll choke to death on an egg roll laughing at my stupid jokes.

Monday, November 23, 2009
We Received A Kindness From Davy

As soon as we got back from vacation out in the woods where there was no cell phone service, we learned that Ginny's 86-year-old mother had been seriously ill.

Three different hospitals in two weeks.

She returned home with a pacemaker and appears to be recovering nicely now.

Much loved, her being down generated much prayer, much concern, and a flurry of long distance phone calls.

Her seven children live across the U.S. Scattered between California, Florida, Maryland, Michigan, Oregon, and Virginia.

Reams of e-mails and replies between brothers and sisters burned up the airways.

In the midst of all that inbox activity, I received a special kind missive from a stranger in Scotland, a man I had never even heard of before.

All his e-mail said was "Repaired with my compliments. Davy from Scotland".. Attached were several restored family photographs.

Back on Wednesday, July 11, 2007 *Treasured Photographs* I'd posted a blog entry about some old family photos Danny, one of Ginny's younger brothers, sent to us. Here's a copy of one of the ones I posted:



Out of the blue, David Wilson, the gentleman in Scotland, picked out several of these old family photographs from my site, and beautifully restored them. He did this out of the goodness of his heart.

Here's the same photo after Mr. Wilson fixed it:



4 Generations

Mary Alice & James F. Daniels ,Elliott Daniels,
Alva Worthington, Virginia, Kathy & Jack C. Worthington

I hesitate to say just how old this antique photo is, but my wife is the smallest person in the picture; her mother, Alva, stands in the back row on the left.

What a nice surprise this gift from a stranger was, especially coming in a time of family crisis.

I replied to his e-mail: "Thanks Davy. The photos are from my wife's family I'll show these to her. Your unexpected gift comes at just the right time. Ginny's father died last summer and her mother is seriously ill in a hospital this week. Perhaps the Lord directed your timing. Thanks again!"

David Wilson (at dw010f4707@blueyonder.co.uk) replied, "John, if you have any more old or new photos that need some tender loving care just email them to me and i will do my best. I do this sort of thing for fun, i hate to see old photos that have been through the wars. Most are easily fixed and bring a smile to someone's face at no cost. Davy."

I am really touched by his kindness from across the world. Thank you, Davy.

In a different vein...

As Ginny shopped for groceries this morning, I sat on a bench outside the store watching pretty girls wag by and praying. If these activities seem inconsistent, they are, and I am. The most consistent thing about my Christian life is that I'm inconsistent.

Anyhow, aggressive drivers intent on holiday shopping squealed through the parking lot vying for close parking spots in the rain. Saw several near-accidents.

An elderly man pushed a shopping card down a lane; it supported him as he pushed it. Through puddles.

A Ford Expedition wheeled from one lane to another. The driver, I'd guess a vice-president type, brooked no interference as he drove, window down, CD blaring.

The tottering old man blocked his way. The driver shoved forward and forced the old guy to step back into a puddle. Way clear, the Ford zipped into a parking space...

And as he did, several bills of money blew out of the driver's side back window. I could not see the denominations but it looked to be three bills. Unaware, the driver jumped from his car and marched (looked like that executive stride they teach up-and-comers) toward the store.

The old man let him stride. Then he bent painfully over and picked up the cash. For one moment I thought he was going to call the asshole back and tell him he'd dropped the money. I could see the wheels turning in his brain. On mature reflection he let the guy stride away. He folded the money and stuck it in his shirt pocket and kept pushing his cart through the rain toward the store.

When I told Ginny about the incident, she said, "He was just conducting an exercise in justice".

God bless the old guy.

As my Aunt Hazel, God rest her, once told me, "Youth and skill is never a match for old age and treachery".

Tuesday, November 24, 2009

Thumbnails

Yesterday someone had asked me for help, but they did not show up to get it.

That missed appointment freed me to work on turning my 22 print books into E-BOOKS to add to my online book catalog in addition to my hardcopy, real book print editions.

Because I was not spending the time I'd expected to in helping, I've been able to expand my E-BOOK editions by another nine volumes.

I've never read an E-BOOK myself, but I'm told that people buy these things to read on their little machines, and I want to have them ready for the Christmas shopping season which starts next Friday... So I've really felt pressed for time. Problem is...

In my on-line book catalog, an e-book thumbnail looks to me exactly like a real-book thumbnail. How can buyers tell them apart?

I know.

I'll make a different thumbnail. One with a little gold seal on the book cover saying, this is not a real book but an E-BOOK.

I'm proud to announce that John Cowart, King Of The Geriatric Computer Geeks, solved this knotty problem with my usual hi-tech skills.

All I needed were Ginny's nail scissors, a paper oval, tweezers, something with my Bluefish Books logo, a glue stick, a post-it note, 22 books covers, and a pack of cigarettes.

So, I printed out a smallified Bluefish Books logo. Using Ginny's nail scissors, the kind with a curved blade, I cut it into a perfect oval. I unraveled a pack of Ginny's cigarettes so I could take out the gold-foil lining. I glued the little paper oval to the foil from the back, then traced a bigger oval around the little oval. Then I—am I boring you with all this hi-tech computer jargon?

All I needed to make was 22 of these shiny seals for my book covers...

Problem is I can't cut ovals.

Can't cut along the traced lines.

I remember back when I was in the first grade, my teacher, Miss. Ink... midway through my first grade something happened to Miss. Ink and her name changed

to Mrs. Skeleton. That was a shame because Ink was so much easier to spell than Skeleton... Anyhow, Miss. Ink whacked my fingers with a ruler because I could not cut out the mimeographed figure of this purple pumpkin. I could not stay on the lines and she checked the scraps to see if there was any purple showing and to hide my scraps I turned them face down on the desk but she turned them over, saw the purple where I cut outside the line and she whacked my fingers and fussed at me and I cried.

Anyhow, yesterday I needed to cut out 22 oval shapes and I couldn't.

Damn, Miss Ink/Skeleton anyhow!!! She was supposed to teach me not whack my fingers. If I had ever learned to cut pumpkins, then ovals would be a snap.

Being a hi-tech genesis, albeit a clumsy one, I figured out a way to transfer the one seal I did manage to cut into a mostly oval shape from one book cover to another.

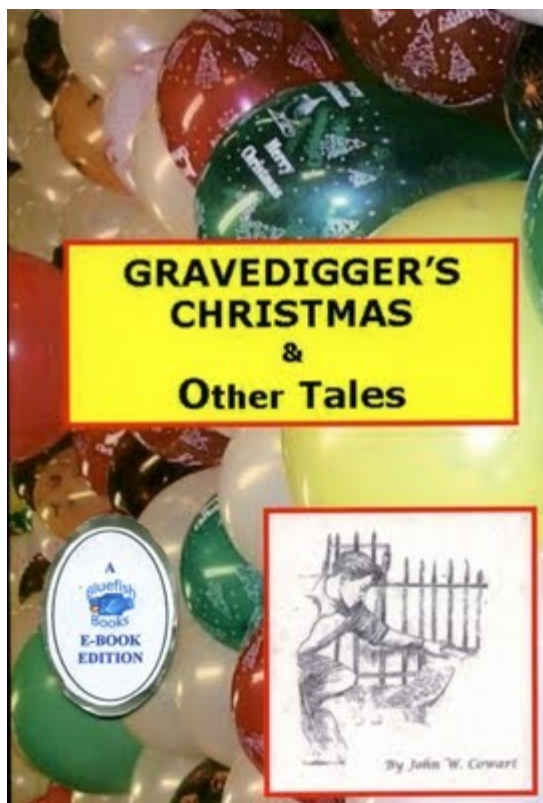
What I did was I folded a post-it note into eight little folds, sticky-side out and stuck it to the back of the one foil oval. Then I could use the tweezers to peel it off and move it to another book cover.

Damn but I'm cleaver.

So I stuck my shiny oval Bluefish Books seal onto the front cover of a book and scanned the whole cover in anew. Because of the bright light of the scanner, the gold foil reflects down and comes out scanned looking gray... but people who buy E-BOOKS should be computer literate enough to see that this is an E-BOOK not a real book that they are buying.

When they buy an E-BOOK, they get it in-hand immediately. Since production costs are lower, the price is cheaper. And there are no shipping and handling fees to pay, so you save more money that way.

Here is a scanned copy of one of my book covers with a shiny seal to prove that it is an E-Book, not a real book:



I still have a bunch of these thumbnail thingies to make, but I think I can have all 22 E-BOOKS available on line in my catalog at www.bluefishbooks.info by tomorrow night.

The 22 E-BOOKs are added at the tail end of my catalog. The same book in print editions, I put at the top of the catalogue listings.

Oh, by the way, the person who had asked my help, said she wanted “to pick my brain about preparing her books for publication”. Alas, She could have learned so much about writing and publishing from me. Always glad to share my expertise with young writers.

I’m proud of my technical ability in preparing these E-BOOKS for publication. I keep abreast of the latest technological developments. Stephen King must be able to cut out ovals quicker than I can because he has a lot of such E-BOOKS available on line. I’m trying to catch up with him as America’s best-selling author, so if you see him—hide his nail scissors.

Wednesday, November 25, 2009
Two "Almost" Lessons

By going to afterburners, working intensely, and putting in overtime, I pushed through and reformatted all 22 of my books so they now are available in three formats: print copies, downloadable to desktop computers, and e-books which can be read on e-book reading machines.

I'm proud of myself.

This represents an enormous accomplishment for me since normally my only computer skills are limited to cutting, pasting, and finding porno sites.

Thus, my on-line book catalog stands ready for the onslaught of book buyers which the newspaper tells me will surge onto the internet on the day after Thanksgiving. If my surge goes like last year's, that means about three people will actually buy one of my books between now and New Years.

Hey, a surge of three people is better than no surge at all.

Personally I have never read an e-book. I like a physical ink and paper volume. But there is a new age of readers out there in the world. I've even met one lady who can read books on her smart phone! My son's e-book reader holds the text of hundreds of books in a little device hardly bigger than one of my paperback books. He loves the gadget.

While preparing the additional new formats for my writings I... er, *learned* is too strong a word... *observed* is also too strong a word.... maybe *noticed* Or even *thought about*...two lessons.

Maybe God is trying to teach me something and I'm just beginning to get a hint.

First thing I noticed is that I learn how to do something after I've already done it and am not likely to ever need to do it again.

I learn how—after the fact.

For instance, AFTER I reformatted and resized 19 book covers for this e-book project, working one file at a time—I

learned how to do that operation to dozens of book covers as a batch in one single computer operation!

If I had know how to do that beforehand, I could have saved hours and hours of time.

And here's another thing, after I had individually worked with 17 files of my 22 book files uploading them one at a time... I discovered that in computer jargon the words *unpublish project* and *delete project* do NOT mean the same thing.

You don't want to know how I found that out!.

You really don't.

Had I known the difference beforehand, I could have saved a full day's work on this endeavor. But I didn't find that out till only five books remained to be processed.

I doubt that I will ever again in my life need to do this kind of clerical/editorial work again... so I wonder why it is that I learn how, after I no longer need to know how?

Is there some spiritual insight to be gained here?

I don't know.

Another thing that strikes me... the other day I expected a visitor, a friend of my son's and his wife's. I wanted to make a good impression, so I made all sorts of preparations. I emptied the ashtrays. Swept the front walk. I shaved. I bought special cookies to serve. I unstopped the bathroom sink—which in the divine order of the universe always clogs up when company's coming unless there's a whole bunch of company coming then it's the toilet that clogs just hours before they are due to arrive.

In other words, I prepared.

The visitor postponed our meeting.

I realized that, not just this week, but all my life, I have spent inordinate amounts of time preparing for things which never happened.

Now here is my puzzlement—I'm writing a book about how God leads us—and I can't help but wonder that if I am led by the Spirit of God, then why do I get ready for stuff that doesn't happen? Couldn't the Spirit have told me, "Hey, back off, John. Don't get your bowels in an

uproar. Just do your normal jobs and quit obsessing about making a good impression”.

Did the Spirit tell me that?

If He did, then I didn’t hear Him.

Oh.

Have I stumbled onto something here?

Perhaps God would have taught me how to batch-manage files if I’d read the instructions beforehand. Maybe God’s Spirit did tell me to relax and not go to afterburners and not obsess about that postponed meeting, but I was not listening.

Maybe this whole work week has not been about preparing manuscripts but preparing me.

The kingdom of Christ on earth may just possibly muddle through without my real books or my e-books... maybe what needs reformatting here is me.

On another note:

Our family decided to each one spend Thanksgiving in their own homes this year instead of gathering for a massive feast in one place.

Ginny and I are looking forward to that; we never get enough time alone.

Weeks ago, Donald and Helen had invited us to Thanksgiving dinner at their home.

Then last week Donald called to un-invite us.

He said, “Dad, we’ve met this really nice couple at church and they asked us out to Fleming Island for dinner with them. They are really nice and we want to go there instead of having you and Mom here”.

So I said, “Well, if you’d rather spend Thanksgiving with nice people instead of with us, go ahead”.

Lord, but we laughed over that!

Happy Thanksgiving.

Hope to see you after the weekend surge.

John

Friday, November 27, 2009
Our Thanksgiving With Ducks

As a treat on Thanksgiving day, Ginny and I fed ducks in Riverside Park a few blocks from our home. We saw a bald eagle soaring above as we strolled beside the lake.

Here's an early 1900s postcard showing where we enjoyed this beautiful day:



Feeding the ducks reminds me of three things:

- Tony Soprano, the tv gangster;
- Our youngest daughter, Patricia, who plans to marry on January first;
- and ***The Lord God Almighty And His Duck Matilda.***

I identify with Tony Soprano more than with any other character on tv. He's my kind of guy. Sure, he cracks heads and breaks legs and makes problem people "go away". I haven't done any of that stuff, yet. But Tony and I are on the same wave length when it comes to ducks.

You'll see why by the end of this posting.

Then there was the incident when our daughter fed the poor starving people...

Once when Patricia was 13 or 14 she encountered a poor family on her way home from school. Neither Ginny nor I were home at the time so Patricia decided to make

up a food basket from canned goods and food from our kitchen. She packed a couple of grocery bags with cans of Spam, tuna, beans, powdered milk, etc. Also in her food basket for the poor, she placed a loaf of bread from the freezer..

Now for ages, Ginny has saved all bread scraps from family meals (crusts, moldy slices, half-eaten toast, broken cookie crumbs, etc) so that when we go to a park we'd have something to feed the ducks. It was Ginny's custom to store these scraps in an old bread wrapper in the freezer until she accumulated a bagful. Also, she'd buy several loafs of real fresh bread at a time and freeze it till she was ready to use it.

You guessed it.

Patricia inadvertently gave the poor, starving family the duck food in the bread wrapper when she carried her two food packets to their house.

It wasn't till Ginny got home that evening that the error was discovered!

Ever since then the whole family has teased Patricia unmercifully about being cruel to poor starving wretches by making them eat duck food.

Naturally, Ginny and I remembered that incident and laughed about it all over again yesterday.

Then, on a sad, sad note, as I fed ducks yesterday I remembered an entry in my diary on May 31, 2006. I repeat it here:

The Lord God Almighty and His Duck Matilda



My hat is old.
My teeth are gold.
I had a duck I liked to hold.
And now my story is all told.

These words of that great American poet Theodor Seuss Geisel, Dr. Seuss, (1904-1991) sum up my day Tuesday.

Yes, Matilda the duck is no longer with us.

Beginning on May 13th, my blog has periodically chronicled how this wild duck came to stay in our back yard after being attacked by a raccoon.

We have fed the duck. We bought a pool for the duck. We protected the duck from neighborhood cats.

And we learned from the duck.

Ginny and I enjoyed a perfect day together yesterday. We lingered over coffee talking. We lounged in our swimming pool. We read our books. We napped. We enjoyed a two-hour lunch at a favorite restaurant talking about raising children, Indonesia, computers, and a host of other topics.

We decided that Matilda the duck no longer needs the refuge and safety of our yard. We decided that we should

take her to a local park with a lake sprinkled with other ducks. We feared that as her wings became stronger she might fly over our fence and land in a neighbor's yard among dogs. We decided that the best thing to do for her was to set her free.

It may sound dumb but we prayed about our decision.

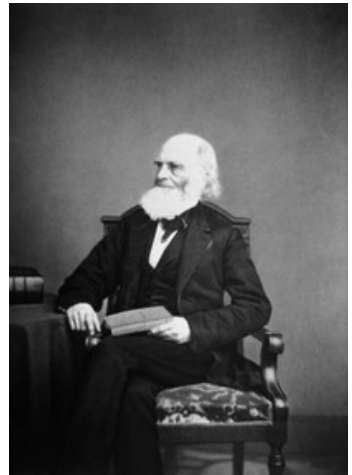
Yes, we prayed for a duck.

The Scripture says that God knows every sparrow that falls.

Maybe so, but are ducks included in God's care?

One of my favorite hymns is *All Creatures Of Our God And King*, written by St. Francis of Assisi. In his poem, Francis calls upon all nature, clouds, winds, birds, animals, men to praise our Creator.

When I looked at Matilda the duck, I'd also remember the words of the poet William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878).



Bryant watched a waterfowl flying across a marsh and thought about how the good Lord God guides us through life:

He who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy
certain flight,
In the long way that I must tread
alone,
Will lead my steps aright.

Sounds lovely, doesn't it?

Ginny and I tossed a wet beach towel over a protesting Matilda.

We were carefully not to squeeze her or to break a feather.

Ginny drove while I cradled the frightened duck in my lap.

We parked as close to the lake as possible.

Here's an old postcard showing where we released Matilda:



We carried a bag of bread scraps. Ginny scattered the crumbs in one place to attract the other ducks away while I unwrapped Matilda at the far side of the pond.

Oh, she was happy to be free.

In her own element, she flapped and dove and preened...

Then three male mallards saw her and attacked. They chased her around the edge of the pond. They chased her out of the water, pecking and grabbing her neck and fighting over her.

Were they killing her?

Were they mating?

I ran over and kicked the three males away.

Matilda ran quacking up under a hedge with the three males charging in hot pursuit. Great squawking and shaking of bushes.

Soon the three mallards emerged.

Alone.

They began chasing another female across the grass.

We searched the undergrowth, but saw no further sign of Matilda.

We think they killed her.

As a Christian I believe (barely) that Scripture which says, "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose".

That's a tenant of my faith. But why does it so often seem otherwise in my day to day experience? Why do so many of our efforts seem so futile?

Why would God allow us the nurse this duck back to health only to have her raped or killed by her own kind?

That makes no sense to me in my limited human experience. Maybe it does make sense in some vast eternal plan, but it doesn't seem right to me in the here and now where I live.

My faith says "Good".

My experience says "Crap".

I can not deny my personal observation of life; neither can I deny the love of God.

It's hard for me but I try to move beyond my own observations and experiences to a place where I can say with Paul, the quintessential realist, "I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord".

I believe that.

On a shallow level I really do believe that..

But sometimes, even when you do what is reasonable, even when you act with the best intentions, even when you plan ahead, even when you do what is right, even when you do what is logical, even when you pray — even then, your duck gets screwed.

Or worse.

Tuesday, December 01, 2009
The Butterfly Girls

Ever encounter a puppy delirious with the sheer joy of seeing you?

The puppy will bark and quiver and roll on the floor and wag and wiggle and bark and leap on you and express utter exuberance just because you are there.



The three young women who visited my home Monday morning reminded me of a trio of such happy puppies. The enthusiastic girls plan to start their own publishing company, Butterfly Books, they hope to have it up and running by mid July, and they'd come to see me to explain their project and ask about the process of publishing startup. Here's a picture of their initial logo:

Apparently, Julie, Patsy and Helen, my

**All things are possible with
God. Matt. 19:26**



BUTTERFLY BOOKS, INC.

daughter in law, came to see me solely because I'm Donald's father. All attend the same church. When they realized that I've written some stuff, they got the idea I might be of some use.

Good Heavens but they're a peppy crew!

They bubbled and gushed and talked over one another, caught up in the pleasure of talking about their project. They envision an initial press run of 2,000 copies and speaking tours and book signings and tv appearances and spreading their message all over the country.

And their message is important.

These young women have suffered, endured and survived the devastating circumstances endemic to young women of our generation. Their testimonies will resonate with thousands of other girls overwhelmed by choice and circumstance. Abused, violated and abandoned, the authors these women have collected to work with them range from a pastor's wife, a former exotic dancer, a formidable career woman, a wealthy socialite—all sharing the joy of deliverance and new life through the mercy of Jesus Christ.

Peppy. Peppy. Peppy—walking and leaping and praising God.

That's them.

And then there's me.

John Cowart, human manatee. Propeller scars on my back. Here in Florida, the waters abound with manatees, sometimes called sea cows. The fat, sluggish vegetarians have no natural enemies but speedboats. The slow creatures cruise just below the surface and boats run over them chewing propeller slashes in their backs. Naturalists identify individual manatees by the pattern of propeller scars on the animals' backs.



So here I am. Minding my own business. Not bothering anybody. Moseying along at my own speed. I starts slow, then I tapers off... Then here come Christian ladies on jet skis. Wildly enthusiastic about Jesus, about deliverance, about life, about youth and dreams and plans and visions of their own world-wide Christian publishing empire.

As best I can tell, they have one book's text actually written, one partially written, and two waiting in the wings.

Dower. Sour. Morose and moss-covered, I meet this mighty rushing wind of Christian femininity in my own living room. They are hellbent on publishing; I'm just hellbent.

You know, they say a pessimist is just an optimist with experience.

Yet I do not wish to quench the Spirit enlivening these young women. I want to caution them about all the sharks in the publishing waters without hindering their spirit.

The words of King Solomon occur to me: "Of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh. Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing , whether it be good, or whether it be evil".

I'm all too familiar with the "Weariness of the flesh" phrase in this verse.

But these ladies have great experience in marketing books. They bounce. And one of the things they bounced on was my shortcomings in sales. They began to develop an all encompassing plan for my life. They expound all sorts of ideas to help me achieve success as a writer.

And when I balked, they accuse me of being a fearful coward, of not trusting God, of betraying my gifts, and of being prideful in false humility.

They are probably right on all counts.

They quoted Joshua at me—strong, good courage, battle manfully, all that crap.

One said she thought God had led them to my house, apparently to straighten me out.

Could be.

But here's an ongoing problem I have:

I can't tell the difference between a temptation and an opportunity.

Are all these marketing ploys the ladies talked about temptations to lure me away from writing; or are they indeed an opportunity to speak about Christ to a larger audience?

Of course the only question I really need to ask is "Lord, what will Thou have me to do?"

These women had made the appointment and came to me asking for help—now they saw flaws in my life-process and were offering to help me... and they were much more gracious about it than I make it sound.

Nevertheless, I cringed.

Writing books and selling books are two different disciplines.

One of the women has worked in the past with well-known established religious publishers.

I asked, "Why do you want to start your own Christian publishing company when so many well-established ones already exist, and you already have access to some of the major ones?"

“This is something God has given us,” one said.

In the face of the girl’s enthusiasm and child-like confidence, I recalled that section of Psalm 68:

“But let the righteous be glad ; let them rejoice before God: yea, let them exceedingly rejoice Sing unto God, sing praises to His name: extol Him that rideth upon the heavens ... and rejoice before Him.

“A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation. God setteth the solitary in families: He bringeth out those which are bound with chains: but the rebellious dwell in a dry land. ...

“Thou, O God, didst send a plentiful rain, whereby thou didst confirm thine inheritance, when it was weary .

“Thy congregation hath dwelt therein: thou, O God, hast prepared of thy goodness for the poor.

“The Lord gave the word: great was the company of those that published it”.

But isn’t the market flooded with religious books?

No.

A Christian writer competes with no one else; we each seek our own place in God’s scheme of things, and no other person on earth can fill the niche God has for me alone.

The praises of the Slain and Risen Lamb echo from every tribe and tongue and nation. As St. John observed at the end of his Gospel after he told how Jesus rose from being dead, “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”.

Meeting these young women made me feel like a dew drop caught in a cloudburst!

For some God’s salvation comes as silently, as imperceptibly as dew forming on blades of grass; for others God enters life in a cloud of dust and the pounding of hooves and a shout of Hi Yo, Silver Away!!

I met these women—and suddenly I feel aswirl in a Christian version of *Girls Gone Wild*!



Thursday, December 03, 2009
Beware The Yellow-Crested Night Heron

Back when we were poor, each night I walked to a dock on the Ribault River and cast a net all night to catch enough shrimp to feed my family the next day.

Yes, I lived as a food-gatherer in our high-tech society.

But, we survived.

Back then, I often saw different species of waterfowl lingering over the marshgrass hunting food just like I was. In the small hours of the morning, mist rose off the dark waters and I'd hear the grunt of gators seeking mates or prey. On full-moon nights, the mist glowed with haunting beauty and no soul in the world seemed alive except me and the herons.

Yesterday in a pity party as I licked my wounds feeling sorry for myself and regretting my failure as a writer, I thought about those birds—the Great Blue Heron, the Tricolored Heron, and the Yellow-Crested Night Heron.

One night as I pulled in my net, I glanced toward shore to see a huge Great Blue Heron standing majestically in the shallows. I'm 5 foot, 11, and this silent bird stood a good six or eight inches taller than I am. It

was the largest bird I've ever seen. The sight of this king of birds awed me. Perhaps as a Christian I shouldn't admit this, but I felt strongly tempted to worship the creature.

The Great Blue Heron hunts passively. That is, the bird stands perfectly still in the shallow water watching for an unsuspecting fish, shrimp or crab to venture close. When one does, the heron snaps him up.



On the other hand, the Tri-colored Heron hunts actively and aggressively. No patient waiting for prey for him. No, he runs through the shallows squawking, splashing, flapping his wings as he runs. The commotion scares schools of fish into fleeing near the surface. And when they do, the Tri-Colored Heron gobbles them up.



But then there's also the Yellow-Crowned Night Heron

Often as I cast my net, a Yellow-Crowned Night Heron accompanied me. This thief crowed against my legs waiting for me to pull in my net so he could snatch shrimp out of the mesh before I could pick them up myself. I'd have to shove him out of the way to harvest my own catch and he appeared quite indignant at my interference.

Of course, when I brought in a netfull of pogies, small trash-fish, I'd throw the old Mafioso a couple as an extortion tithe for doing business in his domain.

He's an attractive bird---but a thief.



I've been mulling over my encounter with the Butterfly Girls on Monday. They really pointed up my failure and the uselessness of my work—if you can call it work. Dabbling at writing may be a more appropriate term.

I go through such depressed mulling about my life and work often. And as I enjoy my wallow in self-pity I always eventually conclude the same thing: I do what I do because I do it.

But thinking about book sales made me remember the three types of Herons.

I am a lazy passive hunter like the blue heron. I stand still as a statue waiting for some reader to venture close and buy one of my books.

The Butterfly Girls resemble the Tri-Colored Heron—splashing and running and creating a commotion to scare up business.

There exists a thriving industry of cheaters who make their living preying on unwary writers. They resemble thieving yellow-crested night herons lurking to snatch away what you have legitimately caught

I am not sure the ladies heard anything I said the other day, but I did advise them to consult the Writer Beware website at <http://www.sfwaweb.org/for-authors/writer-beware/> . A Google search for *Writers Beware* brings up a host of related or similar sites.

Writer Beware tells about various scams instituted by scurrilous companies and individuals that pretend to help writers, but only cheat and steal. These vicious predators have discouraged many a new writer and chewed up his dreams. They not only take the money but suck dry the soul.

So, I may not be much of a writer or book salesman myself—I'm just one voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord".

But, at least I can warn other writers: Beware The Yellowed-Crested Night Heron.

Friday, December 04, 2009

A Writer's Wife

Both Ginny and I are a trifle deaf; this makes for some interesting conversations.

The other night as she made a Christmas list of people to send cards or to buy for, I asked, "Are you listing individuals or couples"?

“Combining husbands and wives,” she said.

“Well, we know some folks who live together but are not married, as well as some homosexual couples, so your card could say—To You And Your Significant Other”.

“I hate that term, Significant Other. It sounds so cold”.

“Well,” I said, “You could address the card to Cohabiting Units”.

Ginny paused a moment with the eraser of her pencil tapping her teeth, then said, “I didn’t know we even knew any Eunuchs”.

See what I mean about interesting conversations?

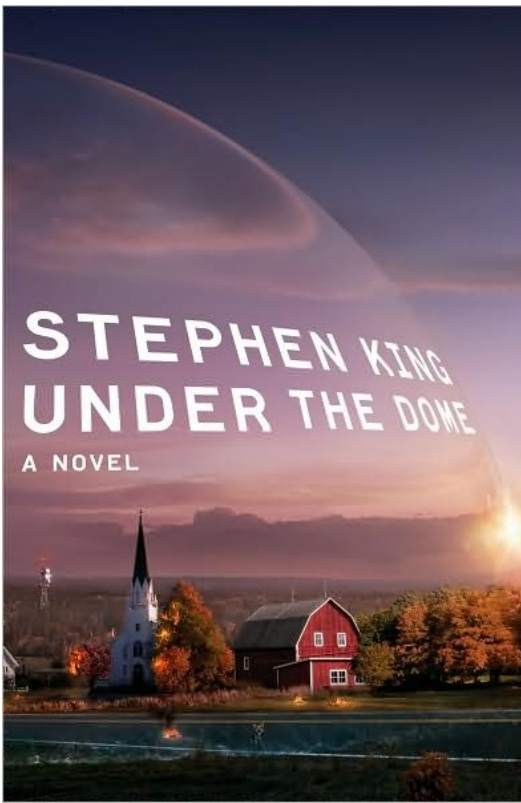
Last Tuesday, my friend Wes treated me to breakfast at someplace that isn’t Dave’s. In the course of our conversation, he remarked, “John, your wife is the best thing that ever happened to you”.

I hardily agree.

Ginny did something particularly nice for me that very afternoon—she brought me a book, the latest Stephen King novel, *Under The Dome*.

Back in April or May, when Ginny first heard the new King novel was coming out, she reserved a copy to give me. At that time, my name was number 89 on the list. But Tuesday, when she heard my copy had arrived, she took off work at lunch to pick it up and bring it home to me.

She hardly ever reads Stephen King herself, but she knows my great admiration of his skill as a storyteller, writer, and craftsman, so she went to a lot of trouble to get this 1,074-page book for me. So far



I've only read the first 484 pages, so I can't say how the book will meet my expectations because I think Stephen King is...

But, this is not about him, but about her.

From the word GO! Ginny has supported me 100% as I've pursued my career as a writer for the past 35 years. We've especially set goals and planned to be able to do exactly what we are doing today. We are very deliberate persons.

I wrote my first magazine article because I suddenly lost a job I'd held for eight years. At the time I raised mosquitoes for test purposes for the local mosquito control board. As everyone knows, a man who knows how to grow mosquitoes can write his own ticket in the job market.

Well, not exactly.

I could not find work of any kind.

Our money ran out.

We faced starvation.

As we prayed about our own dire situation, we realized that other people might be in the same boat. So, I wrote an article about coping with unemployment as a Christian. Wrote it with a pencil in longhand on a yellow legal pad. Ginny typed it for me.

Problem was, I did not have money enough to buy stamps to mail it to a magazine.

Ginny believed in me.

When she was a little girl, Ginny had collected postage stamps.

She dug into the back of the closet and pulled out her old stamp album. She peeled out mint, uncanceled, stamps. We mailed my fledging first attempt at writing using 25-year-old stamps from her girlhood collection.

That article sold, but not for much. So I began writing articles about coping with poverty.

That's how I got started.

And that's a tiny part of what Ginny did to help me get started.

I know little about Stephen King's career or his personal life other than what I read in press releases. I imagine that as America's best-selling author, he is blessed with a fortune. I just pray the poor guy is also blessed with such a wife.

Sunday, December 06, 2009
I Forget Little Things

It was either in St. Augustine, Florida, or in Little America, Wyoming, or in Pickle Gap, Arkansas—I forget which place—that we bought the unique razorback hog refrigerator magnet Ginny asked me about yesterday.

Her doctor gave her a vitamin D supplement to increase her energy level and it must have kicked in yesterday because she decided to rearrange furniture beginning with the magnets on the refrigerator and progressing to the attic. Dr. Woody should have given that vitamin to me instead!

Anyhow, when she asked me about the boar's head with glaring red eyes and white foaming tusks, I've forgotten where we picked up that lovely work of art.

Having no taste in fine art, Ginny put it in the go-box.

She also asked me where I put a cork board she wanted to use for a Christmas display at her office; I either stored it in a closet, or sold it in a yard sale, or gave it to some kid, or put it in the garden shed—I forget what I did with it.

Back in September, I forgot our youngest daughter's birthday.

Just plain forgot.

Forgetting is nothing new with me. When I was a boy, my mother used to say, "Johnny, you'd forget your own behind if it wasn't nailed on". But my forgetting seems to be getting worse now that I'm past 70.

Yesterday Ginny also wanted to know what I did with our Christmas tree stand?

Have you seen it?

Me neither.

Today I need to get the ladder and climb up into the attic to see if it's up there. We haven't put up a tree for the last two or three years and I've forgotten where I put the stand.

I'm forgetting a lot of things recently. Trouble is, I forget the wrong things. I vividly remember slights and grudges and faux pas and sins and mistakes I've made in the past—those things well up in my mind all the time; but I forget little everyday things.

Like cancer.

Yes, Friday Ginny and I went to the office of Jim Love, our State Farm Insurance agent. We spent two hours in a delightful conversation about insurance and Jacksonville history. He's just returned from taking his family to see the Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York and one of his sons begins training as a firefighter next week. So, since I've written a history of firefighting in Jacksonville, we had all sorts of good things to talk about besides insurance.

But, when we did talk about life insurance on me and filled out all the blanks on the application (including the questions about my medical condition) and we were all set to sign on the bottom line, I suddenly remembered that I happen to have prostate cancer.—which renders me uninsurable.

I'd forgotten.

I think Mr. Love was shocked.

How could a man forget he has cancer?

I felt like a fool.

How could I have forgotten a little thing like that?

Here I'd just been telling him all sorts of details about a local plane crash that happened during World War II. That, I remembered. But I'd forgot my own prostate cancer. What kind of warped mind works like that?

We tore up that insurance application and our conversation continued along other lines talking about more important things.

St. Paul once said, "This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus".

I need to commit that verse to memory.

I'm going to do it right now!

I've just read it, so I'll just close my eyes and say it from memory:

"Forgetting my behind... I press forward...."

Monday, December 07, 2009

The Mouse In The Can

Today marks the 68th Anniversary of the Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 when they started America's involvement in World War II. Historians say that 418,500 Americans died over the next four years. The National Archives maintains an honor roll of their names at <http://www.archives.gov/research/arc/ww2/>. The dates of August 6th and August 9th, 1945, mark the end of Japanese involvement in that war.

Sunday Ginny and I enjoyed lunch at Crabby Ben's, a favorite seafood place.

Waiting for our order, we observed a seascape picture on the wall and a pelican on a piling ornament outside our window. These decorations got us talking about nautical things and Ginny reminded me of a bit of devilment I got into years ago.

Yes, although I carry the reputation of a serious, solemn Christian gentleman, at heart I'm a prankish wag.

During the 1980s I worked at the *Florida Times-Union* as a sort of mail clerk who could be blamed for a lot of things that can go wrong at a newspaper. Knowing I was a Christian, editors and reporters alike teased me by calling me a rabid fundamentalist. I accepted the nickname and used Rabid Fundamentalist as my computer screen name.

At the time, the nine-day wonder news story in Jacksonville involved a man trying to get money from the Coca-Cola company; he claimed to have gotten sick and traumatized when he found a dead mouse inside his can of the soft drink.

Let's just say the plaintiff's name was **GWPM NCCN**.

The Coca-Cola company wheeled out a cadre of lawyers. Their public relations department issued detailed

explanations of the bottling process proving that no mouse could ever get in a Coke can at the plant.

GWPM NCCN insisted the touch of dead mouse on his lip as he sipped Coke had ruined him for life and he wanted a cash settlement.

Coke brought in the full CSI Team—independent labs, scientists, forensic pathologists and Dr. Bunsen Honeydew—who performed a detailed autopsy on the dead mouse proving it had not drown in Coca-Cola.

For weeks the newspaper carried almost daily updates on the story. Locally, **GWPM NCCN** became as famous as Michael Jackson.

Finally, under the pressure of scientific evidence, **GWPM NCCN** confessed that he had stuffed the dead mouse in the can of Coke himself. He was brought up on charges of product tampering, attempted extortion, fraud, and Lord knows what else.

What does this have to do with me?

Ever notice my avatar, that small photo of me in my website sidebar? It's a photo of me building a ship in a bottle, one of my hobbies in my younger days when my eyes were stronger:



Well, one Christmas CSX Railroad, the company that owned the newspaper back then, sponsored a craft

contest for employees. They set up a big display in the Times-Union lobby.

I can do crafts.

On one side of my exhibit space I displayed a schooner in a bottle—constructed by John W. Cowart, the Rabid Fundamentalist.

For the other side of my exhibit space, I fabricated the forecastle, bowsprit, dolphin striker, rigging, anchors, and jibs of a tiny clipper ship. And I inserted it in a Coca-Cola can so the foreparts of my little ship were visible jutting out the little triangular opening.

I labeled the plaque for my exhibit:: **Three-mast Clipper Ship In Full Sail—constructed by GWPM NCCN.**

The judges, reporters and editors just about choked laughing—and I won a blue ribbon.

Wednesday, December 09, 2009 Gone To The Dogs

Just as I started work Monday, my friend Barbara White called inviting me to lunch. Ever diligent in looking for any excuse to avoid writing, I quickly agreed to go.

At the Silver Star, a favorite Chinese restaurant, Barbara told me about the sense of contentment she's found after the last of her chemotherapy treatments. Initially, she felt that since she's apparently been granted more days to live, she ought to work harder at achieving something significant.

But she said, "Recently, I've realized that it's ok to be insignificant"

As she prayed about what to do with the rest of her days, she said that a sense of calmness, peace and deep-seated contentment came over her as she realized that she did not need to do anything to gain God's approval.

"When I was a girl, about 13," she said, "I realized that God loves me. That's never changed. And I hadn't done anything to please Him then. It was His grace. That hasn't changed either".

The love of God is commended toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

“We don’t have to be important, to be important to Him,” she said.

As her sense of contentment and peace grows, Barbara says she is letting go of many attitudes and activities once important to her. These things are just drifting away. No feeling of giving them up. They are just not important to her anymore.

Her focus for years has been on simply knowing Jesus and being in His presence; that element of her life continues to grow and grow.

I suggested that people are like dogs.

A dog loves nothing better than to be with his master no matter what the activity. A dog loves to ride in the car with head out the window, ears flapping in the breeze. But he’s just as content to chase sticks. Or to lay on the floor with his head resting on your slippers while you read. He needs to do nothing else to be a perfect dog.

Barbara said, “John, I like your analogy, but it’s only true if that dog has a home”.

Months ago, I thought of giving my diary this year the title, *A Dirty Old Man Goes To The Dogs...* I had in mind Francis Thompson’s poem *The Hound of Heaven*: it’s about how we run away from God, away from Home,

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

Few things are sadder than a dog without a home, without a master. Poor mutt, coat unkempt, ribs showing, ranges back and forth across the highway dodging cars.

Bewildered.

Homeless.

Fearful.

Lost.

And, there is a dogcatcher on the prowl.

Fear not, Puppy. The message of Christmas is that your Owner has come looking for you. Your picture and

name, He's posted on every telephone post in town. He came to this world to seek and to save the lost.

The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew Himself strong in behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward Him.

No sooner than this picture entered my mind, than I remembered the refrain of Will L. Thompson's (not the same guy who wrote Hound of Heaven) 1880 hymn *Softly And Tenderly Jesus Is Calling*:

Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling,
Calling for you and for me;
See, on the portals He's waiting and watching,
Watching for you and for me.

Come home, come home,
You who are weary, come home;
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,
Calling, O sinner, come home!

After lunch, Barbara drove me over to Hall's Nursery where I bought a live Christmas tree in a big black pot, and two poinsettias.

Thursday, December 10, 2009
Newspaper clipping about Jacksonville's
Bible Lady:

I was all set to write about me this morning, but this clipping from today's *Florida Times-Union* by Jim Schoettler is more important:

I never met Mrs. Jarvis, but I think we would have understood each other.

Jacksonville's Bible Lady killed in accident: Sarah Jarvis preached for Jesus on the streets of East Arlington for 22 years



Sarah (L) and Jefferson Jarvis (R) flank their grandson Kenneth Justice Barrow at his Terry Parker High graduation.

Sarah Jarvis is home.

After witnessing for Jesus on the streets of East Arlington for 22 years, the neighborhood fixture known as The Bible Lady died Monday after being struck by a truck.

The accident occurred as Jarvis walked across Mount Pleasant Road about dawn, Jacksonville police said. Witnesses said the driver had a green light and tried to brake before hitting Jarvis, 73, tossing her and her Bible into the street. The driver knew Jarvis from her walks and was distraught, a friend said.

Jarvis was hit near one of several school bus stops she visited daily with Bible open, reminding youths about prayer and staying in school. Those students fondly remembered Jarvis as they stood across from a makeshift memorial Wednesday.

"I never knew somebody who believed in God so much that they would just come up to people they didn't know and talk to them," said Hannah Adamec, 12, who attends Landmark Middle School. "Everybody in the community knew her."

Jarvis' subtle preaching touched generations. Adamec's mother, Amanda, said she remembers listening to her as a first-grade student at Sable Palms Elementary.

“She’d come to the bus stop every morning to let us know how important it was to make sure we did the right things in life and looked out for people around you,” said Amanda Adamec, 27. “She was just a gold-hearted soul.”

Most area residents knew Jarvis only by sight, but admired her determination and devotion. She spent every morning but Sunday, rain or shine, walking on or near McCormick and Mount Pleasant roads reading her Bible. She always wore a hat with a JESUS pin stuck to it and carried an umbrella.

Jarvis would occasionally bless vehicles as they passed. Every Sunday after church she’d sit in a lawn chair at a neighborhood bus stop and read her Bible. She also held Bible studies in her Spanish Point home and comforted neighbors in need, including a man who recently lost his wife.

Though gone only a few days, Jarvis’ absence has shaken her neighbors. Some called her the community’s guardian angel.

“You miss seeing her,” said Katie Fulton, 27, who lives across from where Jarvis was hit. “It’s a normal routine.”

Jarvis was a native of the Caribbean island of Montserrat, said Jefferson Jarvis, her husband of 53 years. The retired postman said the couple was living in New York 26 years ago when his wife gave up partying for preaching. He said she simply picked up a Bible one day and began to witness in the streets and hospitals.

Jarvis, 78, said his wife was on a lifetime mission to better people’s lives.

“She spoke to God. God spoke to her. Who am I to interfere?” he said.

Jarvis said his wife continued walking when the couple moved to East Arlington with their three children in 1987. He said she’d leave the home by 5:30 a.m. and would stay out three or four hours, greeting friends and strangers over several miles.

“It didn’t matter if the person was a saved person or a lost person. She wanted to reacquaint them with what she felt in her heart,” her husband said.

Upon returning home, Jarvis spent much of her day going from room to room reading individual Bibles and praying. She had few other interests, her husband said.

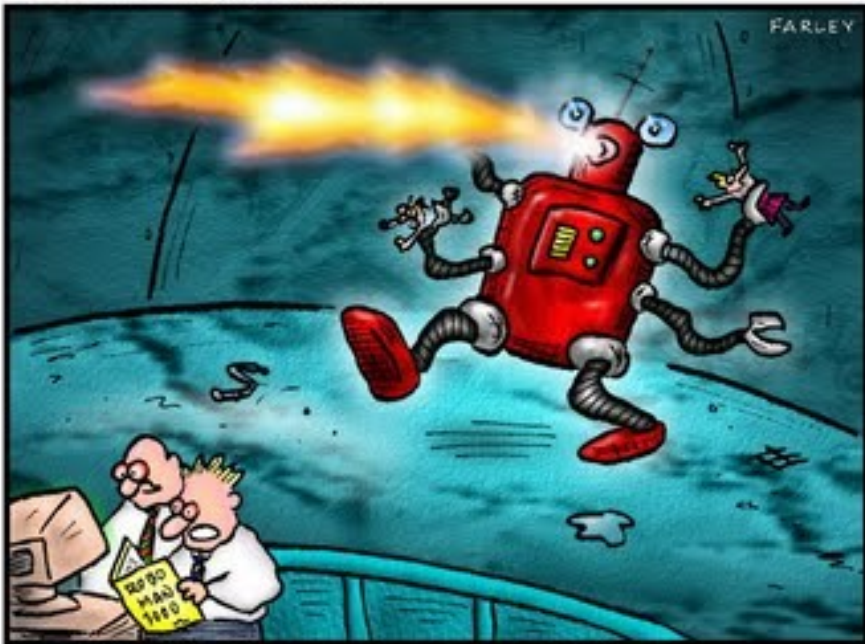
A few hours before her death, Jarvis said he watched his wife turn and smile as she headed out the door. He said he'll never forget how she seemed to glow with love for him and for God.

And then she began her trip home.

Services

A visitation for Sarah Jarvis will be from 6 to 8 p.m. Thursday at the Monument Point Fellowship church, 13720 Mount Pleasant Road, Jacksonville. A Celebration of Life for Jarvis will be Friday at 11 a.m. at the church. The public is welcome to both events. In lieu of flowers, the family asks that donations be made to World Harvest Missions, 3357 Pinehurst Drive, Lake Worth, FL, 33467

Friday, December 11, 2009
Computer problems today: Nothing loads right



"Oooh, look! It says in the manual they have online help!"

Saturday, December 12, 2009
Christmas In A Little Tin Box

After three phone calls—and close to three hours talking with customer support—AT&T finally restored my internet connection.

Left me exhausted!

I browsed back over my files from last year to see what special Christmas post I'd offered and found a video film clip my youngest son made of me playing with a little tin box. The film only takes five minutes to watch but it takes a long time to buffer.

The link to my debut as a movie star is at
<http://www.blip.tv/file/1572083/> or at
<http://cowartvideo.blip.tv/>

Pop some corn and watch—on second thought, there's already enough corn in my performance.

I had fun with the movie. Hope you do too.

Tuesday, December 15, 2009

Searching For Lights

For the past several years Ginny and I hardly decorated for Christmas at all, but a couple of weeks ago she decided she wanted to put up a tree this year. That meant digging through 40+ years of boxes of decorations we've been collecting throughout our marriage to find the specific ones she wanted.

Therefore, our tree sat barren and undecorated in our living room for several days while I hunted the lights—not just any old lights. Ginny envisioned our tree shining with a specific string of lights, one shaped like tiny old-fashioned oil lamps.

This string of lamps originally decorated my mother's Christmas tree about 50 years ago. After Mama died, we ended up with this string of lights.

Where are they now?

We had to put lights on the tree before we added ornaments.

Oh, the joys of Christmas. My face full of spider webs from pulling down sealed cartons from high on the washroom shelves. The taste of dust from front and back closets as I lifted more boxes down.... Here's that present I meant to give that kid last year, but I didn't see him till August and by then I'd forgotten.

Six. Eight. Ten boxes of decorations from when we used to put up floor-to-ceiling Christmas trees. Decorations we bought. Ornaments the kids made when they were little. Santa figures friends gave us years ago. A bust of Caesar Augustus, in his day the most powerful man on earth, more famous than Michael Jackson and Tiger Woods combined, now he's just a convenient peg for dating the birth of Christ.

But, no lights. No where.

Nothing left to do but bring the ladder into the house and search the attic. There are another six or eight sealed cartons of old Christmas stuff stored up there.

As I put on my shoes to go outside to get the ladder, Ginny said, “Just a second, John. I want to check something”.

Sure enough, she found the lights hidden underneath some Santa beards in one of the first cartons we’d pulled out. Good!

She plugged in the string to test the lights.

One brilliant flash . Then darkness.

At that, I said some traditional season’s greetings.

Now, this old string was wired in series? Parallel? I forget which is which—the kind of old wiring that when one bulb goes out, all go dark.

Nothing to do but test each little bulb one at a time—assuming that I was testing with a bulb that works in the first place.

The test bulb may have worked, or it may not have—end result, the lights stayed out.

After having searched for the lights for two and a half days, the next day, Ginny and I bought a new string of lights for pocket change...

Must be some deep spiritual lesson here somewhere.

Once our festive tree was up, in the true spirit of the season, Ginny and I watched a *Godzilla* movie.

As I’ve been thinking about searching for the lights, I remembered how in my younger days I boasted about being a Seeker after light—saying I was a seeker sounded so much better than admitting I was a sneaky sinning snot.

But, God turns the tables.

O, I’d see a flash of light now and then in my spiritual quest and I’d think I was on the right track—light on my terms.

But I was not seeking Light—I was evading it.

In reality, Light seeks men, we rarely seek Him.

Picture a criminal climbing over the prison wall in the dark of night. The last thing he wants is for the searchlight to spot him. And that's just the mental image I get when reading the Apostle John's account of Christ coming into the world:

"In Him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not....

(Jesus) "was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world....

"And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil".

I've been going through a thing about an evil deed recently.

There's something I want to do that God does not outright forbid; the Bible just says that to do it is a shame.

That gives me some wiggle-room...Or does it?

That's the thing about Jesus.

He gives more light than I want.

On a happier note, early this morning I saw a photo that greatly pleased me.



It's on *The Far Side Of The Sea* blog in Norway at <http://felisol.blogspot.com/> .

The photo shows a Youle-nisse, that's a sort of happy Norwegian Christmas elf. The one pictured at the library desk is reading a copy of *Glog*, a book I wrote!

Felisol, Thanks. I was so surprised to see my book displayed amid your decorations. Gave me a lift! Your photo made my day.

This morning my friend Wes brought someone to visit me for the first time. The young man faces two job opportunities: one in Iraq, the other in a gambling casino out west. Serving in either place is sure to challenge his Christian life.

Wednesday, December 16, 2009

What The Plumber Found

Yesterday I mentioned that my friend Wes brought a young man, Ted, to visit me for the first time. The three of us engaged in a running, free-range conversation as we went out for breakfast then returned to my house.

An incident Ted related fascinated me.

I may not have the details right because our bull session included topics as varied as work schedules, dangerous areas of the city, Bible translation and commentary, rectal exam jokes, Christmas Eve worship services, the sung fit of the waitress' jeans, how to cook red-eye gravy, divine guidance, bosses without a clue—the typical fellowship conversation of Christian guys.

Remember what Jesus said—Whenever two or three of my guys sit around shooting the bull, I'm right there in the middle of 'em.

So, I may have garbled details of Ted's story but I think I heard the gist of it:

Not long ago Ted and a partner worked on an old house in Montana. An elderly woman owned the house. She had a sister who died some years ago.

The house's old plumbing pipes needed replacing. That involved digging a trench under the house. After they had dug about two feet down, Ted and his co-worker

uncovered a sealed packet which had been hidden away for years.

They unwrapped it and discovered that it contained an old diary written by the deceased sister of the homeowner. After work, they took it back to the motel where they were staying, and both read it.

Ted says it contained two significant elements:

First, the sister who wrote the hidden diary detailed her promiscuous sexual encounters in vivid images; second, she vented great anger and bitterness against her family, especially the sister who now owns the home.

The diarist said nasty, hurtful, damaging things—dirty things best left hidden in the dirt.

Ted and his partner (whose name I've forgotten) debated what to do with the old diary. Ted felt they should keep or destroy it; his co-worker argued that it was the rightful property of the homeowner and they should return it to her.

They flipped a coin.

Next day they gave the woman her dead sister's old diary.

At first she was delighted. She had not known it existed. But Ted said as she began to read, her face fell. Her eyes teared. The long buried words wounded her.

I wish I had access to that diary. Old diaries fascinate me. I've had a life-long thing about old diaries. They give the real-time experiences of ordinary people revealing their thoughts and dreams, the depths of their hearts. Seldom do they touch on "Great" historical events (When I edited and published Samuel Ward's diary, I found he hardly even mentioned the Spanish Armada!)

I envy Ted the experience of finding a previously undiscovered diary.

But the opportunity for preserving that one is gone forever.

I have kept my own daily (almost) diary for going on 35 years. I frequently address entries to "The Kid In The Attic", an imaginary teenager who may stumble across my diaries in a dusty cardboard box in his attic on some rainy day fifty or a hundred years from now. I want him to

see what the Christian life is like in real-time for one ordinary guy at the turn of the 20th Century. Maybe he will spot something that will encourage his own dedication to Christ.

But what about hurtful words?

Shouldn't I clean up my act so I appear an ideal Christian?

No. If my life story is to be real, then I need to be real. I record me as I is. I hide little. I think Christ can stand the test of reality.

I've asked my children not to read my diary till after Ginny and I are dead (Save all concerned some embarrassment). And I've urged them to never read less than 50 pages at a time. That's because if they opened to some random page on a day when I happened to be pissed at them, I don't want them to ever think that is my whole attitude towards them. My peeves pass daily.

Oddly enough, Ginny seldom reads my diary—she sees enough of me in real-time. She knows what I am better than anybody else, she doesn't feel a need to read about it. Of course, my diaries have always been open to her. I'm a glass guy. I intend to live and be transparent.

I want people to see through me to Christ.

In my opinion more people should keep diaries. You know, I know virtually nothing about my own parents. For instance my father lived in the same house all my life. He went to work in the foundry every morning, came home, ate supper, fell asleep in his chair, went to work next day, went fishing some weekends, was once an Eagle Scout...

I have no idea what he thought, what he dreamed, who he loved, what he hated, what he wanted in life. We lived in the same house all my childhood, yet I know virtually nothing about the man. Even if he'd left hurtful words written somewhere, he would not be such a stranger to me.

Another thought I had about Ted's experience is what Jesus said about buried, secret things: "For nothing is secret, that shall not be made manifest; neither any thing hid, that shall not be known and come abroad".

In another place He said, "There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be

known. Therefore whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops”.

St. Paul said something similar, he told Timothy, “Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after .Likewise also the good works of some are manifest beforehand; and they that are otherwise cannot be hid” .

Yeap, good or bad, what we are, what we do, how we live—whether we write it down or not—can not be hidden away out of God’s sight.

Someday a plumber will come digging.

Friday, December 18, 2009

I Knew Nothing About John Freeman Young

Last Sunday Ginny and I drove to Jacksonville Florida’s Old City Cemetery to visit the grave of John Freeman Young. Although I’d never even heard of the man before last week, I felt our visit made for an appropriate outing in this Christmas season. Here’s a photo of Ginny at Young’s grave; notice the Christmas ornaments on the wreath:



Earlier in the week, while listening to a radio morning traffic report, I chanced to hear announcer Arthur Crofton say something about Young. That comment sparked my

interest, so I did a bit of research and even read a biography of the man.

I've written two books about the history of my hometown so I was particularly surprised that I knew nothing about Young and his relationship with Christmas before.

In the late 1800s John Freeman Young served as the Episcopal Bishop of Florida. But that's not his most notable accomplishment.

I think it odd that his biography tells about his labors as bishop but does not even mention the single aspect of his work that gained world-wide notoriety.

As an accomplished linguist proficient in several languages he translated a song from its original German into English. It's a song you already know most of the words to—at least the first couple of verses. And I'll bet that you and I will both be singing it within the next couple of days.

By translating the German-language "Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!" into the English as "Silent Night, Holy Night" John Young made a lasting Christmas gift to English-speaking people around the world. He published the song in 1859.

Here is a copy of the 1859 text of the first three verses—the ones you are likely to know—of his translation:

Yes, the man who translated *Silent Night* into English ministered right here in Jacksonville. And the wreaths placed on his grave in the Old City Cemetery each Christmas contain musical instruments as ornaments.

In *Gloria Mater! bellige Nacht!*
A CHILD'S CAROL.
Original Melody.
Harmony by A. HARRIS.

pp Si - lent night! Ho - ly night! All is calm, all is bright,
pp Round you Vir - gin Mother and Child! Ho - ly In-fant, so ten-der and mild,
cresc. Sleep in heav-en-ly peace, Sleep in heav-en-ly peace.
pp

1. *Gloria Mater! bellige Nacht!*
Kilod Kildig, anten nadt
Sua nat tustat boddelige Vuar.
Gleder Nade, in ledigen Quas,
Hilfelig in kunnstbet Hel!

2. *Gloria Mater! bellige Nacht!*
Quies off fest gmadet,
Duch bet Engel Guldage,
Tuch et land von fern unt nah
Jesit, vor Herre ih ba!

3. *Gloria Mater! bellige Nacht!*
Osten Ques, a wie lude
Vuf aus beisen glindigen Wahn,
Tus und Seldigt bis emsten Stuer,
Jesit, in breiten Oeben:

2. *SILENT* night! Holy night!
All is calm, all is bright,
Round you Virgin Mother and Child!
Holy Infant, so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace!

2. Silent night! Holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight!
Glories stream from Heaven afar,
Heavenly Hosts sing Alleluia!
Cantor the Saviour is born!

3. Silent night! Holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from Thy Holy Face
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at Thy Birth!

THE REV. JOHN F. YERGEN, N.Y.

While most of us know those first three verses by heart—Silent Night is one of the most familiar hymns in the world—the last verses contain a deeper message in the song:

4. Silent Night, Holy Night
Here at last, healing light
From the heavenly kingdom sent,
Abundant grace for our intent.
Jesus, salvation for all.
Jesus, salvation for all.

5. Silent Night! Holy Night"
Sleeps the world in peace tonight.
God sends his Son to earth below
A Child from whom all blessings flow
Jesus, embraces mankind.
Jesus, embraces mankind.

6. Silent Night, Holy Night
Mindful of mankind's plight
The Lord in Heav'n on high decreed
From earthly woes we would be freed
Jesus, God's promise for peace.
Jesus, God's promise for peace.

Silent Night, a poem by Joseph Mohr, had been set to music and first sung on December 24, 1818, in St. Nicholas Church, Oberndorf, Austria. John Freeman Young heard the hymn and his English translation became one of the most popular and familiar of all English hymns.

Edgar Pennington's biography of Bishop Young, *Soldier And Servant*, by can be read at www.archive.org/stream/johnfreemanyoung00penn#page/n3/mode/2up .

While Pennington's 1939 biography contains much of interest to the Jacksonville history buff, it does not mention Young's translation of *Silent Night*. In fact, while the biography dwells on the bishop's church work, I felt disappointed that its diary excerpts contain little about his spiritual life.

Young, a native of Maine, began his ministry in Jacksonville in 1845, but moved to New York as the Civil War approached. Up north, he served at Trinity Church, Wall Street. It was while there he translated *Silent Night* among other hymns. After the war, in 1867, he returned to Jacksonville as bishop.

Tough. A yankee Episcopalian bishop in the war-torn South. One dilemma Young found was that unscrupulous yankee carpetbaggers had come to Jacksonville and taken advantage of recently freed slaves. These businessmen cheated the blacks out of real estate property and possessions. They even discouraged blacks from worship. One of the things Bishop Young did was to establish several churches, such as St. Phillip's, Jacksonville, as churches that welcomed blacks.

Bishop Young did that sort of thing all over the state. One of the more interesting portions of his diary tells how he spend three days and nights alone in a row boat, pushing it through shallow waters with a long pole, in order to visit congregations in a flooded area.

The war devastated Florida and the horrors of reconstruction left churches destitute.

Besides being a musician and linguist, Bishop Young, held an interest in architecture. He instituted the construction of a hallmark style of Florida church architecture known as Carpenter Gothic. Inexpensive local wood was used to form these distinctive church buildings, some of which survive to this day. Here is a photo of a typical example:



Bishop Young died of pneumonia in 1885. He was buried in Jacksonville's Old City Cemetery. He is honored by a stained glass church window. The window gives no indication that he had anything to do with the famous hymn.

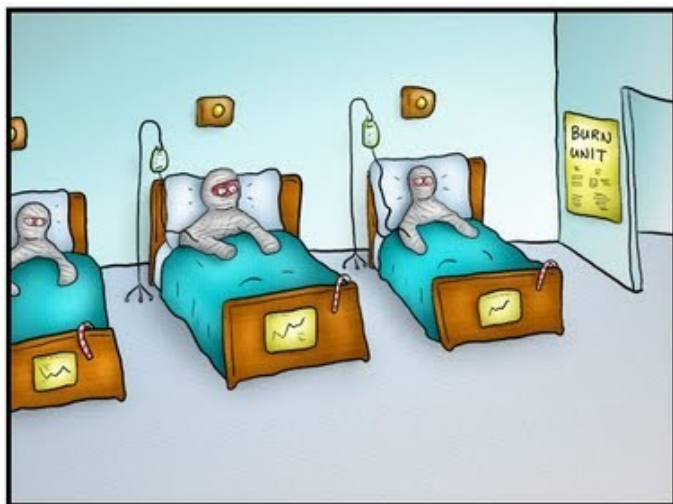


Nevertheless, I felt this Christmas season was an appropriate time to visit his grave:

Sleep in Heavenly peace, Bishop Young.
Sleep in Heavenly peace.

Monday, December 21, 2009
David Farley's Christmas Cartoons

Ever in quest of fine cartoons which reflect my own sense of refinement and good taste, I recently chanced upon the site of Dr. Fun (at <http://www.ibiblio.org/Dave/>) and browsed through his archives to select a few examples of superior art which capture the true spirit of Christmas—or something. Since I have nothing worthwhile to say at the moment, I hope to run a couple of David Farley's cartoons this week:



"That is the last time we go caroling up at the Addams' place."



A Cretaceous Christmas



"Everybody wants reindeer that fly, but then they complain about the little bat wings and the blood-sucking."



The Little Flamethrower Girl

Tuesday, December 22, 2009
In 1947...

Last night Ginny and I wrapped presents.

Since I had about a hundred dollars to spend and 13 people I wanted to give gifts to, I did most of my shopping at a thrift store.

Shopping exhausts me. I gave out and had to stop—that reminded me of something that happened to my grandmother...

Back in 1947, my grandmother—her name was Matilda, but everyone called her Mam—went Christmas shopping at Cohen Brother's, then Jacksonville's finest department store.

The St. James Building, constructed by architect Henry Klutho, now houses Jacksonville's City Hall, but back in 1947 Cohen's occupied the building. The department store was famous for its animated Christmas windows and people made special trips downtown just to see the displays. Their candy shop offered chocolate-covered strawberries the size of coffee mugs! They had a bookstore which carried archaeology books. Ladies' toiletries. Crystal. China. Mink stoles. A tea room. Cohen's was a complete mall in one store...

And it even featured Jacksonville's first escalator!

What a thrill.

So Mam had \$50 for her Christmas shopping. That was big bucks back in those days, Fifty Dollars was. She planned to shop in style at Cohen Brothers. She planed to buy presents for me and my brother, David. For my parents. For her sister, Grace, and her brother, Waverly. And for their children.

Mam wore her finest—stockings, heels, hat and gloves—back in those days a lady dressed to go shopping at Cohens. Gloves were mandatory for shoppers of Mam's generation.

It was a hot December day in Florida. Temperature in the high 80s.

Mam rode the bus downtown to Hemming Park, in those days buses stopped at a terminal right across the street from Cohen's.

She walked over to admire the animated display windows.

Did she ride the escalator up?

I don't remember.

But Mam fainted inside the store.

Remember she was an old lady back then. Must have been at least 40.

But she fainted on the floor. The floorwalker called an ambulance. The medics checked her out. Just overheated.

They charged her \$50 and put her in a taxi home.

Without a single present.

All her money spent.

As a seven-year-old kid, I didn't understand why she was so upset.

Now I do.

OK. Now it's time for a few more of those great David Farley Christmas cartoons from the site of Dr. Fun:





The Gift of the Moby



Underneath the Muscle Toad

Wednesday, December 23, 2009
What are your Christmas plans?



The night before Christmas, with the cat

Thursday, December 24, 2009
A Christmas Reading



Now this is how Jesus the Messiah was born:

His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

Joseph, her fiancé, being a just man, decided to break the engagement quietly, so as not to disgrace her publicly. As he considered this, he fell asleep, and an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream.

"Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "Do not be afraid to go ahead with your marriage to Mary. For the child within her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a Son, and you are to name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

All of this happened to fulfill the Lord's message through His prophet: "Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a Son, and He will be called Immanuel (meaning, God is with us)."

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded. He brought Mary home to be his wife, but she remained a virgin until her Son was born.

And Joseph named Him Jesus.

— *Matthew 1:18-25 New Living Bible*

Friday, December 25, 2009

A Dirty Old Man's Erotic Christmas Dream

All I know is that on Christmas Eve about midnight while I sat in the living room putting new batteries in my digital camera for Christmas photos, I heard this scratching sound in the chimney.

When I looked up, there she was crawling out of the fireplace. She wore a red teddy lined with white fur. It gaped at the front showing quite a lot of her.



Startled, I said, "Are you San... "

"His granddaughter," she said. "I'm helping out this year".

"Want some milk and cookies"?.

"No thanks," she said. "I just flew in from Germany, my last stop in Europe. Now, I start here in Florida and work my way north. So, what do you want for Christmas? You have been a good boy, haven't you John"?

She laughed as she said that.

Of course, I noticed that it wasn't her round little belly that shook as she laughed.

Nice. Very nice.

She noticed my glance. "Naughty. Naughty," she said.

"What is it that you want for Christmas?" she asked again.

Embolden, I said, "That fur-lined underwear you have on is mighty attractive. Think I might have it"?

Slipping a teasing finger under one spaghetti strap on her shoulder, she said, "So, you'd like my fur-lined undergarment? I've just left Castle Marksburg in Germany. And there I picked up a little something that's just right for you".

Quick as a flash, she went straight to her work. I saw that she certainly filled her stockings, but she said, "What a jerk".

She whipped out a cloth something from deep in her bag, threw it around my shoulders, and strapped me in so tight I could hardly move.

"It's a hair-shirt for repentance, straight from Castle Marksburg's medieval torture chamber," she said. "How's that for fur-lined underwear, John? You dirty old man you"!

And laying her finger aside of her nose, and giving a nod, up the chimney she rose.

And I heard her exclaim, err she drove out of sight, "Not even in your dreams, Cowart. Not even in your dreams".

I prickle. I itch.

Did you know that a hair-shirt does not have a zipper?

How do I get out of this thing?

Saturday, December 26, 200 **Stones and Locks**

The stone is sinking.

Christmas Eve I went to the cemetery to take my annual beating by my own memories.

I found my grandmother's grave in good shape—for a grave that is.

But the tombstone over my father and mother's grave is sinking below ground level.

Next week I'll call the cemetery office to see how much it will cost to have it raised and leveled again.

I don't know why I put myself through this ordeal every year. Just something I do. Must love guilt trips, I suppose.



"I know! I'll run my Christmas screen savers!"

The above cartoon, by David Farley at the site of Dr. Fun, speaks to me. I identify with it because most of my adult life I have worked alone on most holidays—as a long-distance truck driver, in the newsroom, at the old folks' home, as a caregiver for terminally ill patients—all occupations needing individual attention by one man alone. God bless the poor bastards working alone as Christmas music plays over the company's automated intercom system.

On a happier note, for this afternoon (Dec. 25th) I'm all prepared, physically at least, for my annual patriarchal devotional talk at the family get-together. I've constructed all my silly little visuals for the talk. The kids

asked that I do my “Ugliest Virgin” demonstration again this year.

Essentially my presentation is a one-man Christmas pageant in which I play all parts, including the Virgin—hence the title, *The Ugliest Virgin*. The high point comes when I demonstrate how to diaper a teddy bear amid clouds of baby powder.

After that tomfoolery, God willing, my serious focus this afternoon will turn to stones and locks:

God was locked out of Bethlehem’s inn; He came into our world anyhow, born in the inn’s parking garage.

He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and His own received him not.

But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:

Which were born , not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

That’s Christmas.

After Jesus rose from the dead the disciples had locked themselves securely in a safe-room fearing the same enemies who crucified Him. Jesus walked through the locked door into that room and spoke with Thomas:

The other disciples therefore said unto Thomas, “We have seen the Lord”.

But he said unto them, “Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe”.

And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut , and stood in the midst, and said , “Peace be unto you”.

Then saith He to Thomas, "Reach hither thy finger, and behold My hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into My side: and be not faithless, but believing".

And Thomas answered and said unto Him, "My Lord and my God".

Jesus saith unto him, "Thomas, because thou hast seen Me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed".

Of course, eight days before this, Jesus had already walked out of His sealed tomb. He could walk through locked doors and a sealed tomb because God is more solid than flimsy physical things like stone or locked doors. Our physical world is vapor compared to the substantial presence of God—think of yourself walking through the bathroom stream of your shower. The angel had rolled the tombstone away to let the women and disciples into the tomb to see it was empty, not to let Jesus out.

That's Easter.

The third locked door of Christmas is a little different; it is the door of the human heart. God does not kick the door and stomp on in. He knocks on our locked door to gain entrance. He respects our wishes in the matter.

In the last book of the Bible Jesus says, "Behold , I stand at the door, and knock : if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me".

That's salvation.

If we refuse to open the door, He remains outside.

You can let Him in—it is your heart, after all—to your own eternal delight.

Or you can keep Him locked out—it is your heart, after all—to your own eternal regret.

Well, I wrote the above this morning... my presentation went ok.

The downside is that afterwards I learned that my daughter Eve had prepared a presentation she intended

to give—but I hogged the show and she did not get to give the one she'd prepared. Bummer. I feel really bad about that; I've had that sort of thing happen to me and I know it hurts.

Johnny drove down from Maryland to celebrate with the rest of the family; great to see him again.

Patricia called. We will not see her and Clint till the day of the wedding next week.

Ginny gave me a pack of pipe cleaners for Christmas, much needed, and I gave her a calendar.

Somebody had a laptop at the party and everyone passed it around to read my blog entry for yesterday and got a laugh.

Oh yes, some of the kids made a video on that Ugly Virgin talk and are fixing it up to go on U-Tube; I'll post a link if they do.

Monday, December 28, 2009

Warships, Ferryboats, and Divine Guidance

Now that the Christmas holiday is over, I'm almost, but not quite, ready to go back to work writing that book about knowing and following God's will.

I've worked on that book off and on for years and I'd hoped to finish my first draft back in November, but I had to put it on the back burner while Ginny and I celebrated our anniversary, then Thanksgiving, family birthdays, and Christmas kicked in and I've delayed going back to work.

Now, our youngest daughter is getting married on January first and I just got an e-mail asking that I pick up 35 rental chairs and deliver them to the wedding venue. That should tie up my logistics for about three more days. But after the wedding, God willing, I can get back to thinking about divine guidance.

Meanwhile, thoughts of warships and ferryboats nudge my thinking.

The fishing village of Mayport lies at the mouth of the St. Johns River about a dozen miles east of my home. From the time of the first European settlers in the 1500s, the mouth of the St. Johns has been regarded as strategic importance. The French build Fort Caroline there to keep

the Spanish out of the river. The Spanish killed the French settlers and took over the mouth of the river. The English under General Oglethorpe pushed the Spanish back and established Fort George opposite Mayport.

During the Civil War, Confederate forces established forts at Yellow Bluff and at St. Johns Bluff to protect the river from yankee invaders—who took over both batteries and control of shipping in the river.

Eventually the federal government established the Mayport Naval Base, homeport for carrier groups where the *USS Kennedy* and the *USS Saratoga* each carried enough weaponry to destroy whole continents. Now, plans are in the works to expand the base to make it capable of supporting nuclear aircraft carriers and their accompanying battle groups.

Crossing back and forth between Fort George Island and the landing in Mayport is a ferry service connecting the two sections of US Highway A1A on the north and south banks of the river.. The name of the ferryboat is the *Buccaneer* -A1A down the Florida coast is known as the Buccaneer Trail.

What does all that have to do with divine guidance?

In the midst of holiday activities I've been reading bits and pieces in the 1845 diary of Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard; Something he said sparked my thinking about Mayport.

Kierkegaard observed that the captain of a ferry boat knows exactly where he is going. He sails from Landing A to Landing B and back again. While variations in current, weather, and river traffic influence his movement, by and large, he travels a straight path from here to there.

In contrast, the captain of a warship does not get his orders till he is already on the high seas. He leaves port and takes up station somewhere in mid ocean. There he patrols that general area till he receives orders to proceed to such and such a place to attack or defend a specific target.

Kierkegaard says that we Christians are more like warships than ferryboats.

In general our orders are to "occupy till I come" so we range in our general assigned area till other orders come

down from High Command. We seldom go straight back and forth between landings like ferryboats; but sometimes we do range around on the open ocean as though we had no purpose, no specific destination. We appear to be cruising aimlessly.

Not so.

Kierkegaard said, "What I really lack is to be clear in my mind what I am to do, not what I am to know, except in so far as a certain understanding must precede action".

I'm finding that thought helpful, because to be honest, I feel as though I'm just floundering around out here in deep water.

Maybe that's exactly where I'm supposed to be.

Tuesday, December 29, 2009

Rushing Forward Backwards

It's been years since I last rode a train, but I recall one odd feature—some of the seats faced to the rear. Looking out the window I saw scenery flash by, a cow, a barn, a stand of trees. But I only saw each thing after the train had already passed it.

My reading in Soren Kierkegaard's diary brought my train ride to mind when the theologian said, "Life must be lived forward, but understood backwards".

Yesterday I spent hanging around with my son Johnny who drove down from Maryland for the holiday and for his sister's wedding. I had not spent time with Johnny for years and we caught up on news and ideas as we talked all day. I found him to be a wise young man filled with insights and discernment as he demonstrated so much understanding of things that went on in the past.

I had forgotten many of the things that came up in our conversation especially when he drew me out about my own accomplishments in life. I knew I'd done stuff in the past, but somehow in the present, I tend to discount it. For instance, it was not till long in the evening that I remembered to mention that portions of my books have been translated into eleven languages. I knew that has happened but I discounted it as of little importance till Johnny asked about it.

Life must be lived forward but understood backwards.

If my keeping a journal for 35+ years has taught me nothing else, it's taught me that I do not understand what is going on in my own life. Things I thought important one day, fizzle the next; things and people I wrote off as trivial assumed major parts in my life—but like the cow, barn and trees I saw from the train, I only see that afterwards.

I think the Scripture hints that sometimes we do not know we have done the will of God till after we have done it. For instance, Paul told Timothy, "Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after. Likewise also the good works of some are manifest beforehand; and they that are otherwise cannot be hid".

And the author of Hebrews said, "Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise".

God calls on us to remember the former things. To look at what happened. At what we were. At what we wanted. At how we loved. At where we goofed—then turn around and move forward.

That's the meaning of repentance—not wallowing in despair over past sin, but turning away from darkness towards the Light. If we continue to walk in darkness, that darkness is caused by our own shadow as we face away from the Light of Christ. If we turn around and move toward Him, can we see our shadow or any darkness at all?

Readers of the *London Telegraph* newspaper travel all over the world. Many of them snap photos of unusual signs seen in their travels and sent them to the newspaper where they get published about once a week at

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/picturegalleries/signlanguage/> . Here's one posted recently:



Makes perfect sense to me.

Know of a better definition of repentance?

We've all shown our behind at one time or another.
Now it's time to turn back.

As the Prophet Ezekiel wrote, "As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live.

"Turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die?"

My mother said I was a breech birth; I came into the world ass backwards from the word GO.

That may explain a lot of things.

**Friday, January 1, 2010
Patricia's Wedding**



Today our youngest daughter got married at Jacksonville's Treaty Oak.

The father of the bride survived—but is too tired to write about it.

Maybe tomorrow...

ZZZZZ....

**Saturday, January 2, 2010
Blurred Father's View Of The Wedding**

First internal stuff mostly about me...

I may get to the wedding in a bit

It's now 5 a.m. and I've spent the past two hours trying to figure out what happened at the wedding yesterday; it's all a blur.

To start with Ginny and I did not know Clint and Patricia's wedding was actually on for January 1st. We found out on the day after Christmas. There'd been some hitches and we did not know how those things were working out. Then Patricia wrote us an e-mail from downstate where she lives but instead of sending it to us, she'd punched the save draft key on her computer, so we remained in the dark.

Thus, many events caught us by surprise.

Besides, both Ginny and I are a bit hard of hearing so I kept missing names of people, directions, and pieces of vital information. So I've been off balance for days now.

However, thanks be to God, there was little we needed to know. Clint and his parents, David and Melonie, handled everything.

Meeting Clint's parents scared me to death. They are very successful and wealthy people and I felt inferior and ashamed to meet them. David is an executive in the maritime industry and travels internationally managing ships; Melonie owns a shop of some sort. (I didn't quite catch it).

I did not know we were to meet them till just hours before we did. So I felt nervous. But they acted so gracious and happy and made us feel welcome.

My son Johnny paid for our dinner at that meeting at a restaurant usually too expensive for Ginny and me to frequent. Johnny and David got to be thick as thieves talking about shipboard computer systems.

That was on New Year's Eve—cold, wet, rainy.

Clint and Patricia had chosen to marry in an outdoor ceremony beneath the branches of Jacksonville's Treaty Oak.

Wide-spread canopy of branches, lovely flourishes of Resurrection Fern, 25-foot diameter trunk, grassy field, wooden deck—and 800,000, 000 acorns!

Patricia asked me to go early with a broom and sweep the acorns and leaves off the deck. Dad on the go. Up at

dawn. Loaded leaf blower in the car. Put on rain gear because it was pouring. Drove to the oak. Located a fuse box and threw the switch. Plugged in my leaf blower and cleared the deck of leaves, sticks, acorns and a used rubber.



Returned the electric switches back exactly as I'd found them. Drove back home soaked to dry off, warm up, and dress.

Hummm—the pants to my suit fit the last time I wore it three years ago.

Must have shrunk.

Try these tan pants instead.

Ginny drove us back to the oak an hour ahead of time. For some reason it was important to the wedding couple to be married at 1 p.m. on 1/1/10. Mystical numerology, I suppose.

Although the rain continued to drizzle, the wind blow and the temperature drop, I managed to work up a sweat carrying chairs from the parking area to the deck.

Tragedy!

My pipe tobacco got damp—could hardly get it lit.

Johnny and the preacher (J.P.? Notary?) were there already. But the first person I met was a lovely young woman who hugged me. Who was this girl?



It was Rachael, whom I've known since childhood, but she's matured so much I did not recognize her. She brought her cello to play for the wedding. She and Johnny rigged a canopy so her cello would stay dry. Among other pieces, Rachael played a hauntingly beautiful rendering of *Jesu, Joy Of Man's Desiring*.

More and more people arrived—about 40—but when I tried to seat three more young people with camera's, it

turned out they were tourists in town for the football game and had nothing to do with the wedding.

Finally, the bride, my youngest daughter Patricia, arrived for me to escort down the aisle. As we strolled across the field, I told the nervous child bits of history about the oak.



There were some girls loitering on the steps.

I tried to shew them away, till Patricia informed me they were bridesmaids—I did not know there were to be any bridesmaids.

The preacher asked, “Who presents this woman for marriage”?

I replied, “Her mother, her sisters, her brothers, and I do”.

I retreated to the rear to try to fire up a smoke from my damp tobacco pouch.

Didn't smoke. Smoldered.

I cried.

Not because of damp tobacco.

Such a terrific young couple:



Scads of people, both families and friends, photographed the ceremony. Ginny took this one from the middle of the group, there were more camera people behind her.



Unfortunately, because our camera batteries died, or because of condensation, or whatever, only about a third of the pictures Ginny took came out; Dozens of people say they will e-mail their copies to us.

Another high-tech thing that amazed me came to light when everyone began talking about going to the restaurant Clint's parents had booked for the reception. The Hilltop Club is about 15 miles away in Orange Park—only two people in the crowd had ever been there before—so all these high-tech folks whip out GPS locating devices, synchronized coordinates, climbed in their cars and sped away. I had directions written down on a post-it note. The Hilltop hardly compares with Dave's Diner, but it is nice:



A 20- foot Christmas tree adorned the lobby. Thousands of lights and scads of poinsettias decorated the porches. Golden koi surfaced near the fountain in the pool...But I asked Ginny to photograph one festive decoration especially for me:



Clint and Patricia's reception was held in one of the front formal dining rooms:



At Patricia's request, her sister Eve baked a cat-cake for the occasion:



Mark and Eve, bless them, also paid for succulent prime-rib dinners for Ginny and me.

Cline and Patricia had asked that I give a toast or blessing for the dinner—"Because that sort of things comes so easy for you"—Ha! I worried over this task for

days rejecting a dozen ideas till I came up with three short readings from my tattered old Bible:



Here's what I said:

The kids asked me to open this with a toast or something. I looked up wedding toasts on the internet and they are too obscene for your innocent ears. So I'm going to read three short passages from the Bible: a commandment for Clint, a bit of love poetry for Patricia, and a blessing for us all.

Cline, this is the commandment of the Lord God Almighty!

Rejoice with the wife of thy youth.

Let her be unto thee as a gazelle upon the mountain,

Or a deer in the meadow.

Let her breasts satisfy thee at all times.

Yea, Be thou ravished with her love!

(At first the audience seem stunned, then they began to hoot and laugh and clap Clint on the back).

What, I said. Did you think there were only ten commandments in the Scripture?

Patricia, this love poem by Agar the Seer is for you:

There are three things too wonderful for me to tell about.

Yea, there are four too beautiful for me to describe:

The way an eagle soars in the air,
The way a serpent moves on the rock,
The way of a ship in the midst of the sea,

And the way a man makes love to a maid.

And, now a blessing for us all, the words Aaron, High-Priest of Israel, brother of Moses, pronounced over God's people:

The Lord bless thee,

And keep thee.

The Lord make His face to shine upon thee,

And be gracious unto thee.

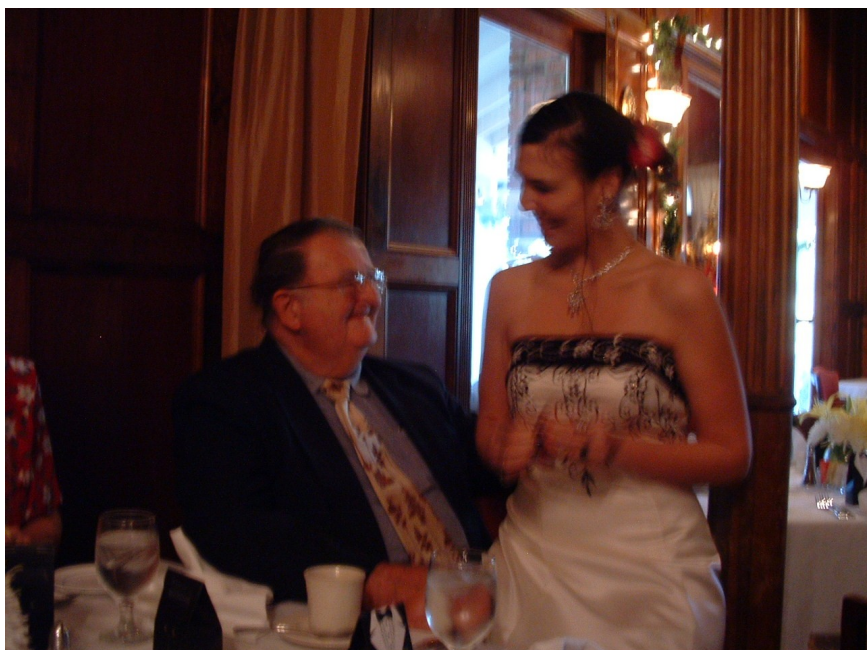
The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee,

And give thee... Peace.

Here's a photo of Ginny and me enjoying a touching speech Clint made about how he met our daughter:



Later, Patricia came over to our table and I took her on my lap and did that little nursery rhyme motion game, "This is the way a lady rides"—she laughed and giggled just like she used to do when she was two years old.



During one smoke break, I enjoyed a conversation with one of Clint's aunts who told me about some 1849 diaries in her family kept by pioneer ancestors who migrated west during the Gold Rush. Fascinating.

I am leaving out so much.

I met so many nice people. I heard so many nice things. I learned of so many plans—many of Clint's relatives are driving downstate for another reception with a hundred or so young people in attendance on Saturday. Ginny and I just could not face that extra trip.

When we got home, she sat reading a murder mystery to unwind. I watched a vcr movie about a prehistoric monster that ate a boatload of people who richly deserved eating—very relaxing.

All day long I've been damp and wet and cold. All day long people have hugged or touched me not knowing that almost anytime I'm touched I have panic attacks so bad my breathing stops. All day long I've had the neurological shakes that make me tremble so bad I have to hold the cup with both hands to drink coffee. All day long people have swarmed around me. All day long the tooth that needs pulling next week has pained me. My feet hurt. I have a cold that racks me with coughing. All day long I've felt inferior and out of place. All day long it has drizzled cold rain. All day long, I've had trouble lighting my pipe.

One moment at Hilltop Clint caught up with me on a veranda overlooking the pool. "Mr. Cowart," he said, "Today has been just perfect. Absolutely perfect".

I agree with him.

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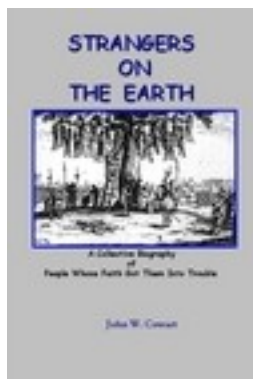
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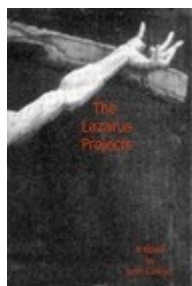
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John Cowart's collective biography, *Strangers On The Earth*, offers miniature portraits of about 20 people who were radically different from the rest of us, people I find to be among the most fascinating characters who ever lived. Some told about in these pages are well known. Others you may have never heard of before. Each one exhibits certain other-worldly characteristics and values which you may find attractive, funny or odd — even repelling. Each of them acted out of place in this world, as though they were strangers here.... Among those profiled here are Astronomer Johannes Kepler, Aristocrat Jeanne Guyon, Farmer Seth Hubbel, Physician Eleanor Chesnut, Explorer Christopher Columbus, Housewife Mary Rowlandson, Saint Patrick of Ireland, Missionary William Carey, and a host of others who lived indeed as strangers on this earth.

The Lazarus Projects



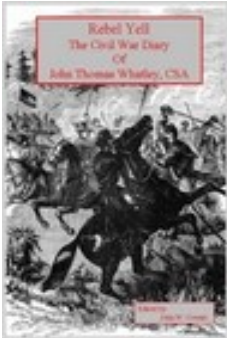
In *THE LAZARUS PROJECTS*, by John Cowart, a team of modern scientists travels back through time to investigate the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in the year 33. Miami businessman Lazarus Wienstien, multi-millionaire owner of one of America's largest breweries, proposes this investigation. The bizarre death of his only grandson



on the day Mr. Wienstien discovers his own cancer motivates him to initiate five research projects, one of which, he hopes, will insure his personal survival after death. These projects include experiments in cyronics, geriatrics, hypnotic regression, resuscitation and resurrection.

Rebel Yell:

The Civil War Diary Of John Thomas Whatley, CSA



John Cowart edited this hitherto unpublished diary of a Confederate soldier. John Thomas Whatley's diary has been hidden away for almost 150 years and is here presented for the first time. Whatley, of Coweta County, Georgia, wrote in a bound farmer's ledger from March 2, 1862, till November 27, 1864. In neat Spencerian script Whatley's diary opens with his accounts while preparing for the defense of Savannah, Georgia; most of the diary's pages record events there. The diary portion of the text ends with his serving near Petersburg, Virginia. Apparently, much of this time he served with General William J. Hardee's cavalry. The yankees killed Whatley at Bentonville, North Carolina, on April 14, 1865 — the same day President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated.

William F. Short's 1854 Diary



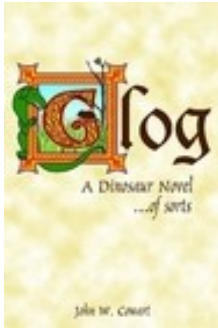
In 1854 William Short said more between the lines of his diary than he did in its pages. He'd proposed marriage to Sarah. But when he traveled to Jackson, Missouri, he was smitten by Amanda. Then at a Methodist camp meeting he met Martha, "My Temptation". Suspense builds as the young minister decides

A Dirty Old Man Goes To The Dogs



which girl to marry while at the same time he feels a deep heart hunger for God. His mix of confusion about love and dedication to Christ still appeals to readers after 155 years.

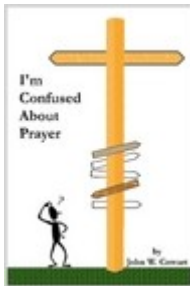
Glog: A Dinosaur Novel—of sorts



John Cowart's Glog, a science fiction/humor fantasy, relates the adventures of a sentient dinosaur in the Chesapeake Bay area where he prays for divine guidance while being buffeted by adverse circumstances which confuse the creature to no end. Glog eats muskrats, lots of muskrats, and hunger motivates him more than anything else. He also illuminates the

initial uncials in a biblical manuscript.

I'm Confused About Prayer



John Cowart, World's Foremost Authority on unanswered prayer, says, "I've prayed for more things and didn't get them than anyone else I know." But many other people also wonder why their prayers seem to get nowhere. So John's amusing book addresses such issues as: Is Anybody out there to

answer prayers? If God is able to answer, then why doesn't He? Is God as mean as a snake? Is there something wrong with my faith, my sins, my breath? If God did speak to me during prayer, would I hear him? If I don't have a whole lot of faith, will God answer me anyhow? Am I praying, or just wishing? And as John worries such questions, he presents his famous Skunk Proof for the existence of a loving God. He dedicates the book to his wife with the words, "I prayed 35 years ago to get over loving you. I'm so glad that God did not answer my prayer"



Heroes All: A History of Firefighting In Jacksonville, Florida



John Cowart's **HEROES ALL** traces the history of Jacksonville, my hometown, from the viewpoint of how many times the place has burned down--or been saved from burning down by heroic firefighters. From 1850, when bucket brigade volunteers grabbed their rifles to shoot an arsonist off the roof of a hotel, right up to the fire department's rescue of a puppy and some other animals from locked cages last year when 200 dogs died in the Humane Society Shelter fire, this book focuses on the bravery and courageous deeds of firefighters who save lives and property daily.

Crackers & Carpetbaggers: Moments In The History Of Jacksonville, Florida



John Cowart said, It all happened in Jacksonville, Florida: *Seminoles Indians, dressed in the costumes of Shakespearian actors, attacked Mandarin. *A letter from a prostitute lead Jacksonville's most popular minister to be aboard the Titanic when she went down (the ship that is). *Yellow Jack, a monstrous killer, decimated the city. *Gentleman Jim Corbett, Boxing Champion of America, fought and fought and fought in Jacksonville. *A pawnbroker buried eight chests of diamonds at Moncrief Springs; his treasure has never been recovered.. *In Riverside, a mule died in Mrs. E.C. Clark's kitchen. *A notorious pirate led a prayer



Man Goes To The Dogs

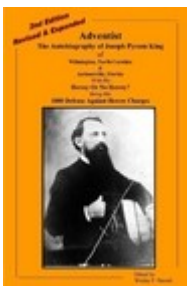


meeting at Fort Caroline.... The Great Seaboard Earthquake, The Great Fire, The Great Freeze, The Great Telephone War, and many other events - It all happened in Jacksonville. *** "Hope you enjoy reading about it." --JWC

Letters From Stacy

Editor John Cowart said, "I bought an old wooden file drawer a few years ago at a yard sale in the Riverside section of Jacksonville, Florida. As best I recall, I paid three dollars for the file drawer and its contents. Inside I found this collection of letters touching on Little Rock, Arkansas', and Jacksonville, Florida's, history and culture from a man interested in family, cooking, gardening, gunsmithing, computers, geology, wines, weather ... and gnomes."

Adventist: The Autobiography Of Joseph Pyram King



Edited by Wes Bassett, Joseph P. King's autobiography spotlights American life between 1846 and 1946. King tells of his boyhood in Wilmington, N.C., during the Civil War, his bout with Yellow Fever, and his love affair with his wife of 60 years. He also tells of his long service as a minister. Included is his defense when he was put on trial for heresy in 1880. This 2nd edition contains corrections, additions, and a section of newly uncovered and collected photographs.

Along The Way



This is the first book in a series by award-winning columnist Barbara White, who describes herself as an insignificant person following a magnificent Savior; a weak person following a powerful God; a pilgrim following the road Home. She



admits being a sinful person on the receiving end of incredible grace. She says, "I write about trying to live the Christian life and failing and trying again". Her modest yet strong newspaper columns influenced thousands of readers as they followed her struggles and joys along the way; in her spiritual journey, they see their own. Readers from all walks of life and every religious persuasion identify with the transparent reality of her life and writing as they seek their own spiritual depth. Join her in her journey along the way; she's headed toward someplace we all want to go.

Further Along The Way



For over 15 years at the Florida Times-Union newspaper, award winning journalist Barbara White 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. "God

loves us just as we are — and too much to let us stay that way. This is the second book in a series of Barbara White's *Along The Way* columns to be published by Bluefish Books.

Seasons Along The Way



For 15 years award-winning journalist Barbara White wrote *Along The Way*, a weekly column for the Florida Times-Union newspaper, chronicling her personal spiritual journey — 15 Easters, 15 Mothers' Days, 15 Thanksgivings, 15 Advents, 15 Lents, 15 Fourth of Julys, etc. Each column was to be read as a stand-alone piece, therefore they retain a timeless

quality. This book collects samples of these



A Dirty Old Man Goes To The Dogs

outstanding columns related to various holiday seasons as well as a generous sample of columns related to the fun, faith and frustrations Mrs. White experienced in her daily adventures Along The Way. This is the third book in Barbara White's Along The Way series. —jwc

Rejoicing Along The Way



In this fourth book of Barbara White's popular Along The Way series, she experiences joy on her spiritual journey in spite of potholes along the way such as her own cancer, a broken wrist, and her daughter's brain tumor. Her discoveries of rejoicing mirror the spiritual riches available in every reader's own life.

A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad



A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad, by John Cowart, records the humor and happiness of a frustrated writer. John's daily blog, Rabid Fun, bears the caption, "A befuddled ordinary Christian looks for spiritual realities in day to day living." Sounds like a downer. Yet, over 104,000 readers from 102 countries visited his website in 2005. A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad reveals John's happy joys as well as his struggles with temptation over bitterness, resentment, pornography, Microsoft, depression, laziness, Google, Blogger, pettiness, sloth, Krispy Kreme Donuts, and anger. All in all, this is a real-time



love story told day by day by a man who loves reality.

A Dirty Old Man Gets Worse



Have great reading fun as you track joys and frustrations in this light-hearted writer's diary. Laugh as this happy man wrestles with temptations and ponders the existence and nature of God. Smile at his antics over editing a Civil War diary and the autobiography of a 100-year-old man while at the same time caring for a duck attacked by a raccoon. Enjoy a year's worth of fun with his wild and rambunctious family. Be amused at the false and mistaken report of his death; and relish his abiding joy in life. Follow John's exploits as he plans to write THE WORLD'S GREATEST BOOK ON HUMILITY! as a future project.

A Dirty Old Man Stumbles On



In this third book of John Cowart's Dirty Old Man Diaries series the author shares his fun-filled adventures as he takes his wife off for a romantic get-away weekend to an Indian burial mound. But it's not all fun as John wrestles with the problem of, "If God Loves Me, Then Why Won't My Lawnmower Start?". Readers share John's frustration as he worries over two sneaky 16th Century Puritans with the same name and as he turns a shopping bag filled with newspaper clippings into a book. And readers laugh as John plays the part of the "Ugliest Virgin Ever" in a Christmas play when he tries to diaper a Teddy Bear amid clouds of baby powder. In the midst of these humorous adventures, John continually falls to temptations, yet keeps stumbling along seeking spiritual reality in everyday life.



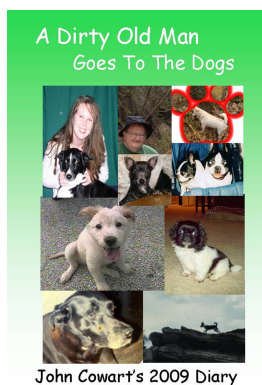
A Dirty Old Man Goes To The Dogs

A Dirty Old Man Sinks Lower

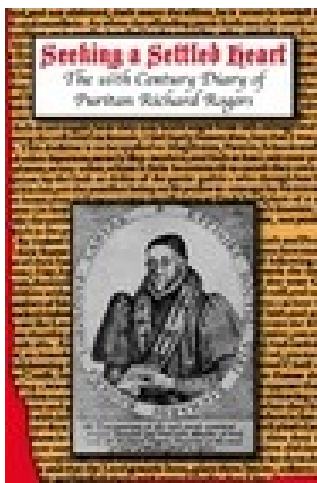


Readers laugh as writer John Cowart bogs down in tar when he paints his house. He also bogs down in muck repairing his pool. And he bogs down in words as he finishes writing a history of his local fire department—a project he's tried, off and on, for 20 years. John says he's just a befuddled ordinary Christian who looks for spiritual reality in everyday life—and you'll laugh as he has fun doing that. You never know what the next page will bring. This book is the fourth in John's Dirty Old Man Goes Bad series.

A Dirty Old Man Goes To The Dogs



Once again writer John Cowart proves laughable as he ponders the serious business of life. In this fifth book of John's *Dirty Old Man* series, he thrills to uncover a century-old fingerprint. He struggles with matters of faith and theodicy as he recounts the tale of his friend the librarian's car being attacked by barely-clad nightclub strippers swinging swords. Only real life can be so funny and so serious at the same time.



Seeking A Settled Heart: The 16th Century Diary of Puritan Richard Rogers

The diary of Richard Rogers, a Puritan minister in the time of the first Queen Elizabeth, resonates with features of my own life. Rogers lived between



1550 and 1618; his extant diary covers from February 28, 1587 to August 26, 1590. This present text is based on materials transcribed by Dr. M.M. Knappen. 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. — John Cowart

The Diary Of Samuel Ward, A Translator of the 1611 King James Bible

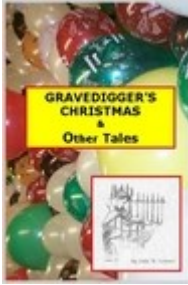


Samuel Ward, a moderate Puritan, lived from 1577 to 1643. His life spanned from the reign of Britain's Queen Elizabeth, through that of King James. and into the days of Charles I. Surviving pages of his diary run from May 11, 1595 to July 1, 1632. He served the Second Cambridge Company Translation Committee, comprised of the finest biblical and linguistic scholars of his day, to produce the 1611 King James Bible, the world's most popular book. Ward walked a thin line between Puritan and Established Church factions.

While perusing his academic career at Cambridge, he preached solid Puritan sermons yet rose to become the royal chaplain for King James, head of the Established Church. Ward's diary reveals that while he cared deeply about larger academic, political and church polity matters, his main concern was his own walk with Christ. He wrote to remind himself of his daily sins and faults, and also to remind himself of God's many blessings to him.

Gravedigger's Christmas

A Dirty Old Man Goes To The Dogs



John Cowart's collection, *Gravedigger's Christmas & Other Tales: Fact, Fiction, And The Normal Daily Grind*, provides entertaining and amusing, yet enlightening, short stories, articles and essays related to daily life as well as to various holidays. Readings in the 230 page book range from "John Burns His Own Stupid Foot" for April Fool's Day, to serious meditations such as "The Ugliest Picture In The World" for Easter. In these pages love stories abound, such as "The Girl In My Shower" and "The Fig Factor". And the book also addresses deep philosophical and theological issues such as "Are There Reindeer In Heaven?" and "Was Jesus A Ghost?". All these chapters combine to make for light happy reading no matter what the occasion — even if it's just making it through your normal daily grind.



John Cowart's Daily blog can be found at
www.cowart.info/blog/

Bluefish Books





Cowart Communications
Jacksonville, Florida
www.bluefishbooks.info
