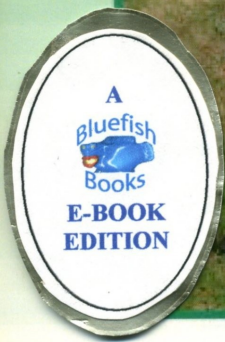
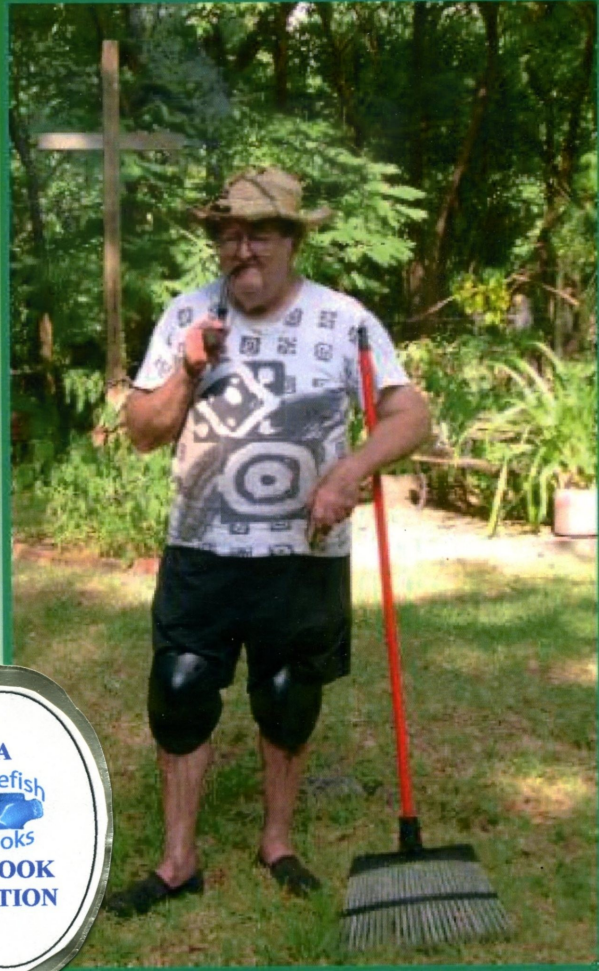


A Dirty Old Man Gets Worse



John Cowart's 2006 Diary

A DIRTY OLD MAN GETS WORSE

John Cowart's 2006 Diary

John W. Cowart

Bluefish Books



CowartCommunications
JacksonvilleFlorida

www.bluefishbooks.info

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This book is dedicated
to
The Kid In The Attic
and
to
VIRGINIA
Who made me the dirty old man I am today.

— jwc



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John Cowart's Daily blog can be found at
www.cowart.info/blog/

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A DIRTY OLD MAN GETS WORSE

JOHN COWART'S 2006 DIARY

Introduction:

Pixels, tiny dots of black, light or color, in a picture on your computer screen — That's the way I think of the months, weeks, days, minutes and seconds of my own life.

Viewed individually, they reveal little sense or purpose. But a picture emerges when these are blended together.

It's not a picture of me

I'm a spear-carrier in the background of my own life.

For close to 30 years I have kept a daily journal. Each posting by itself is a pixel. Some colorful, some light, some dark — very dark indeed.

In 2006, I posted my journal entries as a daily blog. The blog's title is *Rabid Fun* at www.cowart.info/blog/ and its heading reads: "A befuddled ordinary Christian looks for spiritual realities in day to day living."

I think the picture these pixels form shows what Christ is doing for, to, and spite of this one dirty old man.

He's got His work cut out for Him!

My Webalizer counter shows that over 300 people a day read these blog entries.

I can't imagine why.

Nothing good on tv, I suppose.

Reading these entries you may get a few laughs. You'll find a lot of befuddlement and foolishness. You'll see a few tears and much joy. You'll read about temptation, failure, frustration — and deep satisfaction.

In all that, I hope you see far beyond the individual pixels, the little events of my mundane life, to see a bigger picture, a picture of Something truly beautiful.

--John

A DIRTY OLD MAN GETS WORSE

John Cowart's 2006 Diary



John putting a ship into a bottle

A DIRTY OLD MAN GETS WORSE

JOHN COWART'S 2006 DIARY

JANUARY

Sunday, January 01, 2006

Future Plans

An old saying goes: If you want to hear God laugh, make plans!

A dizzy spell woke me up at 3:30 Saturday morning and stayed with me throughout the day; this curtailed plans I had to work on the car. I felt leery of taking the radiator apart if I might not feel well enough to put it back together again, so I stayed inside working on my manuscript all day.

While Ginny disassembled Christmas decorations, I wrote out a work plan for the coming year. This meant trying to realistically examine what I hope to accomplish and evaluating whether or not it's worth doing.

Sometimes yea and sometimes nay.

On some level I do want to be 100% at the disposal of Jesus Christ and available to fit into His plans; on another level, I have my own ideas that I want to push through come Hell or high water.

I've pretty much decided to let other people take care of the young man dying of cancer, yet I'm trying to stay open to the work if I see I'm really needed. I've looked at my motives for wanting to be involved (being with a group of insiders, wanting to impress folks with my hands-on piety, and crap like that) and I see my motivation is a great deal less than love. On the other hand, I realize that a person in need doesn't give a damn about the motives of the helper - the soup tastes just as good to him even if I cooked with paternalistic motives.

At any rate, I decided not to help in this instance but I'm not satisfied with my decision and I'm open to changing my mind.

During break times from our work, Ginny and I sat together smoking and recounting various things we have to be thankful about in 2005. We accumulated quite a list. Things have gone very well for us. We also nosed about things, good and ill, to anticipate in 2006. We'll take those as they come.

She also advised me about some formatting problems I'm having with the current manuscripts. As a writer, I used to envision a special niche in hell where editors would thrash around in flaming piles fueled by manuscript pages they had rejected.

Now that I'm editing my own copy, I can see that editors may have suffered a bit in the here and now already. Their job is not as easy as it looks.

I did get a pleasant stroke when an e-mail arrived from a young historian asking permission to quote from *Crackers & Carpetbaggers*, my book on Jacksonville history,. He's writing his own book on J.E.T. Bowden, a politician in the 1880s, and wants to quote me as a source.

I couldn't be more flattered!

I'm putting together a response with some tips so he can avoid some of the bogs I got stuck in as I wrote my own work.

Another happy thing is that about 4 in the afternoon I received my very first New Year's Greeting, an e-mail from Jellyhead, a young lady in Australia - where it was already the New Year.

That was certainly a lift.

Jennifer and Pat hosted a New Year's Party at their house with pizza, videos, and milk shakes, with a trip downtown to see fireworks at midnight. Ginny & I planned to stay home and watch tv - but I fell asleep about 9:30 and the New Year managed to arrive without me.

Reuters News Service reports that in Palu, Indonesia, a New Year's Eve bomb exploded in a Christian market killing 8 people and mangling 53 others. The bomb was packed with nails to maximize damage.

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According to the wire:

Central Sulawesi has been plagued by religious violence and tension since the late 1990s. Fighting between Muslims and Christians from 1998-2001 killed 2,000 people, mainly around the Muslim town of Poso....

While a peace accord halted the 1998-2001 bloodshed in Central Sulawesi, violence has erupted sporadically.

In one of the worst incidents, three teenage Christian girls were beheaded near Poso last October. Bombings last May in the Central Sulawesi Christian town of Tentena killed 22 people.

Inter-communal violence has killed thousands in Indonesia since the downfall of longtime autocrat Suharto in 1998.

The nation of 220 million people has experienced several major bomb attacks on Western targets as well, mostly blamed on Jemaah Islamiah, a group seen as al Qaeda's Southeast Asian arm.

In addition to such violence, Indonesia is experiencing an outbreak of polio, and bird flu still looms on the horizon.

Last year my book on prayer was translated and published in Indonesia. If you're inclined to pray, please ask the Lord to help my little book on prayer honor Him in this troubled place and time.

Monday, January 02, 2006

An Ordinary Day

Yesterday I drained the car's radiator and poured in new antifreeze. A neighbor saw me working on my car and asked me to jump start hers.

Ginny mended clothes and caught up on odds and ends chores she's been meaning to get around to. I answered a few e-mails and researched the shipwreck photos Wes gave me last week, but I couldn't identify the wreck. It was not the one I thought.

Ginny & I watched football on tv. A common, ordinary, unexciting day.

My blog heading says I'm a guy who looks for spiritual reality in daily life. So, where is God on a day like this?

The Bible says, “God is near”. It says, “In Him we live and move and have our very being”. Why wasn’t I aware of Him as I fiddled with the car or watched football?

I wonder if it’s not that He’s far off, but that all of us -- like people who live in the mountains who take the view for granted -- I wonder if we grow so accustomed to ordinary, daily mercies that we lose sight of Majesty.

I live my life unaware of wonders, insensitive to splendor. Plodding along with my head down, seeing only dirt on earth.

I wonder, are fish aware of water?

Tuesday, January 03, 2006

I Owe A Debt To Dracula

The first book I ever stole was a library copy of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*.

In 1951 I became a Boy Scout and other boys in my troop introduced me to the thrill of horror movies. Having seen Bela Lugosi in the movie, I naturally had to read the book. The story and its format captivated me. I found it not horrifying, but charming.

And Stoker’s choice of format changed my life.

A series of journal entries, diaries and letters give the book its structure.

As a 12-year-old boy I had never before heard of a journal or diary. Discovering that some people led lives so interesting that they recorded what happened to them every day intrigued me.

The fact that Jonathan Harker kept a record of what he did each day and that tracking his days led to the destruction of the monster ... Wow! What 12-year-old boy could resist? I had to begin writing a daily journal so that when I encountered some great adventure, or met a vampire, I’d know how to cope.

I began to record my life’s days in a school notebook. ... Alas, what a bore.

So I quit journaling.

Too much work.

But the idea stayed with me. I remained convinced that life is worth recording.

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Then, as a young man I encountered the *Journal of David Brainerd* (1718-1747), a missionary to the American Indians, and I was deeply touched by this man's life. Then I read excerpts from the extensive diaries of Samuel Pepys (1603-1733); the massive journals of John Wesley (1703-1791) ; the utterly charming diary of 8-year-old Marjorie Fleming (1803-1811) ... and a host of other journal writers, people who wrote for themselves trying to make sense of their own lives.

I collected a whole bookcase full of other people's journals.

The real life daily struggles, problems, observations, concerns, and triumphs of ordinary people fascinate me. I look for meaning in their lives and my own.

Off and on over the years I have started and stopped my own journal a number of times. Some of my earlier attempts were lost through divorce, house fire, moving, etc. But a back closet still contains my own daily record of my life and thoughts for at least the past 25 years...

And then last year, in conversation, my youngest son used a word I'd never before heard – Blog.

Thus I began this on-line series of daily postings – which are not very much different from my journal entries except that I'm MUCH more inhibited in these, and all too aware that other people may read over my shoulder practically as I write.

Two odd incidents related to my journaling:

Once a few years ago the phone rang and an attorney I'd never heard of before asked me to appear as an expert witness at a trial concerning a dispute over an old diary. He'd read a book review I'd written for a local newspaper and I'd mentioned diaries in the review. I certainly never think of myself as an expert on diaries but the judge paid attention to my testimony.

Another time years back, a young lady where I worked asked me if I had kept track of the day an unusual incident had happened on the job. Puzzled by her request, I checked back six or seven weeks and found that I had recorded the incident.

I was able to tell her the exact day it happened – but I asked why she needed to know.

Blushing, she told me that she wanted to know because that was the night she'd gotten pregnant!

Wasn't me!

Maybe Dracula slipped into her bedroom that night.

Actually, she now had -- thanks to my journal -- a specific date and time for a long talk with her boyfriend.

Anyhow, if anyone is interested in some of my old journal excerpts, I've posted a sampling in the right-hand column of my website (www.cowart.info) under the heading "Today In Former Years". That section takes a random date and tracks that date back over a number of years.

When I read back over the events of my own life, I see certain patterns in the mercy of God to me; I see recurring problems and failures; I see jokes I'd forgotten; I see the growth of the love Ginny and I share; and I see our (now grown) children flourish and thrive.

I'm pleased.

Mr. Dracula, I owe you a great debt.

After watching the Rose Parade and football all day yesterday, Ginny & I drove to Jennifer and Pat's new home for dinner with them, Donald and Helen, Eve and Patricia.

We lounged in pool and hot tub and around the fireplace listening to heavy rain on the roof.

We talked about each person's hopes, and especially career plans, for the next year. We also kicked around ideas about a family charitable endeavor we're considering.

In a mini family conference, we discussed ways to market and increase sales of my books. About the only thing we actually decided was not to post more blatant ads on either my website or blog.

I hope that my writing gives readers hope and nudges them closer to Christ, so I (and, to a lesser degree, the family) feel that advertising might muddy the water.

So many people think that religious folk are just in it for the money. Thus, to avoid that putting that stumbling

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block in the way of readers, we again decided not to clutter the sites with any more promotional material.

Therefore, Jennifer urged me to write a book about coping with poverty.

Now, that's a field I am indeed an expert in.

Anyhow, we all had a great time and laughed our heads off over juvenal jokes and ancient family stories - the kids told about a pissing/vomiting contest among themselves that Ginny and I never knew about until last night.

This teaches me that no matter how carefully I record my life - I don't have the slightest idea of what's been going on around me in my own home.

No, I've never seen a vampire scale an ancient stone wall clutching a bag-full of squirming babies to feed his voluptuous companions; my journal has never recorded such an incident... but should I ever see such a thing, my pen is ready.

And you'll get to read about it right here.

Wednesday, January 04, 2006

Beauty In The Junk Yard



My youngest daughter stayed over an extra day from college to hang around with me, get reacquainted, explore and take photographs.

We had a great day!

After breakfast out, she took a picture of the phone post outside Dave's Restaurant where for years folks have posted Lost Dog or Garage Sale signs; hundreds of nails and staples remain in the post giving it an intriguing texture.

We are both interested in beauty, shapes and textures, especially as they appear in unintentional art, i.e. ordinary objects left out to weather until they gain a rustic beauty.

So I took her to photograph a rusty door in a tiny house near the railroad tracks:

(But the Rusty Door photo will not transfer to Blogger for some reason??? I think Blogger hates me.)

Then for a special treat, I took her to a junk yard ... excuse me, the proper term is salvage yard. For over 70 years workers at Burkhalter Wrecking have dismantled abandoned buildings in Jacksonville. They salvage architectural features worth preserving for resale. These range from a sea of toilets to a galaxy of chandeliers.

Mr. Trey Burkhalter gave us permission to photograph some of the treasures in the huge collection and we spent about three hours roaming amid hundreds of doors, roof tiles, old sign boards, antique toys and bottles and door knobs.

Patricia took over a hundred photos and I've posted a sample of them in the Jacksonville History section of my website under the title, *Jax Junk Yard*.



My favorite picture is one of a bucket full of door knobs:

Our father/daughter outing was a resounding success; we have not spent such a happy time together in ages. I came to a new appreciation of my grown daughter's beauty, wisdom, grace and maturity. And her business acumen also impressed me greatly - How in the world did

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I miss all that before by just thinking of her as a college kid?

Dads are denser than anybody.

But looking for beauty in a junk yard, I found it.

Sometimes I think God gives us glimpses of beauty, mystery and wonder in the most mundane settings.

Seeing all the debris of once-great buildings with my daughter reminded me that the only thing on earth that lasts forever is people.

The ones we love, the ones we hate, the ones we discount with indifference – every person around us – we ourselves – will spend all eternity Somewhere.

And the Scripture reveals God's odd promise of giving beauty for ashes.

I think that's wonderful.



Thursday, January 05, 2006

I Made A Top Ten List!

I am honored (sort of) to have made a Top Ten List.

At least I think I'm honored.

Yes. I am indeed honored. And I'm very pleased.

You see, I maintain three spots on the World Wide Web: There's this Rabid Fun Blog), my Rabid Fundamentalist website and my on-line book catalog (www.bluefishbooks.info).

Yesterday, according to the Webalizer Counter Software my son installed for me, 95 readers visited my blog from 15 countries; 390 readers from 50 countries

visited my website; and not one single one of my books sold.

A typical day.

But I got a surprise and a laugh when I looked at the top search strings readers used to arrive at my blog:

- Pool boy
- Weird
- John Cowart
- Living in a bus
- Little tin boxes
- Crazy party food
- Recycle plastic grocery bags
- Socks and shorts, and ...
- The top ten twerps of year 2005 in the Philippines!

How did I make this list in the Philippines?

The only thing I can think of is that last spring an edition of my little book on prayer was published in that country and it was this book that earned me my spot on the top ten list.

It's good to know that my writing is appreciated.

And I am indeed honored that readers in the Philippines have noticed my books more than readers in my own country.

I wish the Philippine people joy and peace.

Thank you. I am honored.

PS: The book *I'm Confused About Prayer* (or portions of it) has also been translated and published in German, French, Spanish, Indonesian and Afrikaans. Alas, most of these are long out of print. But an English edition is still available at www.bluefishbooks.info.

Friday, January 06, 2006

A Virtual Sidetrack

For days now I've had this great idea to write a blog posting which would inspire and educate, amuse and uplift, convince and convert, thrill and bring joy to all readers.

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So, this morning I Google searched for a cool graphic, something perfect to illustrate my brilliant idea. I looked at the Reverend Fun cartoons at <http://www.reverendfun.com/artchives/>.

I got hung up.

I kept clicking from one cartoon to another all morning till time ran out.

Sorry. Maybe I can write something inspiring some other day.

In my own exciting real-time life, yesterday I formatted 76 pages of my manuscript, cleaned the pool filter, cut my own hair, ate supper, then fell asleep in front of the tv.

Saturday, January 07, 2006

Second Thoughts

I'm having second thoughts about my Christianity.

Meeting a man covered with tattoos brought this about.

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

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

But, no sooner than I had these thoughts judging the man, a second thought came to mind: *Get real, John! Here is a child of God, a potential saint, a man who may walk in obedience to Christ better than you do, John Cowart. You are judging on an impression with a bare minimum of information.*

That second thought caught me up short.

Last Saturday as Ginny and I drove to WalMart, the driver of another car, full of people, crowded us because he was in the turn lane but wanted to drive straight ahead. My first thought – in fact I said most of it aloud – was: *You son of a bitch! I hope you crash into that lamp*

pole and mangle your whole family. I'll stop and watch you bleed. And I'll spit in the puddle of blood as I drive past. And darn if I'll waste one of our cell phone minutes calling 911!

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

I saw a girl.

A well endowed girl.

A very well endowed girl.

My first thought was Any guesses?

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

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

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

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

I could go on and on – about Hurricane Katrina victims, about foreigners, about politicians, about ... Well, you name it.

There's a pattern here.

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

My second thought comes closer to being Christian.

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

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

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

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

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

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

What a shabby way to think.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Is it any wonder that I get befuddled?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sunday, January 08, 2006

The Things I Do For Love

Ginny did not have any idea of where we were driving. I'd made all the arrangements and kept all secret from her.

I told her to trust me implicitly and to wear the shirt I picked out of her closet.

We've been in a bit of a rut recently and I wanted to



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thrill and delight her, to bring joy and light into her dull, drab existence.

But, for this post to make any sense, you need to understand that I am NOT a cat person. That means that when I go into a room where there are eight or ten cat lovers all calling “Here, Kitty, Kitty, Kitty”, the cat will ignore all of them with disdain and jump into my lap and purr. I’ll gently shove the filthy varmint onto the floor. The cat lovers will all Ooh and Aah, and the creature will glare at them with hate and climb into my lap again.

While the serpent may be the most subtle of all beasts of the field, the cat is surely the most perverse.

But in spite of that, I took Ginny to a Cat Show – which she did not know was in town.

I think it made her happy:

The place swarmed with cats and cat lovers:

I was reminded of the Wanda Gag poem:

Cats here.
Cats there.
Cats and Kittens everywhere.
Hundreds of cats.
Thousands of cats.
Millions and billions and trillions of
cats!



When I paid the fine and went into the place, they stamped my hand with the mark of the beast:



Ginny went around cages actually touching cats. Live ones:

I endured.



The cat people at this show acted so intense. Indistinguishable cats were being given ribbons for some reason and the owners acted as though they were competing in the Olympics. Some owners were actually swilling Gatorade to calm their jitters about the judging.

Ginny appeared enthralled and charmed by the show; she didn't even balk at my many clever, witty jokes involving never having seen so much pussy in one place before.

She tolerates me.

I love her.

I took her to a cat show.

Ah, the things I do for love.

Monday, January 09, 2006

Exploring A Shipwreck

A few years ago my friend Wes and his brother explored a shipwreck site on Ponte Vedra Beach, a few miles south of Jacksonville, Florida. Just before Christmas, Wes gave me a set of photos of the wreck to post on my website.

Every once in a while as hurricanes surge up Florida's east coast, the wind and waves and tides uncover things buried in the sands of the beach.

When I was a boy, I heard about a man who, as he strolled the beach down south of here, found an 18-foot-long chain made of heavy gold links. And on this gold chain hung a cross studded with emeralds and rubies. It

had been buried in the sand for centuries, debris from a Spanish galleon's wreck in the 1500s.



Yes, the waves uncover odd things in the sand.

But the sand washes back in to cover all sorts of things too. I've seen cars, parked on the beach for only a few hours, completely covered by sand so you can only see the roof and radio antenna. Docks disappear beneath the sand and even whole houses.

Then, after a time long or short, the tides uncover them again. I've heard of ancient Indian dugout canoes which were buried in the sand being uncovered by the moving waters.

My friend Wes has no idea of the name of the ship he and his brother found, but he did take photos of the Ponte Vedra shipwreck. I've tried to Google search Florida shipwreck sites without being able to find any information at all about this particular ship. The hand-hewn timbers and rusty square-cut nails indicate it is an ancient wreck.

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The 15 photos Wes took are posted in the Jacksonville history section of my website at www.cowart.info .(Left-hand column, under the heading Ponte Vedra Shipwreck). If anyone out there in the Blog World has any information about this ill-fated ship, I'd appreciate an e-mail.

I chose today to post these shipwreck photos because today marks the one-year anniversary of my venture into blogging.

In that year I've seen many things uncovered within myself that I thought were safely buried beneath the sands of time. Waterlogged timbers from the shipwreck of my life, rusty twisted wrought-iron ideas, sharp slivers of broken glass from my past ... but even, now and then, a tiny flake of gold.

In ways, I feel exposed, ashamed, uncovered, when I realize that people read my posting - the counter software says about 13,000 readers of the blog in this first year and scads more readers on the website.

I brag and feel proud and flattered...

Yet, like a ghost crab, I'm tempted to scurry for cover and burrow back under the sand when exposed to light.

It's uncomfortable to be so vulnerable.

I feel I am a singularly unsuccessful man, a loser, a washout,. a shipwrecked soul, a man Christ rescued by the skin of my teeth.

Other men have to drink heavily to get to where I am in life. And I got here sober!

I feel ashamed of myself and my failings and I want to bury all in the sands of time...

Yet I feel there are a lot of beachcombers out there in the world, people wandering the beach hoping to find something of value in the litter washed up by the tide, people searching for a flake of gold, people hoping to find something worthwhile leftover from a floundered ship -- or from my floundered life.

I write with these beachcombers in mind, thinking they may find something useful in the shipwreck site that is my life.

So, I let the tide wash over me exposing worm-eaten timbers and broken crockery and shipwrecked dreams -- and an occasional bit of glitter worth putting in your pocket.

I try to be honest in this blog, writing happy things and pleasures as well as frustration and despair; temptations and failures as well as giddy joys.



You'll find a lot of plain old aluminum tab tops when digging through my blog. But every once in a while, maybe someone will uncover a cross in the sand. That's what I hope they'll find.

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Or, maybe my musings are just flotsam and jetsam which should rightfully be covered by the sands of time with no loss to anyone.

But, nevertheless, I keep on believing and I keep on writing.

It's what I do.

Tuesday, January 10, 2006

Words From The Throne

Last night, for want of better reading material, I took a dictionary with me into the bathroom.

Words interest me.

Lots of times, I'll use a word thinking I know what it means only to find out that I don't. So I check the meaning of a lot of words.

With my Southern accent, I apparently hear words different from other people. I remember in grammar school a teacher called me to the front of the room in front of everybody and demanded that I spell the word for that stuff the ocean is made of, the stuff boats sail on, the liquid people drink.

W.A.R.T.E.R., I proudly spelled.

Everybody laughed at me.

Anyhow, last night – God only knows why -- I looked up the word VERT and words related to it.

I discovered that VERT means the color green. It's an Old English word which refers to green vegetation where deer browse.

I didn't know that.

Maybe what got me started on this word search was that somebody on tv news said something about congress investigating some COVERT military operation. My dictionary informs me that in zoology the word *covert* means small bird feathers or "a flock of coots".

Surely the tv announcer was not using the word *covert*, a flock of coots, to mean our distinguished senators?

On further investigation I find that *covert* also means "hidden, not openly practiced, covered".

On the other hand, the word OVERT means “open and observable, not secret or hidden, open to view”.

I’d like to live an overt life before my children, with some things private but with no shady secrets.

When I was a kid, maybe 11 or 12 years old. A man down the block stopped my Dad and me on the street and asked my father for a cigarette. The guy was shaped like a string-bean and he constantly scratched his arms and acted as jumpy as a squirrel.

After the man walked away, Daddy said, “John, I don’t ever want to see you talking to him. He’s a pervert”.

“What’s a pervert,” I asked.

I’d never heard the word before.

Daddy explained, as only a father can, by whacking me aside the head and saying, “Never you mind! But I’d better never see you talking to him!”

Last night I looked up the word PERVERT to find the dictionary says it means “To cause to turn away from what is right, proper, or good; To bring to a bad or worse condition; To debase; To put to a wrong or improper use; To interpret incorrectly; misconstrue or distort”

Once when St. Paul was talking to a Roman army officer, a sorcerer named Elymas tried to turn the officer away from the faith. Paul said to the rascal, “Thou child of the devil! Thou enemy of all righteousness! Wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?”

The sorcerer went blind. “Immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness; and he went about seeking someone to lead him by the hand”.

Wow!

Since I have macular degeneration myself, I can sympathize with the bad guy. But I certainly want to watch out that I don’t pervert the right ways of the Lord myself.

I’ve been in church services where I heard men who were being paid to preach Christianity teach something less. Instead of declaring that Jesus is indeed God come in the flesh, who died on the cross because of our sins and who rose from death because He is the Prince of Life, these guys, who get a salary to teach Christianity, get up

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there and say that folks should be nice because poor 'ol Jesus was a nice guy who got whacked because he was ahead of his times but his spirit lives on in flowers.

Any man is free to believe as he chooses. I'd never dispute that. But to take money to teach one thing and to teach something less instead - I'd call such a guy a *pervert* of the worst sort.

O yes, the dictionary also says the word relates to sex, but you can look that part up for yourself if you're interested.

The next word I examined was SUBVERT, meaning to undermine or corrupt. Enough said?

All last week Ginny got home from work later than usual every day because of road construction. That brings me to the word DIVERT -- To turn aside from a course or direction: *Traffic was diverted around the construction.*

It also means to distract or to entertain -- as in "NFL Football on tv is my main diversion".

Of course, that brings me to the word CONVERT -- to convert the extra point after a touchdown, the kicker has to put the ball between the uprights. Unless the team goes for a two-point conversion; then, in essence they have to score another touchdown right after the first.... I think there's a religious meaning too.

But, if a football team does not move advance the ball at least ten yards in four tries, the ball REVERTS to the opposing team.

Revert means to go back. For instance if I can't make my mortgage payment, our home reverts to the bank.

But to *revert* is not always a bad thing.

The prophet Isaiah gives a good example of what it means to revert. He said, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon".

By turning around and returning to God, we prevent many troubles, turn aside a lot of bad things and AVERT tragic loss.

Wednesday, January 11, 2006

It's Devilishly Good!

Yesterday? Yesterday? Oh, yes, I remember what I did yesterday; I stayed very busy and accomplished?? Let's see, come to think of it, I accomplished nothing.

First thing, my friend Wes called and took me out for breakfast where he lavishly tipped the tired, discouraged, old woman who served our table. We delivered some clothes and junk for the poor to the mission. He drove me to the store to buy pipe tobacco - but they were out of my brand. Then we came back to my house where Wes, who is a Master Craftsman Printer, told me all about paper resisters and ink bleeds.

Then I blogged, and then I read computer books, and then my friend Rick dropped by to tell me about his brother in Afghanistan...

Then Ginny came home from work....

And we faced starvation!

We have plenty of groceries in the house... but not a single plate to eat off of.

Unlike many happy couples, Ginny and I have no division of labor rules. Sometimes I cook, sometimes she cooks. Sometimes I take out garbage, sometimes she does. Sometimes she laundrys clothes, sometimes I do. Sometimes she washes dishes, sometimes I do - and sometimes neither one of us does any of that stuff.

We have more important ways to spend our time together.

For instance, Friday we went out for supper, Saturday I took her to that cat show, Sunday, we watched football play off games, Monday we both worked late - so Tuesday, no one had washed the pile of dishes left in the sink, we had no clean plates, no forks, no spoons, no bowls, and thus we faced starvation.

Obviously it was all the cats' fault!

We saw two possible ways out of our dilemma: we could either wash dishes, or we could order a pizza delivered and eat it with our fingers in front of the tv.

Back before Christmas a local pizza company ran tv ads offering three medium size pizzas with a sprinkling of

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toppings for five dollars each. They called it their Five, Five, Five Deal.

But when their tv ad ran during the football games Sunday they'd changed the offer. Now they offer three pizzas for SEVEN dollars each. Wisely, they do not call this promotion a Seven, Seven, Seven Deal.

Their ad outraged Ginny.

"They've bumped the price of the same pizza up by two dollars each," she said. "That's a bigger price hike than gasoline! That's just too much".

"They had to go up two dollars because of religious convictions," I explained.

"What does religion have to do with pizza," she asked?

"Well, they wanted their pizzas to bring in more cash but they couldn't raise the price by only one dollar, so they had to raise it by two".

"Why is that"?

"Well, this is the Bible Belt," I explained.

"What does that have to do with it"?

"Can you imagine trying to sell 666 Pizza in the Bible Belt"?

We washed the dishes.

Friday, January 13, 2006

I've Been Thinking About Scruffy

This week I've been formatting and editing my current book manuscript, *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad*, I've managed to reduce it from a cumbersome 465 pages down to 393 pages so far. - and still working on it.

I haven't done much else this week, but for some reason recently I've been thinking about Scruffy:

Scruffy lived in the crawlspace under someone's house.

The homeowner didn't know he lived under there because Scruffy stayed quite and sneaked in and out during the dark hours making sure he was never seen.

Scruffy's real name was Lewis but everyone called him Scruffy -- for good reason. He never bathed or changed clothes or combed his hair or shaved.

When I first met Scruffy, I worked as the night janitor at a huge church, a church which sponsored, supported and contributed to many programs to help the homeless... the homeless who didn't happen to show up in the parking lot like Scruffy did, panhandling churchgoers and scaring the hell out of blue-haired old ladies as they got out of their cars at every service.

This behavior got Scruffy barred from the church.

Orders came down from the administration that I was not to feed Scruffy anything from the church pantry or ever give him money for drink and drugs. But he kept coming by late at night when no one else was in the buildings, so I disobeyed.

Ok. I was wrong. I am an enabler; I can live with that.

Several times I offered to drive him to a homeless shelter. He refused saying he felt more comfortable living under buildings than in them. Maybe that was his legacy from Viet Nam?

I attempted to witness to him about Christ, how Jesus came to save sinners, was crucified dead and buried, rose again from the grave, and promised to return. But Scruffy dismissed my words with, "That's a crock of shit, John, and you know it".

Then for a period of weeks there was no sign of Scruffy until...

Late one night there was a knock on the church door. I opened it and there stood Lewis, clean shaven, hair combed, decently dressed. He glowed.

"I got saved, John," he said as I opened the door.

We sat in the church kitchen drinking coffee as he told me that he'd been crossing the street drunk when a car hit him breaking his leg. Fortunately a nurse and her husband in a car following saw the accident and stopped immediately to render aid.

Laying on the pavement, Lewis looked up and saw this beautiful woman leaning over him, examining his injury.

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“Be still,” she said, “You’re hurt. You were nearly killed. Do you know Jesus”?

Scruffy spent a few weeks in the hospital, then joined that nurse’s church. He quit drinking and drugging. He got a job with a tire company. He moved into an apartment. He talked about Jesus. He was a new creation... for a while.

A month or two passed.

Again in the wee small hours of the night when I was alone in the huge building, there was a knock on the side church door.

There stood Scruffy. Drunk. Wild eyed. Filthy. Profane. Hungry.

Again against orders, I led him back to the kitchen and gave him coffee.

“Didn’t last,” he said. “Nothing to that shit. Not really. Not for guys like me”.

He stumbled out into the night looking for another fix.

Another month or two more went by when I got word that he’d been found dead under somebody’s house. He’d been hit by another car, refused medical attention, but managed to stagger away and crawl up under a house.

The homeowner never knew he was under there till he began to rot and the smell got too bad.

The church I where I janitored paid for his burial.

So, do I think Scruffy went to Heaven?

Well, it’s by grace that any of us are saved through faith . It’s not of ourselves. It is the gift of God not of works, lest any man should boast.

Scruffy was in bad shape to start with. Then, at rock bottom, he called on Jesus to save him. He believed in his heart that Jesus is the Risen Lord and he confessed that with his own lips.

For whatever my opinion is worth, I think Jesus saved him

And Jesus has the reputation of being mighty good at what He does.

But a spiritual commitment and a physical addiction are two different things. So, in so far as I can perceive such things, Scruffy made the deepest commitment he was capable of making, but was physically defeated by his addiction.

I may be entirely wrong about such a thing, but when you get to Heaven, take a look in the crawlspace under the Throne and see if there isn't somebody hiding under there.

His name is Lewis.

Tuesday, January 17, 2006

See Any Difference?

Yesterday proved to be an enormously productive day for me.

Although Donald was off work for the national holiday, he devoted the entire day to working with my computer on various projects. I'd compiled a two-page list of questions about computer workings and he taught me how to handle about 2/3 of my list.

To accomplish some of this stuff, he had to access DOS programs in the BIOS of both my computer and the remote dedicated server to reconfigure... stuff. (I have no idea what he did).

The result makes my work easier and my on-line life a lot more fun.

Two immediately evident results show up in this blog:

First, he inserted a link with the Bluefish Books logo into the sidebar to make it easier for readers to browse my on-line book catalog. This may increase sales. I hope.

Then, he also set up on the blog sidebar a photo gallery site for me.

I'm having a blast playing with that!

Several e-friends inspire me to try my own hand with a camera.

Robin, in New England regularly posts hauntingly beautiful landscapes she photographs while driving her kids to school. She captures intriguing details in her pictures:

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Funky Bug, a free spirit in Florida sometimes stands in front of her mirror and photographs herself. She studies photography and posts a wide variety of fascinating subjects:

Platypus in Danktown works in a hospital emergency room. He ventures into abandoned buildings to photograph unusual architectural features. I consider him to be a brave pioneer in urban art. His gift is to capture beauty amid what others might see only as derelict trash.

He inspires me.



Anyhow, with these excellent e-examples before me, I want to begin a photo gallery of my own – and Donald set up this fascinating toy for me to play with – now I can really avoid work with a passion.

However, toys and bookstore front aside, Donald also walked me through some editing techniques which will save me hours of drudge work. For instance he taught me how to use the Paste Special a formatting tool which I'd never heard of before.

He showed me that, in ignorance, I've been using a lot of unnecessary steps in formatting the two manuscripts I've been working on: *Strangers On The Earth* and *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad*. I can attack these two bears with renewed spirit now.

Even more important, he counseled me regarding my work's focus. He pointed out places I've been sidetracked and he helped me think through a number of policy decisions.

I find great pleasure when my children give me wise advice. For years in my roll as father, I've dumped boxcar loads of advice on them. But now I often find our rolls reversed when I find that in many areas my children are wiser than I am. And it's a real delight to heed their counsel.

Ginny was off work today also. While Donald and I played computer geek, she shopped for groceries. Then she announced that the curtains needed washing.

I checked and, sure enough, every window in our house has some cloth around it.

Ginny took this cloth down, ran it through the washer, and placed it around the windows again.

"Doesn't that look better," she said.

Since she does not usually read my blog, I think I can safely say that I see no difference; cloth is cloth - but, I haven't been married for 38 years without learning a few things.

"Yes, those look a lot better now," I said.

As I prepared Ginny's lunch this morning, the radio announced a nursing home fire underway in Southside. I recognized the spot as my friend Barbara's address.

Barbara uses an aluminum walker to get around so her safety concerned us. Since I was up to my elbows in mayonnaise, Ginny phoned. Barbara said the fire is confined to another building in the complex and she's ok right now. Damage and injury reports have not come in on radio or tv yet. I'll keep you posted.

--- UPDATE: According to the noon tv news, the nursing home fire at Barbara's started at 5:30 this morning in a bedroom where a short in an electric adjustable bed covered by an electric blanket ignited. Heroic nurses, aids and police officers successfully rescued and evacuated 20 elderly residents, many of them bed-ridden. Two of the police officers were hospitalized for smoke inhalation. But no injuries are reported among the old folks.

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Wednesday, January 18, 2006

My Worry Du Jour

The good news is that using the techniques Donald taught me Monday, I edited close to a hundred pages of Dirty Old Man Goes Bad yesterday. That book is really progressing well.

On the other hand, Ginny's boss called an All Staff Meeting to announce that, out of 105 people working in her office, 20 will loose their jobs next month — Ginny may be one of them.

Since she earns much more than I do, I react to this news on two levels:

The first naturally is "Oh Damn!"

The second is "Well, the Lord has brought us through periods of poverty before so I imagine He will do it again".

It is relatively easy to have faith about *doctrines* when you have gas in the tank, food in the frig and the rent's paid. When things go well, then you can believe in the parting of the Red Sea, Daniel in the kitty litter box, the raising of Lazarus, the communion of saints, and the life of the world to come.

But, trusting God for the here and now, relying on Him to feed you and clothe you in real time ... that can get hard.

Why is it easier for me to trust Jesus for my soul's eternal salvation than it is to trust Him for gas money today?

Believing that God cared for and provided for people in the historic past is one thing, believing that He is sufficient for my own prescription coverage, my car repairs, my bus fare, my credit card bill, my pipe tobacco, my every day expenses – those things are not theological doctrines but everyday life...

A life of faith.

I thought I lived a life of faith, but now I wonder.

It's been a long time since we've had to pray for daily bread daily, and we have never lacked, but – don't tell the preachers this – living by faith is not what it's cracked up to be.

Susannah Wesley, a woman of great faith whose sons founded the Methodist movement, lived most of her life in grueling poverty. In her old age she 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".

OK, if Ginny loses her job, we'll face some quality of life scaledowns, If other people there lose their jobs, it might even be tougher on them. At least in the past we've had more than a nodding acquaintance with Dame Poverty. We're experienced.

And, who knows the times or tides in the affairs of men?

The lay-offs may not touch us at all. I may be foreseeing a trouble which never comes.

I often do.

But the prospects, the being off balance, that feeling of walking on eggs, and the unsettled atmosphere in which you dare not make plans beyond today ... well, all that's real.

Uncertainty is life's reality.

And it's a reality - even though we seldom admit it -- we all live with every hour of every day. But when we have "job security" we tend to lose sight of that reality and live in a mist world where we think all things are solid.

Sometimes, I think God has to shake my tree. Otherwise I'd sling a hammock, lounge with a book in my lap and a tall glass of iced tea in my hand. I'd get to acting as though this world is a permanent home instead of a staging area for eternity. So now and then God shakes my tree just to bring me to the reality of impermanence.

But I don't like that.

I don't like it at all.

I was quite comfortable doing exactly what I've been doing, thank you..

Still, a Scripture spoken by the prophet Habakkuk comes to my mind:

Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
Though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
Though there be no sheep in the fold,
and no cattle in the stalls –
Yet will I rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.
The Sovereign Lord is my strength.

Sounds nice, but I worry anyhow.

Thursday, January 19, 2006

The Worst People/Film On Earth?

Wednesday I continued formatting the two book manuscripts I'm preparing.

With much fussing and fuming and frustration, I managed to post a sample chapter, *The Worst People On Earth*, on my website.

The chapter title comes from a 1956 *Time* magazine article referring to the Auca Indians of Ecuador who murdered five missionaries drawing worldwide attention to the previously obscure tribe.

That's one incident I include in my book, *Strangers On The Earth*. This book was previously published by InterVarsity Press under the title *People Whose Faith Got Them Into Trouble*, but that's been long out of print. So I've revamped it and added a few more chapters getting it ready to re-issue it in February – and yes, this is the same manuscript I intended to have published last November, but was too lazy to get it done.

The layoff at Ginny's office made the tv news last night with the emphasis being on how much money would be saved by firing people. No mention of the major service cuts this action will generate. Ginny – as she does in every crisis – lets it all swirl around her as she blithely goes about her duties as though there were no crisis.

I've seen her do this again and a gain over the years. She is the most calm, contented, non-excitabile, focused person I have ever met. I suppose she has to be in order to stay married to me all this time.

The only time I've ever seen her blow up was back when we were first married and driving a truck cross country. A government inspector was giving me a hard time over some paperwork on a shipment I'd already delivered. He and I stood beside the door to the truck as Ginny was sweeping the interior. I attempted peacemaking, conciliation and negotiation to placate the guy. Ginny swept a mighty cloud of dust into his face, brandished the broom over her head like a swarm of avenging Valkyries, and chased him down the street shouting, "One more word out of you! Just one more word! And I'll cram this broom up your ass sideways and twist it"! The inspector jumped in his car and fled the scene without one more word.

I was impressed.

That was close to 40 years ago and I've never seen her loose her cool again.

To relax last night, we watched a DVD borrowed from Donald.

This prime example of the film maker's art attracts the attention of refined, cultured viewers with discriminating tastes. It's called *Jesus Christ: Vampire Hunter*.

In the opening scenes of this fictional cinematic event, vampires attack lesbians in the city. Church leaders appeal to the Savior of the world for help. Jesus, who's been studying karate before his second advent, comes out of retirement to battle the vampires. He recruits followers who follow him as he whisks along the street on his skateboard healing the sick, blind and crippled as he goes. He meets Mary Magnum who makes him get a haircut and one earring then takes him to a thrift store to buy modern clothes. A gang of 36 atheists attack and Jesus karateizes the lot. Then vampires beat him up and leave him bleeding in the gutter. A priest passes by on the other side, a cop passes by, but the Good Transvestite picks him up and nurses him to health. Then Jesus teams up with a professional wrestler and they whack vampires right and left in an auto junk yard and -

Oh yes, have I mentioned that this movie is a musical?

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The tunes are not as catchy as those in *Godspell*; I mean how can you compare “Prepare Ye The Way Of The Lord” with “Everybody Gets Laid Tonight”?

Is this movie the worst ever made?

I doubt it.

Is it blasphemous?

Well, except for a bit of psychobabble mush toward the end, *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* adheres to the Holy Bible closer than some sermons I’ve heard preached in churches.

I’d give it a thumbs up, except that some vampire might bite my thumb off.

Ginny’s evaluation?

“John, that is so terrible that it’s ... terrible”.

I love her with all my heart but she will never make it as a movie critic.

Friday, January 20, 2006

Invisible Underwater Obstructions

Jacksonville, Florida, my hometown, is often called the River City. The St. Johns River, one of the few rivers in the world that flow north, runs right through the center of town and a wooden walkway, appropriately called the Riverwalk, flanks both banks.

Boats of every sort cruise the river. Mighty aircraft carriers name Mayport, at the mouth of the river, their homeport. Water taxis ferry passengers from Southbank to Northbank. Pleasure yachts and cruise ships tie up right behind the old City Hall. Tall sailboats glide under the bridges, which have to be raised bringing auto traffic to a stop. Speed boats dash along. Crab boats work the waters. Tug boats pushing barges trudge through the city. Casino ships sucker in gamblers. Jet skis roar. Kayaks paddle.

Any hour day or night you see boats moving on the river.

What you don’t see is what’s under the dark waters.

Couple of times a year some boater rams his craft into a bridge pilling, dock, tree or other boat. You can assume that he's drunk or not paying attention.

But, other times the wreck is not necessarily the boater's fault; he hits some invisible obstruction under the water. Some obstructions are natural, a drifting log, a grazing manatee, a shifting sandbar. Other unseen underwater obstructions are man-made. For instance, back in 1865 an enemy ship, the *Maple Leaf*, ran into one of our Confederate mines and sank. If the yankee invaders had stayed where they belonged, their boat wouldn't have got in trouble. Serves 'em right. In recent years divers have recovered all sorts of goodies from the Maple Leaf wreck site to put in a museum. The relics draw more yankees.

But, I'm getting sidetracked.

There are unseen things under the water that can mess you up big time.

For instance, one night about 3 a.m. I was out casting a 12-foot net to catch shrimp when my net snagged on something. I tugged this way and I tugged that way, but I couldn't free my net. I had to go into the dark water, follow the guide line down to the river bottom about 15 feet under, and feel my way around the obstruction to get my net loose. In zero visibility, I discovered that I'd cast my net over a grocery cart which some... *citizen*... had shoved off the dock into the water. Blessings on him - or something.

A shopping cart.

Upside down.

Under 15 feet of dark water.

With my net tangled over the wheels.

What makes me remember this incident?

Over the past few months I've been working on a book manuscript, *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad*. Initially it ran to 467 pages. I used a template. I set margins and tabs. I inserted section breaks, headers and footers. I eliminated widows and orphans. I resized graphics. Spellchecked. Removed redundancies. Polished. Tweaked. Designed a book cover ... At last my ship was ready to launch. I could cast my perfect bread upon the waters...

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Then, last night when I went to upload my manuscript and convert it into a pdf file for the printer, I get an error message. There was a box to click for more information. I clicked it. A dropdown box told me "Formatting Error. Action can not be accomplished." --- BUT IT WILL NOT TELL ME WHAT THE ERROR IS OR WHERE TO FIND IT IN THE 467-PAGE MANUSCRIPT!!!!

Damn yankee software!



Saturday, January 21, 2006

A Calm Continuation Of Yesterday's Posting:

Friday I began to re-do all the work I've already done on the Dirty Old Man Goes Bad manuscript. I'm attempting to discover that tiny, little, minor glitch which hinders uploading my book to the printer.

Yes, I did free my shrimp net from that grocery cart beneath the water and I'm confident that in a few minutes calm contemplation I'll untangle this formatting error also.

As I cheerfully go about my appointed tasks, I work with a song in my heart. And, with my being a dedicated Christian, it's only natural that that song be a familiar old hymn of the church. The third verse of *Amazing Grace* rings in my heart:

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
Tis grace that brought me safe thus far
And 'tis grace will keep me from pouring lighter
fluid into the floppy disc slot on my computer,
lighting a match, and cackling madly as the cheap
plastic melts into a puddle on the rug, and the glass
monitor cracks, and sorry worthless chips fry as I

stomp the whole damn thing till my pants catch fire
– with this song in my heart.

Monday, January 23, 2006

We Are Too A Fun Couple

For me one pain outranks all others.

Ginny and I have been at odds with each other.

She feels threatened and upset by the prospect of losing her job in the cutbacks her office announced last week.

I'm frustrated by hitting a dead end in publishing a book I've been working on for a long time.

This weekend, we each turned hostile against each other.

Over the 38 years we've been married, we've seen this happen on occasion. And it's a recurring problem we never have learned how to handle. I wish there were some Christian magic bullet which would solve relationship problems, but if there is, we haven't found it.

Normally, we maintain an *Us Against The World* mindset and that attitude has carried us through all sorts of external problems. But when we lose that and began to function in a *Me Against You* mode, things deteriorate between us rapidly.

How rapidly?

A single word, a single facial expression or a shrug of the shoulders triggers nuclear meltdown. I feel, *Ah Ha! Now it comes out. She never did love me in the first place. All these years have been a charade. Now she's showing her true colors. All our married life has been meaningless.*

And all these feelings can hinge on a single word or even on a silence when I expected a word.

Pain overwhelms me. Mental anguish. Despair. I feel rejected, unloved, defensive.

I suspect she feels the same way.

I withdraw. I become an iceberg. A black, damp rock in the Antarctic Ocean. Untouchable. Barren. Hostile. Incapable of supporting life.

Ginny exhibits similar symptoms.

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We are not a fun couple.

Perhaps the best thing we've got going for us is that over the years, we've come to recognize those symptoms and know that, eventually with much pain, we will survive them. We've learned that nobody loves anybody all the time. We know we'll face interludes when love with hearts and flowers, just is not there – for the moment.

When we first got married, we drove a truck all over the country. For months at a time we lived three feet away from each other 24 hours a day. We learned to be honest with each other without taking offence. We learned that sometimes all you can say is not “I love you” but “I tolerate you”. We learned that we each carry our own internal demons which have nothing to do with the other person.

For ages I've heard that communication is the most important thing in marriage – I don't believe that.

No, the most important thing in marriage is assuming good will on the part of your partner.

And sometimes that's hard to do.

But at least, we've come to realize that we are going to go through bleak periods like this every once in a while and that while such ghastly periods are truly horrible, they don't last.

Not forever and ever, but for a passing time long or short.

Eventually one or the other of us makes overtures of reconciliation... Sometimes one or the other of us will apologize -- but most often not, because we each remained convinced that *I was right* about whatever the triggering disagreement was about. We are both proud individuals and can't readily admit, “I was wrong” -- but what we can do is say, “I'm sorry that we are at odds and I don't want to be at odds with you”.

I can't think of a light note to end this posting. Ginny and I have been at odds most of the weekend. We made up yesterday. We are exhausted – but we've exhausted together.

Thanks be to God.

Tuesday, January 24, 2006

Driven Crazy By A Crab!

My work has been driving me crazy.

For the past week or ten days, my work floundered as I attempted to convert my book manuscript of *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad* from a 467-page Word document into a 325-page PDF file for the printer.

No go.

The thing would not convert.

I tried this. I tried that. I revised. I cursed. I prayed. I copied. I pasted.

Nothing worked.

With weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, I labored over this thing but nothing I did made any difference. I consulted my computer guru son Donald and followed his suggestions.

All to no avail.

I pondered reasons why I can't get this book to the printer?

Perhaps the devil did not want my words of wisdom to reach a needy world of readers anxiously awaiting these autobiographical snippets.

Perhaps the Lord God Almighty did not want my writing to muddy the water for readers headed to His Kingdom.

Perhaps Bill Gates (who I'm convinced personally hates me – although I never did anything to the man) Perhaps Bill Gates hacks into my computer at night and messes up my files.

Or maybe Stephen King, America's greatest writer, fears my writing will bump him from his spot on the Best Seller List, so he sabotages my work in a fit of petty jealousy. Poor fellow. Must be tough to be the King and see your replacement on the rise.

You know, sometimes when you screw up the same thing again and again, it's wise to consult an expert.

Donald asked his friend Helen, a graphic artist, to look at



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my files to see why I've floundered. Glancing over my text this morning, she spotted and corrected the problem in just a couple of hours.

It was all the crab's fault.

You see, my manuscript carries a couple of dozen photos to illustrate the text.

One of these photos is a picture of a crab statue that Donald gave me for my birthday:

One of the people at the party snapped this photo on one of those telephones that not only make noise but also take pictures. This FoneyFoto was e-mailed wirelessly from my backyard to the computer in my living room - a distance of 50 yards. And to illustrate *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad*, I used this one photo among all the others which had been taken with real cameras.

The crab picture from the FoneyFoto device carries within it a vastly different electronic structure from real photos. Whenever I'd try to convert my manuscript using pdf software, the thing would perk along fine till it came to this snapping crab.

Terrified of the crab's pinchers, the software would run screaming out of the water leaving all my manuscript pages to soggyify into mush and sink beneath the surface.

Helen did something technical to the crab.

Now the conversion program works.

All those hundreds of pages of text I've been revising and revising had nothing to do with my problem. Maybe there's some spiritual lesson I can learn here, maybe instead of beating my head against a firewall fruitlessly, I should have asked for help sooner.

I think I almost remember a Scripture verse that applies:

*Come unto me all ye that labor
and are heavy laden,
and I will swack thy crab - or something like
that.*

Anyhow, my manuscript converted into a pdf file last night.. Printer's proof pages are on the way.

In another week or ten days the book will be available
– please mail my copy to the asylum.

Wednesday, January 25, 2006

A Living Saint

Worked at my desk all day. Watched tv all evening.

Got nothing else to say ... Except here's a great joke:

George and Joe, twin brothers, tried to outdo each other in being mean, evil, conniving, sorry, wicked men.

They cheated on their wives. They embezzled from their business partners. They foreclosed on widows and orphans. They corrupted young people. They bribed building inspectors. They never left tips for waitresses. They aggravated neighbors with frivolous law suits. They made life harder than it needs to be for everyone they met.

Then Joe died.

Now George had little use for religion but he got the notion that he wanted his brother buried from a church.

He went to the pastor of a small struggling church and said, "You know who I am? You know about my brother's heart attack".

"Yes. Everybody in town knows the two of you".

"You willing to burry Joe from your church"?

"Yes I am. All men deserve a decent funeral".

"I got little use for religion," George said, "But I'll tell you what. When you preach Joe's funeral, I want you to say these exact words – 'Joe was a living saint'! If you'll say them exact words, then I'll hand you a check for \$10,000 for your building fund; But if you don't say them exact words – Joe was a living saint – then I won't give you nothing".

The preacher thought it over and agreed.

"I thought you would," George said. "You preachers go around acting holier than anybody else, but when it comes to money, you're all moneygrubbers. But just to make sure you don't go back on your word, I'm gonna tell everybody in town about our deal – you're going to stand right behind that pulpit and say, Joe was a living saint".

Well, George spread the word. He told the guys at the barbershop, the ladies at the supermarket, everybody everywhere, that for \$10.000 that hypocrite preacher was going to say, "Joe was a living saint".

Come the day of the funeral the whole town turned out to see if the preacher would really do it.

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The minister entered the pulpit and said, "Friends, you all know how Joe lived. He cheated on his wife. He embezzled from his business partners. He foreclosed on widows and orphans. He corrupted young people. He bribed building inspectors. He never left tips for waitresses. He aggravated neighbors with frivolous law suits. He made life harder than it needs to be for everyone he met.

"We all know Joe was a mean, evil, conniving, sorry, wicked man. But, compared to his brother, Joe was....."

Thursday, January 26, 2006

Questions & Complaints While Flying Home

Yesterday my friend Wes came over early bringing me some pipe tobacco I needed and a DVD movie he wants me to watch. We talked a bit about his family's history and publishing his grandfather's autobiography.

We went out to breakfast at Dave's Diner where Wes told me about a squabble going on at the church he attends. He said that when he gets to Heaven, he wants to ask God about such things.

That set me to thinking about what questions I might ask.

I thought of this and that, but before long I realized that questions and complaints are for the journey - not for the arrival.

My mind drew the analogy of an airplane flight.

In the terminal waiting room, I have all kinds of questions. Will I get bumped? What time does the plane leave? Will I get a window seat? What's for dinner? Why this long line at security? ...

Here's a dumb aside that has nothing to do with what I'm talking about:

There was this stewardess checking passengers onto an airplane. She asked this weird guy in the line, "Sir, may I see your ticket?" The pervert flipped open his black overcoat and flashed her. Unperturbed the stewardess said, "Sir, I asked to see your ticket, not your stub".

Anyhow, getting back to my analogy:

On an air trip I also have a lot of concerns and complaints. That PA system garbles the announcements; I can't hear what flight they're calling. I feel airsick. That

baby two rows back won't stop crying. The fat guy beside me hogs the armrest. Bet they're gonna lose my luggage. The air conditioning is too hot. ... and on and on

But, once I reach my final destination the only thing that matters is who is there to meet me.

My questions, concerns and complaints – all perhaps legitimate in their place – no longer matter.

Jim Elliot, a missionary killed by the Auca Indians of Ecuador, once said, "No one in Heaven will complain about anything they lacked on earth".

The things that concern us now on the trip will just fade when we are greeted. The greatest problem, the most aggravating person, the scariest fear – all forgotten like last Thursday morning's radio traffic report.

The only thing that matters is who greets us.

At our final destination we shall see Light. Light that shines with such bright splendor we can see nothing else. All that once mattered and seemed important now fades to insignificance.

We're likely to prostrate ourselves to kiss his nail-scarred feet, and his nail-scarred hands will raise us up and he'll say something like, "Welcome! Welcome! I hear you had a rough trip. I'm glad you're home now".

We'll have no questions. No complaints.

We shall see The King in His beauty, and we shall be

...

Satisfied!

I wanted to end with that last word, but I'd be remiss if I didn't say something about crashing and burning. We don't want to do that.

Yet there's not a one of us who doesn't think we can run this airline better than the present CEO. We're not content to be passengers, so we wrest the controls out of our Captain's hands. That's not too smart.

There's a reason we need a Savior. Enough said?

Oh, the DVD Wes brought me is a remake of a Sherlock Holmes story, *Hound of the Baskervilles*. I'll tell you about it when I've seen it. Bet it makes a great in-flight movie.

Friday, January 27, 2006

Just For Me

Back in the mid 1980s, I wrote some things that embarrass me now.

I ran across such a piece yesterday. I'd forgotten that I wrote it ... I mean, I remember that I wrote on the subject (my mind is not that far gone), but I'd forgotten what I said about it.

Does that make any sense?

Back in the mid '80s I wrote a bunch of magazine articles about Christians whose lives inspired me. I collected these pieces into a book which was published by InterVarsity Press in 1990 under the title *People Whose Faith Got Them Into Trouble*. Although this collective biography was translated into a few foreign languages and was broadcast as a radio series, it pretty much disappeared without a ripple.

It went out of print and a bunch of copies were pulped because I could not afford to buy them at the time.

That hurt.

Several editors at IVP asked me to write another book, one about knowing and following the will of God. They gave me a small cash advance to do the work. I started the project... but some life problems steamrolled me. Depression overwhelmed me. I could not write anything. Although the editors and publishers extended my deadlines several times, and although I accumulated reams of notes, I just could not finish that book. I defaulted on the contract and they generously forgave my debt so I did not have to pay back the advance.

The whole experience wilted me.

For a couple of years I wrote nothing but my personal journal.

Last January when my son Donald encouraged me to attempt this print-on-demand business, Bluefish Books, I thought that reissuing my collective biography, *People Whose Faith...*, would be an easy task. So I began scanning text and writing a few new chapters. That's the project I've been editing this past week.

I've approached the task as a hurdle, anxious to get it over and done with, just words to plough through. Text to edit. Pages to scan. Computer formatting problems to solve. Spacing to adjust...

I had forgotten why I wrote this book in the first place.

Yesterday I'd worked my way up to the chapter on Mary Slessor, a Scottish Presbyterian lass who changed the face of Africa. She was one tough lady. I mean if Indiana Jones ran into her, he'd step aside, go sit in a corner and suck his thumb.

She escaped from an abusive drunken father, became a factory girl in a textile mill, served as a missionary in Africa, and was honored by the King of England, becoming Lady Slessor. She once beat off a charging hippo by banging it on the nose with a metal dishpan. —But those aren't the important things about her.

The thing that astounds me, the thing I'd forgotten, the reason I'd chosen to write about her back in the '80s is her passion for Christ. Her letters and diaries reveal a single-minded dedication to the Savior. Her vision of Christ, high and lifted up, generates such fervor, such a grasp of reality, such an intensity — that her life make me ashamed of my own wallowing in self-pity and seeking after comfort.

Yesterday as I read over what I'd written all those years ago, my own words mad me ashamed of my own lukewarm spirit and my petty desire for a comfortable life. I realized that I've put Christ on a back burner while I devote my energies to more important things like getting my books out and watching NFL playoffs.

I had forgotten, but yesterday the chapter I wrote about Mary Slessor reminded me that I must live and write first of all for the benefit of my own soul, if anyone else reads my stuff, well and good. But if my life and work springs from something less than gratitude to Christ for who He is and what He's done, then who needs it?

Physician, heal thyself. If I am to inspire others, then I myself must first be inspired ... I'd lost sight of that.

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Tuesday, January 31, 2006

A Wonderful Long Weekend

Ginny and I just took a long rainy weekend to get reacquainted and recharge our batteries. While the rain drizzled outside, we holed up in our home like bunnies in a burrow watching a string of 1950's B-grade science fiction movies like *Bloodtide*, *The Atomic Brain*, *The Transparent Man*, *Ro-Man Monster*, and other equally distinguished films which we checked out of the library.

Saturday we dined at Yeschi Café. We'd never been to an Ethiopian restaurant. before so I explained to Ginny what to do if robbers held up the place while we were there.

She's not a cosmopolitan sophisticate like I am so she didn't know what you're supposed to do.

At Yeschi Café the owner's daughter explained that we were to eat with our fingers using torn-off pits of a huge pancake made of exotic flour to scoop up the stew. This is served without silverware on a huge platter set in the center of the table - think extra-large pizza without cheese on a base of sponge cake which absorbs the sauce and spices.

Delicious!

Although the menu is printed in a squiggly alphabet, I quickly learned the names of the Ethiopian dishes. Baked chicken served with a hard-boiled egg in a yellow sauce of jalapeno peppers, curry, celery and onions - in the Ethiopian language that's called Number 13.

Other dishes have similar exotic names.

Seriously, Our dining experience at Yeschi Café proved exquisite. The décor is exotic, the waitress was helpful and charming, and the food tasty. Ginny and I walked out of the place saying, "O, we've got to bring so and so here"! or, "Wouldn't so and so enjoy this place?". We plan to add this to our regular list of places for our Friday Night Dates.

What? You mean you don't know what to do about robbers either?

If you're in an Ethiopian restaurant when the place is robbed, you obviously call a Coptic.

For some reason, Ginny says she'll be glad to get back to work today.

The proof pages for *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad* arrived from the printer yesterday. So I have my own work cut out for me this week.

February

Wednesday, February 01, 2006

A Prick In The Eye

Monday afternoon's mail from the printer brought the proof pages for my book *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad* and the first thing I saw as I opened the package was a misspelling!

AHGGGGG!

The second thing I saw was a minor formatting error.

AHGGGGGGG! AHGGGGGG!

I discovered both mistakes within two minutes of opening the pages.

Some words which you will not find printed in the Bible escaped my lips.

I thought I'd honed this manuscript to perfection. I thought I had no more work to do on it.

I expected to rubber stamp the proofs and move on to other projects dear to my heart. I felt sick of working on this manuscript and I didn't want to fool with it any more.

Here comes an insidious train of thought:

Why bother making corrections? These mistakes are so minuscule that no one else is likely to notice them. Don't want to get hung up on trivial details. Don't want to be an obsessive perfectionist. These little things don't matter. You could spend all day just punctuating your grocery list. Besides, who's likely to buy this book anyway? I doubt if six people will read the thing; so why bother putting another week's work into searching for mistakes when you've already been over this manuscript a dozen times already?

So I was tempted to ignore shoddy workmanship.

Ever heard the phrase, Close enough for government work?

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I've already started another project and I don't want to return and re-do work I've already done. I'm sick of this book and I want to move on to fresh material.

Back in the days when I worked as a janitor, one part of my job was cleaning public urinals. Like the labor of Sisyphus (the Greek guy who pushed the bolder up the hill when it kept rolling back down) the task never ended. No matter how well I'd clean one night, they'd be slimy the next day. I was tempted to say "what's the use" and cut corners and just do the minimum the job required.

I fought that temptation by realizing I did not work for the building manager, or for the public, but for Jesus Christ. So I tried to clean those urinals as though the Lord God Himself would be the next guy to piss there.

Yesterday morning as I thought about re-doing those proof pages, a phrase in my morning Bible reading brought an odd image to my mind.

I sometimes read a snippet of Scripture with my coffee at the start of a day and Tuesday's passage was from the Book of Numbers. Here's the verse that caught my attention:

"If ye will not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you; ... those which ye let remain of them shall be pricks in your eyes, and thorns in your sides, and shall vex you in the land wherein ye dwell"

As the Jews entered the Promised Land, God told them to exterminate the idol worshipers already living there.

The Jews had a better idea. Instead of killing the idol worshipers, they made treaties with the Gibeonites and enslaved others to cut firewood and carry water buckets – before long the heathen led the Jews themselves into idol worship. The people they should have taken care of and exterminated became thorns in their sides, undermined their souls, and disrupted their peace.

I'm sure the Bible verse refers to that sort of thing...

But the phrase "pricks in your eyes" reminded me of something else. Somehow, that phrase congers up a different image to me... it's not exactly the image the Bible writer had in mind I'm sure -- but it is effective.

So, I've written all that just to say that for the rest of this week I'll be going over those proof pages again and doing as thorough a job as I can of correcting my mistakes – even the little ones.

Thursday, February 02, 2006

Hello, Kitty. Make My Day...

While Ginny and I enjoyed our long holiday last weekend, we discussed a recurring problem.

We enjoy watching birds. We keep four birdfeeders at various places in our yard so we can see the birds wherever we sit with our morning coffee. These birdfeeders have been in the same locations for over ten years, so the birds know just where to find food as they migrate through our neighborhood.

Our feathered friends know they are welcome to eat, bathe in the birdbaths and nest in the trees on our property. Some of the same birds come year after year.

Last weekend we talked about whether it might be wise to move the feeders farther away from the house in the light of the impending bird flu epidemic which is projected to kill millions of people.

One of my aunts lived through the 1918 Spanish Flue epidemic and told me all sorts of horror stories about that plague.

But Ginny and I decided to leave the feeders where they are even with this threat.

But the problem with our feeders is the neighborhood cats.

These vile creatures know that birds congregate at our feeders. These cats slink through the fence and lurk beneath bushes near the feeders.

When a poor defenseless bird lights on the ground to eat seed fallen from the feeders, this huge black snarling cat lunges out with claws flashing and disembowels baby birds right in front of their mother's eyes.

The cat will crunch tiny bones and scatter bloody feathers right underneath the feeders.

For evidence in case we ever have to go to court over this matter, I tried to snap photos of these atrocities but

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the depraved cat slinks back into the bushes too fast for my camera to catch the deprivations.

So I called my artist buddy Picasso who has a quick eye for such things and he came over to hang out, sip coffee and draw a quick sketch of the cat in action.

He often likes to set up his easel and paint in our backyard.

Here's a picture Picasso whipped up for me:



Picasso suggested that we set the water sprinkler near the bushes to hinder the beast's marauding. Worked for a few days. Water bill came in. We find we can't afford to keep sprinklers going 24 hours a day.

So, I walked over to the local High School and explained my problem to the kids in the science club there. My problem interested them so they broke off their class science project of producing crystal meth and began a little experiment in gene splicing and cloning to help me out.

Here is the result of their work:



Here Kitty. Here Kitty! Here Kitty, Kitty.

Actually, before Oprah exposes me on her show, I confess that Picasso hardly ever drops by our house for coffee; but the fuzzy little kitten painting really is one of his.

And local high school kids did not stop making meth. No, the bird dog photo comes from a website called When Cloning Goes Bad; you can find it at: <http://floatingworldweb.com>.

I ran across dozens of such doctored photos while surfing the net the other day when I should have been working and I thought the site was such fun that I wanted to share it.

The only thing true in this posting is that bird flu is real, and cats really do haunt our birdfeeders, and that I'd always rather screw around on the net than work.

Friday, February 03, 2006

A Religious Cartoon

Ginny is sick this morning so I'm keeping her home from work. The administration still has not said if she will be among the 20 laid off at the end of the month, so I figure that if they may do without her then, they can darn sure do without her today. Of course, being the conscientious worker that she is, she wants to go in even though she's sick as a dog. Crazy woman!

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Yesterday I finished locating misspellings, goofed punctuation, etc in my manuscript's proof pages. God willing, I'll make the corrections in the computer today or Monday.

This morning's Google News cites 1,151 stories about people rioting over a cartoon. In Indonesia yesterday a mob attacked the Danish Embassy protesting a newspaper's editorial cartoon. It's a religious cartoon.

This interests me because the oldest picture of Jesus ever found is also a cartoon.

According to archaeologists, a soldier scratched the cartoon of Jesus on the wall of a Roman army barracks about 30 years after Christ rose from death.



This cartoon means so much to me that I keep a copy on my office wall.

Some people say it is disgusting and offensive.

They're right.

The picture was meant to mock Jesus.

It's been called the "Ugliest Picture On Earth".

A couple of years ago, I wrote a piece about this cartoon, the Alexamenos Graffiti, and what it means to me -- The web address is <http://www.cowart.info/Monthly%20Features/Ugly%20pix/Ugly%20%20pix.htm>

Monday, February 06, 2006

Did You See My Superbowl Commercial?

Superbowl commercials last night cost \$5,000,000 per minute, so I could only afford a 30-second spot to advertise my books. Didn't you thrill to see the world famous Cowart Clodsdale horses pull that wagon filled with cases of my books?

No?

Phooy!

No one I ask saw my commercial!

No wonder.

The World Association of Residential Plumbers (WARP) reports that during my 30-second spot, every toilet in America flushed!

My entire advertising budget for my books... down the drain.

Oh well, as my Dad used to say whenever he handed the cashier money to pay a bill, "Don't worry about it, there's plenty more where that went."

Now, if anybody wants to see my new book, they have to click on www.bluefishbooks.info. I'll spend today with a shovel.

Stupid bigassed horses!

I'm thinking Alpo!

Tuesday, February 07, 2006

200 Minutes

Yesterday, an elderly couple from down the street walked to my house to ask my help with a technological problem.

They came to the right place.

After all, I am King of the Geriatric Geeks.

You see, neither of these old folks is able to read or write. But they know that I can. Each of them has medical conditions and it's not unusual to see a city rescue ambulance parked in front of their house with paramedics running in and out.

One of their granddaughters, knowing the old folks are shaky (they are as old as I am) and that they had no telephone, gave them a cell phone and a prepaid card with 200 minutes on it.

Problem is that you have to activate this device and manually add the minutes to it's memory bank. This involves calling an 800 number at the prepay company, then going on the internet, punching in the 800 number there, then the cell phone number with area code, then a 15-digit IFD number (which you find by scratching an emulsion off the card), then punching in an 11-digit

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access code number, then there's a 13-digit number just for the hell of it and then...

So, they brought this thing to me.

I talked on a cell phone once.

Ginny turned it on, punched in the phone number, and handed the tinny tiny phone to me and I talked.

Thus, being an experienced cell phone user, I had no idea how to activate the old folk's telephone. Complicating matters, my macular degeneration makes it difficult for me to see those little buttons. So I used a real telephone to call a friend who has a cell phone and I ask him how he turns it on.

He explained the complex process to me in layman's terms, "I always let my wife do that," he said.

I admitted to Bubba and Dolly, my elderly friends, that I could be of no help. But they urged me to try to do this for them anyhow.

I said a silent prayer and called the cell phone company's helpful answering machine in Calcutta. I counted the number of digits on the scratch & sniff card and punched in 13 of them, guessing which of the dot-matrix things are zeros (0), capital Os or maybe the letter D – OOD they all look the same to my degenerate eyes.

Bubba and Dolly hovered on the edges of their chairs. I punched in 11-digit numbers and 15 digit numbers. We made a wild guess at whether the next number string was a IFG number or a SIG-2 number because you enter them differently but the instructions don't tell you which is which.

It took us 45 minutes to do all this.

Then a message appeared on the screen: WAIT 15 MINUTES.

So we waited.

I often wonder if my dabbling at writing books on this computer is serving God or just indulging my own vanity. Hardly anybody reads my stupid books. What use are they. What use is this computer? Do I make any difference in the kingdom of Christ on earth at all with this

thing? I thought about such things as we waited making small talk about children and grandchildren.

Dolly's phone rang!

It was the prepaid company.

The phone worked!

The three of us cheered. We stood up and hugged each other. We laughed like fools. We celebrated. We cried. We had beaten technology. The damn phone worked. It will keep working for 200 minutes.

I don't know if my writing website, books and blog on this computer advances the kingdom of God or man... but I think that getting that cell phone to work for two old folks who can never read anything I will ever write was probably the best use I've ever put this computer to.

Wednesday, February 08, 2006

Are All Writers Nuts?

First in local news: About dawn yesterday a man dressed in an animal costume broke into a historic lighthouse just a few miles south of my home. He barricaded the door then climbed the lighthouse circular stairway (219 stairs) up to the catwalk, 165 feet above the ground. Then he climbed over the lantern and up onto the cupola dome. Hanging from the flagpole up there he unfurled two signs. These signs promoted a book he had written.



Yes, he was a writer wanting to advertise his book.

Cops arrested him for breaking into the 1871 historic monument and he's in jail today.

No permanent damage was done to the lighthouse.

Oh, the animal costume?

Of course, he dressed up as a cat, what else.

I've decided not to mention the author's name or the title of his book but if you want to search Google for it, try the key word, *asshole*.

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Speaking of history writers: my friend Wes and I went out to breakfast yesterday. Most of our conversation revolved around two things, publishing a history Wes' great-great-grandfather wrote, and deathbed conversion.

Last year I wrote about a dying atheist being cared for by a group of volunteers from a local church? Wes tells me the man became a Christian shortly before his death this weekend. I have mixed feelings about such things.

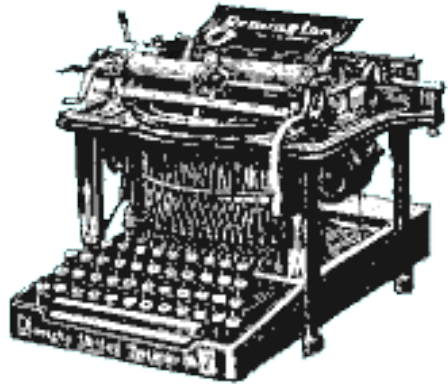
On one hand I realize that Christ is able to save to the uttermost. To a thief nailed to the cross beside Him, Jesus said, "Today, shall you be with me in paradise."

Obviously, when you realize that *Hey, my parachute didn't open*, is not the best time to start praying. And, come right down to it, every bed we lie on is a deathbed, we are all dying, fast or slow. So I think last minute conversion is possible, but not smart.

On the other hand, I'm inclined to agree with Methodist founder John Wesley who told a crowd, "You can't live a goat and die a lamb".

But whatever, a number of people are rejoicing because the dying atheist made a commitment to Christ in his last extremity.

Concerning the history of Wes's ancestor: Joseph Pyram King died in 1948 just before his hundredth birthday. Bedridden from age he called on his daughter, Theodocia Ithiel Grant, to write his memories as he dictated. She wrote out the old man's words with a



pencil in a school composition book. Years ago Wes used a manual typewriter to transcribe her jottings.

These papers are important to Wes as part of his family heritage. I think this manuscript is worth saving for its historic content and I want to preserve it. Local history

buffs and researchers will find it fascinating but I doubt if anyone else will buy a copy.

So, this week I'm scanning in the typescript into my computer and formatting it into a small book. This is a pain because the pages have many crinkles that scan in as symbols and it's a mess to clean up...

And although the manuscript contains many redundancies, spelling and grammatical errors, Wes insists that it be presented verbatim with no editing at all. He's adamant about this.

This vexes me because I see where the manuscript can be cleaned up and made more readable and understandable.... I care about such things... but I also don't care.

It's not my baby, I'm just helping.

The editor says, "How many writers does it take to change a light bulb?"

The writer says "I ain't changing a damn thing!"

Since I'm willing to help with this history book project but I'm not emotionally tied to it. —

When it comes time to promote the book, if you see some guy in a cat costume on top of a lighthouse waving a sign —

– That'll be Wes.

Thursday, February 09, 2006

Lord Of The Dull

Yesterday I sat at my desk all day formatting Wes' manuscript.

When Ginny came home, we made a fruit salad for an office breakfast, then she read all evening while I continued to work.

Jesus is Lord of even the dullest days.

Here's a happy Bible verse:

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

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Friday, February 10, 2006

I have no idea what to call this

It's 1 a.m. now and I began formatting the Joseph Pyram King autobiography at 3 a.m. yesterday. It's only 48 pages but I've worked on this thing steady for four days now.

I'm a little tired.

Wes's great-great-grandfather began his career as a butcher supplying meat to Confederate forces in Wilmington, N.C. during the Civil War. He was converted and became a Baptist preacher for a time but changed his doctrinal views to become an Advent Christian and was tried for heresy. When the Baptist Association put him out, he became an Adventist preacher. And seeing the need for a doctor to work among poor people, he studied medicine to become a physician. His wife of 59 years died shortly before their anniversary and on the eve of what would have been their 60th wedding anniversary and while on his sickbed, he dictated his autobiography to a daughter who wrote it down in pencil in school notebooks. He dwells more on their love affair than on either preaching or medicine.

I scanned in the text from pages done on an ancient manual typewriter and the scanner refuses to recognize anyspacebetweenanywords and the spaces have to be inserted one at a time..

The thing is a bitch to format.

The highpoint of my day was lunch with my daughter Eve. We had a delightful time as she advised me about books and life. She loves my jokes - hardly choked at all.

A minor crisis this evening made me think the king autobiography had already been published, but Ginny checked the Library of Congress catalogue and discovered that the copyright on that edition was from 1898. For a few hours there, I thought I'd done all this work for nothing. I was in a rage kicking my own ass over my own stupidity. I'm glad she discovered that I was wrong and all upset over nothing ... as is usually the case.

Tough day, but Jesus is Lord of the tough as well as the dull.

Sunday, February 12, 2006

Cow Catapulting Cowarts

Saturday most of the family gathered at Jennifer's house for an impromptu party for no other reason that we haven't had a get together since Christmas. Pat is down with a cold and fever. Jennifer grilled steaks outdoors and we all brought in food of various sorts with no coordination or planning. — It was a feast.

Eve gave Donald a Monty Python Cow Catapult so we all gathered round the table shooting cows into the air and catching them. Growing tired of that, we placed bits of dry dog food in the catapult and shot it across the room to see Jennifer's five little Mexican dogs that nobody can spell scramble for the tidbits.

Great fun. — It doesn't take much to amuse Cowarts.

Pat's six-year-old niece was there having a blast but no one could get a word in edgewise because of the chatterbox. Jennifer said that she couldn't imagine how Ginny and I raised six kids without resorting to drugs or drink. She asked how we avoided drowning one or another of them in the bathtub... I told her that we were going to, but some other kid always interrupted.

It really does take the grace of God to raise children. I can't imagine how we did it... but here we are with them all grown and now they are our best friends.

Helen came with Donald and she told me that with the pressure of her regular job, she is not able to illustrate the book we've talked about. On one hand, I'm disappointed because she's so talented and does such a fine job and makes it look so easy.

On the other hand, I'm relieved because I get to do the cover design myself.. So when Ginny and I got back to our house, while she dabbled in the kitchen, I tried a few things with graphic files on my computer and had a blast. I really believe I can do this.

I resist learning new things because they stretch my mind and my mind does not like to get stretched.

In thinking about what a help Helen and everyone else in the family has been to me in my writing projects, my mind began wandering back to recall how many wonderful people have helped me in the past... I like to

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think of myself as independent, a lone artist sitting in my lonely room creating great literature — What a false picture.

Dozens and dozens of people have helped me over the years. I write while standing on the backs of many good friends that I had almost forgotten in my arrogance over being a self-made man.

A writer does not work alone — but those people are the ones who can't spell Chihuahuas.

Anyhow, all evening Ginny nestled down on my shoulder as we snuggled under a blanket laughing at British comedies on tv. It's been a wonderful day.

Monday, February 13, 2006

Fun Sunday & Undie Monday

Two happy things to write about this morning: Fun Sunday and Undie Monday.

Fun Sunday: On her drive to work each morning Ginny has to pass through a slum where she sees various odd things.



As a special treat for me, Sunday she took me to see an odd standpipe exposed by demolition. She knows I am enamored of photographing beautiful things which have been unintentional created by people, things I term organic art. So she knew that I'd love this standpipe.

We had a wonderful time taking pictures of that as well as the decorations on a brick wall of a neighborhood storefront church.

A funny thing happened during our breakfast at Dave's Diner, a spot where we have hung out often for years, where we never need to look at a menu, and where we have an easy relationship with the staff.

When the waiter came over for our order, he greeted, "Ginny, I'm glad to see you with him this morning instead of one of those strange women he usually brings in here".

I reached across the table, took her hand and said, "Sweetheart, I don't know any woman stranger than you".

The three of us cackled like fools.

Great fun on a cold Sunday morning.

Undie Monday: No, don't get all excited; this has no relation to Half-Nakkid Thursdays which some of my e-friends observe by posting photos of themselves in various states of undress every Thursday. This is something different.

My librarian daughter told me about Undie Monday the other day when I took her to lunch.

In the past I've written about her library's fighting rattlesnakes which like to sun on the warm concrete walk at the front door. I've written about how her library lets kids who are slow readers come in to sit on a blanket and read stories to dogs. Her library sponsors a program where readers knit warm afghans for an old folks home up in the cold frozen north. And her library sponsors a program to cull Jacksonville libraries of duplicate books to replenish the stock of libraries flooded by Hurricane Katrina.

But, now her library is collecting underwear.

While working at various rescue missions, I've noticed myself that while donors generously give coats and pants and sweaters, they seldom donate underwear. The clothing centers often fall short in that department.

Well, to fill this gap, the libraries of Jacksonville act as collection points for brand new still-in-the-package underwear and socks in children's sizes. Library staff and readers bring such underwear to local libraries and on a Monday in March (hence the name Undie Monday) these items will be gathered for distribution to the poor by a charity called *Dignity U Wear.*

What makes this extra fun at my daughter's library is that some wag began attaching the donated underwear to a plant to create an underwear tree!

And here's the amazing thing: along with snakes, dogs, underwear, afghans, and all that stuff — the library also occasionally circulates books.

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I wonder why the library system buys so few of the books I write?

I think it's because they waste all their funds on this other stuff.

It is entirely possible to read a book while wearing no under garments whatsoever.

I do it all the time.

Tuesday, February 14, 2006

My Life As A Great Master

Monday I had a blast playing with graphics for book illustrations and Gimp software trying to make a book jacket for *Strangers On The Earth*. After many mistakes, I'm beginning to get the hang of it. The problem is that I can't decide which of my exquisite designs I want to use. They're all wonderful (If you like my sort of art, that is).

The afternoon mail brought my corrected proof copies of *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad*. I double checked pagination, index correlation, etc. Looks as perfect as I can make it. Thanks be to God! It's now available for sale in my on-line book catalog.. Bring a fist full of money and get in line for your copy.

I need to celebrate.

I haven't been celebrating small victories enough recently.

Life's too short and tough not to celebrate every victory you can; if you don't mark even the small things by rewarding yourself some little something, then you tend to forget triumphs and only remember bad nasties in life. That's a downer...

I'm going to have to think about that for a bit. At the moment, any reward that occurs to me to give myself is immoral. Yes, I'm going to have to think about this a bit more. But I feel I deserve something. I just can't decide what right now.

Yesterday my friend Barbara came over between one doctor's visit and another. Last week she broke a toe stumbling over her own aluminum walker! She has one of those electric scooters to get around the old folks home but the tire had gone flat and she fell over her walker on the way to the dining hall.

I comforted her by saying her accident can't be blamed on old age, she's always been clumsy.

I took her out to breakfast at Dave's. One of my waiter friends there has started growing a Captain Ahab beard. He didn't believe me when I told him that 30 years ago I grew that same style beard. So, Chris, here are two photos to prove it.

Way back then, in a mad fit of evangelistic fervor, I used to spread the Gospel by doing paintings in city parks as part of street preaching. Not many souls were saved but many people found it amusing to see a guy as shy as I am doing this.

This first photo was taken at the slave market in St. Augustine; notice my cool beard:



This second photo was taken when I was invited to teach a lesson at a Korean Church. And, no, I do not speak Korean. For the honor of speaking in their church, I learned to draw the letters and say five words which were the main points of my lesson. Again, notice my debonair whiskers:



Oh, the question I painted at the top of the easel asks, “What Is God Like”. The five points of my drawings and the Korean words down the side say:

God is Great
God is Holy
God is Light
God is Love
God is Near.

Ah yes, as you can see from my drawings, the world lost a great artist, comparable to Rim Brant or Van Go, when I turned from painting to writing. And, before I finally shaved it off, that beard grew long enough to tuck under my belt!

So, being the renaissance man that I am, I’m having great fun not only writing Strangers but also designing my own book cover for it. Having such varied talents humbles me — but not much.

Oh, yes, one other thing. This will be posted on Valentine’s Day but Ginny and I do not pay any attention to any holidays except Easter, Christmas and our anniversary. We were just as in love last Thursday as we are today so we feel no need to do anything different than on any other day. But for those of you who do observe the day, I wish you love and joy.

Wednesday, February 15, 2006

An Invitation To Join The Parade

Bogged down preparing my book cover for *Strangers On The Earth* yesterday. I did all I could then e-mailed the result for Donald and Helen to repair the damage.

Ginny spent the entire day in a mega-meeting reviewing 36 grant contracts to disperse 13 million dollars for various worthy charities. She still has no word on whether or not she'll be laid off Friday but she still keeps plugging away at the duties of the day as though there were no sword hanging over her head.

Last night she was amazed that I'd found those photos of my beard that I posted. Those pictures are from the Dark Ages (late 1960s or early '70s). We laughed to think we were once so young.



For six or seven years back then, I worked nights and volunteered at a sort of half-way house for drug addicts and street people.

One of the odd things I did there for several years was to design and build parade floats for the annual opening day of the beaches parades.

We used the floats both as fun projects for the kids but also as evangelistic tools. We passed out religious tracts along the parade route. Then after the parade we'd park the float on the beach and I'd use it as a platform to speak to the crowds.

Have I mentioned that I am one of the shyest people in the world?

I really am.

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During any of the evangelistic street I ever led, I never raised my voice or spoke to anyone who did not speak to me first. The way this worked was that I'd set my easel up somewhere, say in a park, and begin painting a stick-figure drawing and never say a word till people gathered to watch and someone would ask what I was painting. I'd say it's a picture that tells a story and go from there.

Anyhow, we'd use the parade floats as a platform for that sort of thing.

Last night seeing those old photos, which had been packed away in a drawer for years, reminded Ginny and me of some of the odd things we enjoyed back in those days.

Here are a couple of more photos of two parade floats we made in different years. This first one is Noah's Ark. The base was an abandoned boat trailer. The ark cabin is a bunk bed covered with cardboard; teens inside the cabin poked animal hand puppets through the port holes. The giraffe is a dog skull mounted on a fishing pole with the neck covered by the arms of an old coat. Notice the stuffed Snoopy on the roof.



The Lord has given me this odd knack for seeing one thing and transposing that shape into another thing at a different angle. For instance, the lion on this next float (about persecution) is a rusty gas can fixed to a board and covered with the insulation from an abandoned freezer. This float won the trophy as Most Outstanding in the parade. Some companies spent thousands of dollars sponsoring commercially designed floats in this same parade. But by scrounging in the trash for bits of this and that, I produced our float for only \$5 cash money. (I spent the cash on smoke bombs to go at the feet of John Hus being burned at the stake).

Anyhow, this photo shows one of only about three or four times Ginny spoke to the crowds ever. Normally that is just not her thing, she's quieter and shyer than I am. But on this one occasion she felt she should be the one talking, so she did.

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You know, I often hear young people complain about being bored and having nothing to do, I hear more mature folks say how empty and meaningless their lives feel.

The poor things don't have a clue.

I think that when a person chooses to follow Jesus, they are in for a blast! I suppose folks who are not Christians are able to have a bit of fun now and then... but they miss out on so much.

I think that's a crying shame.

Want adventure in your life?

Then just follow Jesus and go with the flow.

Take a better camera than we did. It's amazing the things you will see.

Thursday, February 16, 2006

Only a prayer

Of course, since I wrote about some exciting adventures of the Christian life yesterday, nothing at all of significance happened in my life today.

I sat at my computer all day proofreading copy.

So I have nothing special to say.

I find it much easier to jabber about God than to listen to Him.

A thing that helps a little is that each morning I receive a devotional e-mail from <http://www.rdex.net/devotions.php> . That helps me focus somewhat on the Lord.

Here's a prayer from yesterday's e-mail:

Lord, help me to glorify Thee. I am poor, help me to glorify Thee by contentment; I am sick, help me to give Thee honour by patience; I have talents, help me to extol Thee by spending them for Thee; I have time, Lord, help me to redeem it, that I may serve Thee; I have a heart to feel, Lord, let that heart feel no love but Thine, and glow with no flame but affection for Thee; I have a head to think, Lord, help me to think of Thee and for Thee; Thou hast put me in this world for something, Lord, show me what that is, and help me to work out my life-purpose: I cannot do much, but as the widow put in her two mites, which were all her living, so, Lord, I cast my time and eternity too into Thy treasury; I am all Thine; take me, and enable me to glorify Thee now, in all that I say, in all that I do, and with all that I have.

Friday, February 17, 2006

How Dedicated Christians Handle Anxiety

Well, it's Friday and my Thursday was a carbon copy of my Wednesday.

Ah, the romance and excitement of a writer's life.

I enjoyed the thrilling adventure of sitting 12 hours at my desk searching for punctuation mistakes in the *Strangers* ms. Know how when you've been out in a row boat all day and come home at night but the boat is still rocking even though you're not in it? Well, I close my eyes and still see a computer screen floating before me.

However, the last remaining task with this book is formatting the index and I'll be all set to send it off to the printer for proof pages — which I am confident will not reveal one single mistake this time. HA!

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Also, today Ginny should find out if she's among the 22 people being laid off at her office.

We probably should feel more anxious about this.

I can't tell if we are in a state of holy resignation to accept the will of God in the matter, or if we are in a state of stunned denial — but the end result for us is pretty much the same: We just don't give a damn what happens.

You know, there's just so much crap, even tragedy, you can take before going into system overload and shutting down. At that point you just go into familiar routine ignoring the irritants around you; like during the Great Fire of Jacksonville in 1901, there was a lady who escaped carrying an empty canary cage, and a man who rescued a bundle of old newspapers from his burning home.

I can't say that Ginny and I are in that state of shock but there may be a few symptoms... For instance:

Nothing much on tv so we have been enjoying some black and white 1950s science fiction vcrs. These movies didn't make B Grade when they first came out and the years have not improved them a bit. Yet we have enjoyed them thoroughly even with the tin pie plate flying saucers. This week we've watched such thrillers as *Teenagers From Outer Space*, *The Amazing Transparent Man*, *Bloodtide*, *The Brain Machine*, and *Hercules Against The Moon Men* — and no, we don't own these, we check them out of the public library. These things were cheesy when I saw them in theatres as a kid, but they are just our speed at the moment.

I suppose if we were a more pious couple we'd fast and pray about our situation, but to tell the truth, tonight we intend to watch *Hercules And The Captive Women* — with popcorn.

My Machine, She is broke

Friday (2/17)I worked indexing *Strangers On The Earth*.

Unfortunately, I hit two snags.

First, the computer server is down today; that means I can neither update my Blog nor post anything on my website.

Next, I worded for hours indexing the wrong version of *Strangers*; that is, I indexed a backup copy which I had not updated so the pagination is different from the version I'll send to the printer. This goof came about because I was not paying attention to what I was doing.

Back to the drawing board.

Again.

Ginny came home from her office still not knowing here job status. After telling everyone two months ago that today 22 of the 105 people working in the office would be laid off, today the administration made no announcement at all. This leaves Ginny and everyone else there to spend the weekend in limbo.

Sometimes I wonder if satan himself does not top the organizational chart in most businesses. However, the Lord's kingdom is not of this world and out job and joy is to fit into His plans whatever is going on in the world at the same time.

After dinner out, we did watch the vcr of *Hercules And The Captive Women*: This king kidnaps Hercules and put him aboard this ship bound to conquer Atlantis where the evil queen is sacrificing luscious young girls to a volcano and where all the palace guards dress in black armor. And Hercules plugs up the mouth of the volcano with bad guys he lifts above his head to throw in the hole while girls cling to his sweaty chest while their white negligees (which never get dirty even in the cave) threaten to slip off their shoulders and this dragon bites the heads off the guys Hercules throws in the hole and it snaps and bites and claws and Hercules lifts this boulder and ... I fell asleep.

Good thing.

It would spoil the movie for you if I revealed the ending now.

Saw A Varmit

Ginny and I wasted Saturday running around doing necessary household chores such as grocery shopping.

We enjoyed a late lunch on the deck of Harpoon Louie's overlooking Fishwier Creek. We saw three different species of heron hunting within a few feet of each other; a great blue, a white and a tri-color. The white

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and the blue are static hunters while the tri-color is an active hunter so it was interesting to watch their different methods of stalking prey, each effective in its way.

We spotted an animal swimming briskly under the bridge and watched it climb out of the water onto the far bank. It was a nutria, a large invasive rodent from South America. It's similar to a 30-pound beaver only it has a rat tail instead of a flatten one. I have never seen one in the wild before. I'd heard they have reached Florida by way of Louisiana and they present a problem in that they undermine riverbanks and destroy marshland. Some states, such as Maryland, actually have programs to eradicate them. Not a bad idea because essentially they are nothing but big ass rats.



Nevertheless, it was interesting to see one.

There used to be a good sized alligator that lived in the mouth of the creek just off Louie's deck but somebody decided it was a nuisance gator because customers in waterfront restaurants would toss it tidbits.

So Fish & Game officers trapped it and (killed?) removed it. The nutria has no natural enemies in North America so it breeds unobstructed; but if they'd left the gator alone, I imagine he would have thinned the colony of them in no time — unless the varmint really did prefer

luscious Avondale children from Fishwier Elementary School just across the bridge.

I think it would be cool to watch a gator feed as I enjoyed my own dinner. Besides, who'd really miss those skateboarders who make such a ruckus on the concrete bridge footings right beside the restaurant?

Monday, Feb. 20th — Today, Server has been down for almost a week now so I can't post a blog, use site e-mail, or do many such things yet.

Donald is working on it...

Ginny & I watched the Olympics some on tv last night... we concluded that while we may not be much physically, we are ice dancers of the spirit.

Tuesday, February 21, 2006

Why I'm Not A Best Selling Novelist

Server is still down so I can post nothing, not can I receive e-mail.

Apparently the tech support people in Calcutta or maybe it's a kid running a Fortune 500 internet company out of his garage in Cleveland took a three-day weekend to celebrate President's day and have not worked to get my sites back up.

I didn't know they celebrated President's Day in Calcutta.

Anyhow, apparently my server hard drive won't get hard. Therefore it can't perform as it should.

Sometimes, I know the feeling.

As Ginny got in the car to leave for work this morning, (she still has no definitive word about her job status but continues to labor as though the office depended on her efforts alone)....

Anyhow, as she got in the car I was wondering why my most recent book manuscript could be posted to the printer. I wondered if the devil was blocking my work, or if perhaps God is delaying publication for some timing reason of His own?

Ginny quipped, "Love, I think they've called a truce and are cooperating on this one".

That's what I get for marrying a literary critic.

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Interesting thing this morning: I went to the doctor's office for a blood test to check my cholesterol and such. A young man was just ahead of me at the lab. He wore brown work boots encrusted with mud, faded jeans, a company tee shirt indicating he was a construction worker and he sported bulging biceps and abs showing off his strength.

When the nurse put the needle in his arm, he fainted.

She and another nurse revived him and offered him a paper cup of water. He lifted it to his lips, saw the needle and fainted again spilling the water all down the front of him.

This was so curious to me.

Back in the mid 1960s I was already a member of the ten galleon club as a blood donor and it's incomprehensible to me that anyone would be bothered by a nurse drawing blood. I usually watch the procedure or don't notice it at all. So I was amazed at this young man's reaction. God has made us all different about such things.

One other thing to catch up: While I've not been able to write online, I've been reading. When writers don't write, they read. My reading this past week convinces me that I'll never make it as a novelist.

I read this mystery that's been on the New York Times best seller list as well as on the Waldenbooks and B.Dalton best seller lists.

Here is a quote from this novel:

"She caught her breath with a strange trepidation as she felt his crushing manhood poised on the very brink of her feminine core... He pushed his knee between her silky thighs and tasted the dark grape that tipped her breast... Slowly he thrust into her , taking his time so that he could experience every centimeter of her clinging, velvety core."

This went on for eight pages!

I'll never make it as a novelist.

If I were writing that scene, I'd use only five words — not one of them would be *core*.

Saturday, February 25, 2006

Yep, I'd say that's a mammal alright.

Anyone who has read my novel *Glog*, or about my bird watching activities in this blog, knows that natural history interests me.

Since I was a Boy Scout, I've found fossils fascinating. Our troop used to go to an abandoned phosphate quarry and collect the huge teeth of *Carchadrodon Megalodon*, the giant shark that used to haunt Florida when the whole state was underwater.

And I once spent a happy vacation with a group doing an underwater survey of fossil and Indian remains in a Florida spring.

And I have prowled the Calvert Cliffs fossil bed where Glog found his baculum and explored caves looking for fossils deep underground.

Yes, I've always been interested in fossils, so I often read about new discoveries in paleontology whenever I see a news item about them.

Friday, scientists announced they have uncovered a fossil mammal which they say is older than any previously found.

I understand that newspaper editors do not always pay attention to what they are doing, but some mistakes should ring a bell with a proofreader shomewhere....

Am I the only one to think this news report on fossils is hilarious?

Here is a verbatim copy, including graphic, from this morning's *South Coast Today*, *Standard Times* newspaper:

Fossil overturns previous ideas of Jurassic Mammals

The discovery of a furry, beaver-like animal that lived at the time of dinosaurs has overturned more than a century of scientific thinking about Jurassic mammals.

The find shows that the ecological role of mammals in the time of dinosaurs was far greater than previously thought, said Zhe-Xi Luo, curator of vertebrate paleontology at Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh.

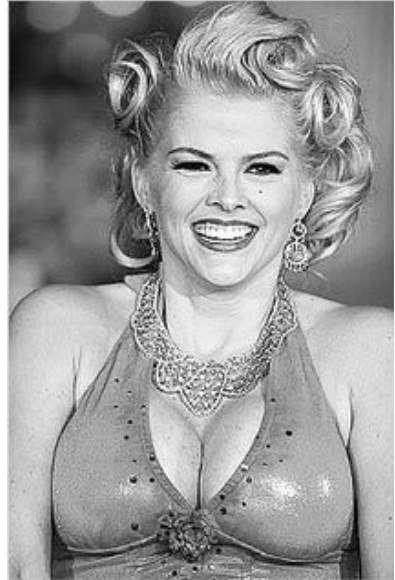
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The animal is the earliest swimming mammal to have been found and was the most primitive mammal to be preserved with fur, which is important to helping keep a constant body temperature, Luo said in a telephone interview.

For over a century, the stereotype of mammals living in that era has been of tiny, shrew-like creatures scurrying about in the underbrush trying to avoid the giant creatures that dominated the planet, Luo commented.

Now, a research team that included Luo has found that 164 million years ago, the newly discovered mammal with a flat, scaly tail like a beaver, vertebra like an otter and teeth like a seal was swimming in lakes and eating fish.



The team, led by Qiang Ji of the Chinese Academy of Geological Sciences in Beijing, discovered the remains in the Inner Mongolia region of China.

They report their findings in today's issue of the journal Science. Matthew Carrano, curator of dinosaurs at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, called the find "a big deal."

Sunday, February 26, 2006

"Despise Not The Day Of Small Things"

Saturday morning Ginny & I went out to breakfast at Denny's and found the place so crowded and the staff so rushed that when we found a booth there was no placemat on the table.

What a drag.

I love restaurant placemats. For as long as I can remember I've had the habit of turning the placemats over and drawing little pictures on the white side. I draw stick figures of birds or elephants or scrolls or camels or anything the conversations around me suggest. I do this

almost unconsciously while paying close attention to the person I'm with as we talk. Ginny finds this amusing.

When the food arrives at the table I flip the placemat back over and the world tragically loses another example of great art.

But our table had no placemat yesterday.

The harried waitress did stop to tell us that she's changing jobs and moving to another restaurant a few miles away and we promised to go there next week to see her in her new environment.

Now, here's an odd thing.

Neither Ginny nor I can remember first meeting.

We are deeply in love and we've been married for 38 years but we can't remember when we first met. We were both connected with a large church youth group back in the 1960s and to each of us, for the longest time the other was just part of the crowd, background noise to the group's activities.

So it was definitely not a case of love at first sight.

There wasn't any first sight.

But one night after a prayer meeting, the gang went to a Hot Shoppe restaurant and packed around a couple of tables pushed together to make room for everybody. Being the shy person I am, I wrangled a place in the corner so I didn't have to speak to anybody. I turned over my placemat and began to draw as usual not really paying attention to the others who were engaged in animated conversations.

A hand with a pencil appeared at the edge of my vision and began adding features to my drawing. It was this girl seated beside me. This shy girl who never had anything to say in group meetings. I'd seen her around but I didn't even know her name. I drew a hammer. She drew a house. I drew an alligator. She drew a squirrel.

Neither of us spoke a word for the longest time....

And out of such a small beginning grew a lifelong friendship, a torrid love affair, a joyous companionship, a thriving family, a contented old age.

There's no particular point to this posting...

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I'm just remembering.

And smiling.

Monday, February 27, 2006

And The Gold Medal Goes To

The information came at me in a rush.

In the restaurant at breakfast yesterday, Ginny & I started talking about restaurants we might try someday and I mentioned one I've heard about but never been to and she said the place disappointed her when she'd been there and I ask when she'd ever been to that restaurant and she said, "Oh some of us went over there for lunch when the building was evacuated during one of the bomb threats. I had a shrimp salad and ..."

"Whoa! Back up there a minute! Bomb Threat! What Bomb Threat? And what do you mean One of the Bomb Threats?" I said calmly - calmly for me, that is.

Now I should explain that while I work out of a home office, each day Ginny drives across town to an office building in a slum where, along with a hundred other people, she helps make sure that several thousand hungry children are fed and cared for.

Every day when she returns from her office, I have coffee waiting for her and we sit to sip coffee and unload to each other the problems of the day. I tell her about the frustrations of writing; she tells me about encumbrances, contract negotiations, budget analysis, and who's pregnant this week.

We talk like that every evening.

I don't understand half of what she does but I do listen.

Never once has she ever mentioned bomb threats until yesterday at breakfast.

"John, it's no big deal. It's just one of the obstacles we have to get around to get the job done," she said.

Yes.

Just one of the obstacles.

That is what she said.

"One of the obstacles?" I said.

I knew that once a guy crashed his car into the side of her building in an apparent suicide attempt and that a few weeks ago a stabbing victim had staggered in off the street. Those things made the evening news.

So yesterday over pancakes, she now also mentioned that in the six months since her office moved to the new building that six times windows have been shot out.

She never mentioned these incidents before because she didn't want me to worry. "It's no big deal," she said.

"There's only a small window in my cubicle and it's high up and I duck my head when I pass it," she said.

Such things are "just obstacles" to getting the job done, to getting the children fed. She and her co-workers get past such obstacles every day.

And the administration feels they have to lay off 20 percent of these people who are working to overcome such obstacles. There are budgetary considerations.

And tonight on tv I see that they hand out Gold Medals to guys who only slide down icy hills on their asses.

Tuesday, February 28, 2006

I Don't Have A Title For This Post Because I don't Know What's Going On

Monday I went with my brother to attend the funeral of a younger cousin.

The pastor spoke on the first five verses of Psalm 31 and moved from there to the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

Members of my mother's extended family packed the funeral home chapel. I helped the funeral director bring in extra chairs but even so there were eight of us standing against the back wall while several mothers with small children remained in the hall outside.

I saw many familiar faces. Faces I remember from my youth as belonging to old folks, but the odd thing is that these faces are now on people younger than I am. Family features are strongly stamped on people.

I felt so nervous about being exposed to the ridicule and censure of all these people again, that I spent the whole day psyching up for the encounter.

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I have not been to any extended family gathering for years since they ostracized me and my family, and dropped us after my father died. As always, I felt like the failure. poor relation, family fool, village idiot, being barely tolerated among the successful. They'll let anybody into a funeral, you know.

My brother really did not need my support although he'd insisted that I come with him. His wife was along for that. (Ginny was still at work and couldn't be with me).

However, I tried to stay out of the way and not offend anybody again. I kept my guard up to avoid injury. I spent the whole time walking on eggs but nobody threw rocks. I paid my respects to the dead and I survived the contact with the extended family without being wounded so I suppose it was ok.

When I got home, Ginny cooked me a hamburger and, without speaking to me because she knew how on edge I'd be after this ordeal, sat me down to watch the *Incredible Hulk* on video.

It's nice to fit in someplace.

MARCH

Wednesday, March 01, 2006

I Do Not Turn Green!

When I get uptight, scared or angry, my ribs hurt.

Why do my ribs hurt?

Because I press my elbows so tight against my sides; I also cross my ankles and press my knees together so hard that they hurt too.

I spent most of yesterday and last night and a good part of this morning in that condition.

This is not good.

Oddly enough, this doesn't happen in times of real danger or crisis, just in social situations. I can speak before a large group with no problem because that is a structured situation, but at a party or funeral or Sunday School breakfast, or such... I clam up big time. It's really painful.

What about the peace Christ is supposed to give us Christians?

Doesn't work for me.

Not in social situations.

Anyhow, inspired by the movie I watched last night, as we dressed this morning I put on my Incredible Hulk tee shirt to work in while I formatted the Joseph Pyram King autobiography.

Ginny noticed my Hulk tee shirt and said, "Are you going to be the Incredible Hulk today?"

"No," I said. "I wish I was. When I get hurt or angry I don't turn green, grow huge biceps and smash things; I just get quite and withdraw into my shell."

"I've noticed that," she said. "When you get upset, you turn into --- the Incredible Sulk!"

I love her dearly, but sometimes Ginny is a smart ass.

Thursday, March 02, 2006

Working On Fire Photos

Wednesday morning started with a doctor's appointment where he gave me the usual dire warnings.

The physician spends one month every year in Cameroon, Africa, caring for ailing folks there.

It wasn't clear if this service is motivated by religious conviction or humanitarian feeling. Not that it matters to the sick folks; they're getting care either way.

When I escaped the doctor's clutches after being diagnosed as needing two more appointments, I drove into Southside where it's easier to park. Then I rode a water taxi back across the St. Johns River to photograph the spire which commemorated the 1901 Great Jacksonville Fire.

I'm working on a history of firefighting in Jacksonville. The text is written and now I'm gleaning photos to illustrate it. Actually, this book is a history of my hometown told from the vantage point of how many times the place has burned down.

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The boatmen were enormously helpful when I explained what I was doing. They proved a wealth of information and pertinent questions.

Since no one else was in the water taxi except a young couple so busy smooching that they did not know if they were on the water or in a hotel room, the boatmen brought me close into the memorial and paused the boat there and allowed me to go outside the roped off area to take my photos.

This memorial marks the spot of the Market Street Horror.

When the city burned, hundreds of people crowed onto a dock at this spot to escape the flames. In the scramble for safety, in the press of people, some were shoved into the water and drowned. Not Jacksonville's finest moment.

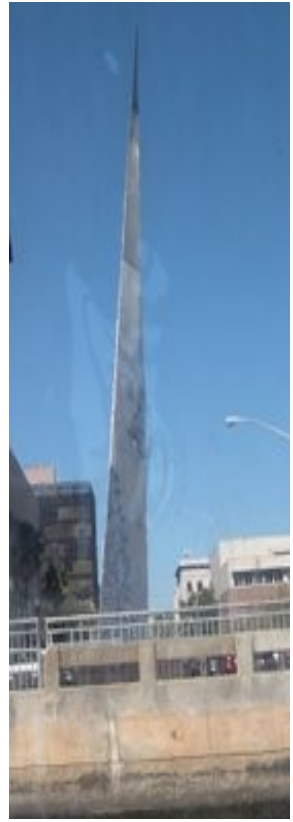
Anyhow I had a great time with the boatmen.

Then I drove to Fire Station One to photograph a monument to firemen killed in the line of duty:

During our prayer time after supper, Ginny and I got into a long discussion about the meaning of the word *ascribe* in Psalm 29. In the version we read, *ascribe* is used several times in verses such as "Ascribe unto the Lord the honor due His name". The King James the Hebrew word is rendered "Give" — which makes more sense that *ascribe*.

We broke out the dictionary and see the word has a lot of different connotations.

I'm only familiar with *ascribe* in a literary sense such as "The plays of Shakespeare are sometimes ascribed to Bacon". In that way the word seems to mean "give credit to".



Anyhow, we concluded that we have no idea what it means.

I agree with a quotation ascribed to Mark Twain, “It’s not the parts of the Bible I don’t understand that give me problems, it’s the parts I do that bother me”.

Friday, March 03, 2006

Christians In A Tree

Yesterday I fought software ad nausea all day trying to design two book covers. I’d checked out an armload of computer books from the library and studied them diligently. I followed the instructions step by step. Each step worked just as it should; but when I combined them...

Zilch!

Double zilch.

Double damn zilch!

Ginny came home and made both covers in less than an hour.

As I age, I’m finding it harder and harder to learn new things. I understand a joke told by my e-friend Gene, who lives in a nursing home in Oregon and who tells worse jokes than I do:

More money is being spent today on breast implants and Viagra than on Alzheimer's research. Thus, by 2040, we will have a great population of oldsters with perky boobs and huge erections but no recollection of what to do with them.

Anyhow, I was able to send the manuscripts, with covers, to the printer for proof pages. We’ll see how they come out.

To reward myself for my efforts on these books, I spend this morning making new tin boxes for my matches. Bikini girls inside the covers, Spring and work related pictures on the outside.

I used one picture from the cover of one of my books on one matchcase:



This is from *Strangers On The Earth, A Collective Biography Of People Whose Faith Got Them Into Trouble*. It's about people who followed Jesus even when it meant suffering; the engraving is from the chapter on Johannes Kepler.

The Christians are the ones in the tree.

No software hassles for these folks.

Saturday, March 04, 2006

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Reading back over my posting yesterday I see I've glossed over three things which leave a false impression:

First, in the Kepler engraving, the folks on the ground are Christians too. The famous 15th Century astronomer (who discovered the laws used in satellite launching today and who invented the first vacuum cleaner) lived in a time when warring Christian factions hung each other from trees over religious disagreements. Both sides wanted to hang Kepler; and he tried to follow Christ between the adversaries.

Forgive me for implying that in matters of faith there were good guys against bad guys. I don't see any white hats in that picture.

Second, I pass off in a phrase that I made my matchboxes with bikini girls inside the covers. Nothing to it, right? What I didn't say was that to select pictures of women wearing bikinis or less, I spent three hours browsing girly photos to get just the right ones for my four matchcases.

This is the first time in months I've looked at such photos.

Odd, isn't it that at a moment of spiritual triumph (just finishing a manuscript on people who remained faithful to Christ in the worst circumstances) I reward myself by browsing photos of naked ladies - and I munched chocolate donuts as I browsed!

How decadent is that?

How could a Christian man be so two faced?

Well, if you want to read about piety, maybe the Pope, or Billy Graham, or your rabbi, or the Deli Lama keeps a blog.

My reality is that I'm a dirty old man.

I'm not very good at it, but I'm getting worse.

Do God and my wife know about my inclinations?

Of course. A hypocrite fools no one but himself.

Are they shocked, horrified and left aghast and in disarray?

Nonsense.

Both know me exactly as I am and both love me in spite of what I am.

That's grace.

And I'm a recipient.

The third misimpression I left yesterday concerned my age and my worries about Alzheimer's. Yes it bothers me when I forget something or have trouble learning new things...

I mentioned my concern to Ginny last night at the restaurant and we got to talking about age and health. Remember the phrase from *Grumpy Old Men* —when Jack Lemon would hear of some guy dying suddenly of a heart attack, he'd say, "Lucky Bastard" — Well, one of the biggest fears I have as I get older is that I won't die quick.

Hey, if you don't die first, you're likely to grow senile.

Not too many other options.

Following a risen Lord makes a lot of sense in that light.

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But, my brilliant accountant wife broke out a pencil and began figuring dates on a scrap of paper. She subtracted the date of my birth from the date of my next birthday and she proved mathematically that I'm an idiot.

I'm not 67 years old.

I'm only 66.

I've been a year off.

I'm younger than I thought.

What a relief.

I'm not old at all....

Er, Do early-stage Alzheimer's guys have trouble with math?

Oh, one last thing: Ginny just read over my last week's postings. She objected to the nice things I've said about her. "You make me sound like a darn saint," she said, "I ain't no saint".

I just record my own impressions of her and I do hold her in high regard.

That's my perception of her.

But I do remember something Frank Foster, the pastor who gave me pre-marital counseling 38 years ago, said when I enraptured about this beautiful girl I planned to marry. He said, "John, if you put a woman up on a high pedestal, you'd better carry a big umbrella".

Monday, March 06, 2006

Reading Frenzy!

When I was a student back in the late 1950s, my archaeology class surveyed two identical Indian mounds out on an island in the Gulf of Mexico.

I forget the official name of the site, but we called the twin mounds "Sandy's Nipples" in honor of a young lady in the class. The accolade pleased her.

The island was accessible only by boat.

On one trip to the island we saw a commotion in the water.

Splashing, blood spraying, violent turmoil.

Drawing closer, we saw a pack of sharks attacking a giant sea turtle. They'd already bitten off a flipper or two, yet the turtle, bigger than a table top, attempted to escape by struggling on the surface and actually trying to jump from the water.

Each shark viciously grabbed a bite, thrashed around to tear off a chunk of bloody meat, and fled with it to keep brother sharks from snatching it away. Gulping down the meat, the shark would flip around for another bite. It looked as though dozens of sharks engaged in this feeding frenzy.

What calls this vivid gory memory to mind this morning?

Well, Sunday afternoon Ginny and I attended the annual Friends of the Library Book Sale at the fairgrounds.

There, over a hundred thousand books, culled or donated to Jacksonville libraries, are stacked on hundreds of long tables for buyers to purchase at \$10 or less each.

A vast warehouse stuffed with every kind of book, books lying peacefully, tranquilly on long tables. Books filling boxes under the tables, not bothering anybody.

Then here come the buyers!

Hundreds, if not thousands, of readers of every size and description cruised the tables grabbing treasured books, clutching them close to their breasts, packing them in boxes. Grabbing armloads. Filling shopping carts especially stolen from grocery stores for the sale.

Ginny & I separated to cover more ground. When we met by chance in the G section, we each looked as though we just played three quarters of NFL Football on a rainy field.

I made three trips out to stack books in the trunk of our car when my canvas bag overflowed. Ginny made two trips out. We had to break off to replenish our cash at an ATM then back into the fray.

Spending money we don't have for books we don't need and books we're unlikely to ever read. But we couldn't stop.

Materialism run rampant..

But we got books.

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Great books.

There was blood in the water.

Books to be had for the grabbing.

Yes, hundreds of other readers crawled under tables and elbowed each other aside for another bite at the turtle.

But we got ours!

We got a carload.

I got books on archaeology and history and old diaries and journals and travel and....

They are MINE! All mine. My very own. My books. Mine! Mine. Mine.

I'll rip down our old bookshelves and build new bookshelves then sit back and relax and say to my soul, "John, eat, drink and read, for thou hast much books".

So we came home replete, happy and exhausted.

Then guess what we did all evening?

We watched tv.

Tuesday, March 07, 2006

Musings on books, ants and bird flu

Monday I worked adding footnotes to my book on the history of firefighting in Jacksonville. I hope to have that book ready for publication in about three weeks.

As I worked on it, I mused about possible futures for my books.

Pipe dreams really.

For instance I imagined that Stephen King stayed awake all last night worried that this is the book that will bump him off the best seller list and that I'll usurp his place as the best writer alive today.

My book traces the history of my hometown from the viewpoint of how many times the place has burned down. And while my book touches on politics within the Fire Department, it focuses on the bravery and heroic deeds of firefighters who save lives and property daily.

I can envision massive crowds of readers huddled in sleeping bags on the pavement and fighting for places in

line as they wait for bookstores to open so they can buy my book.

Little kids will dress in fireman costumes. Books store owners will stack copies of J.K. Rowling's books on the floor to make steps so little kids can stand on them to reach the countertop to get my book.

Adoring teens will chant my name and throw themselves on the hood of the limo as I pull in for the book signing.

Luscious young women will mob me ripping their own bodices open, screaming for my autograph as tears stream down their faces..

Bankers will secure first editions in vaults gloating over the increased value as my book goes into printing after printing.

Computers sit idle, screensavers flickering, as nerds abandon the net to pour over my book..

On the other hand...

I also envision that library book sale Sunday where thousands of books—whose authors worked just as hard as I do— languish on tables picked over by indifferent crowds who think a dollar is too much to spend on a writer's life work.

Every book on those tables represents as much work and as many dreams as my own books do. Sobering thought.

"Of the making of many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh," said wise King Solomon.

That didn't stop him from writing his books though, did it?

Hey, he even wrote poetry and we all know what a booming market there is for that stuff.

Of course, King Solomon lucked out and got his books included in the pages of the Bible—which didn't become a best seller till long after he was dead.

Even kings are frustrated writers at heart.

And other parts of the Bible show that Solomon's own children paid no attention to the wisdom he wrote down.

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“All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes,” Solomon wrote, “But the Lord weigheth the spirits. Commit thy works unto the Lord, and thy thoughts shall be established.”

Another thing he wrote says, “Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. (The ant) provideth her meat in the summer and gathereth her food in the harvest.”

Wise words indeed.

I thought of his advice as I read this morning’s Associated Press report on bird flu. The disease spread to 17 new countries last month alone. It has crossed from birds to some mammals (cats, of course).

Considering what the Black Death did in medieval times, what Spanish Lady did in World War I, how Yellow Jack decimated Jacksonville in 1888 (a tidbit from my history book) and how Typhoid Fever killed more soldiers right here in Jacksonville than died in all the fighting of the Spanish American War—

Well, it might not hurt to prepare our souls and pantries for bad times ahead.

Be sure to stock your bunkers with a few cans of beans and copies of my different books to read during the possible bad times ahead.

I hope bird flue fizzles out. I really do.

But, if not, my history of firefighting in Jacksonville—or my book on prayer—might help surviving readers get through tough times.

Thursday, March 09, 2006

Lobster Thoughts

Remember how back on my February 25th posting I got a kick out of a newspaper running the wrong photo of a new fossil mammal? By mistake the newspaper attached a photo of a buxom young lady to their article about the new mammal.

To me that was hilarious.

Yesterday another thing happened in the same vein:

Yesterday at work Ginny saw a newspaper article about yet another previously unknown animal which

marine biologists recently discovered near a volcanic vent off Easter Island.

When she came home she told me about the new animal, a blind lobster-like creature which appears covered with blond fur. I had not heard of the discovery so I immediately did a Google search.

Here is a photo of the new — to us — creature:

A rare find indeed. A creature of exotic beauty. A living creature previously unknown to science.... But what struck me as funny is that my Google search not only turned up this photo of the *Kiwa Hirsuta*, but Google also enhanced my search with targeted ads geared to appeal to the specific taste of a searcher.

The ads on my screen were for the Red Lobster chain of seafood restaurants!



Well, maybe you had to be there to see how funny that is.

Anyhow, I think that each new discovery of creatures nobody has noticed before reminds us of how little we really know about the wonders of the creation around us. A family of beautiful flying squirrels lives in the tree in my neighbor's back yard. He'd lived in that house for over 30 years and never knew of their existence until I pointed them out to him last summer

Who know? A unicorn really may graze in those woods by the Interstate. Angels may hover above us. Trolls may hide beneath the bridge. Seahorses may be real — and mermaids ride their backs.

Perhaps my novel *Glog* is not as far-fetched as it seems.

A line from an old prayer book says something like, "Lord, open our eyes to behold the wonders of Thy creation."

. On a sad note, the same Google news that tells about the blond-haired lobster, also tells about another scientist accused of fraud in his research. That's becoming commonplace. Almost daily the news tells

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about a scientist who falsifies research findings to enhance his reputation or to get more grant money. Such things just indicate that even the best and brightest among us are human sinners needing a Savior.

However, that's nothing for me to dwell on. It behooves me to think little about the sins of other men and more about my own.

For instance, recently I've been wrestling with a problem in intellectual honesty involving my manuscript on the history of firefighting in my hometown.

Usually, my books run in the neighborhood of 300 pages; to qualify for a Library of Congress pre-publication catalogue number, a manuscript should run to at least 200 pages.

At the moment, this fire history of mine comes to only 109 pages.

I am tempted to pad.

I've been adding a lot of historic photos. That's legitimate. But I've been enlarging them to cover a whole page. That's unnecessary.

I've also tried to insert three chapters from another local history book I wrote. This increases the page count but these chapters dilute the focus of the fire history book.

I want to give the readers who buy my books good value for their money and to pad the manuscript with extraneous crap is just wrong.

But in my vanity I want to say I wrote a BOOK not a pamphlet!

I'm not sure if writers face more temptations than say exotic dancers or scientists or Enron executives or housewives or politicians but I know that my own heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.

Ain't nobody nowhere needs a Savior more than John Cowart.

Enough. Such thinking wearies me.

Ginny is taking a couple of days off work to tend our garden over this long weekend. I plan to take her out for dinner tonight.

For some reason I'm thinking about seafood.

I wonder if she'd like to go out to Red Lobster?

Friday, March 10, 2006

My life as a great writer/yardman

First, scientists have done it again.

Today's *Seattle Times* reports the discovery of a mammal, a rockrat, which they thought had been extinct for 11 million years.

A biologist in Laos saw the creature being sold as groceries in a meat market. No, not as a fossil but as food.

Again, I'm reminded that my novel *Glog* may be realer than I thought when I wrote it. Who knows what's living in the bushes?

Here's a photo of one, looks delicious for a fossil:



Thursday I spent the day mowing and doing yard work instead of writing.

Ginny has all these dirt-eating plants that she has me lug in and out of the house according to temperature or wifely whim. She decided to re-pot the things so I left off writing my history of firefighting in Jacksonville to chop bushes and mow grass under her adult supervision.

How can I produce great literature behind a lawnmower?

Can you imagine Chaucer mowing grass? How could he have written *Cranberry Tales* if he had to push a mower?

Does Stephen King mow his own lawn? No! I imagine he has little people to do mundane things like that. Of course his little people have fangs and only come out at night.

Did Dante mow grass? Did Hemmingway? Not a chance; he just drank and let it grow.

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I mean can you picture Truman Capote pushing a lawnmower all hot and sweaty, wearing black socks and tennis shoes with his shorts and wearing no shirt...

Maybe it's best not to picture that.

No wonder my books never make the best seller list.

But, I'll have to confess that it's while mowing the lawn that I get most of my thinking and praying done. For me it's easier to pray while doing some mindless, repetitious task; I let my hands do the work while my heart focuses on the Lord.

Unfortunately, Thursday my mind focused on an unpleasant aspect of Christianity:

Christians tend to shoot their own wounded.

We're inclined to blame victims for their misery and make painful situations worse, to hurt the hurt worse than they're already hurt.

That's a shame.

Back in the First Century the apologists defending the faith against Nero's paganism would point to the lives of Christians as proof of the truth of our religion.

Justin Martyr, a Christian apologist writing about the year A.D. 150, said, "Many (pagans) changed their violent and tyrannical disposition, being overcome either by the constancy which they witnessed in the lives of their Christian neighbors, or by the extraordinary forbearance they have observed in their Christian fellow travelers when defrauded, and by the honesty of those believers with whom they have transacted business."

I don't know that I'd want anybody pointing at my life, constancy, forbearance or honesty if they were arguing that Christians should not be fed to lions.

Nowadays we tend to shoot our own wounded.

Case in point, about ten or 12 years ago a young pastor came to our house. He ministered at a church of a different denomination from mine; we'd met and became acquainted at an interdenominational feed the hungry drive but I hardly knew the man.

I was out mowing grass when he stopped by unexpectedly, so we sat on our back deck as he hemmed

and hawed over small talk working up courage to ask me something.

Poor bastard was worried sick.

He'd done something which he worried may have exposed him to AIDS and he was feeling this horrible itching and he was scared shitless that he had it and he was scared that if anybody in his church found out they'd fire him and that his deacons would ostracize him and other pastors in his group would brand him as a vile nasty sinner and he his physician was a member of his board and he would die in shame and all the people who looked up to him would

Well, you get the idea.

Somehow at the food drive, he'd got the idea that I would not whack him with an ax if he came to talk to me.

Now, I'm not a pastor, counselor or professional Christian of any sort, but the guy felt he could talk to me while he was worried sick over all this.

Now, I'll admit that I feel the thing he'd done was sin.

Big deal.

I said, "Bill, you're a pastor so you know more about handling the sin side of things than I do. So do what you know about that. Christ is Deliverer and a delivery man takes things from where they are to where they ought to be."

That's about all I had to say about the sin part of his unfaithfulness.

But I made arrangements for him to be tested for AIDS by a state agency; he did not know that this could be done anonymously. Turns out he had scabies not AIDS!

Wow. What a happy camper.

He was so relieved. And his deacons would not find out. Or his wife. Or his congregation. Or even his physician (who was a member of his church).

I advised him to "Go and sin no more. Stick with your own wife and leave that other woman alone unless you want to feel that way again".

I have no idea if he did or not.

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Having revealed his affair, his anxiety, and his relief to me, he became embarrassed and withdrew from contact.

That's ok.

It's what we do.

The thing is, it's such a shame that he was so scared of his fellow Christians, that they'd turn on him instead of dealing with sin honestly and supporting the guy.

I mean we're all in this boat together and ... don't know how to finish this.

Anyhow, that's the sort of thing I thought about while mowing the grass.

Today, I'll be clearing a fence line -- again, under adult supervision.

Saturday, March 11, 2006

A Cat In My Garden Of Earthly Delights

Yesterday I mentioned how I find lawn mowing and yard work provides me with a sense of tranquility and both physical and spiritual exercise.

HA!

Doesn't that sound pious?

Discovering the ecstasy of mental prayer is a hallmark of mature spirituality.

Wouldn't Brother Lawrence, who wrote *The Practice Of The Presence Of God*, think that I'm the cat's meow when it comes to spiritual discovery?

Well, Friday as Ginny & I cleared thorny undergrowth from the fence line and I crawled along on hands and knees in the dirt rooting out thorn vine roots between the flowers Ginny treasures, I discovered exactly where our neighbor's cat shits.

Lots and often!

What do they feed that creature? Anchovies?

Since my discovery was not of a spiritual nature, I said a few words which aren't exactly spiritual either.

That set the tone of my day.

Then, after working in harmony among the flowers of our garden all day, Ginny & I found ourselves at odds this evening over sex.

Looks like after 38 years of marriage we'd have ironed this sort of thing out, but we still haven't mastered it all yet.

I think we need more hands-on practice; she thinks Agatha Christy writes a great mystery novel.

So we had this long meaningful talk about our feelings.

Just talk.

Damnit!

The person who said, "Communication is so important in marriage" had to be some blazing, flaming, tattooed, ear-ring-wearing, orange-haired whimp of a hair-dresser who wants beautiful women to cut their hair short so they'll look plainer than he does (not that there's anything wrong with that, you understand).

On the other hand, in his movie *Octopussy*, James Bond, who along with his other sterling qualities must be a true spiritual giant, said, "Actions speak louder than words".

I, of course, remain a cool, impartial Christian gentleman amid the negations.

You know, it is so much easier to write Christian stuff than to live it; if I didn't try to live Christian, then I could write a whole 26 volume *Encyclopedia Britannica* of spiritual tips for other people.

But the longer I try to follow Christ myself, the less I know about it and the fewer answers I have.

I write a lot but I'm most often at a loss for words.

During our devotions after supper, Ginny read an old version of Psalm 99 which says, "The Lord is King, be the people never so impatient. He sitteth between the Cherubim, be the earth never so unquiet."

I'm not positive what that means but I find it comforting. Especially when I'm frustrated, and without answers, and up to my elbows in unexpected cat shit, and

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my life is not making a whole lot of sense, and I'm impatient and unquiet—even then the Lord is King.

About that cat situation.... I've read that the city health department loans out these humane animal traps. Apparently, you put bait, maybe a tiny baby bird, inside and the lurking cat slinks through the dark of night; claws extended to shred the baby bird, it enters the cage —and the trap snaps shut capturing the vile creature alive.

Then the next morning, I suppose, you have to put your own shotgun through the bars to make garden mulch. Sounds like a winner to me.

Sunday, March 12, 2006

Ready For St. Patrick's Day?

This morning aching muscles inform me that I need to either quit doing heavy yard work — or to do it a lot more often.

Saturday from dawn to dusk Ginny & I continued our fence clearing project. Problem is that each time we got one area looking good, our work reveals other areas that need work also; cleaning produces a self-perpetuating mess.

The postman delivered the proof copy of *Strangers On The Earth*. My hands were too dirty to examine the book closely, but a casual glance showed several structural defects I need to correct before I can release the book to buyers.

No big deal. I'd targeted this book for release before last Thanksgiving but I'm slow and lazy and just have not done the work as I should.

However, I hope to round off the rough edges and have it published by the end of this week.

This year, March 17th, St. Patrick's Day, falls on next Friday. One of the chapters of *Strangers* profiles St. Patrick largely in his own words. Yes, he did write an autobiography, *Confessions*, which I find to be a classic in Christian literature even though he doesn't even mention green beer.

If a short biographical sketch of St. Patrick interests you, I've posted an HTML copy of that chapter on my

website, www.cowart.info . It's in the left-hand column about half way down the page.

OH, speaking of St. Patrick — he does not mention that snake legend in his *Confessions* either — but this morning when I checked over that flower bed along the fence line I'd cleared Saturday, I found that over night a snake had shed it's skin right where I'd been working.

Neat!

Monday, March 13, 2006

The Ride Of His Life

A plastic whirligig hangs from our fig tree in the back yard.

It's shaped like a birdcage, even has a little wooden bird on a swing inside. Each bar of the cage is twisted slightly to form a wind vane; that makes the cylinder into a turbine that spins with the wind.

There was no wind Saturday night.

A little garden spider spun a web between one vain of the whirligig and a fig leaf. Ginny & I noticed it yesterday as we sipped our morning coffee on the patio.

We noticed when a stiff breeze started. The dot of web anchored to the leaf broke loose. The whirligig revolved at the speed of the wind. The little spider clung at the end of a strand of web about eight inches long. Around and around flew the spider holding on for dear life. Centrifugal force caused the spider's lifeline to flatten out; it looked as though the creature were riding on the tip of an airplane propeller.

Spider got the ride of his life...

When the spider chose to build a web there, it must have looked like a safe, stable location, a solid foundation to build on.

Until the wind came... There's a life lesson here somewhere.

Darn if I can figure out exactly what it is.

Tuesday, March 14, 2006

My Historic Day

No one I know if enjoys life more than I do and Monday really iced my cake!

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Even on computer frustrating days I love my work and today I practically wallowed in it. Not only did my work go well, but I found three minor but peculiar adventures.

This day was too good to miss a moment of it:

Up at my usual 3 a.m. to enter yesterday's journal entry and study till time for Ginny to wake at 6.

Packed lunch for her then drove her to work so I could keep the car.

Did a few life-maintenance chores, gas station, drug store, etc., then drove to the Jacksonville Fire Museum to photograph exhibits for my fire history book.

The Fire Museum, old Fire Station 2, stands at the edge of Metropolitan Park on the St. Johns River immediately adjacent to Kid's Kampus, Jacksonville's premier playground for children.

That's important to what comes later.

Last week I'd made an appointment with a young woman, Mrs. Linda Treadwell, the museum curator. She showed me every possible courtesy and cooperated fully giving me access to every thing I needed. At the same time she was shepherding classes of school kids through the museum and I learned a lot as I eavesdropped on her lectures.

For instance, she showed the kids a flag which had flown over the World Trade Center site and was presented by New York's mayor to Jacksonville Firefighters for their help in rescue and recovery efforts in the aftermath of the bombings.

When I walked into the museum, the first thing I saw was a barefoot woman stretched out on the polished hardwood floor doing yoga contortions. No, this was not the museum curator. This was a mother chaperoning a kindergarten class; she was exercising while the kids were at the other end of the building. She challenged me and demanded that I explain my presence.

Because she was so snotty, I refuse to answer her questions except in monosyllables. She was not pleased and remained suspicious, but since I did nothing but stand to the side and wait for the class to leave, she could not convict me of any crime.

Thank God for her and others like her.

.Anyhow, I spent a couple of hours pouring over old albums and Alarm Records upstairs in the bunk room which is not general open to the public. I love doing that kind of research. I discovered that in 1951, nobody appears to ever know how any fire started:

Don't know. Don't know. Don't know —

That's the reason folks gave the firemen to explain how their house caught fire... Like the old hotel joke about not smoking in bed: "It was on fire when I lay down on it."

The day was warm, mid 80s, so I'd parked a ways away from the museum in the shade. As I left the museum, I noticed a black, or dark green, pickup truck parked in the same area; it was backed in against some bushes so the tag was not visible.

A man in his mid-30s, had the look of a construction worker, sat in the truck watching the children at play in the park as he jacked off.

He was so intent on his recreation that he did not see me until I banged the trunk of my car shut. The noise startled him and he revved up his truck and sped away.

Unfortunately, I did not get the tag number. Nevertheless, spooking this guy may have been the most important thing I did today.

Let me emphasize that the Kid's Kampus is well patrolled both by city cops and belligerent, watchful parents. Horny adults should find some place else to play.

Back home I downloaded the photos I'd taken (sorry, but my photo gallery is still down or I'd post them all).

As I drove to Ginny's office to pick her up from work, my mind kept writing passages from this book or that. I was not paying attention to where I was driving.

You know, Jesus saves us from our sins but He doesn't often save us from our stupidity.

He made an exception for me today. Because with my brain on autopilot, I wheeled around the corner in a left turn on Jefferson Street which is One Way — One Way coming toward me!

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Some God-inspired guy on the street called me a nasty name that got my attention and I realized that hundreds of rush-hour cars were speeding toward me head-on. I bumped over the curb into a vacant lot to the sound of blearing horns.

Thank You, Jesus.

I made a dignified U-Turn and drove the right way with traffic without making the acquaintance of Jacksonville's fine Fire/Rescue Department first hand.

Now here's where it gets cool:

When I got to Ginny's office building in the slums, I parked in the designated Employee Of The Month parking space. (At the old office, Ginny earned that distinction several times but the rat-finks didn't give her a parking space there). Since this building is new construction workmen had dug the hole putting up the sign recently.

There poking from the dirt left over from the pothole, lay a rusty horseshoe. The metal is warped, twisting the shoe back in on itself. The warping makes me think this metal had been exposed to intense heat.

I'm pretty sure that there haven't been horses in the area more recently than 1920, but I'm not sure if this site was among the 400+ acres of Jacksonville that burned in the Great Fire of 1901...

But this ends on a sad note.

The nails are still in the horse shoe.

Does that indicate that the horse was still wearing them when it burned?

So, there you have it. Just a typical day in the life of a writer.

Thank You, Lord.

I'm really enjoying the life You give me... but, being what I am, I still wait for the other shoe to drop.

Wednesday, March 15, 2006

A Productive Day -- With Refined, Tasteful Jokes

Tuesday my friend Wes called inviting me to breakfast at Dave's Dinner where we shared jokes and laughed so hard I thought we got kicked out.

Wes tells it far better than I can but the gist of one story goes like this:

This church (it could be any church but let's say Trinity Wall Street) needed a new preacher so the vestry had this young man deliver a trial sermon.

He mounted the pulpit and said, "In the beginning a sower went forth to sow and he sowed on the Mount of Olives and he came down from the Mount with the Ten Commandments engraved on stone and he saw this tower and the wicked Jezebel was up there with her servants and the sower called forth, "Fling her down" and the servants flung her down. And he called again, "Fling her down" and they flung her down again. And he called a third time, "Fling her down" and they flung her down again. And that softened her up so that dogs would lick her fingers whereas they wouldn't before. And she became the tenth virgin with oil in her lamp and the meaning of this story is that you should write your congressman about the Oil Depletion Allowance. Amen"

The deacons met to discuss the sermon and the vestry chairman said, "Well, he is young and he's not too eloquent, but that boy sure does know his Bible!"

Wes told one he heard from a friend from Brazil. I'd never heard of it before but apparently there is some tension between Brazil and Argentina.

A Brazilian and an Argentinean found a magic lamp on the beach, rubbed it and a genie appeared offering to grant each a wish.

The Argentinean said, "I want to be back in my own country and I want you to build a wall around all of Argentina. I want this wall's foundations so deep no one can dig under it. I want it so thick no one can break through it. I want it so high that no one can ever get over it. This wall will prevent any Brazilian from ever getting inside."

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Immediately it was so. The wall appeared.

The genie asked the Brazilian what he wanted.

He said, "Now fill it with water."

So I told two genie jokes too. The first, as I recall, is a Yiddish joke:

A man finds a lamp, rubs it and the genie tells him, "I can grant your wish but whatever you wish for, your worst enemy gets double what you get."

"You mean, if I wish for 30 pounds of chopped liver...?"

"Yes, your worst enemy will get 60 pounds."

"If I wish for a million dollars, then he gets two million?"

"That's right. He gets double whatever you get."

The man thought of all the things he might wish for, but it all soured when he thought of his neighbor getting double. Finally, he arrived at an answer.

He said, "I want a woman to wife, one whose sexual drive and desire will exactly match me at my best. That'll fix him!"

Then I told the one about the office manager:

An office manager, a secretary and a clerk went out to lunch and as they walked back they found a lamp at the curb. They rubbed it and a genie appeared offering to grant one wish to each of the three.

The secretary said, "Hawaii! Hawaii! I want to be at a luxury resort with an umbrella drink in hand and admiring surfers gathered around me."

Immediately she disappeared.

The clerk said, "I've never been to the Bahamas. I want to lounge in a hammock by the sea, with tropical breezes and cloudless sky."

Immediately, he disappeared.

The genie asked the office supervisor, "Now what is your wish; I can give you anything you want."

The manager looked at his watch and said, "I want those two back in the office by one o'clock!"

Wes picked up the printer's proof copy of his great-grandfather's autobiography. That book will be ready to publish when as he proofreads it.

My neighbor Rex supplied gas and mower for me to mow the strip at our community's entrance where we planted flowering trees over two separate years, so I spent much of the afternoon pushing the mower through the high weeds. In one place I encountered a large bed of wild onions; as the mower trimmed the tops, they gave off a lovely aroma.

When I returned the mower, I sat in Rex's yard smoking my pipe and scratching Spot's ears. That collie believes that God put me on this earth for no other purpose than to scratch his ears. And who knows, maybe the dog knows more about the divine will than I do. There are less worthy reasons to exist than scratching a dog's ears.

Then I came home and instead of working, I indulged myself reading the *Diary of John Bright*, an English Quaker and member of Parliament who kept a daily journal for 50 years during the mid 1800s. I found it really pleasurable reading history just for relaxation instead of research.

So, I didn't do a lick of work today, but all in all I'd say I spent a very productive day — at least Spot thinks so.

Thursday, March 16, 2006

Please Don't Avoid Strangers

Tuesday I didn't do a lick of work; Wednesday made up for my slacking; I spend close to 20 hours in front of the computer correcting minor glitches in the proofs of *Strangers On The Earth*.

That book is now published on my Bluefish Books Storefront. Along with a bunch of my other books.

I suppose I should write some fluffy promo extolling the virtues of *Strangers*, but truth is I'm sick of it and never want to see another copy.

It's been a bear of a book to produce (as they all are).

I wonder if that happens to other writers?

My idea starts out as an inspiration and I get excited about it. I eat, sleep and live anticipating the book. My excitement mounts as I discover fascinating tidbits and

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back alleys in research. I write fervently until my system overloads and by the time I've battled spelling, syntax, reference problems, computer formatting, stupid mistakes — I'm sorry I ever started the thing.

The finished product becomes just another book to throw on the pile.

And then I meet somebody who has actually bought a copy of one of my books; "I bought one of your books," he says.

I mentally prepare myself to respond modestly to a compliment; then he says, "Haven't got around to reading it yet."

Can't tell you how many times that has happened.

Then, ages later, my royalties check comes in. And I wonder why I bothered. I'd earn more cash money in my pocket working behind the counter at McDonalds. But, by the time I think that, I'm already mind deep in writing another book.

Oh, in case I haven't mentioned it -- and you haven't guessed it -- *Strangers On The Earth* is an inspirational book. It profiles a bunch of people whose lives have inspired me to try to be a better Christian. The Bluefish Storefront offers sample preview chapters when you click on a book cover.

A shorter version of it was published years ago by InterVarsity Press and that edition was translated into several foreign languages before it went out of print, so I suspect that maybe it does inspire readers.

But right this moment, I only find it depleting.

I'm at my lowest whenever I finish a book.

Friday, March 17, 2006

Happy St. Patrick's Day... with cats

Yesterday, after only 36 tries, yes, that's right, 36! — Count 'em: 1, 2, 3, 4,...36 tries to revamp the pdf back cover — I finished work on the autobiography of Joseph Pyram King, the 100-year-old great-great-grandfather of my friend Wes. It is at the bottom of my on-line Bluefish Books catalogue at www.bluefishbooks.info.

Our youngest daughter plans to come home from college this weekend. Looking forward to that. She plans to go with me to the Fire Museum and take some photos; because my hands get so shaky at times, I messed up some of the shots I tried last Monday so Sunnibunny will take them again for me.

Next Monday, March 20th, I've been invited to give a talk at the Maxville Branch Public Library. I'll be giving an overview of Jacksonville history and illustrating my lecture with various rusty objects I've dug up here and there around the city.

Anyone doing a Google search for "Live Pussycat Cam" is in for a big disappointment. My son Donald has set up a 24-hour surveillance camera so he can watch his cats online while he's at work. I think it's because he can't trust the vile creatures not to demolish his house, he says it's because he enjoys seeing the kittens at play.

Personally, I can see all the cats I want to see during a drive on the Interstate. But, if anyone else is ~~crazy enough~~ interested enough to want to watch Donald's cats, the link is <http://www.rdex.net/webcam/> .

After the server problems last month, Donald has also restored his on-line Dream Library site where you can record your dreams and read other people's dreams and comment on them. The Dream Library can be found at <http://www.dreamlibrary.org/forums/index.php> .

Donald is very smart with computers. He's a network manager. He teaches Linux Cluster classes. He could have set up Wes' book in maybe only 34 tries... but look what he does with his computer skills and talent!

Wasted! All wasted!

Cat Cam, indeed.

Where, O where did I go wrong as a parent!

Saturday, March 18, 2006

Upstaged By Cats!

Yesterday I mentioned that Donald installed a computer camera so anyone can click on and watch his seven cats. This cat cam has been in operation for 24 hours and drew One Thousand Eight Hundred (1,800) hits.

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Day before yesterday I announced that I published *Strangers On The Earth*, a book that I have worked on for years — a book designed to inspire, to comfort, to encourage to educate, to inform. A book to teach the ignorant, to uplift the fallen, to rescue distressed maidens, to spread virtue and light...

Less than a hundred hits on that link.

Damn cats!

W.C. Fields said that no actor should work with animals or cute kids; he said, "A man who hates dogs and children can't be all bad."

I understand where he is coming from.

I've been upstaged by the cat cam.

Oh well, I'll get over it.

Everyone knows that all cats are illiterate.

That must go for cat lovers too.

I write to reach a readership with higher standards.

Besides, when I clicked on the cat cam site, there wasn't a cat to be seen on the screen. I think they deliberately hide from the camera.

Speaking of cameras —Patricia came home from college Friday afternoon. We drove to the Fire Museum where she re-did the photos I goofed up the other day.

Again, the curator, Ms Treadwell, helped tremendously. I was concerned about spelling the names of firemen who died in the line of duty; she looked them up and gave me a printout of all the information I needed.

We talked about methods of preserving the archive collection and I offered a few tips about possible grant sources for such a project.

She told us about some of her experiences working with Rescue and revealed a compassionate heart. When we left, Patricia said, "Dad, I just wanted to hug that lady."

We joined the rest of the family for supper at a seafood restaurant. I think there were nine of us at the table. *"Honest, Ms Waitress, I've never seen these people*

before in my life". We enjoyed a riotous time. (Ginny cheated; she turned off her hearing aid).

Ginny & I met Helen's daughter for the first time and I mystified and amazed the charming young lady with my famous straw restoration magic trick. She was truly amazed in spite of the usual groans from lesser family members — Hey, this is the only magic trick I know.

Afterward, we retired to Jennifer's garage and talked for a few hours. Besides the usual catching up on news (Donald's new job, Helen's moving, Jennifer's remodeling, Pat's need for a seeing-eye dog, Patricia's classes) other topics of conversation included the murder of a student nurse about a hundred yards from Eve's apartment, bird flu, American Idle, school plays, diseases of the urinary track in cats, how to disassemble an antique upright piano, and hurricane relief volunteering for the next one ("You can loot some really neat stuff," said our experienced disaster relief humanitarian.)

When someone unfamiliar with the house asked directions to the powder room, Jennifer, ever the gracious hostess, said, "Just wander around till you see a room with a toilet in it".

Then Maggie broke out the Monty Python Cow Catapult and we all dodged flying cows that pinged against the metal garage door, while her embarrassed mother tried to get her to stop — and all the rest of us wildly cheered her on.

Who are all these people anyhow?

And why am I so incredibly blessed as to be a part of them?

Hummm.... Maybe if I posted a picture of a cute fuzy kiten on my site, I'd draw hits too. I'll try it.:



Sunday, March 19, 2006

St. Patrick's Day Is Over... So Is Christmas

Friday when I bemoaned the fact that my son's Cat Cam draws more hits in a day than my books do all week ... (Go ahead, click on the cat cam, leave my blog and look at cats. I know you want to. Never mind reading what I have to say). ...

Anyhow, as I bemoaned that cats are more popular than my writings, Patricia, my youngest, said, "Dad, how many people read your books is not as important as the effect the book has on the people who do".

Yes, Patricia is home from college for the weekend. She spent the day with us yesterday working on various projects:

Of course she brought her laundry home to wash — that's a given.

Then she and Ginny worked on her income tax.

Then I reduced her to tears by pushing on with unsolicited, unwanted, un-needed fatherly advice; Will I ever learn to keep my damn mouth shut? I am in no way qualified to be a dad!... But she forgave me.

And she helped me put away Christmas decorations. No, not take down decorations; they were already down and sealed in boxes.

But she climbed a ladder and stored those boxes in the attic till next year for me (I don't do well on ladders).

This project reminded me of an article I wrote several years ago. I wrote the article to address the burning

theological question uppermost in every thinking person's mind: *Are There Reindeer In Heaven?*

Of course there's no question in my mind at all about what should happen to cats in the afterlife, so we won't go there.

But you may enjoy reading about reindeer.

Monday, March 20, 2006

Nothing to say... Neat Bricks

The Blogger server was down early this morning but that's ok because I really didn't have anything to say and I'd have been tempted to pad the site if it had been working.

Of course, not having anything to say has never stopped me from posting in the past. I'm a great one for talking a lot without saying anything.

Anyhow, today I'm gathering material for my lecture on local history tonight; maybe, if God gives me strength and energy, I'll have something worthwhile to say tomorrow....

Or not.

Meanwhile, my e-friend Karen in ~~England~~? ~~Britain~~? ~~Wales~~? (not sure which is proper) overseas, clued me into *The Brick Testament*, a site which tells Bible stories with Lego blocks. Ultimate cool!

You'll find it at <http://www.thebricktestament.com/>

Various chapters are marked as to adult content, violence, etc. You may want to check them out before turning the kids loose with these Lego blocks.

Tuesday, March 21, 2006

Milestone To Nowhere... & Prayer Request

Preparing for to teach a Bible lesson or to give a lecture obsesses me.

Monday I dropped all else to prepare for the local history presentation at the library. I cleaned the antique ax head, the Civil War sword, the big penny, the ox shoe, all the stuff I use in my hands-on lecture.

I practiced burning tea bags.

I re-checked facts and dates and quotes.

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I rehearsed a sort of Power Point presentation to illustrate my talk.

I shaved.

I chose a shirt which would provide a contrasting background to any object I'd hold in my hands so people would see the item clearly.

Ginny took two hours off work to drive me and all my stuff to the library in time to set up the room and practice with computer/projector system which shows websites on a giant screen.

In making local history come alive I emphasize tales of heroism, tales of romance, courage and adventure. Pirates and Indians. Plagues and conflagrations. Conquest of wilderness and strength of character. Clearing raw wilderness and overcoming alligators. Feats of endurance and trials of faith.

So, how did my lecture go last night?

Eight people showed up.

Three of them left early.

Pissing against the wind.

Another milestone on my road to nowhere....

The above describes the typical pattern of obsession, elation and depression I go through every time I teach a lesson or deliver a lecture. I've been through this painful pattern hundreds of times over the years.

It's my way of doing things whether the audience is eight people or 80 or 8,000, whether I'm teaching in a tiny class room, on the street, or during an interview on tv.

Obsession with preparation, elation during the presentation, dark depression immediately afterwards -- that's the pattern.

I suspect that the Holy Spirit applies this pattern to my speaking, and to my writing books, to protect my vain soul for getting too fat headed because I do so love the spot light and the smallest sign of success and acceptance makes me giddy with pride.

I expect so much of me.

All this reminds me to stay faithful whether I'm successful or not.

It reminds me to live for Him, not them.

It encourages me to be humble.

I hate being humble.

Damn shame that I can't learn humility without being humiliated.

I still say that someday I'll write another book entitled, *THE WORLD'S GREATEST BOOK ON HUMILITY*.

I'm getting giddy. Thus endeth today's lesson.

E-Mail Prayer Request:

An E-mail this morning and a Google news search for *trial, Christian, Afghanistan* provides me with fuel for prayer.

According to a *Chicago Tribune* news report, after a one-day trial, a judge in Kabul sentenced Abdul Rahman to be shot for being a Christian. The prisoner will be granted a stay of execution if he renounces Christ and reverts to Islam.

"Now, in a major test of Afghanistan's fledgling court system," The Tribune says, "Rahman, 42, faces the death penalty for abandoning Islam for Christianity. Prosecutors say he should die. So do his family, his jailers, even the judge. Rahman has no lawyer. Jail officials refused to let anyone see Rahman on Monday..."

"We will cut him into little pieces," said Hosnia Wafayosofi, who works at the jail. "There's no need to see him."

"We are Muslim, our fathers were Muslim, our grandfathers were Muslim," said Abdul Manan, Rahman's father, who is 75. "This is an Islamic country. Imagine if your son told a police commander, also a Muslim, that he is a Christian. How would this affect you? It's very difficult for us."

"He is my son," said Manan, crying. "But if a son does not care about the dignity of his family, the dignity of his father, God can take him away. You cannot make anything out of such a son. He is useless."

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The link to this news story is
<http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/world/3737107.html>

Wednesday, March 22, 2006

Unbelievers

Tuesday I got in a good solid day's work on my history of firefighting in Jacksonville; I'm filling in gaps in my original manuscript.

Apparently some of the people who attended the local history presentation Monday night talked to others about it; Eve called this afternoon saying enough new people have asked about it that she wants to schedule me for a repeat lecture next month.

During smoke breaks from fire research, I sat by the fountain in our garden thinking about the Abdul Rahman case and about people in general who feel compelled to defend their religious beliefs with violence.

To me it's obvious that an urge to defend God reveals a lack of confidence in God.

Do these Believers, who do not believe enough to trust God, really think He is helpless?

Does the Lord God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and earth, lack strength to defend His own honor?

Truth is true whether anybody believes it or not.

Suppose, for instance, that centuries ago a pirate crew buried a chest of gold coins under the ancient oak tree in your back yard and they left a map pinpointing the location.

Suppose that you're scrounging in the back of a closet and find that old map.

The treasure is there whether you believe the map or dismiss it as a hoax.

I think that's the situation with truth in the Bible.

The treasure is there whether you choose to dig it out or ignore it.

If you choose, believing makes you a winner with untold riches; if you choose not to believe, you miss out on the treasure.

A sure mark of people who do not believe very much, is that they feel compelled to adamantly defend their choice. They know that their choice is shaky, cowardly, dishonorable, questionable — but pride compels them to force their wobbly beliefs on other people.

They want to be affirmed.

They're scared not to be.

We don't defend truth, we defend sin. I'm so hellbent to justify that — in spite of whatever my favorite sin is — I'm a good man, that I'll go to any length to prove that I'm right even when I wallow in sin.

In his own mind, no man is an asshole.

I know I'm not...

Although the people who have to live around me may have a dissenting opinion.

You see, the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.

I'm not positive but I'd bet that people who insist on self-justification most vehemently are most likely to be harboring some secret sin, some personal evil, some wicked, vile inclination or practice that entangles their souls but that they never want to give up. They want to hold on to something they know damn good and well is wrong, but at the same time they want to think of themselves as good guys. Not sordid squalid fallen human beings, but right.

If I do it, it's me. And I'm right. And you'd better agree or you'll be sorry.

God did not come down from Heaven to die on the cross for our petty self righteousness. Jesus did not rise from the grave just to prove that we are right.

The well have no need for a physician; it's the unhealthy who need a Savior.

But we live in denial.

We refuse to admit that black spot is melanoma.

"I'm alright. Nothing wrong with me," we say.

So unbelievers try to affirm their own unbelief of truth to their own wicked hearts by loud, violent, fanatical, irrational defenses of their substitute for truth.

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This vile practice is not limited to religious fanatics burning flags or bras or cars or draft cards or whathaveyou. I mean, look at the scientists who attacked Richard Sternberg at the Smithsonian last year (see my August 20, 2005, blog posting).

If you are a true believer, if you are confident that what you believe is true, then you can tolerate, even love, people who do not believe the truth. You pity them and, out of brotherly love, try to show them Jesus as the way, the truth and the life.

But you need have no compulsion to beat them over the head thinking you're defending God.

Relax. God needs no defense.

He's a Big Boy. He can take care of Himself.

Only unbelievers would believe otherwise.

Lord, I believe; help Thou my unbelief.

Lord Jesus, be merciful to John Cowart, a sinner.

Thursday, March 23, 2006

My Pile Of Books Is Level Now

First, after a long hiatus, Sunnybunni, my youngest daughter who's in college, resumed blog posting this week. She only has two courses to pass (more A's in her future) before graduating. This young lady has overcome enormous obstacles to reach this point and I admire her greatly.

Wednesday I sat at my desk for ten or 12 hours researching my book on fire department history. During this time I gave no thought to God, nor man, nor even girls in green bikinis.

One thing I did think about was two side-by-side piles of 16 books on Florida history on the table beside my desk.

These books, each of a different thickness, did not make even piles.

Several times I rearranged the stacks.

Getting them even became an obsession to me.

I found that if I place nine books in the left-hand pile and seven books in the right hand pile, they come out

level. But now I ended up with a green book on top of the right pile and a red book on top of the left.

I kept fooling with them again and again till they finally satisfied me.

What's the difference? What does it matter if two piles of books level out in equal stacks?

It's just that every time I looked at them, they looked wrong. That bothered me. It bothered me a lot.

Perhaps this obsession reveals the onset of a mental illness.

Maybe I'm going crazy... crazier?

That could be the answer; after all, I am a Christian.

Oh, you haven't heard? News reports from Afghanistan say the officials judging Abdul Rahman may not execute him for being a Christian after all.

No, there's talk of declaring him "mentally unfit" to stand trial. That way they don't have to face international outrage over killing him for being a Christian, they can just put him in an insane asylum and "treat" him for the rest of his life.

Good call.

Problem solved.

Everybody knows that you have to be crazy to be a Christian.

I wonder, if they allow him to have books in the insane asylum, will he stack them in nice, even, level piles?

Friday, March 24, 2006

Tell Oprah I'm Available

Worked on my fire history book and odds and ends Thursday.

Those piles of research books bugged me so much that I shuffled my clipper ship models around to make room for the books in a bookcase so now they're still handy but out of my line of sight.

Odd, the things in my life that I feel **MUST** be corrected and the things I'm so comfortable with that I blithely ignore.

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My website e-mail got screwed up during the server break-down last month. But yesterday an interesting e-mail (which had been sent ten days ago) got through. A famous local radio commentator requested permission to read one of my history articles on the air. He plans to divide it into sections and read it daily over the course of a week or so.

I'm excited and flattered.

Today the Dick McMeekin show — Tomorrow Oprah!

Tell her I'm available.

Stephen King, eat your heart out.

Saturday, March 25, 2006

Jesus Loves Me and Saved Me \$400!

IMPORTANT NOTE: If you have had trouble connecting to my blog, website, book catalogue, or e-mail in the past couple of days, my son Donald, a computer network manager, just called telling me that our remote server is under a "distributed denial of service attack".

As I understand it, that means that somebody set his computer or computers to send small messages to my server every second round the clock

These thousands of messages clog the server so that readers who want to get to my sites get timed out and can not read or comment.

In other words, you get a busy signal because the attacker is tying up the line.

Donald is doing geek stuff to correct the problem.

My sites and Donald's run off a remote dedicated server which runs through yet another server so we may be innocent bystanders and not the main target of the denial of service attack.

On the other hand, last week I wrote some things which may have been offensive to cat lovers (or others). They may be sending me thousands of cute kitten photo every second of the day. It's cat hair clogging my server.

Please be patient.

I've already got a call in to Orkin Pest Control.

Friday I put my fire department history manuscript on the back burner so I could edge and mow our yard.

This chore takes me about six hours.

That indicates both that our garden is huge and that I'm slow.

Whenever the phone rings, Ginny says, "Oh good, there's somebody with plans for our life".

Had she been home, she'd have been right today because when I came back inside the house, I saw the little red light on the phone answering machine flashing like mad.

I'd missed an important call.

It had come in hours before and I'd been outside whacking weeds.

I listened to the message and returned the call.

The caller had wanted to borrow \$400 in the morning and the "need" was so urgent that when I didn't answer, she called somebody else and got the money from them instead of me.

And who says Jesus doesn't love me!

Monday, March 27, 2006

Not Our Best Weekend

Still having server problems. Please see note at top of my March 25th posting.

This past weekend proves that Ginny & I do not handle unstructured time well.

Friday I'd cleaned the yards, vacuumed the house, washed all the dishes, and done all sorts of household chores in advance, clearing the field so we could have uninterrupted time together to do anything we wanted.

Problem is that there was nothing we wanted to do all that much.

"What would you like to do?"

"I don't know. What would you like to do?"

"I don't know. What do you have in mind?"

"Nothing really. Anything you want...."

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We fell into the trap of me suggesting things — everything from a walk in the woods to dance lessons and everything in between — and her rejecting my every suggestion but not offering any of her own.

We've been here before. Can't stay married and in love for 38 years without hitting a few bad patches like that.

We ended up —even though there were beautiful Spring days outside — vegging on the couch watching videos of movies we neither one really wanted to see.

In spite of what the preachers say, even for Christians not all days are happy, happy, happy. Some days are just a waste.... And that's where we're at at the moment.

Tuesday, March 28, 2006

Bambi Doesn't E-mail Me Anymore

Some server problems fixed, but still having problems. Please see note at top of March 25th posting.

Monday, Donald repaired some of the glitches in my websites. On his blog today, he gives an explanation of what's wrong and what he's doing about it. His blog address is <http://slackv.blogspot.com/>.

I don't understand what he says there but you computer people will.

I took a computer basics for seniors at the local library to increase my level of computer skills.

I can cut. I can paste.

Anything beyond that, I rely on Donald's expert help.

I would have been hopelessly entangled in the net long ago without him.

My dedicated e-mail site is back up, and after weeks of getting nothing, I find 84 messages dating back to February on my screen this morning. If you have messaged me and have no response, I've not been ignoring you; your mail was clogged by cat hair in the system.

The denial of service attack screws up several of my other computer functions also. At least, I think the attack is responsible — but maybe not.

My book sales dropped drastically recently. Either readers have suddenly developed good taste, or maybe the drop is caused by readers not being able to access www.bluefishbooks.info. Comments I make on other people's blogs have not made posting; and I suppose comments other folks have made on my blog were hindered also.

The morning devotions I read daily were also curtailed, and my photo gallery disappeared. Those are other problems Donald is working on now.

This denial of service attack bugs me.

I feel I should have recognized it sooner.

My first clue was that Bambi stopped sending me e-mail.

Ever since Donald first gave me a computer three years ago, without fail every morning's e-mail brought a message from Bambi offering me various unsolicited erotic sexual favors.

Yes, I have a spam filter, but Bambi, a resourceful girl, always got her message across.

I always deleted her messages unopened.

This was not because of my high sense of Christian morality but I just didn't want to pick up some unsolicited virus. I have the impression that Bambi never denied her services to anybody.

But, I'll admit, her subject lines intrigued me.

When she stopped e-mailing me, I missed her cheerful greeting each morning.

I wondered why she'd stopped. I sort of half-way worried that something bad may have happened to her.

Then I started wondering if the poor girl may have clicked on my website and saw my photo there. Maybe seeing it, she decided that there are some things she just won't do for either love or money.

The girl has her standards.

Anyhow, Bambi's e-mails don't get through to me anymore.

I miss her.

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It was kind of nice to feel wanted.

Wednesday, March 29, 2006

Christian To The Bone?

Tuesday I responded to 80+ e-mails stacked up in my box by the server problems. I visited a number of favorite blogs and attempted to comment on each one just to let friends know I'm still reading their stuff, but only one in every five or six of my comments would take. I'm still reading your site but the server on my end acts temperamental. — Or else, I never have learned how to work a computer.

As I worked on my book on the history of firefighting in Jacksonville, I hit a snag, a discrepancy in my research which calls for yet more research. This may change the basic structure of the book.

I just couldn't handle that at the moment so I shut down the computer and went out to water the garden and think things over.

My thoughts turned to Abdul Rahman, the man in Afghanistan threatened with death because he is a Christian. News reports say he was released because he is "mentally unfit" to stand trial. To be a Christian there equals being insane.

Of course to my way of thinking, anyone staying in Afghanistan must be nuts whatever their religion. And it looks as though America troops are being used to replace Taliban I with Taliban II.

All that aside, the thing I wonder about is that Rahman said he was converted by watching the daily lives of some Christian aid workers.

I'm impressed that it is not our words or our arguments or our political stands but our daily lives that draw non-Christians to Christ... or repels them.

I wonder if my own daily life attracts people to Christ?

The other day my friend Barbara and I were talking about the biblical phrase "Christ in you, the hope of glory". I mentioned that I certainly don't feel much glory (whatever that is) in my life. And Barbara pointed out that *Christ in you* does not mean glory for you but glory for the people who observe you. It is for others.

So, Lord, help me to live Christian to the bone.

Thursday, March 30, 2006

Fire History & Onions

The way of the historian, like that of the transgressor, is hard.

Wednesday I wallowed, like a happy pig in a puddle, in research and writing on my history of the Jacksonville Fire & Rescue Department book. I've revised sections up to World War I and the more I work on this history, the more facts and incidents I find I want to include in the book.

At one time I bemoaned the scarcity of material; now I'm wondering what to cut.

Between sessions at the computer, I ran outside to move the sprinkler from place to place in the yard. We've hardly seen rain in weeks and none is predicted for yet more weeks. I hate to pour money on the ground, but to keep lawn and flowers alive, I'm forced to water.

Actually the watering sessions made for pleasant breaks in my work. I'd sit for a time in a lawn chair smoking my pipe and watching the spray sparkle in morning sunbeams and watching birds bathe in shower.

I often reflected on how I can enjoy such a peaceful idyllic scene because American soldiers fight in Iraq, Afghanistan, and throughout the world to insure such peace as mine at home. I feel thankful for their sacrifices. Although I live a sedentary quite life, I admire the heroic actions of others.

I suppose that's one reason I chose to write this history of firefighters.

Yes, I know the traditional picture is of a bunch of guys hanging around the firehouse playing cards most of the time. One firefighter I interviewed described his work as "hours of boring tedium punctuated by moments of sheer terror".

Yet in my research I keep uncovering astounding acts of heroism and valor and self-sacrifice. I'm writing this history largely as an expression of my admiration.

Yet, as an amateur historian and a Christian, to be honest I have to also deal with the realities of political

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infighting, corruption, racial tensions, and plain human goofiness.

These elements are part of our history too. And they should not be ignored, but the thrust of my book is not to dwell on them but to focus on the good, decent and dangerous things firefighters do daily, even as I acknowledge their ... what's the word I want... cowboy-ness?

For instance, a few years back somebody thought it would be a good idea to take photos of a young woman in an abbreviated swimsuit posing with a city fire engine as a backdrop. These photos were posted on the web and came to the attention of a local newspaper reporter. The newspaper went ape with indignation condemning the moral turpitude of Jacksonville firefighters and calling for an investigation.

It's interesting to note that while the newspaper, from the high ground of shock, outrage and offence, did not publish the photos — it did, however, publish three web addresses where the photos could be viewed!

Of course in the name of historical accuracy I checked out the sites. In hundreds of photos there, I did not notice a single fire truck.

Ah, the burden of historical research!

On the homefront, Sunday a friend gave us a huge sack of onions. So tonight I cooked an enormous pot of onion soup. After supper Ginny and I stayed at the table dicing even more onions to put in Ziploc bags and freeze.

Somebody (to save her embarrassment I won't tell that it was Ginny) knocked over the trashcan squishing onion chips into the carpet even though somebody wiser and more careful (it was me) had warned her to watch out and not do that.

Of course, I had just emptied my big ashtray overflowing with 12 hours worth of ashes from my knocking out my pipe. Onions and ashes and onion juice fanned out across the carpet.

Glade just ain't gonna do the job this time.

Being the kind, gentle Christian husband that I am, I did not tease Ginny at all about this incident — not while she still held the dicing knife in her hand.

The way of the husband, like that of the historian and the transgressor, is hard. But I have learned a few things in 38 years of marriage. (When not to tease being one of the most important).

Oh, but I love her so. And I love my work, and my garden. And my hometown. I have so many things to relish and enjoy.

Thank You, Jesus. I appreciate the life You've given me.

Friday, March 31, 2006

Two Fat Guys Smoke Pipes & Talk Theology

Thursday my friend Wes came over and took me to breakfast at Dave's where, like the good quidnuncs we both are, we caught up on personal news: he, on a medical conference in Orlando he's just returned from; me, on the denial of service attack on my computer server.

Afterwards, he drove me to a post office to mail the Library of Congress their copies of my most recent books.

Then comes the fun part:

For over three hours we sat in my garden enjoying the sound of singing birds and flowing fountain, smoking our pipes and discussing theology — a conversation others might find boring but I find stimulating.

Among other things we thought over Romans 10: 17, "So then, faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God".

Wes, who is proficient in Greek, pointed out that the word *hearing* means more than listening to background noise like music on the radio or even listening to a sermon in church; the Greek meaning is corresponds to our legal term *hearing* in which people evaluate the evidence before them and form a verdict.

And our own nature determines our evaluation of the evidence before our eyes.

For instance, When Jesus called dead and stinking Lazarus to life again out of the tomb, a lot of people were

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there and observed that fact. This incident is recorded in John, chapter eleven.

When Lazarus, still wrapped up like a mummy, came forth, “Then many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on Him.”

They evaluated the evidence and acted according to their nature.

On the other hand, “But some of them went their ways to the Pharisees, and told them what things Jesus had done... Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death”.

Evaluating the same evidence according to their nature, they went their way.

Emmanuel, God come in the flesh, the very Lord of Life at whose call all dead everywhere will come forth from all graves on the last day was followed by some people and put to death for our sin by others.

Then He rose from His borrowed grave under His own steam.

The record about Lazarus shows the problem lies not with the evidence before our eyes, but the way our nature reacts to that evidence, the way we evaluate Jesus.

Our nature, unless changed by God, is to rebel, to fault God, to demand our own way, to strive to be god and to manipulate all things and people around us ourselves.

To become Christians, we must be touched by a supernatural factor, a change of nature which results in putting God in place, in acknowledging Jesus as Lord of my life.

So far, so good.

But here’s where Wes and I hold different views.

The way my nature evaluates the Scripture, I feel that God exposes every person ever born to enough evidence to evaluate. Jesus is the “True light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world”.

I believe that if any person moves toward the light he has, he will eventually come to Jesus, the Light of the World.

Unfortunately, “Men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil”.

Wes, on the other hand — if I’m presenting his view correctly — quotes a phrase from a long convoluted sentence in Ephesians, chapter One, verse eleven, which says, Christ, “In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will”.

Wes reasons from this Scripture and his studies of Paul’s letter to the Romans, (Wes is a big Romans fan) — he reasons that all humanity has fallen so far and is so rebellious by nature and is so depraved, wicked and evil, that the whole lot of us are bound for Hell.

And justly so.

Sooner the better.

But, for reasons of His own, God chooses to change the nature of some of us according to His will and good pleasure — but He lets the majority of us continue in our own way to where that leads us.

I mentioned the good social works of one Christian group.

“Yes,” Wes said, “They work diligently to make the world the nicest place possible to go to Hell from”.

Let me assure you that Wes lives a better Christianity than he talks; I know of no one anywhere more given to acts of kindness and charity than him.

Wes reasons that the saving of any person at all , even though nor a one of us deserves it, reflects the mercy and glory of God.

I suspect that in matters of theology Wes and I are both equally wrong.

And equally right.

We enjoy talking about things far beyond us.

The Lord God Almighty is bigger than both of us and His thoughts are not our thoughts, His ways higher than ours. He is past our finding out. He is Creator, we, creatures. He is holy, we’re not. He is just, we’re self-serving. He is love, we are recipients of that Love.

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After Wes left, I mowed grass.

APRIL

Saturday, April 01, 2006

The Fat Guy Up On The Roof Top

Ginny plans to take a few beautiful Spring days off work to dabble in our garden. As usual when she plans this, I tried to get all the yard donkey work done ahead of time so we can enjoy pleasure gardening.

Since our Before-Christmas cleanup, I have not climbed the ladder onto our roof to clean rain gutters and blow away the residue of oak pollen, leaves and twigs from the four oaks which overhang our home.

Friday was the day for that job.

I went up on the rooftop.

A thick mat of mast makes our roof look brown when actually the roof tiles are gray. Those oak trees sure know how to pollinate.. Pounds and pounds and pounds of mast cover the roof. I have not cleaned up here since before Christmas.

And now I, with my trusty leaf blower, plan to scour it all away...

What's this?

Here beside the chimney I see a cigar butt.

How could a partially-burned cigar butt get up on our roof?

I occasionally read Sherlock Holmes mysteries so I put my acute powers of deduction to solving this problem. Three possibilities come to mind:

First, the only man I know who smokes cigars is my neighbor Warren. Could he at some time while visiting me, have flicked his burning cigar up onto our roof?

No! That would be out of character for him. Besides he smokes dinky thin girly cigars and the butt on my roof is a regular hefty stogie.

Second, could this cigar butt been left beside the chimney by one of the many bluejays which inundate our bird feeders? That's a possibility. Maybe in collecting nest building materials...?

A picture springs to mind. ... When I was a kid there were movie cartoon characters called Heckle and Jeckle, two mischievous crows. As I recall, they smoked cigars.

But they are fictional characters, crows not bluejays.

Besides, how would a bluejay light his cigar? He holds the cigar in his beak with one claw, he strikes the match with the other claw, and he stands on his other claw...

But, that's impossible.

Bluejays only have two claws.

The cigar by my chimney can not have been left by a bluejay.

In *The Adventure of The Blanched Soldier*, Sherlock Holmes said, "When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

Applying the Great Detective's wisdom, I have concluded that Santa Clause stopped for a smoke break by my chimney and contrary to popular ledged, he does not hold "a stub of a pipe clinched tight in his teeth" — Santa smokes cigars!

See there.

We Christians can too apply objective reasoning to arrive at a logical conclusion.

Sunday, April 02, 2006

At Blooms Galore My feet Got Sore

To me, the term "working in the garden" means sawing down trees, digging deep holes, pruning branches, pulling stumps; to Ginny it means walking for hours and hours and hours around a flower show.

Saturday, the 1,400 members of the Garden Club of Jacksonville hosted a festival called "Blooms Galore & More". The event featured 55 booths donated by member circles and 35 vendors.

"It's an effort to fulfill the garden club's goals to reach out and educate the community on environmental issues and the beautification of Jacksonville," said the announcement which Ginny found.

She lugged me to this educational thing where speakers at various displays educated me about plants.

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I learned:

- Some plants have flowers.
- All plants eat dirt.
- They need water every once in a while.
- At Blooms Galore my feet get sore.

To learn these valuable gardening facts took only two and a half hours.

An Ancient Memory — Back in 1970 while I was an over-the-road truck driver, we were passing through Oakland, California, and somehow Ginny discovered that an Iris Society was having a show. I escorted her to it. Once there, I found hundreds of female women looking at a room full of green things and lying to each other that they could tell the difference between one plant and another.

I thought I was the only male in the place, till across the room I spotted what had to be one of Oakland's original Hell's Angels bikers. Studded leather jacket, chains, jeans, beard — this was in 1970 remember, and such an outfit was not to be seen in just any mall.

I approached the guy and said, "Looks like we are the only two men in this place".

"Yeah," he grunted. "I had to be here. Drove my mother."

"I'm here because of my wife," I said. "I'm not really into this sort of thing".

"Me neither," he said. "I'm a camellia man myself".

For some reason I've never forgotten his words.

Monday, April 03, 2006

Within the borders of respectability

Multimillionaire hotel/railroad magnate Henry Flagler began building Jacksonville's Union Station as a freight and passenger railroad terminal in 1890. Here's a 1920s photo of the station in its heyday:



The last train ran out of Union Station in 1974, and a few years ago the city converted the building into a convention center.

During the conversion, construction workers disposed of hundreds of thousands of old bricks.

I salvaged a truck load of those antique bricks and outlined flower beds in our backyard garden with them.

Sunday after church Ginny & I dabbled in our garden. She re-potted plants, I refurbished a brick-outlined bed beneath the crepe myrtle tree. Over the winter a runaway vine had transformed this bed into an eye-sore.

My own fault.

I'd planted cuttings of this vine (which I'd found in a ditch) in the flower bed amid a stand of aloe. The vine produced hundreds of tiny white flowers which produced thousands of seeds which produced tangles of vines choking out the flowers we want to grow in the bed. The vine overflowed the bed hiding small garden statues and a birdbath; it spilled over the train station bricks so you couldn't even see the boundaries of the bed any more.

I decided to clean up this mess.

A weed is any plant growing where you don't want it to.

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I moved out the birdbath and statues and I crawled around and around the bed with my clippers trimming back the vine enough so I could see the brick border.

I just wanted the vine to stay within the border.

Yet the vines covered a mat of dead brown winter leaves; the more I trimmed the thing, the worse it looked.
— Time for a smoke break.

I glanced down to see a wolf spider running up my arm headed for the dark cavern of my shirtsleeve. I brushed him off thinking little of it.

I know a guy who drives a bulldozer. Macho man. But he's deathly afraid of tiny spiders; the sight of one drives him into a panic attack.

The weeds, the spider and a phrase from the Scripture reading at church ran together in my mind.

The Scripture simply said, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

But I don't want a clean heart.

I'm quite comfortable with my heart the way it is. As long as I can trim my internal weeds back enough to stay within the borders of respectability, they don't bother me all that much.

I don't want to be clean, just respectable.

I like me the way I am.

I have self-respect.

I admit that I may not have a clean heart, but I like to think of it as only a trifle dingy.

This thought reminded me of a passage I read last week in the diary of a man writing in 1876. He met a millionaire who, "Gave me an interesting account of his early life and the sources of his success. His industry, anxiety to study, his resolve to instruct himself in everything connected with mechanics and machine making. Referring to his conduct when young, he said, 'I was a very good lad, never a better — worked hard, studied, conducted myself well.'"

Those self-centered words could be my very own.

I too am pleased with myself.

I can't see the garden for the weeds.

But as long as my sin stays within the borders of respectability, that doesn't upset me very much.

I realized that the only way to expose the flowers in that bed beneath the crepe myrtle was not to just trim around the edges, but to clean the bed thoroughly.

To root out.

No half-way measures just to stay within the bounds of respectability.

The vine with the pretty white flowers had been choking out better plants.

Then I remembered a tale about an old-time Methodist camp meeting. A young fellow felt conviction, went forward, and knelt at the mourners bench. The preacher came to pray for him to "break through" but the young mourner said, "I can't. There's just too many cobwebs in my mind".

The preacher called the deacons to gather round, lay hands on the fellows shoulders and pray. "I can't break through; there's just too many cobwebs clouding my mind," he said.

Preacher and deacons prayed long and loud for the cobwebs to be cleared away.

An old lady on the front row could stand it no longer. She marched to the altar, lifted the young man up by the hair of his head, swacked his forehead with her open palm and shouted, "Lord, kill that spider! Lord, kill that spider!"

I pulled up the vine. By the roots.

I suppose I can pray, "Create in me a fair-to-middling heart, O God."

Will that be acceptable?

Is that good enough?

I suppose I already know the answer to that.

Tuesday, April 04, 2006

Just an observation:

In our neighborhood not everyone who walks down the street alone talking loud owns a cell phone.

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Wednesday, April 05, 2006

Movie Night & Memories

Ginny's time off work ends today so our mini-vacation is over. Back to the office for her, back to the fire history book for me.

We spent most of Tuesday dabbling around the pool and talking about future plans. We've been toying with the idea of selling this house and moving, but decided there are other things more important to us. So, God willing, we'll stay right where we are for the moment.

Last night we watched a library movie, *Kinsey* which traces the career of sex researcher Dr. Alfred Kinsey. We know what works and what doesn't work for us but the movie sparked an interesting conversation. After 38 years of marriage, we're still learning to know each other.

For me, the film triggered some really troubling memories; I could just as well have done without a reminder.

Each day has enough pain of its own, no need to dredge up ones from the distant past. It's a wonder of God's grace that I made it to adulthood without being an utter emotional basket case.

It surprised me how bad these memories hurt. I thought they were long gone, scabbed over, but the movie reminded me that 60-year-old anguish can be as fresh as a Google news update.

Of course some of my memories return as hilarious (now, not then) or as crushingly embarrassing (even still).

Like the time when I was a Boy Scout and a young lady invited me to an *orgy* but since I'd never heard the word before and didn't know what it was she was asking me to do, I turned her down.

Yes, over the years, ignorance has protected my virtue far more often than my sense of morality ever did.

As a youth I fell into that category of folks just too dumb to sin, I suppose.

That's not to say I stayed that way.

Thank God we only have to survive adolescence once!

But memories, sin, chagrin, and embarrassment aside, I think the thing to know is that Jesus meets us where we are, not where we ought to be.

Back when I used to teach Bible lessons at the rescue mission, a thing I'd always emphasize to the men and women there was that no matter what you have done, no matter what has been done to you, our holy, righteous God stands ready to forgive.

God is good.

He cares about you.

Jesus said, "Whosoever will may come" –

and, (Kinsey movie aside) no, He wasn't talking about that kind of coming.

Thursday, April 06, 2006

A Long Nap

The Wednesday morning radio announced the fire department's hazardous materials team had been called out and there are local road closings because of a chlorine gas leak.

Since I'm working on a history book about the fire department this caught my interest so I went in at noon to watch the news on tv... I fell asleep in my chair and did not wake up till Ginny came in from work at 6:30!

Six hours of wonderful, glorious sleep!

See why I love doing historical research?

But if my history puts me to sleep now, what will it do to readers?

Anyhow, during my long nap I dreamed one of the sweetest dreams:

A young woman and I floated on air mattresses in the St. Johns River which was crystal clear as spring water. Vivid colors in the air mattresses reminded me of the striping of hot air balloons, sharp, bright green, blue, yellow, and reds.

The golden girl wore a tan bikini which matched her skin exactly and she was laughing and happy. Splashing and playing, frolicking in the sparkling water

She showed me that by laying on your stomach and paddling with your arms, you could make the air

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mattresses move, not only through the water but up into the air. We paddled faster and faster soaring above the river, swooping in and out among the girders of Jacksonville's Main Street Bridge. We rose high above the city, looking down on the skyline, on sailboats in the blue river, on bathers lounging along the beach, on deer running through marsh grass, and on hawks circling far below us.

We saw a restaurant with diners on an outside deck and we drifted low, light as thistle down, lighted on the water's surface, and paddled to a welcoming shore.

That was my dream.

I'm going to make an odd transition here from this beautiful dream in my long nap to a memory from real life which I also found beautiful but which many people might not be comfortable with:

When I was a young man for a time I worked nights as a security guard. The company usually assigned me to a different place each night. Sometimes I'd be on duty in an office building, or a warehouse, or at a sports event.

The worst assignment for me was the early shift at a bowling alley where the noise drove me nuts.

The best assignment for me was to guard the anatomy lab at one of America's oldest medical schools. I'd spend from 11 p.m. till 7 a.m. alone in this huge room filled with marble slabs containing human bodies in various stages of dissection.

The vast room resembled the inside of a church emptied of pews and lined with dissection tables. Rust red brick walls, timbered ceilings, tall arched windows of mullioned glass, clear and rippling, only a few dim night lights here and there. Silent. Holy. A place of worship.

Apparently the same room was used for different classes because the naked gray bodies on the tables showed various stages of work. Here internal organs were exposed; there an arm's muscles were separated into individual strands. In one section the students in an advanced class had opened skull tops and removed brains which lay in shallow pans. In another section, each corpse's feet were laid bare to the bone.

In no case did I see any sign of disrespect to the dead people who were educating the future doctors.

All night long I'd wander (er, make that patrol) the aisles of this lab and marvel at how wonderfully and fearfully made the human body is put together. The aroma of formaldehyde (or whatever it was they used to preserve the bodies) rose like incense above the lab. It gave the preserved flesh a uniform gray color and a texture like Jello that's been in the frig too long, rubbery, tough, yet pliable.

I'd look with fascination into the innards of these dead people and think about who they'd been in life and what they were contributing to the student physicians in death. Sometimes I'd pray for the deceased and for the student learning from him or her.

One of the most interesting sights in that ancient building was the receiving area vat. An arched doorway, a left-over from the horse and buggy days when the school was founded, led from the outside world into the receiving area where bodies were delivered to the lab. I would have thought they'd come in boxes or body bags or something, but all the bodies in that area were naked.

There was a huge galvanized metal tank the size of my living room and God only knows how deep, filled with formaldehyde or some preservative fluid. Dozens of naked bodies floated on the surface or lay sunk beneath the surface.

Here's an incongruous sight, some wag had hung a life-preserver on the wall. ... And in a corner stood one of those shepherd crook poles used by life-guards at a swimming pool to aid swimmers in trouble. I understand the young medical students used it to hook out the body of the person they are to work on.

What is it about the happy dream of me and the golden girl flying over my hometown and the gray reality of that anatomy lab memory that link the two in my mind?

Resurrection.

I believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

The Lord God Almighty who created us and who fashioned our intricate parts in an astounding array and

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infused life into us, He himself came down to become one with us. He died the death for our sin to redeem us from the clutches of the enemy. Jesus Christ died as dead as any corpse in that vat. And He rose again from that death because He is the source of all life.

And because He lives, we too shall live.

At times, Jesus compared death to a time of sleeping.

And our resurrection to a time of waking.

“The hour is coming and now is,” said Jesus, “When the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live... Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice and shall come forth...”

St. Paul gives another picture of this event:

“For the Lord himself shall descend from Heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words”.

Can you see why my mind links my nights as a security guard in that medical school with its vat of naked bodies 50 years ago and the soaring bright flight with the golden dream girl, my anima figure, during my long nap yesterday?

Death and glory; I see the connection.

It's a happy one.

Oh, the chlorine gas leak was quickly brought under control with no injuries.

And by the way, for whatever it's worth, Ginny and I are both signed up to be whole body organ donors. At my age and condition, I doubt if they can salvage any usable parts for transplant so there may be a vat in my future.

Watch it, Doc, I'm ticklish there.

But that's ok, I have a flight to catch.

Friday, April 07, 2006

Gnaws: An Oral Adventure

When I went to mow the lawn last week I had trouble starting the mower; dust clogged the air filter and I had to clean it. I usually mow on Fridays but, since I was not sure if I'd need to work on the machine, I got started a day early this week.

Needn't have worried; mower started on the first pull.

And of course as I cut grass, I thought about teeth.

Something I read on an e-friend's blog reminded me about a Christian businessman's seminar I attended back in the late 1950s.

I didn't really belong at this seminar but I attended because I wanted to meet important people, network, make contacts, advance my career, brownnose and manipulate successful people so I could get ahead myself.

You know how it is at these Christian business seminars.

After the first lecture I mingled, searching for somebody who could do me good.

This seedy-looking guy approached me.

Smiling brightly, he said, "Jesus is wonderful, Isn't He?"

His smile revealed a mouthful of broken or rotten teeth.

I wrote him off.

I nodded and made some innocuous response and gave the looser a cold shoulder. I mean this guy's mouth was so messed up. One look at him and I dismissed him as being a person of no importance. Not worth my time.

I saw someone substantial-looking across the room and I hightailed it over there to join the circle of sycophants around the successful Christian businessman.

When the bad-mouth guy had said, "Jesus is wonderful, isn't He", my unspoken thought was, "Doesn't look like He's done much for you".

And I shunned the man.

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I eased away leaving him alone in the corner holding his Styrofoam coffee cup in his hand.

A Bible verse says, “Man looketh on the outward appearance; God looketh upon the heart”.

Not being a preacher, I’ll leave the part about what God does to the professionals, but I understand the part about man looking on the outward appearance.

We do.

That’s why we dress for success. That’s why you should dress for the job you want, not the job you have. That’s why we follow the leader’s example when it comes to fashion. Because man does indeed look on our outward appearance.

Now fast forward about 30 years, to the mid-1980s:

My teeth ached. Years of neglecting basic dental hygiene resulted in my developing severe periodontal disease. I suffered excruciating pain. Being without either cash or insurance, I went to a charity hospital emergency room and was screened for a pilot dental care program. X-rays showed that several of my teeth actually grew parallel to the floor underneath the roots of other teeth. Several operations were necessary.

They’d render me unconscious and cut out handfuls of teeth at a time.

Again and again.

Over several months, they discovered that my head was so rotten that essentially there is no facial bone left above my mouth; nothing there to anchor false teeth to.

My face began to cave in.

Not nearly as pretty as I used to be.

“Jesus is wonderful, isn’t He?”

Funding for the pilot program ran out.

The hospital cancelled further treatment.

My remaining teeth ached like sin. One abscessed. I tried to find a dentist who would pull it. All wanted health insurance or cash money and I had neither.

In anguish and misery, I cried and prayed and cursed and despaired.

Remember the scene in the movie *Castaway* where Tom Hanks used the blade of the ice-skate?

No one in the audience cringed more than I did.

Because I remembered the agony of pulling one of my own teeth.

Yes, the pain overwhelmed me so I boiled a pair of pliers, washed my mouth out with Listerine, swallowed a handful of aspirin, and tried to pull that abscessed tooth myself.

I whimped out.

Couldn't stand that pain.

Then the other kind of pain got so bad that I knew I had to try again.

I took me numerous tries over three days but I finally pulled that tooth.

This is a practice that neither the American Dental Association nor I would ever recommend to anybody!

So, the last state of the man was worse than the first.

But I survived.

I'm not as pretty as I once was what with no teeth, no denture, no bones, and a caved in face, but I survived.

There are words I can't for the life of me pronounce anymore, but I survived.

I don't care to be seen eating in public, but I survived.

I avoid ever smiling at anyone, but I survived.

I drool, but I survived.

Worst of all, when I kiss Ginny, my mouth goes all spongy, but I survive.

To show their love and support, my then-teenaged children went to a silk-screen artist and had a special tee-shirt made for me. It shows a comic rendering of the shark of movie fame but it is toothless and the caption reads GNAWS!

Although the Scripture says, "Judge not, that ye be not judged", somehow I don't believe that God indulges in

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cruel payback, that He's punishing me for shunning that man at the seminar... Yet hardly ever do I brush my few remaining teeth that I don't remember the look on that guy's face when I walked away leaving him in the corner holding his Styrofoam coffee cup.

Alone.

Ignored.

Shunned.

Is this just a pity party, or do I have a message to convey here?

Do I really have something important to say?

Is there some point to my rambling post?

Yes, there is.

What I want to say is this:

Jesus is wonderful.

Isn't He?

Saturday, April 08, 2006

O Wow! They've Discovered Another New Gospel-- Put It There On The Pile With All The Others

Easter must be approaching: flowers are blooming, birds are chirping and media hype is spreading doubts about the resurrection of Christ again.

Happens every year about this time.

Sure as Spring weather generates tornados every year, about this time as Easter approaches, somebody somewhere releases a new film or book or song or tv show to prove that Jesus is not who He was, that He never did what He did, or that He never said what He said.

Astounding "new" information appears annually to reveal that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a torrid affair, that Judas was a hero, that crucifixion didn't kill Christ, that the dead body of Jesus is hidden in a bank vault, that Saucer People took Jesus to the Mother Ship, that Jesus and Judas planned to come out of the closet, that Jesus and Elvis live in a trailer park in Phoenix, that this year there will be a jellybean shortage so you'd better stock up now...

Well, we've all heard all this stuff before

Every year, sure as fireants in the lawn, startling new information says the same old thing — that Jesus Christ rotted.

Well, He rose or rotted.

No other alternatives.

If he rotted then nothing he said or did matters; if He rose, then nothing else matters.

Anyhow, next phase of the Easter cycle is that some folks get all aflutter and pushed out of shape. Accusations and counter accusations will appear on tv news shows. Protesters will march with signs. Conservative scholars will huff. Liberal scholars will puff. Media will enjoy a field day until another politician does something stupid and the news moves on.

What's all the excitement about?

So another old book comes to light. Big deal.

This is a surprise? It shouldn't be.

Remember the last sentence in John's Gospel?

"There are 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."

Old books about Jesus have been around for ages and ages. We've all seen ads in the tabloids for reprintings of "Hidden Secret Books Of The Bible".

Bible scholars call such writings by names such as apocrypha, pseudepigrapha, extra canonical, deutero-canonical, Gnostic Gospels, and National Inquirer—Geographic.

Other early related versions include the Diatessaron, the Peshitta, the Bohairic, Armenian, and the Georgian with a text known as Caesarean.

(And yes, I looked those names up because although I've know about them for 50 years or so, I couldn't spell any of them. I'm by no means a biblical scholar).

But my point is that "new" books of the Bible are nothing new.

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Among the 50 or so “new” old books which are not found in the Bible are such titles as:

- The Acts of Pilate
- Gospel of Nicodemus
- Protoevangelium of James
- Gospel According to the Hebrews
- Jesus and Salome
- Gospel of Peter
- Gospel of Thomas
- The Ararus Letters
- Didache
- The Sibylline Oracles (written in Maccabean times and not to be confused with the Roman Oracles of Sibyl)

And the list goes on and on with other names I can’t spell and I’m too lazy to look up.

Now the news announces — with fanfare — *the Gospel of Judas*.

Big deal.

Put it on the pile until you’ve read the Gospels in your own Bible first.

And be sure to stock up on jellybeans; Wal Mart is running out...

You know, sometimes I wonder if we Christians don’t get upset over the wrong things. O well, by their fruits shall ye know them...

Sunday, April 09, 2006

A Rainy Sunday Morning

We are enjoying the first rainy day in months.

I woke up at my usual 4 a.m. but when I heard Ginny’s alarm start to sound at 6, I ran in and clicked it off to let her sleep another few hours..

Sometimes the most spiritually uplifting thing you can do on a rainy Sunday is to sleep in.

Monday, April 10, 2006

Wallowing In Depression & Rejection

Sunday at lunch I felt fine as I forked a bite of roast beef, but by the time I lifted it to my mouth a wet blanket of depression overwhelmed me.

Yes, it came on that sudden.

Waves of depression have hit me periodically before but never so clearly marked or so abrupt as this one.

No big deal; it's something I live with.

Because of the sudden onset, I recognize a couple of the triggers this time.

Sunday afternoon Ginny frolicked scattering flower blossoms in the air as she figured our income tax for several hours.

As she played, I diligently studied financial matters also by reading *Dave Barry's Money Secrets*.

Dave Barry is one of my favorite writers. Chapters in his financial planning book include such timely topics as:

- Why Is There A Giant Eyeball On The Back Of A Dollar Bill?
- Teaching Your Children About Money: Let The Little Bastards Starve
- Start Your Own Business: Harness The Awesome Power of Human Stupidity
- Retirement Planning: The Financial Advantages of Early Death

From this sage volume I learned (as I have long suspected) that the chairman of the Federal Reserve Board who determines the flow and future of the U.S. economy, and Punxsutawney Phil, the groundhog who predicts six more weeks of winter if he sees his shadow — these two are actually the same person using the same techniques in their different professional capacities .

Anyhow, as I read this excellent book, I urged Ginny to forget that stuff they taught her while getting her accounting degree and to fill out our WD-40 according to Dave's advice.

Even though she ignored me, we will get money back.

Amazing.

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Friday night Ginny & I went out to dinner with our friends Warren & Carol. After we ordered, Carol asked me about where I'd gotten the idea for writing *Glog*, the novel which I consider the best thing I've ever written.

As I prepared a modest answer in my mind, she elaborated by saying she'd read the first 50 pages and decided the book was so horrible it gave her nightmares and she put it aside and has no intention of finishing the other 283 pages.

Her evaluation stunned me.

In my mind, *Glog* is a happy, bumbling, loveable creature who, although he devours an occasional human for food, should generate sympathy and identification in a reader. I never imagined that anyone would find him horrible.

Doing our taxes involved reviewing my book sales for 2005... I'm not nearly as depressed as I should be.

Of course all writers experience rejection; it goes with the territory. I once submitted a book manuscript 19 times before a publisher bought it.

Writers consider rejected manuscripts an occupational hazard.

Years ago I sent an article to a magazine. After a few months, the editor returned it. The editor had gone over my work with a blue pencil correcting typos and such as he read the article. He strengthened some weak verbs and removed redundancies — all work which indicated that he was considering the manuscript for publication... Until he arrived at my concluding paragraph...

Then he stabbed his blue pencil completely through all pages of the manuscript!

That was one ticked off editor.

Something must have touched a nerve.

I've never had that happen before.

Glad I didn't deliver that manuscript in person.

Oddly enough, the article was an Easter-related piece called "Was Jesus A Ghost?"

I wonder if Stephen King or Dave Barry ever had an editor stab a blue pencil completely through one of their manuscripts? O well, I suspect Jesus Himself knows a bit more about rejection than I do.

And even while I'm blanketed with depression, I echo Job's words, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him".

Jesus is Lord even of my depression.

Tuesday, April 11, 2006

Today and 1982 - An Instant Replay

Monday evening Ginny & I attended a Neighborhood Crime Watch meeting where the group discussed the usual problems.

Our neighborhood made the tv news recently because a young man a few houses down from Ginny & me killed his baby son.

Shook it to death to shut it up.

Poor bastard. (I'm referring to the dad, not the kid here).

I'm sure every parent in the world has been tempted to use such a direct means to quite a screaming baby; the wonder of it is that so few of us give in to that temptation. But we are the adults and should learn how to endure kids.

Of course this dad was not exactly an adult; late teens, early 20s I think, hardly more than a baby himself.

The family had moved in just a few weeks ago.

Now the house stands abandoned.

The landlord put all their furniture and stuff at the curb. Brand new baby crib, stroller, playpen, changing table, a new giant-screen tv — and a used ratty sofa, cheap dinette, some adult bedroom fixtures that has the look of rented furniture.... All the stuff you'd expect to see in the home of a young couple just starting out and trying to make a life for themselves — new stuff for baby, make-do stuff for the couple.

Anyhow, the dad's in jail, the baby's dead, the mom's disappeared.

Three lives shot to Hell in one flash of frustration.

Not a whole lot Neighborhood Watch can do there.

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Instead of working on the fire department history yesterday, because of the depression welling up inside me (and because of pure laziness) I decided that reading was better for me than writing.

I finished the Dave Barry book and I also finally finished the *Diaries of John Bright*. John Bright, a Quaker and a member of British Parliament, kept a diary from 1837 to 1887, a span of 50 years. As a young man, he considered entering the ministry but decided that he would be of more service to Christ by fighting poverty, war and slavery by serving in the government.

I enjoy reading the journals and diaries of other people. For one thing, a person who keeps a diary seeks to discover pattern and meaning in his own life, as I do.

I'd have to unpack boxes in the closet to see just how far back my own diaries go, not nearly 50 years, but close to 30 I guess.

This morning, just for fun, I pulled down my 1982 journal to see what I was doing on this day (April 11th) that year. My entry started:

"Patricia (then age 4) woke me this morning as she struggled with the cat in our bed. She was vigorously brushing its teeth with my toothbrush — an omen of how this day was to go..."

The entry goes on to describe how I was trying to repair an old clunker of a car while a drunk guy from next door told me a better way he'd do it, and how a counselor suggested that Ginny and I get a divorce!

Until I looked at my old journal, I have forgotten all about cat and car and counselor!

I think keeping a daily journal helps me see what are some of the important things in my life because on the day while they are actually happening, I have no idea of what is important and what is not!

I don't understand life as she is lived.

Here's something odd, a quote from my next 1982 posting reads:

"I wonder if Jesus would have been a Christian if He'd had a car to fix & a drunk to kibitz? ...but still, as Job says,

“Though He slay me; yet will I trust Him” but that doesn’t mean I have to like it”.

That’s the very same Scripture I comforted myself with yesterday!

Do I detect a pattern here?

Oh, I should hasten to add that even with a member of Parliament, 50 years of journal rambling of an old man can get boring as hell!

Enough of mine for today.

Thursday, April 13, 2006

A Happy Easter Ritual

Years ago my friend Henry, a Jewish man I greatly admired, received a shock, one he probably should have expected, but didn’t.

Because of deaths and other changes in his family’s structure, he abruptly realized that he would be the oldest man at the Seder table. As a boy, when he’d been the youngest kid, he’d been the one to ask, “Father, why is this night different from all other nights?”

Now, he would be the one to answer the Passover questions.

The power of his changed roll in this ancient ritual instilled him with a sense of awe and just about overwhelmed him.

Over the years, the Cowart family has also observed a number of simple customs that became rituals for us.

For instance one year Johnny, my middle son, decided that our family ought to have a Bible reading and prayer time after supper each night. We began the practice, it became a regular custom, and today, even though all the children are grown and gone, Ginny and I still follow that ritual — except on Saturday nights.

One Saturday when the kids were little and supper was a later than usual, Donald announced, “No use having devotions tonight. God is watching the Muppets!”

“Well,” I said, “Maybe we should join Him”.

So on Saturday nights ever thereafter we watched the Muppets instead of devotions.

Our rituals are not engraved in stone.

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One ritualistic practice that Ginny and I observe — and I don't remember when we started this or how long we've been doing it — but every day after our morning coffee while still in our bathrobes, Ginny comes over and sits on my lap to kiss and cuddle while we silently give thanks and pray for each other's day.

Better than Maxwell House!

Problem with that is that sometimes I am not in peace and harmony with that left-handed, wrong-headed, exasperating woman. Or, for some impossible unreasonable reason, she's decided to A-bomb my calm, peaceful Luxemburg — yes, she occasionally finds fault with the St. Francis Clone she's married to — Anyhow, our morning ritual of post-coffee cuddling forces a truce and re-evaluation of our marital harmony.

That doesn't always help, mind you, but it tempers our anger. It's hard to stay pissed at someone you're thanking God for. Especially when I'm aware that He's not too keen on hypocrisy.

I'm becoming a specialist at grumpy prayers.

When the kids were home, we fell into another family ritual. Every year on the Thursday before Easter, after supper I'd crawl on the floor around the table and wash the feet of each person in my family. We treated this not as some solemn religious ceremony but as a time for jokes, foot tickling, and expressions of love.

Then the kids would squabble over who got to wash my feet and inevitably the basin would get knocked over and water splashed everywhere...

Happy chaos.

After Jesus washed the feet of his disciples at the last supper (John 13) he said, "Ye also ought to wash one another's feet... If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them".

I may be wrong but as best I can recall, that's the only thing Jesus ever specifically said would make us happy.

I know that when our family was all together for this, we'd have a blast.

And, yes, I know that Jesus regarded this not as a mere ceremony but as symbolic of hands-on, down-and-dirty real service to others.

In Bible times, thousands of sheep, donkeys, camels, horses and whatever plied the streets of Jerusalem. None of this traffic carried emissions control devices.

People walked these streets also.

Think of what may have squished through those open-toed sandals.

Jesus washed the disciples' feet because their feet were dirty.

Anyhow, after we'd do the foot-washing thing at the table, we'd talk about the Crucifixion. The gory details. The meaning to us. The love of Christ.

It was not for few or small offences that God became a human being; not for little and small sins only did He suffer torture in our place. His love brought him to this night of terror because of the sin which so permeates us that we think it normal

I tend to think: Really, Jesus, you should not have gone to all that trouble! Sure I mess up a little now and then but I'm really not a bad guy. I think you're over reacting to this sin thing. I'm not that bad. After all, I'm only human.

Obviously, God in His pure white-hot holiness, thinks my behavior, my attitude, my heart me, my sin, my core — are all in more serious condition than I think they are.

But Jesus has been know to save people too dense and dumb and dark to know they needed saving in the first place. — folks like me.

I thought that little snake was rattling because he was happy to see me.

Anyhow, I'm getting carried away here.

I could have just said that Jesus died for a reason and left it at that.

The kids all grown and gone now. They won't be with us for supper tonight.

What got me to thinking about these things is that tonight after supper, I plan to wash Ginny's feet...

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In fact, I like Peter's idea — not just feet, but hands and head also ...

In fact, I think I'll try to lure her into the bathroom for a shower together!

What a cool idea.

I'll try to make that a family tradition.

Wish me luck.

Good Friday, April 14, 2006

We Were Just Friends

Her name was... Let's say her name was Susan.

We both worked for a huge government agency in Washington.

Things fell out that we took our coffee breaks at the same time every day and took to sitting at the same table in the snack bar for our allotted 15 minutes morning and afternoon. Then we started eating lunch together every day.

Our conversation often revolved around inane things the supervisors were doing at the moment.

Susan's parents brought her to America when she was a teen. Susan, her family, parents, grandparents and back for generations and generations in the old country were not Christians. They worshiped something other than Jesus Christ.

As we became friends, I often "witnessed" to Susan hoping to win her to Christ.

I gave my "testimony".

I handed her tracts to read....

I showed her Scripture verses.

Then a better job offer came along for me.

I left the agency.

Something came up that I wanted to do. Something I wanted to do bad. Something entirely at odds with my being a Christian.

I weighted my desire on one hand against my Lord on the other.

I chose my desire.

I did what I wanted.

One day I got a call from Susan. She asked if I'd meet her for lunch in a quite and private place. I agreed.

"John," she said, "I've thought about those things you told me. I've thought about them a lot. I think I want to become a Christian. Can you show me how?".

I said, "I don't believe that stuff anymore".

"But you told me..."

"Yeah, but I've changed my mind. I don't believe any of it's true".

"Those beautiful things about Jesus?"

"Nothing to it," I said. "Nothing to it at all."

We finished lunch.

I never saw Susan again.

I never even heard a rooster.

Saturday, April 15, 2006

Grasping At Straws

I encountered the first snake of the season Friday.

Ginny & I had not planned anything for this weekend but a flurry of phone calls reveal that we are hosting an Easter cookout; so I worked all day Friday preparing the yard for visitors.

I found the garden snake, between 18 and 24 inches long, sunning in the grass near the pool steps. Not wanting to mulch him with the mower, I captured him and moved him into a fern bed — three times.

He kept running back to the same spot I picked him up from so I'd have to move him again.

Here's the odd thing, every time I'd try to pick him up, Mr. Snake would bite a stalk of fern straw or something anchored to the ground and hold on for dear life.

I've never seen a snake do that before.

Sunday, April 16, 2006

Happy Easter

Here are a few of my favorite Rev. Fun Cartoons to enjoy.

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Scads more can be found at : <http://rev-fun.gospelcom.net/>

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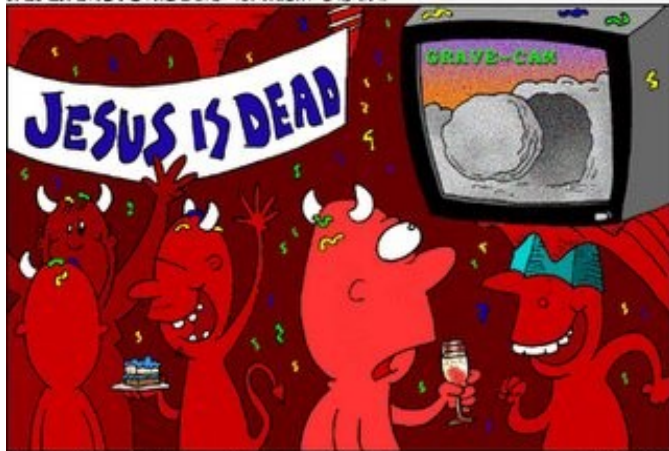


(See John 20:1-18)

03-29-2002

I WANT YOU TO FOLD UP MY BURIAL CLOTHES,
WAIT FOR MARY, AND REMEMBER THAT THIS IS
SERIOUS ... NO HIDING AND YELLING "BOO"

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Thanks to Ben Gallagher (See John 20:1-18)

04-01-2002

Monday, April 17, 2006

Tax Deadline Today

The deadline for filing Federal Income Taxes falls at midnight tonight.

The Cowart family spent Easter afternoon enjoying a rousing pool party and cookout.



The party was fun but left me exhausted

I'll post more photos when my photo gallery is back running.

Oh About those taxes:

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Thanks to Pam Winn (See John 20:1-18)

04-12-2004

NOTHING IS CERTAIN EXCEPT WHAT AND TAXES?!?

Wednesday, April 19, 2006

Divine Guidance Seven Years Ago?

I read brain candy all day yesterday so there's nothing really to enter in this journal... So, for a blog posting I decided to see what I was doing on this date seven years ago.

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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!

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 — 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 or 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.

Later, he stood over her and 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.

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"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." I said. "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, my 86-year-old aunt. "Oh John," she said, "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.

Saturday, April 22, 2006

Protective Coloration

Thursday I attempted to resume work on my history of firefighting in Jacksonville. I got entangled in Word transfers and gave it up as a bad job for the moment.

Failing that, I decided to scan in a long-out-of-date history pamphlet. Although I've done the exact same thing in the exact same way numerous times before, the scanner refused to scan...

I've heard that there is no computer problem you can't fix if you have a big enough hammer.

Frustrated, and fearing that I might go out to the toolshed and get a 12-pound computer repair kit, I thought it best to walk away from the machine and spend the day reading Dave Barry's novel, *Tricky Business*.

Friday as I mowed the yards, I mulched a snake in our front yard.

Honest, if I'd seen it, I would have avoided running the mower over it. But the snake's protective coloration matched the ground so perfectly that I did not see it till it was too late.

When it heard the mower coming, why didn't the snake slither out of the way?

Stupid snake.

No it didn't run; it hunkered down in the grass thinking it's protective coloration would protect it. The snake's protective coloration lets it blend in with its

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surroundings so that it can sneak up on it's prey and so that predators hungry for snake meat will not see it hiding in the grass.

I have macular degeneration and my vision does not always distinguish things where there is little contrast.

Too bad for the snake.

Sometimes blending in doesn't help a bit.

Sunday, April 23, 2006

A Moving Experience

Spring breezes wafted away the morning fog. New green leaves filtered slanting rays of sunlight. Coolness crisped the dawn. Butterflies flitted among the flowers of our garden. Ginny poured cracked grain into the birdfeeders and we lingered with our morning coffee, binoculars and bird book, rocking in cushioned lawn chairs trying to confirm our tentative identification of an indigo bunting. A lizard lounged on the rim of our fountain flicking its tongue to capture moisture from the damp surface of the Grecian urn beaded with diamond droplets escaped from the fountain's cascading burbling flow.

The sparkle of Ginny's eyes, the soft brush of her hand against mine, the husky aroma of her perfume, that tantalizing gap in her robe, the splendid prospect of the day ahead with no plans or duties — all carried the sensuous promise of untold, unhurried, lingering, day-long erotic pleasures of love, passion, tenderness spiced with lust and ...

And then the phone rang.

Eight a.m. on a lovely spring morning and the phone rang!

And John Cowart, the idiot, answered the damn thing.

"Dad, if you and Mom don't have anything planned, I'm in trouble and need some help".

Of course we had nothing planned.

Nothing that I'd mention on the phone to one of our kids anyhow.

So Ginny and I spent Saturday helping Donald move his girlfriend from a three-bedroom house with home office equipment to a two bedroom apartment. Rental

truck. Homepack job. An energetic but inexperienced 14-year-old boy the only other helper.

The house was being repainted for sale. All furniture had been piled in the garage along with sheetrock, painter's buckets, sawdust, scrap boards, file cabinets, laundry baskets, kitty-litter box and garden tools.

Picture the neat, orderly arrangement of the Third Circle in a Dore engraving of Dante's Inferno.

Now, Helen is the world's sweetest girl, vivacious, energetic, personable, pretty, intelligent, artistic... it puzzles me how she could have alienated all humanity so that she is alone and friendless in the earth so that no other person in the world would show up to help her move. I mean, Saddam has more friends who would help him move than she does.

And, Donald, of course, is a computer geek who knows no actual live human beings.

Now, Ginny and I, in our younger days, worked as professional movers. That was almost 40 years ago. Recently, the heaviest thing either of us has lifted was the tv remote.

So, for ten hours we strained and lifted and levered and dollied, and slid and carried and trudged up and down the truck ramp, in and out of the house and apartment.

File drawers and lamps and bicycle and antique wardrobe and clothes on hangers and chairs and chests and hampers and tables and paintings and damn big things and a baby-changing table (??? Is there something they're not telling us???) and paint cans and groceries and mink oil (? I didn't know she raised minks??) and sofas and unsealed boxes with coat-hangers and glass bottles sticking out the top so you can't set anything on top of them and garden hoses and treasures and — O damn, they packed all the rolls of toilet paper — and lawn furniture and a suit of armor and pole lamps and rugs and ... It took two truck loads.

As Ginny and I drove home we joked about how sore and stiff we felt. Aching backs and arms and leg muscles.

Naturally, when alone like this our conversation turned to risqué jokes, the kind of jokes which only can be

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shared (or even understood) by a couple who've been in love for 40+ years.

Our car lacks air conditioning; We drive with the windows down.

We were paused in traffic in the kicked ant-hill that is Jacksonville's Orange Park section. We were laughing like crazy about one of our erotic jokes....

I think I'd just said, "If my dick were as stiff as the rest of me..."

And Ginny said... Well, never mind what she said.

But the guy stopped in traffic beside us , who also had his window down, burst out laughing.

"He's eaves dropping on us," Ginny said. "He heard me say that. Young people have no idea, do they?"

We ate supper at a familiar restaurant where the waitress sat at the table with us for a few minutes complaining about her six grown children who are visiting at her house for two weeks. She joked that if she got enough in tips that instead of going home she planned to buy a deck of cards, check into a motel alone, and play solitaire all night.

I slipped my shoes off under the table and lost them and had to crawl under to find them again. My feet were so swollen that I had trouble getting them back on my feet.

When we finally got home we felt too tired to bother unloading our car of the cast-off stuff we gleaned from Helen's.

Ginny said, "John, I'm going to get these shoes off and stupefy in front of the tv. I love you but for the rest of the evening. I don't want you to even speak to me."

I didn't. — But we fell asleep in front of the tv holding hands.

True love.

Tuesday, April 25, 2006

Here's The Plan:

This past weekend Ginny and I planned.

Sunday, we spent six hours just talking over our options in a number of areas, discussing our goals, deciding on various actions, and setting a loose timetable for doing this or that.

For most of our talking we sat outside by the fountain watching birds raid the feeders and listening to the fountain, but as we got down to core decisions, we came inside and sat at the kitchen table with calendar, phone book, pencils and 3X5 cards.

We do not engrave our plans in stone.

The ancient Proverb says, "Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth".

The Apostle James echoes that adding, "Ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live and do this or that".

But Ginny and I are planners so naturally during our planning we often asked God to guide us to the best decisions to make at the moment. And we suspect that He does so guide us but nevertheless we hold our plans lightly.

We realize that a single phone call in the night can disrupt any plan we may make yet it behooves us to look ahead as far as we are able - which realistically is about as far as from here to the coffee pot.

But we can't sit around talking about stuff forever either because sometimes the future depends on what we chose to do today.

We canceled some things dear to us (no new car; repair the old one).

We postponed some things we'd thought of (Trip up north in November or December instead of next month).

We solidified some intentions (Made reservations for our Anniversary getaway).

And we decided on several changes in day to day living (No more grocery shopping on weekends, we have better things to do with that time together).

We also reviewed our hurricane/bird flu preparations.

Incidentally, for a good rundown on family and individual information about bird flu check out

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www.pandemicflu.gov . That site offers comprehensive information I haven't seen elsewhere.

After all our long-range planning and decision making on topics as varied as world-wide plague and buying bicycles — we then came to the decision about where to have lunch.

That's where things broke down.

As Alpha Male, head of this household, man responsible for our health, safety and well-being, I decisively chose a restaurant.

We drove there.

It closes at 2 o'clock on Sundays.

We'd talked in such detail and planned for so long that we'd missed the closing hour.

Settled for Chinese carryout.

Damn!

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

Wednesday, April 26, 2006

Last Night I Talked About History

Last night I gave a lecture on Jacksonville history to a group at the Maxville Branch Library.

As usual, a bunch of rusty artifacts I've found over the years illustrated the lecture. A hand-forged ax, a Civil War sword, a toy cast iron horse, a 1901 rum bottle, a burning tea bag, a newspaper front page announcing the sinking of the Titanic, and other odds and ends which I use as lecture notes and crutches to help me in public speaking.

The folks who attended the talk displayed a keen interest and contributed greatly to my understanding of local history because many of them have ancestors whose stories they told.

- One lady told about finding arrowheads near a local creek.

- Another told how she once had the first issues of Wonder Woman, Superman and Batman comic books — which her mother gave away!
- A retired sailor told about icebergs he encountered.
- Another man talked about his knife collection...

Thus the audience enlightened me as much as I could them.

We talked about how fires and disease shaped much of Jacksonville's history.

My grandmother, an old country Cracker, only recognized two types of illness: the dying person either had *Creeping Corruption*, or *Gallopig Eruption*. Those two terms covered it all as far as Grandma was concerned.

The lecture group also talked about the heroic actions of nurses during the 1888 Yellow Jack plague.

Yellow Jack was the personification of yellow fever.

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During the quarantine, the mayor of Montgomery, Alabama, offered a \$100 reward to anyone shooting or capturing an escapee from Jacksonville.

Other cities even refused to accept mail from Jacksonville.

On the other hand, a contingent of 18 Red Cross nurses from New Orleans took a train to come relieve suffering in Jacksonville, but the train engineer refused to stop in the plague zone.

It was after midnight in a torrential downpour when the nurses jumped from the moving train in MacClenny in order to reach the sick who needed them.

They stayed in this area for 79 days often working shifts of 72 hours without sleep. Some carried patients on

their backs for miles to seek help. These nurses earned \$3 a day.

Apparently, eight of them died of the fever.

An editorial cartoon of the day shows other cities defending stricken Jacksonville:



But of course there was no defense; no one at the time knew the cause or cure of Yellow Fever. Plagues of Yellow Jack decimated Jacksonville in 1872, 1877 and 1888.

In 1898, during the Spanish American War more soldiers died here in Jacksonville because of typhoid fever than were killed in battle.

No one knows how many people Spanish Lady, the personification of Spanish flu, killed here in 1918. The record keepers themselves died. In Evergreen Cemetery

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row after row of markers show that six or eight members of the same family died within a day or two of each other.

So many died that mass pit burials became necessary. Some of these were located near the present-day Gateway Mall.

The prospect of epidemic disease, such as bird flu, which could be a more efficient killer than either Yellow Jack or Spanish Lady, frightens us.

Yet even in the face of wide-spread disease the death rate stays the same as always.

Whether we face plague, fever, or Captain Trips himself, the death rate does not change.

Cancer, AIDS, a drunk driver, swallowing a peach pit, heart attack, shark attack —no matter what the threat, the death rate remains the same — One per person.

That's something to think about.

Of course we should take prudent measures to protect life and to comfort the dying. That's common sense.

But a plague death is certainly nothing more for us to worry about than any other kind death.

"And as it is appointed unto men once to die and after this the judgment: so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many."

If nothing else, history shows that the road doesn't end here.

You may not have guessed it, but I really love giving history talks.

Thursday, April 27, 2006

Yo Ho Ho & A Bottle Of Rum

If I ever grow up I'm going to be a pirate.

You guessed it. I've been reading again.

Thursday I read a reprint of an 1836 edition of *The HISTORY OF THE LIVES & BLOODY EXPLOITS of the MOST NOTED PIRATES*. It's a collection of case histories of individual pirates.

The title page contains no information on the author, but he compiled these accounts from contemporary magazine and newspaper accounts, letters written by

prisoners who escaped from pirates, journals, and trial transcripts. The book portrays pirates in a different light from my previous mental image.

For one thing, contrary to Hollywood razzle-dazzle real life pirates of the late 1700s and early 1800s seldom attacked other ships by a blazing, cannon-thundering frontal assault on the high seas.

Yes such attacks sometimes happened but most often Pirates stole by stealth, deceit, subterfuge and treachery. Most often they appear to have taken their prey in ports while the victim was at anchor.

At sea pirate ships often posed as a vessel in distress (as though they were out of drinking water, etc.) to lure a victim close enough for boarding.

Sometimes in port the pirates would pose as merchants come aboard to buy legitimate cargo. Once they were ensconced aboard, they'd attack and sail the ship away to another port and sell the cargo themselves.

Sneaky.

But the pirates among themselves adhered to a twisted code of honor.

For instance one pirate crew bought goods from a Dutch merchant ship. They stole the whole ship and looted all the money on board — except for the money they had paid for the goods they bought. They felt that taking that money back would be dishonest!

One pirate explained that the purpose of a voyage was to “honestly and quietly rob what Mores that fell in their way, and return home with clean consciences, and clean, but full, hands”.

Many pirate crews did not see themselves as bad guys, but as independent nations afloat, at war with all other nations on earth.

They stood among the world's first true democracies in that captains, officers and various lower posts were chosen by vote. All in a crew stood equal regardless of race, religion or national origin. And stolen loot was divided by strict contract ratified by all aboard.

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When one man was killed in action, the others made sure his portion of the loot went to his widow and children.

Yes, they acted fair and square among themselves (allowing for treachery, lying, cheating, double-dealing and human nature, of course).

Outsiders did not fair as well in the pirates' hands.

While some were noted for gentlemanly conduct, especially for prisoners of their own nationality, most believed that dead men tell no tales and slaughtered all prisoners taken so that no witness could ever testify against them should they come to trial.

This could get rough.

Pirates played for keeps.

When one captured captain refused to tell where he hid his money, the pirates cut off both his arms at the elbows. This motivated him to tell the cash was sealed between ship ribs. But, because he'd been slow to answer, the pirates coated his bloody stumps with turpentine and set it afire to see him dance.

They laughed at his amusing antics.

Pirates didn't have cable tv.

Other captives they stripped naked and set on barren sandbars to sunburn to death.

When they felt one captured pilot may have tried to run their ship aground, they nailed both his feet to the deck and left him there for the seas to wash over.

A 17-year-old female captive was passed around among the crew till they approached a port where they feared she might be noticed. They felt that because she had been of such good service, they'd show her mercy by poisoning her instead of giving her a more unpleasant death.

As the pirates considered their nation at war with all other nations, so all other nations hunted down pirates for execution.

On Friday, February 7, 1823, in Kingston, Jamaica, ten pirates were hung.

The judge at a pirate trial used the legal formula “Be carried to the prison from whence you came and from thence to the place of execution, where you are to be hanged by the neck till you are *dead, dead, dead*”.

Yes, he’d say it three times.

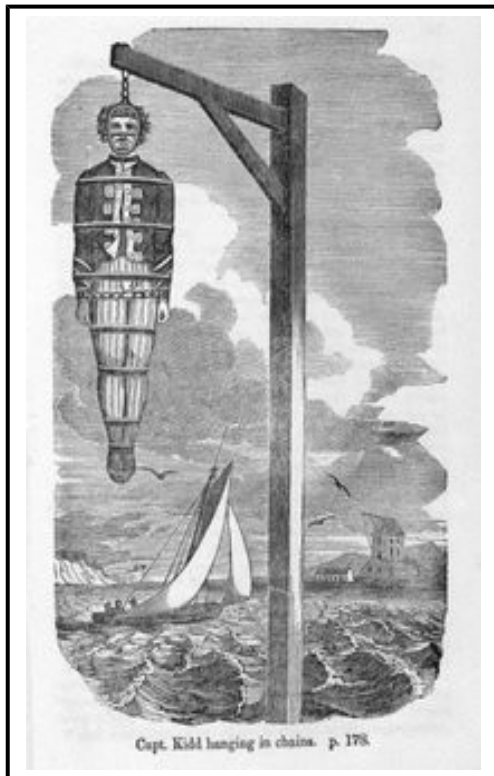
The account goes on to say, “The gallows was of considerable length, and contrived with a drop so as to prevent the unpleasant circumstances which frequently occur”.

I have no idea what that means.

But it doesn’t sound nice.

One chicken-hearted pirate fainted when he saw the gallows. They sat him in a chair and tied him upright. Then they hung him and his chair.

After a hanging, the dead pirate’s body was chained up to rot on display as a warning to other men about the fate of pirates. That’s what happened to Captain Kidd:



Nevertheless, even though some pirates died on a rope, others returned to their homelands with fortunes,

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set themselves up as gentleman merchants, married into titled families, lived in mansions, became government leaders, and died in old age respected by all as successful men.

That's the kind of pirate I want to be...

Only one problem...

I get seasick.

Friday, April 28, 2006

Proud Dad Requests Feedback

Yesterday I spent the day with my daughter, Eve.

She brought laundry over from her apartment to do in our washer and dryer. Her laundry had piled up because she's been heavily involved in planning and coordinating a staff development day for 500+ librarians. It all came to a head Wednesday, and Eve is taking a few days off to recuperate.

I'm so proud of her. She used her organizational skills to the maximum for this professional event.

Among the things she did was recruit 24 organizations to set up booths with displays ranging from art museums and banking to tai chi and computer scanners.

She arranged shuttle transportation for the handicapped and a police escort for attendees in a change of venues, plus a catered luncheon, door prizes, 10,000 stars, name badges, special speakers and presenters, and a pep talk by the mayor. Plus a dump truck and horses ...

No, wait, those last two were for another event she's also involved with.

Here is a quite, shy girl marshaling forces like General Eisenhower at the Normandy Invasion.

I'm impressed.

Anyhow, her own laundry got neglected in the swirl of activity and I'm glad we could help her out in this minor (if you can call five loads minor) behind the scenes need.

After supper, as usual we had a short devotional time. Ginny read a Bible passage but when it came time to pray, neither she nor I nor Eve had even a thought.

We just didn't have a heart to pray so Ginny read a prayer for us. Sometimes the best we can do is pray:

"Lord, I'm so weary. Help, please".

Sunday, April 30, 2006

Two Happy Songs

At church this morning our pastor read the following announcement:

With all the sadness and trauma going on in the world at the moment, it is worth reflecting on the death of a very important person, which almost went unnoticed last week. Larry LaPrise, the man that wrote "The Hokey Pokey" died peacefully at the age of 93. The most traumatic part for his family was getting him into the coffin. They put his left leg in. And then the trouble started.

Internet research shows a discrepancy about PaPrise's age and date of death but here is a link to his famous dance

tune:

<http://www.niehs.nih.gov/kids/lyrics/hokey.htm>

Another happy song ran through my head a lot yesterday:

All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful:
The Lord God made them all...

He gave us eyes to see them,
And lips that we might tell
How great is God Almighty,
Who has made all things well.

Saturday the words to this old hymn occurred to me several times as Ginny and I enjoyed the wonders of God's world found in our own yard.

Actually, our encounter with nature began before we even went out in the yard. We saw a large house spider underneath my desk where all those wires from computer stuff hang down; you know, power cable, surge protectors, mouse, keyboard, monitor cord, wires for desk lamp, scanner, microphone, speakers, router, and for all I know a microwave and hair dryer. Donald installed this stuff and I have no idea what wire goes where.

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Anyhow, this poor spider seemed to think this tangle was a giant web and scuttled from wire to wire looking for a moose or something caught in the wire web. It was really funny to see the perplexed creature.

We decided to clean out our front flower beds and again we encountered God's creatures going about their business with intent purpose:

- We watched a father cardinal feed seeds to a raucous baby bird nearly as big as himself.
- We uncovered earthworms as we dug up flowers to transplant.
- We squished all kinds of bugs.
- We saw a field mouse sitting on a log munching a sunflower seed fallen from a birdfeeder.
- A hawk eyed us as we pruned an oak branch.
- A squirrel couple in love frolicked beneath the porch swing.
- And a huge white crane, largest I've ever seen, landed in the neighbor's backyard intimidating Felony, the pit bull, who stood in awe of this bird which stood close to six feet tall.

Yes, the Lord created all sorts of creatures to inhabit the earth and not one of them, except man, has ever sinned.

St. Francis said:

"Try to realize the dignity God has conferred on you. He created and formed your body in the image of His Beloved Son, and your soul in his own likeness. Yet every creature under heaven serves, acknowledges and obeys its Creator in its own way better than you do."

What a shame!

But, as our pastor said in church this morning, "The name Jesus means *God Saves*, or *God Heals*, or *God Makes Whole*. While God created us out of nothing, the Resurrection is a new demonstration of God's power. Jesus is the expiation of our sins.

"The old word was *propitiation* but to make it clearer they changed it to *expiation*! That's a real help! What it

boils down to is that Jesus covers it, that He takes care of it. The love of God is shown toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”.

What a joy!

MAY

Wednesday, May 03, 2006

Waiting Around

Tuesday I spent eight hours and a thousand dollars in a garage.

In accordance with the plans Ginny and I made (see April 25th posting), I took our Ford Escort to Erbaughs Auto Fitness and I hung around all day while the mechanics replaced the radiator, water pump, thermostat and other car guts.

All this was expensive but I've had work done on the car there in the past and I've been pleased with their work.

Because the garage is so far from our home and because anyone I might have bummed a ride from was either at work or out of town, I carried several books to read while the work was being done on the car.

I read a local history book and a book on revival and I started a book on the holocaust.

Of these, the book on revival was the most important. At various times in history the Holy Spirit has swept over areas with little human agency involved. He apparently makes His presence known in ways that people with no religious intentions are suddenly aware of the majesty and holiness of God. Christ is honored and lives are changed, not by preachers or plans or programs, but by the Spirit's direct influence.

The phenomenon is well-documented history, but I've never seen it personally.

Such a visitation is something I covet for myself and for Jacksonville.

You know the sort of thing, “The glory of the Lord shown round about them and they were sore afraid”.

For years I have prayed for it and looked for it but so far, nothing. God doesn't jump through hoops just

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because I want Him to. One earmark of true revival is that we become intensely aware of God's sovereignty, that He indeed is Lord.

I'd sort of half way hoped that today was the day, that revival would break out... why not in a garage? He manifested Himself in a stable once, on a death-row cross, from a borrowed tomb, in an upper room.

Between reading chapters as I wanted in the garage, I listened and talked with a number of other folks. One young man told me about ecology and the importance of frogs. A guy on vacation told me about his brother's electrical business. A young fellow told me about having to bring his grandmother's car to the shop. And old guy worried about health problems – just the sort of small talk strangers indulge in in a waiting room.

Wednesday, I get to hang around a doctor's office. Then Thursday, I plan to bring the car in again for additional work...

Just living the stuff of life

Doing everyday duties.

Looking for the sign of His coming

Anticipating wonder.

Thursday, May 04, 2006

This Struck Me:

Yesterday, while reading a biography of Jonathan Goforth, a missionary to China in the early 1900s, I ran across a striking verse of Scripture.

The missionary kept a calligraphy copy of it in the pasted in the cover of his Bible.

The words were spoken by King David as he advised his son Solomon:

Be Strong and of good courage,
and do it:
Fear not, nor be dismayed:
For the Lord God, even my God,
Will be with thee;
He will not fail thee,

Nor forsake thee,
Until thou hast finished all the
work...

Friday, May 05, 2006

This Reminds Me Of That, Which Reminds Me Of...

I drove Ginny to work early so I could again sit with the car at to the garage so the mechanic could test for the next thing and do the work...

Except that the tests showed the next thing would cost an additional \$1,300.00!

Not having that much change in my pocket, I decided we can live with the problem, after all it does not effect safety, just comfort and cosmetics. Erbaugh's had already done the essential work on Tuesday.

As I drove back home I remembered another garage where I had some brake work done years ago. A lady drove in and got out of her VW Hatchback.

This was an interesting sight because her doors would not unlock. She had to crawl over the seats to the rear and open the hatchback to get out of her car. Since she was not quite as fat as I am and since she was wearing a skirt, this made for an interesting operation.

She was also in the garage for brake work.

As we waited forever for our cars to be repaired she told me that she was a social worker and drove around all day visiting needy families thus had to get in and out of her car numerous times a day so when the door locks broke, she had to climb in and out of the back.

When the guy came out and told her what it would cost, she was dismayed. It cost much more than she anticipated. She could not afford to have the work done.

Down and discouraged, she climbed back in through the back of her VW and drove away.

Now in the course of our conversation, I'd learned her name and where she worked.

That next week I told another Christian about this social worker's car problems. The Christian gave me a

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hundred dollars to give anonymously to the social worker for car repairs. I called her and...

Talk about leery!

Here this guy who she chatted with for 15 minutes in a garage calls saying he has \$100 for her — if she wants to meet him in a public place.

A likely story.

However, I must have a kind face which inspires confidence, because she agreed to meet me in a very public place where I delivered the money.

She could not believe that a total stranger would send her help through another total stranger without even knowing anything about her.

I explained that Jesus told us to give in secret and that is what the Christian friend wanted to do. I was just the delivery boy...

That reminds me of another Christian who gave in secret:

A waitress at a favorite restaurant was talking one morning saying that her car had been broken into the night before. The thief stole this and that but the real damage was that he'd smashed her front windshield to get into the car. Her insurance didn't cover the damage and she could not afford to get it fixed and she had no way to get to work if she could not drive her car.

A Christian friend heard this and went to an ATM and withdrew cash; he gave it to me to deliver to her to get her windshield replaced.

He asked me to deliver the money because he wanted to give in secret, so that no one but God would get thanked.

That's the way Jesus told us to give, open-heartedly and in secret not letting our right hand know what the left is doing so that people will see the good works and glorify our Father in heaven.

That reminds me...

Once at lunch with a lady I know, our table was near the coffee station and we overheard two waitresses talking as they worked. One girl was telling the other

about her college classes, her grades and how she lacked a couple of hundred dollars to pay tuition next semester so she would have to drop out...

My friend reached in her purse, took out her checkbook and wrote a check for the amount the waitress mentioned needing for tuition. Since this was not even the waitress serving our table, she got the girls name from the manager, folded the check and gave it to him asking him to give it to the student after we left.

That waitress would never know where her tuition money came from.

"Take heed that ye do not your alms before men to be seen of them," Jesus said.

He said the same thing about praying and fasting as He does about giving.

But that reminds me...

Once I visited a church where there were dozens and dozens of bronze plaques saying who had donated this or that so that everyone would know about the donor's generosity. That makes me uncomfortable.

Personally I give so little to help others that I'd be ashamed for people to know about my giving. I suspect that's why Jesus said what He did; He knows we'd be embarrassed if our parsimoniousness were made public.

But that reminds me...

There's this great cartoon:

A man in a business suit, like a banker, sitting on a park bench feeding pigeons out of a paper sack. In front of him is a bronze plaque announcing:

**THESE CRUMBS ARE BROUGHT TO YOU
BY A GRANT FROM
THE AUTHUR L. FOURACKER FOUNDATION**

That breaks me up — But it also reminds me...

When I was a kid there was this song.

I think it may have been about a sailor who wanted a statue of himself erected in a city park where there were already statues of Abraham Lincoln and General Robert E. Lee. This song may have been about a WWII memorial or something of the sort and the sailor singing it thinks

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about pigeons in that park so the refrain went something like this:

Oh, they build nests on Lincoln,
And they build nests on Lee,
What will they do on me, on me?
Oh What will they do on me?

Saturday, May 06, 2006

Once I got My Ass Kicked... And Once I Didn't

My e-friend Jellyhead is a physician in Australia. She and her husband have two children. He enjoys bird watching and captures beautiful photographs; she studies karate and recently earned her black belt.

I wish she'd been walking beside me one morning about two years ago; as I strolled home through a nice residential area on a beautiful Spring day about 10 a.m., a man darted out of no where, knocked me down, beat me up, and stole my billfold. I never even saw him till he'd already hit me and knocked me to the sidewalk.

A karate champion would have been a great companion that morning.

Thursday Jellyhead asked me the following question:

Do you really believe in an interventionist God, John?

Because to me, the idea that God can help us if we only pray to him, or have faith in him, flies in the face of all those children who die from leukemia, or young people who have tragic accidents, or even older people who die awful lingering deaths. Surely if God could change these things, he would. Hence the concept of a loving God who can watch over us, but cannot save us from tragedy. What do you think?

When I read her question the first thing I thought of was two dogs.

About 15 years ago my car broke down and I had to walk to work through a very rough slum section of town. A block ahead of me I saw a six or eight tough really mean-looking guys standing in the street. They eyed me coming and spread out blocking the walkway. Really scary. One of them hefted a bat or pool cue.

I could either turn around and run or keep going because this was the only way I could get to work. I may have said "O damn!" or said a prayer but I really didn't know what to do.

Suddenly, out a narrow space between the brick walls of a laundry and a bar, two enormous dogs appeared. One black and one white. These two dogs came out like fighter jets in formation and took up station, one on either side of me.

These dogs, each the size of a desk, biggest dogs I've ever seen, looked to neither the left or right but pressed in against my legs and matched me step for step as I walked straight ahead.

The gang of tough guys separated.

These dogs and I walked straight through the two columns of them.

The dogs walked like that with me for another block till we came to Springfield Park where both dogs peeled off and ran, disappearing into the distance.

They had never sniffed me or even glanced at me.

Do you really believe in an interventionalist God, John?

I have to answer: Sometimes.

But I'll have to qualify that by saying that the Lord intervenes in human affairs at His pleasure, not mine.

He is, after all, sovereign.

So, I wonder why, or even if, God protected me by sending those big dogs that one time, but let me get my ass kicked that other time?

I mean in the light of the bad things that happen every day, how can we believe in a loving, all powerful God who lets, or causes, terrible things to happen to His children?

If God loves us, then why does He allow terrible things to befall us?

If God is all powerful, then why doesn't He stop bad things?

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Is it a case of either God does not care about us --or, if He does, then is He too weak or too far removed to do anything about it?

I do not have an answer.

What I do have is a couple of thoughts that help me believe in Christ and trust Him even though I do not have a definitive answer.

Yes, children do die from leukemia, young people do have tragic accidents, older people do die awful lingering deaths. There are deformed babies, wars, cruelty, cheating, bullying, debt, abuse, liars, adulterers, frustration – Suffering in varying degrees touches every person's life.

And if we don't die first, we face Alzheimer's.

It's not a pretty picture.

Why doesn't God intervene?

How exactly would I want Him to do that?

Well, first of all I'd like to live in a garden. A beautiful place with flowing springs, singing birds, peaceful animals, fruitful trees, blooming flowers - no thorns. A place where my beautiful wife and I could romp naked in the forest and roll happy in the grass. No thorns, no sickness. No troubles. A place where in the cool of the day God would come and walk with me and talk with me and listen to me and ...

Oh. Oh. Oh. — He's already done that.

That's the life He had in mind for us from the word go.

But we chose otherwise.

Adam, our president, decided he had a better idea; he decided that humanity could actually be like little gods. Instead of worshiping, obeying and enjoying the Creator, our first leader rebelled, changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator.

St. Paul said, "Even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient".

In other words, God let us do the things we chose to do.

And He let us deal with the consequences.

When Ginny and I talked about this yesterday, she asked if Jellyhead is a mother. "Then," Ginny said, "She'll understand about teaching them to walk. Sometimes, you have to let them fall so they can learn to stand".

She also compared God's treatment of us with a father who teaches his 16-year-old daughter to drive a car. He explains the rules of the road, the traffic laws, the safety tips – everything he can to protect her and keep her safe and help her get where she wants to go ...

But there comes a day when she turns the key and starts down the road alone.

The Father's heart is in his throat. He cringes when she shifts gears. He stays awake all night till she's safely home... But he lets her drive.

He lets her be responsible.

He lets her chose the road she drives on and the speed she goes.

He wants her to be free.

To cruise.

To get where she wants to go.

To come home safe.

But at that point he does not intervene.

How would she feel if he did?

And when she get a speeding ticket, does Dad intervene?

Sometimes.

Is he able to help? Of course. Hey, Dad can drive a stick-shift and back a trailer into the drive without running over the rose bushes. Besides, as all girls know, he's a soft touch made of money.

Is he willing to help?

Not necessarily.

Sometimes he'll say, "You got the ticket, you pay the fine".

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Other times, he intervenes.

He pays the penalty for her.

It costs him.

“Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, *that he might bring us to God*, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit”. That’s what St. Peter said in his first letter, the one that talks most about suffering, both that of Christ and that of people.

I think the phrase *that he might bring us to God* gives a reason for all suffering. Yes, I know that most of our suffering, we cause ourselves — at least I think that most of my sufferings in life have been caused by me.

But there is a redemptive element in suffering.

Innocent suffering carries great power.

In one place Christ is referred to as the Lamb of God, slain before the foundation of the world.

Peter said, “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s suffering ... If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you...But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters... Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf. For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God; and if it first begin with us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?... Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls unto him in well doing as unto a faithful Creator”.

In another place, Peter talks about common afflictions suffered by your brethren throughout the world. Some bad things happen to us just because we live in a fallen world; such things are the common lot of mankind. No body’s fault in particular just the way things are.

But the overall tone of Peter’s thinking seems to be that at least some suffering links the afflicted person with Christ to bring somebody else to God.

In other words, sometimes the suffering is for the benefit of the observer.

Once Jesus healed a man who had been born blind.

The disciples asked, “Master, who did sin, this man or his parents that he was born blind”?

Jesus said, “Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents; but that the works of God should be made manifest in him”.

That the works of God should be made manifest to those who observe his deformity.

I have this fantasy.

I could not prove it by Scripture or even common sense, but I have this fantasy:

In my fantasy babies waiting to be born stand in a line before the throne and God asks for volunteers. God explains that on earth there are parents, doctors, nurses, brothers, sisters – people who will be nudged toward the Kingdom by being exposed to a suffering, cripple child, a child in pain, and God asks, “Who will go for me”? And some kids step forward saying, “I love those people I see down there. If it will help bring them Home to You, I’ll go. I’ll be born that way”.

That’s just a fantasy but it rings true to me.

Suffering is rooted in love.

“Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, *that he might bring us to God*”.

This post is getting awfully long and I know my thoughts don’t really answer the questions, but I hope they help.

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Tuesday, May 09, 2006

Heaven In Our Own Backyard



Over the weekend a flight of American Redstarts flocked around our fountain to drink. Drought conditions here in North Florida made them bold to seek water even though Ginny and I sat within a few feet of them.

Yes, this was a weekend for lounging in the garden carrying on one of those eight or ten-hour conversations we enjoy so. Actually, I suppose we've been engrossed in the same conversation for 38 years (with periodic interruptions for lesser living).

Besides the redstarts we saw two new species we'd never seen before but we felt too lazy to get the bird books to identify them. You don't need to name a bird to enjoy it.

Eve and Patricia took us to lunch Saturday then came over to play music videos on my computer. I always get antsy when anybody else touches my computer - especially geeks who know more about the system than I do, because they are always tempted to "improve" things for me. But they were good girls and didn't even mess with those number lock buttons that drive me nuts.

For Gin and me, the weekend was heavenly.

Speaking of Heaven, I've had the thought that Heaven is not a special reward for people who do extra special things, I'm beginning to think that it's a matter of God restoring us to the place we should have been all along if we had not run from Him.

Oh, also I ran across a quote that's been attributed to a lot of people, but I think it was originally mathematician/philosopher Rene Decartes who said:

I would rather live my life as if there is a God, and die to find out there isn't, Than live my life as if there isn't, and die to find out there is.

Wednesday, May 10, 2006

Tree Trimmers & Pie In The Sky

Tuesday I had conversations with nine people!

That's a record for a reclusive hermit like me.

One young man bemoaned the fact that several years ago the love of his life had left him and had much latter committed suicide. Wringing his hands in remorse and regret, the young man said that his intense love was perceived as smothering but he did not realize it at the time.

"I killed that relationship with my own hands," he said.

He said those same words several times.

I could think of absolutely nothing to say which might comfort him.

In the afternoon workers with five bucket trucks, chainsaws and shredders arrived on my street to clear tree limbs off power lines, getting ready for next hurricane season:

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Herein I proved myself a sneaky sinner.

The work crews cleared the main power lines around and between electric poles along the street. That's their job.

At the corner of my house an oak tree overhangs the electric line running from house to transformer. The work crew has no obligation to clear anything on private property... but sometimes a discrete tip to the crew boss removes this obstacle and they will stretch the strict definition of their work order.

Now, I have degenerative arthritis in my right hip and sometimes when the pain is bad I walk with a cane.

The pain was not bad yesterday.

So I faked it.

I limped outside on my cane to talk with the crew boss. I deliberately came across as a crippled old man. I deceived the workers and they swung the bucked and power saws over onto my property and pruned my tree.

Without any charge.

I must have looked so pitiful.

So decrepit.

So pathetic.

These workmen pruned my oak tree in minutes. If I'd had to climb that tree myself (as I intended to do next weekend) it would have taken me hours to do the same work.

Yes, I have degenerative arthritis in my hip and macular degeneration in my eyes — Ginny says that I'm a degenerate from one end to the other.

But that's no excuse for playing on the workmen's sympathy. For being manipulative. For deceiving.

Hey, it worked.

But that's beside the point.

Just because something works, doesn't mean it's right. In fact, a lot of things that "work" are downright wicked.

There's a point to what I've been telling and it's not really about tree limbs or me but about suffering and glory and Heaven

Last Saturday I wrote a post, "Once I got my ass kicked... and once I didn't", about suffering.

I left two of my thoughts on the subject out of my blog post. I'd like to address one of those now.

One thought I left out is that the Bible links present undeserved suffering and pain to future glory.

"I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us".

"Rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy".

"If we suffer with him, we shall also reign with him".

"All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution".

"Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad; for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you".

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“When we were yet without strength, in due time, Christ died for the ungodly... God commendeth his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us... But now being made free from sin and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness and the end everlasting life”.

Again and again and again the Bible holds out the promise of Heaven ahead, that we can be accepted in the beloved, that we can be joint-heirs with Christ, that whatever happens here and how, the possibility of eternal joy, peace and glory lies ahead.

“When the Son of man shall come in his glory and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats... Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come ye blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...”

This is what we were all created for.

But all have sinned, everyone of us falls short of the glory God intends for us. There’s not a teddy bear in the lot of us.

The Scripture teaches that God lightens every man and woman coming into the world, that He intends glory for us... but He gives us a certain amount of free will to accept or reject Him — and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

And He allows us our own choice.

Till death confirms us in the choice we made.

Of all Christian teachings, I find the one about Heaven ahead the hardest one for me to believe. I mean, how can God allow a guy like me, a guy who fakes a bum leg with a cane into his kingdom?

I’m just not good enough.

Yes, the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, cleans us from all sin... I believe that, but I doubt it too.

In my heart of hearts I harbor the believe that Christ can save everybody in the whole wide world - except John Cowart.

Why, in the light of Scripture and the revealed character of God would I think a dumb thing like that?

I suspect there are three reasons:

I have trouble believing in Heaven because Heaven seems far off, future and invisible; while evil, sorrow and suffering are here and now and visible everywhere I look, like the young man who mourned his lost love right here beside my desk this morning. Poor bastard.

I also have trouble believing in Heaven because I've heard intellectuals tease about it. You know, *Opiate of the masses. Pie in the sky by and by*. That sort of thing.

And because I've been teased by people I respected and thought smart about believing in a future good, I feel ashamed to acknowledge the promise of God that there is indeed future good ahead in spite of what we see daily on earth.

A third reason I have a problem believing in Heaven in the future is because of voices from my past.

"John, I'm so disappointed in you". That's the one phrase I remember most hearing from my father during my childhood and youth.

My mother's characteristic phrase when I aspired to an academic career or anything else was, "That's not for the likes of you. Things like that are for better people".

And my first wife said...

Well, let's just leave that one, OK?

But you get the idea.

My parents have both been dead for many years yet I often hear their phrases as clear as can be. Belittling voices from the past that override and drown out the very promise of God.

I hope you don't know what I mean... but I suspect you do.

I need to follow my own advice:

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When I'm talking about following Christ with a person who's had a bitter experience with their church or a repressive religious family member, I advise:

"Forget everything you've ever heard about Jesus. Pretend you have never even heard of God and begin reading a Bible. Start with the Gospel of Mark, it's the shortest one, and see what the Scripture actually says about Jesus for yourself. See if the Jesus you read about there is someone you can trust, someone you like, someone you can follow. If He is, then follow Him as best you are able, one step at a time."

Reading the Bible with an open mind, with no preconceived notions, as though you've never seen a page of it before heals a lot of hurts.

I need to do that again.

In a way, as a witnessing Christian, I shouldn't talk so much about my doubts; I really don't want to squelch anyone else's faith. But if I didn't believe, I wouldn't doubt... Does that make sense?

Push come to shove, I hope I'd say with the Patriarch Job (known for his suffering), "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him".

Do I understand suffering?

No. Not at all.

Do I believe in Jesus Christ?

Yes I do.

Do I look forward to Heaven?

Not really. I halfway expect to hear the words, "John, I'm so disappointed in you".

Is there pie in the sky by and by?

Well, come right down to it, that's the only pie there is.

The next to the last chapter in the Bible says, "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And He that sat upon the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new'".

For some reason I want to close with another photo I snapped of the tree trimming guys:



Thursday, May 11, 2006

A Touch Of Devilment

Wouldn't you know it!

After using my cane and the fake limp with the tree guys that I wrote about yesterday, this morning I woke up with my arthritis hurting like a toothache -- only three feet lower than it should have been.

Is there a connection?

Something to do with God's keen sense of humor.

But I was not hurting too bad to get into a touch of devilment.

The other night when Ginny and I went grocery shopping, to keep from shopping hungry we first had supper at a Chinese restaurant. Of course two boxes of leftovers remained from the huge servings.

I fixed one of these for Ginny's lunch at the office today.

First, I carefully, without tearing it, removed the plastic wrap from her fortune cookie.

Remember, back when I could see better I used to build model ships; I even constructed a ship in a bottle once. (A photo of me doing that heads the "About Me" thing in the sidebar and gets stuck on whenever I make a blog comment — I forget what those things are called, an

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aardvark or aneurysm or avarice or something “a” like that).

Anyhow, I was once skilled at fiddling with little things in tight places.

So, using curved tweezers from my modeling kit, I surgically removed the old fortune without breaking the cookie. I wrote an appropriate, suggestive, seductive (not quite obscene... well, not very, anyhow) message to Virginia on my computer using several fonts till I matched the one used inside real fortune cookies.

Then I cut the new paper fortune out and inserted it inside the cookie. Then I sealed Ginny’s cookie back in it’s plastic wrap.

This project took me about two hours.

Why would I do such a thing?

To bring joy and excitement into her dull, drab, humdrum existence.

Besides, I have my reputation as a dirty old man to protect.

I eagerly anticipate her response.

Saturday, May 13, 2006

Our Peaceable Kingdom

Friday, as I rested by the fountain while doing yard work, I heard a commotion; it sounded like.... It sounded like....

A duck fluttered squawking across the deck. Right on its tail, clawing at fleeing feathers followed a raccoon!

In blind terror the injured duck ran toward me. I stamped my foot. The raccoon saw me and retreated into a fern bed. The duck tried to hide under my chair.

Here’s a photo I took of the injured duck:



What is a wild duck doing in our yard? There is no sizable body of water within eight or ten blocks of our home.

What is a raccoon doing attacking a duck? I've never heard of such a thing before; I thought coons ate frogs and crawdaddies -- and from our neighbor's garbage can which they put out without a lid.

Eve came over a few minutes later and I showed her the duck and the raccoon which continued lurking at the side of the house. As Eve and I talked, a mouse ran between us and right up the middle of the brick walkway.

Later, when Ginny came home, I took her out back to see the duck, and darn if the raccoon didn't come out and try to catch the duck again!

Then, as she and I sat by the fountain, we saw a dove perched on a branch of a cedar tree right outside our garden gate, a tree that had just been pruned by the tree crew Tuesday, when a hawk swooped down attacking the dove and stirring up a ruckus among the other birds around.

And here came the raccoon again after the duck!

What is going on here?

Usually the only wild animals we see in our yard are lizards.

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After a pleasant dinner out, Ginny and I strolled in Memorial Park watching a full moon rise over the river creating a long path of shimmering light across the water. We could hear faint strands of music from a riverboat cruising close to the far shore.

Several other couples leaned smooching against the old concrete balustrade.

We joined them.

Sunday, May 14, 2006

Yes, It's On Page 287

In my wife's affections, I have been replaced by a duck.

Yes, Ginny dotes on the thing.

She has named the duck Matilda.

At dawn Ginny went outside to check on the duck's well-being. All morning she watched the duck, fed the duck, pampered the duck, talked to the duck. All afternoon we shopped for the duck, buying just the right bowl, birdseed with cracked corn, and a small wading pool for the duck.

The duck, of course, hates me.

Yesterday, when the raccoon was grabbing tail feathers, the duck ran to me to save it and hid under my chair while I chased the vile beast off; today, the duck shies away from me, puffs up, hisses, and runs when I get too close — you know, it acts the same way I do with God. When a raccoon is clawing at my tail, I run to Him; danger past, I want Him to keep His distance.

Ginny loves this duck. She coos at it. Thank God we have no grandchildren yet or my beloved wife would loose it completely. However, I am not jealous of a duck.

Don't tell Ginny, but did you know that page 287 of Betty Crocker's best-selling book mentions the phrase *a' l'orange*?

Monday, May 15, 2006

More About Pain and Suffering

I feel a bit more befuddled than usual this morning. Please bear with me here because I'm having a hard time putting my thoughts into words.

Back on Saturday, May 6th, and on Wednesday, May 10th, I wrote long postings about the problem of pain. My e-friend Jellyhead questioned how we can believe in a good, all-powerful God when there is so much pain and suffering in the world.

I'm not satisfied with what I said in those previous postings and I have another thought about this same question.

Back before I became a Christian, I often relished putting Christians on the spot. A missionary returned from Africa tried to convince me of the truth of Christianity and I teased and baited her with religious conundrums about God. Like the lines from the famous play (I've forgotten the name of it, Archibald Maclish's *J.B.???*) where satan taunts:

Play the even, play the odd,
If He is god, He is not good;
If He is good, He is not God.

And I'd bring up questions about famine in Africa, deformed babies, senile old people, war, etc and I'd ask how a good God could allow such things to happen. The Creator must be cruel or capricious to put us in such a world as this.

In one of Shakespeare's plays (again, I forget which one), two men stand on the deck of a ship at sea looking down into the water when one says, "I wonder how it is in the world of fishes?" The other man replies, "The same way it is in the world of men; the big ones eat the little ones."

The big ones eat the little ones.

That is the observable law of nature. The strong deer our runs the wolf, till it gets old and weak, then the wolf eats it. When the wolf gets too old and slow to catch a deer, it starves in the snow. A successful bacteria infect its host and multiplies till it kills the host and dies itself.

This is the way the world works.

A tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing.

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Later the missionary told me she thought I'd never become a Christian because I was such a cynical hardcase.

About that time I read a Bible cover to cover looking for answers to my questions about pain and meaning and purpose in life.

I did not find them.

I found the Scripture addresses real questions, not my sophistries.

Not one word in the Bible tells me how other people ought to treat me; the Bible only tells me how I ought to treat them.

God comes across as intensely personal.

In His "Sermon From The Mount" Jesus uses some form of the word "you" 207 times; He never once says "they ought to" but with Him it's always, "You, when you pray... You' when you give... When a man has ought against you, you go and..."

With Christ, it's always "you" not "them".

For instance, once people questioned Jesus about some Galilaeans who were killed in the Temple by Pilate's soldiers, and about a construction accident when a tower in Jerusalem fell killing 18 workers.

Jesus did not discuss the evening news with them.

Instead He made it personal and said, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish".

In one of C.S. Lewis' Narnia books, Aslan says to Lucy, "No one is ever told someone else's story".

As I think on the personal intensity of the God of the Bible, I realize that He often does not answer my philosophical questions because the answers are none of my business.

I find that I often use philosophical questions about hypothetical or even real life situations in far away places to avoid God, to put Him off, to side track a duty that I know in my heart I should do.

My own questions are a smoke screen to hide me from God.

So, I don't ask, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do"

Instead, I ask, "What about that senile old lady who can no longer read the books she herself wrote when she was young? What about the 13-year-old girl, an honor student, who was killed in Jacksonville last night when a stray bullet came through the wall of her house and hit her as she read a book in her own bed?"

And God does not answer my question about somebody else's pain, suffering, death or disaster

His Word only speaks to me, about me.

It will only speak to you about you.

In the last chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus told Peter that the disciple would get too old to even dress himself and need somebody to carry him around.

Then Jesus said, "Follow me".

But Peter looked around and saw another disciple and asked, "Lord, what shall that man do"?

And Jesus replied, "What is that to thee? Follow thou me."

Tuesday, May 16, 2006

Night Of The Living Duck



Remember that scene in *Frankenstein* where the villagers storm the castle carrying pitchforks and torches?

Ginny was at the computer by the window last night as I was cooking supper when she called out, "John, they're bringing back the duck".

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I turned off the stove and ran with Ginny to the door where six excited neighbors had gathered bringing back “John’s Duck”. We all clustered in the drive discussing what to do with the escaped duck which apparently has recovered from it’s raccoon trauma enough to fly over the fence and escape from our backyard.

One shirtless young man, the one who carried the duck wrapped in his red tee shirt, had been a volunteer at BEAKS, a local bird rescue charity. Sherry, a lady from down the street, carried a cardboard cat carrier box from her vet to put the duck in. Dennis, Captain of the Neighborhood Watch, suggested we all go to Riverside Park and release the duck at a pond there which is frequented by wild ducks. Scott came from across the street to see what the gathering was about; he’d been raking his yard and carried his garden rake in a way that reminded me of the Frankenstein movie.. . The BEAKS volunteer put the duck in the wading pool Ginny had bought for it and all watched the duck bob for Cheerios I tossed to it.

~~The villagers~~ Our neighbors had captured the beast down the street where all joined in a lively chase trapping the duck against a fence. How anyone knew that this was “John’s Duck”, I have no idea because neither Ginny nor I had mentioned the duck to anyone, but in our community word travels fast.



So, “Matilda” (Ginny’s name for the duck) or “Captain Tripps (my name for the duck) once again resides in the

kid's wading pool till further notice and peace returns to the sleepy village.

This was not the Cowarts first encounter with a wild bird. Years ago when the kids were all living at home, we encountered a seagull and I wrote a humor article about it for the local newspaper.

If you'd like to read it, the article is called, The Hand Of The Almighty Smites A Seagull; it's in the bottom left-hand column at www.cowart.info .

Wednesday, May 17, 2006

The Big, Giant, Huge, Enormous, Terrible, Horrible, Ugly Monsters

Editor's Note: *I intended to write about how God sometimes uses bad circumstances to guide us (that's the underlying theme of my book, Glog: A Dinosaur Novel Of Sorts). But, unfortunately, some terrible bad circumstances in my life prevented.*

Therefore this guest posting is written by Matilda The Duck to describe certain traumatic experiences she suffered last Saturday.... jwc

They tried to make me walk the plank.

You know how in the old days, pirates made victims walk the plank into the mouths of hungry sharks?

That's what they wanted to do to me!

I don't really remember how I got to this place. The last thing I recall, I was flying free and saw some interesting tidbit to eat on the ground.

I landed in lush green grass and was nibbling when this raccoon (a wild animal which readers in Great Britain call a Wash Bear because of its habit of always rinsing food in water) -- This raccoon charged out of the bushes and grabbed my tail.

I fled squawking and flapping my wings.

But the creature chased right behind me. It hurt my left wing as I ran blindly toward this fountain in the garden where I heard water running. A giant monster sat in a lawn chair just a few feet away. I hid at the fountain and the giant stomped its feet at the raccoon and chased it away.

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I thought the giant monster would turn to eat me next, but instead it sat back down in the lawn chair and just watched me cringe.

This creature was the ugliest thing I've ever seen!

The Giant Huge, Enormous, Terrible, Horrible, Ugly Monster held a black pipe in its mouth and actually blew smoke from it's nostrils. Disgusting!

It terrified me when it got up and fiddled with something or another on a table. Then suddenly, miraculously, a dish of bird seed appeared beside the fountain and a dish of water for me to drink.

The fat, ugly giant — I'll swear it was a hundred times bigger than me — opened the door to a tool shed, and the clumsy thing accidentally left the door open.

When it moved away from the door, I hid in there, safe from cats, hawks and raccoons for the night.

The next day another Giant, Huge, Enormous, Terrible, Horrible, Ugly Monster appeared in the garden. This one was a female with flowing white hair and a softer voice. It was stacked. (They are mammals, you know)

This female tried to lure me close with a handful of breadcrumbs.

The thing couldn't fool me.

I know these creatures are vicious and can't be trusted.

I prayed for He-Who-Knows-Every-Bird-That-Falls to deliver me from the female monster's clutches and to keep me safe and to give me a pond where I could swim away from these evil beings.

No still small voice answered me.

That afternoon the giants went away for a while but they soon returned.

Miraculously, a pond appeared!

Right there beside the fountain, a pond appeared as if by magic.

It was round and not as deep as I'd prefer, but it was a pond with bright balloons painted on the sides. An answer to my prayers?

But the sides were too high for me to reach the water because of my hurt wing.

What was I to do?

Besides, I faced a new danger.

These two Giant Huge, Enormous, Terrible, Horrible, Ugly Monsters watched my attempts to climb into the safety of the pond. Their beady eyes stalked me. They looked hungry. Treacherous. Conniving.

The male went into my tool shed and came out with this sheet of plywood. The wicked monster couldn't fool me. I saw there was a nail driven through the end of that plank. Surely he intended to whack me with that board.

He leaned it against the side of the pond while he stalked me. The monster spread wide it's arms and came at me from the right.

I ran left squawking.

Then the female came at me from the left.

Bravely, I ran between them.

They circled inching their way along so that the wall of the tool shed blocked my escape. These Giant Huge, Enormous, Terrible, Horrible, Ugly Monsters were herding me up onto that plank!

Who knows what was at the end of that thing?

Pirates made victims walk the plank into the mouths of hungry sharks.

I ran left. The female blocked me.

I ran right. The ugly male blew smoke at me.

Like wolves hunting in a pack, lunging left and right, these two herded me right up the inclined plane of that plank.

I had nowhere else to go.

Escape was impossible.

Why had He-Who-Knows-Every-Bird-That-Falls allowed this to happen to me?

The giants forced me up that plank. Higher and higher. Deeper and deeper into the unknown.

Forsaking all hope, I reached the end of the plank.

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I jumped.

How about that! My brave leap of faith landed me in water! Cool, clean, clear water. Water where Cheerios and birdseed floated on the surface.

The Giant Huge, Enormous, Terrible, Horrible, Ugly Monsters must not be able to swim. In fact, I think they are afraid of water, because once I hit the surface, they both retreated to their lawn chairs and just sat watching me swim and feed and preen my feathers safe away from their terrible designs.

Yes. Even though I had to go through this terrible scary circumstance with the Giant Huge, Enormous, Terrible, Horrible, Ugly Monsters, the Good Lord God, He-Who-Knows-Every-Bird-That-Falls, delivered me and brought me to still waters with my tail feathers intact.

I'll be safe here till my wing heals and I can fly free again.

Thursday, May 18, 2006

To and Fro

Wednesday, like a certain well-known biblical character, I roamed to and fro over the surface of the earth.

I kept the car so I could run various errands.

First I drove Ginny to work then, since the bank wasn't open yet, I drove to Whiteway Delicatessen to enjoy a breakfast of fried eggs, hot fried sausage and the greasiest, tastiest pile of home fries to be found. The way they prepare breakfast insures that it is no-fat and low-cholesterol — has to be, I was able to walk out under my own steam.

A wonderful treat... except for one thing.

Some customer, with a mouth loud enough to be heard by everyone in the place, insisted on telling jokes about menopause, Jews, lesbians and Viet Nam veterans. When no one would laugh at one offensive joke, he'd try to top it with one even more offensive.

Now as a gentleman and a Christian, I know I'm not to be judgmental of others so in keeping with the tenants of Christian charity I will not call him a dog-fucking asshole.

No, I'm above such pettiness. We Christians don't say things like that.

Next, I drove to the bank to cash our income tax refund check.

I have this theory: Instead of selecting a president by the electoral college, I think that the guy who pays the most tax, in proportion to his income, in a given year should be named President for that year.

During my First Hundred Days, I'd recall all American troops then A-Bomb everywhere between London and Hawaii. Whichever way the wind blows, would the fallout hurt anyone who means our country well?

Then I'd solve the immigration problem by building an 18-foot electric fence along the St. Mary's river to keep all those yankees on their own side of the border and out of Florida.

Enough daydreaming.

I drove to the gas station where I spent all our tax refund. Humm... Also, during my First Hundred Days I'd execute the top three executives of each oil company for treason (How has Al Qaeda hurt us more than these guys?) and see if the number four man in the company might not find some possible way to lower gas prices

When I walked into the gas station, the two clerks on duty were behind the counter engaged in heavy petting and groping.

"It's against company policy to do that in front of customers," I announced as they sprang apart.

I paid for my gas, then said, "The customer is now leaving the store; you may go back to what you were doing. Have fun."

I don't think the guy understood English but the girl got the giggles over my teasing.

Next I drove to Abandon-Hope-All-Who-Enter-Here-Mart. Actually, I'd stopped at another store first hoping to avoid having to go into the mart but the other place didn't carry the pool chemical I needed so I was forced to go to Hell-mart.

While I was there, I bought a pair of winos, the \$6 dollar canvas shoes I favor, but I bought a pair a half size

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larger because my feet have taken to swelling, burning and stinging most afternoons

There went the last of the tax refund.

Drove back home. Too exhausted to get any work done. Read a murder mystery till time to drive to pick up Ginny.

No spiritual insights today.

Some days are just days.

Friday, May 19, 2006

Trash and Treasures

Trash collectors dictate the ebb and flow of my life.

Because they pick up yard trash about 6 a.m. on Fridays, I spent Thursday pruning branches so I could have them at the curb in time for the trashmen. So, all day I balanced on a ten-foot ladder sawing off dead palm fronds.

I now have a huge pile of debris at the curb ready for pick up.

If I don't get the dead branches down this month, hurricane season starts next month and the storms will prune the trees for me, but with less precision.

As I balanced on my ladder, I thought about various aspects and implications of my faith in Christ. The Christian religion reminds me of the many sparkling facets of a diamond; whichever way I turn it I see some shining wonder.

When I consider one facet, I think of others even more impressive. There's worship and history and social and relational and spiritual and charitable and personal and collective and all sorts of overlapping other aspects, each one a treasure and each one a pain in the ass.

Different appeals and different rewards. Some much easier for me to stomach than others. Some I love to ponder and others I avoid thinking about.

I haven't thought any of this through enough to be able to write about it coherently.

I'll let it percolate for a while longer before I try.

Meanwhile, I need to get the recycle bin to the curb; it's six a.m. right this moment and the truck for that stuff comes by at seven.

Saturday, May 20, 2006

Flamingo!



Actress Allison Janney inspires me to think of shrimp.

Actually, this is a very logical thought process —for me, at least.

Friday, among other chores I cleaned my pipes. A few weeks ago Donald gave me a beautiful set of churchwardens he bought on E-bay and I had not taken time to clean them.

For me, pipe cleaning involves an elaborate ritual with a box full of specialized probes and tools and blades arranged in a specific order. Along with a bottle of Scotch whisky.

It's a task only to be done outside because it generates a lot of trash and debris.

No, I don't drink the Scotch. I use the whiskey to cut tobacco residue in the stem and bowl of a pipe..

Thursday night Ginny and I watched a dvd of *West Wing* programs. This, now canceled, tv series starred

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Allison Janney as C.J. Craig, press secretary to the President of the United States.

Ms Janney proves that a grown woman can be intelligent, powerful, human, romantic, alluring and sexy — unlike the brainless, pre-pubescent jiggle bimbos featured on most tv shows as sex symbols; they have no idea what it's all about!

Ms Janney does!

Anyhow, in one of the *West Wing* episodes we watched, the Secret Service gave C.J. Craig the code name *Flamingo*.

A couple of years ago, our youngest daughter, Patricia, gave us a pink plastic flamingo for our garden.

No Florida yard is complete without one.

Naturally we placed the lovely yard ornament at the base of a flamingo plant. We have a dozen or so of these flamingo plants spotted around the yard.



As I cleaned my pipes a few feet away from the plant thinking pure, noble, Christian thoughts about Ms Janney, I remembered a trip to the zoo.

We were looking at a herd of real live flamingos when the ornithologist explained that flamingos are actually white birds — but as they eat shrimp, some chemical in the shrimp turns the bird's feathers pink

Over the years shrimp have played a major roll in my life, both physically and spiritually.

Our family would have died without them.

This importance is reflected in my journal entries over the years; several selections from my journal showing how God has used shrimp in my life; these selections tell of grueling poverty and hardship underpinned by deep joy.

You can find one such entry in the right hand column of my website (www.cowart.info) under the title Shrimp & Dog Days Of Summer.

Flamingos turn pink from eating shrimp. Shrimp turn pink when dropped in hot water —

Speaking of pink and hot, here's another web photo of Ms Janney in a pink gown at an awards ceremony:



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Sunday, May 21, 2006

JOHNNY DOES NOT PLAY WELL WITH OTHERS.

Saturday morning Ginny and I dabbled in our garden clearing a flower bed beneath our bedroom window. This was such a relaxed happy activity.

The day went downhill from there.

She had some old books to trade in so we drove to the largest used bookstore in Jacksonville, a place which covers most of a city block in two buildings which house over a million volumes. My heart sinks every time I go in there and I see all those books which other people have written and I realize that the books I write are just so much useless trash, just another item on the dusty pile.

All those dead writers thought they were doing something important too...

Solomon said, "Of the making of many books there is no end and much study is a weariness of the flesh".

About 9 o'clock this evening my brother called from downstate. He informed me that somebody with nothing better to do has organized a family reunion at a state park next month.

He wants me to come be ridiculed and put down and displayed as a failure in front of all these people who would not have even known about it if I'd died ten or fifteen years ago.

My heart sank at the news.

I do not want to go.

These people dismissed me and my immediate family from contact back when my mother died. I see no reason to renew contact.

These folks are related to me but they mean no more to me, nor I to them, than the crowd I encounter at the grocery store checkout line. Yet some sense of guilt or hint of obligations makes me think I perhaps should attend this function.

Of all the things Jesus ever said, the hardest for me to deal with was when he told some poor bastard, "Go home

to your family and friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee”.

That was said to the crazy guy who lived in the cemetery and cut himself with sharp stones and Jesus cast the demons into the herd of pigs which jumped off the cliff. Then “He that had been possessed with the devil prayed him that he might be with him”.

But instead, Jesus sent him back to his own family.

Seems to me that Jesus did that with a couple of blind guys and lepers too.

Instead of letting them be disciples and get burned at the stake or fed to lions, Jesus sent them back to family.

How cruel.

How could a loving God do such a thing?

I’m going to have to pray about this invitation and see if there’s any possible loophole that will get me out of going.

I wrote about my feelings in this same sort of situation back on February 28th.

For some reason school teacher used to write on my report cards:

JOHNNY DOES NOT PLAY WELL WITH
OTHERS.

Monday, May 22, 2006

Odds & Ends — Mostly Odds

Ginny & I have been thinking about buying a couple of bicycles for exercise so over the weekend we visited a bike store where we discovered that two new bicycles would cost more than our car! Maybe we’ll take up weightlifting or lacrosse or rock climbing.

Yeah, rock climbing.

Rocks are cheap.

We can afford rocks.

Matilda the duck actually flew about ten feet Saturday morning. Her wing is healing and I imagine she’ll be flying away soon.

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I'm still obsessing about that reunion thing. It's a brain consumer. I keep trying to get past every other factor and ask only, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?"

That's the only question that counts.

Since I work at home while Ginny works out of an office, every weekend I try to give her a few hours alone in her own home to do whatever appeals to her. This weekend, to give her the run of the house, I spent a lot of time outside cleaning the storage shed.

For a man who is not a materialist, I own a lot of junk.

Books, old computer parts, file drawers, fossils, statues, teaching gimmicks, natural history samples, broke things to be glued back together, a clock for me to repair, tools I'll need someday, and who knows what all else fill this shed.

I filled three garbage cans with stuff I'm sure I will never need again — until next week when a need for it is sure to arise.

Here's a Bible Quiz question:

Q: How long did Cain hate his brother?

A: As long as he was Able.

During Ginny's alone time, she checked our grab-and-go bag for insurance policies, car title, birth certificates, etc. She also checked our hurricane/bird flu/other disaster supplies.

For the next couple of days, Florida has suspended sales taxes on any hurricane supplies and Ginny checked to see what we might want replenish.

I had not checked e-mail all weekend. This morning 78 e-mails filled my inboxes. Several friends send me this photo of what to expect when bird flu hits Florida:



Tuesday, May 23, 2006

And Now, For Number Two On My List...

First thing Monday morning I wrote down my 2do2da list on a 3X5 card so I could scratch out each item as I accomplished it.

Topping my list of 23 items, number one was to find a faulty electric plug in my outside office shed so I could get the lamps working again so I could see enough to get items eight through 15 done.

You following this so far?

My outside office shed has two wall sockets. Plugged into the one on the north wall is a long surge protector/power strip; in that are plugged four desk lamps, a computer, a printer and a radio.

In front of that north wall socket over months of time, I have build a brick and board bookcase. In front of that book case I stored a floor-to-ceiling stack of file boxes loaded with Florida history materials. On top of those boxes are mailing tubes containing history posters, box lids filled with coffee mugs featuring some Jacksonville logo, and boxes filled with maybe a hundred tee-shirts featuring Jacksonville events from years past.

On top of those are board games, ash trays, pipe racks, a statue of a Greek goddess, a pile of file folders I haven't gotten around to filing, and a long board with nails hammered in a complex pattern which I used in teaching adult Bible lessons.

Can you picture the scene?

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Hold it in mind because you can't actually see it because my lights went out a couple of months ago. I used a flash light when I need to find a book or file out there.

Oh yes, I forgot to mention that the books are double-shelved.

So to find why the lights went out and get them working again, I needed to test every socket in every extension cord and several surge protectors which link to the first one.

To test the sockets I used a small radio.

To make sure that worked, I unplugged the coffee pot in the kitchen and plugged the radio into the wall socket.

I hear music.

Good.

I up plug it.

I still hear music.

The radio is one with a battery back up so that it keeps playing even when unplugged. I remove the battery and check it again.

Again I hear music.

Crawling around under the desk and behind stacks of books and the fan and the child-sized coffin (don't ask) I plug the radio into every socket I can reach.

No music.

That means that I must trace all the wires back to the north wall socket — the one behind all that stuff.

I remove the coffin (which is full of toys — again, don't ask) and the ammunition box, and the Dave Barry collection, and the chess set, and the andirons, and the brass spittoon, and the plastic skeleton under the glass dome, and ... I still can't see the wall socket.

I clear a space on the desk (got to repair that clock someday) for the books and begin disassembling the brick and board bookshelves over the top of the other stuff.

Won't work.

I remove the cinder block with the attached seamstress's hem marker, and the fish skull (Don't ask... well, if you must, it's another adult Bible lesson teaching gimmick). I remove the boxes of tee shirts, the coffee mugs, the board games, the first two layers of bookshelves...

I still can't see that plug.

Good thing I'm not a materialist.

Exhausted I take a break and sit outside smoking a favorite pipe I'd lost months ago but found behind some stuff this morning.

I watch Matilda the duck. I've been running the lawn water sprinklers because we haven't had a drop of rain in over a month

At first the duck is suspicious of this new thing (incidentally, she's still convinced that I'm really Colonel Sanders in disguise) but she soon claims the sprinkler as her own. When a dove or bluejay or cardinal or cowbird tries to drink from the spray of water, Matilda spreads her wings and charges squawking to chase the other bird away.

As I sit there panting from all my exertions, a light comes on above my head...

A mental light, you understand.

An idea.

A bright idea.

A very bright idea.

A brilliant idea in fact!

I went back in the office, unplugged the initial surge protector/power strip, ran a heavy-duty extension cord from the SOUTH wall plug...

And behold, there was light and music and computer cursor flashing and a cooling breeze from the fan.

That cooling breeze felt very nice as I moved all that stuff back to where it was in the first place.

Like most of my labor on this earth, it all proved unnecessary.

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But, if you hear of a job opening for an electrical engineer, I am available.

Wednesday, May 24, 2006

I Have Been Selected ...

Tuesday afternoon the postman delivered a letter hand-addressed to me —

Not to my wife.

Not to one of my daughters.

But hand-addressed to me, John Cowart.

The letter contains my invitation and my official application form.

It says, “You have been selected to compete in the 2006 National American Miss Florida Pageant ... You could be the next **Miss Florida!**”

Yes! My sterling qualities have finally been recognized. I’ve been chosen to compete in a beauty contest.

I may become the next Miss Florida.

This can not possibly be a scam to sucker folks out of the \$20 application fee because the brochure confirms that I was selected by “an experienced panel of judges”.

They couldn’t be wrong about something as important as this.

My application says that I will need a prom dress or evening gown for the formal wear segment of the pageant.

Here’s a worry: I don’t happen to own a formal evening gown... but for the swimsuit competition I get to wear either a one-piece suit or a two-piece bikini — but I can’t wear a thong. Contest rules prohibit thongs.

Drat!

I’m so excited.

I can see myself on the runway.

I can smell my huge bouquet of roses.

I can feel the wide silk slash banner with my title. I can hear the MC announce my vital measurements: 48!... 50!... 53! ...8!

My application requires that I send a recent photograph. The brochure says that my photo may qualify me to appear on magazine covers!

Wow! Since a photo of me has already appeared on a book cover, that's the one I think I'll send along with my application fee.

The pageant is not until mid July. I can hardly wait.

Er... Anybody out there got a prom dress I can borrow?

Yes, I'll use the photo from my book cover. ...

Good thing the experienced panel of judges didn't see that photo before inviting me to appear in their beauty contest.

My hair was just a mess that day.

Thursday, May 25, 2006

Just A Little Thing

A year or two ago a beautiful young lady moved into the house next door. Every morning I see her leave for work. Every evening I see her return. Each time she loads and unloads stuff from her car.

I am a member of our Neighborhood Crime Watch so it's an official duty for me to watch what's going on around me.

Ha!

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John Cowart's 2005 Blog

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Yesterday there was a power outage. Folks up and down the block clustered in front yards to talk about it. I ended up standing next to the girl next door.

After a bit she said she had to go back inside to see about the baby.

“What baby?” I asked.

Turns out she has a new baby.

“How long have you had this baby?” I asked.

“He was born in January,” she said.

In all that time I have never noticed her with a baby. I’d never noticed that she was pregnant. I have fed her dog and I have moved her trash can out of her drive when the garbage men left it in the middle — but I never noticed any baby.

Hey, it’s a little thing.

Little things are easy to miss.

You can’t expect me to see little things like that.

I keep my eye on the big picture along our block. I am alert and watchful... I just don’t know what’s going on around me.

That’s unusual.

Friday, May 26, 2006

Yard Work, Halloween and A Lost Dog

Thursday I told my friend that I don’t feel able to continue taking care of his yard on top of my own. I hated to do this because I hated to admit that I’m feeling old and weak. It was an admission of defeat.

God willing, I’ll keep working at it till the end of June to give him time to hire a yardman or make other arrangements, but I just don’t feel I can keep it up.

Of course, he said I can keep borrowing his mower and tools even though I’m not helping with his yard.

As I edged his lawn and my own, I got to thinking about Halloween.

Ginny and I gave out huge packets of goodies to the kids and among the treasures were little comic books and I kept thinking about the story in one of these:

A man owned a little dog which he loved.

He was nuts about this dog. He fed it and gave it water. He fenced in his backyard garden and placed the dog there to live.

He told the dog, “Stay”.

Every evening the man came to the garden and played fetch-the-stick with his dog. He walked with his dog. He talked with it. He doted on it.

One day the dog wiggled out under the fence. Out of bounds, the dog wandered hostile city streets. It wallowed in filth. It ate garbage right out of the cans. It slept in the gutters. It ran with other dogs.

The dog catcher came. He cast a net over the dog. He lassooed a noose around it's neck and dragged it into a barren steel cage. He took it to the dog pound.

Dogs only stay locked in the pound a few short days before being shoved into the gas chamber.

Destroyed forever.

The owner of the dog searched all over for it. He called its name. He went down alleys and dark places seeking his own. He went to all the low places dogs go.

He even went to the dog pound.

To rescue his own dog from that gas chamber, he paid the penalty. He paid a high price to redeem his own dog.

He took the dog he owned in the first place, the dog he had bought back from the edge of destruction, the dog he loved — and he returned it to the garden.

The Halloween comic reminds me that in his first letter St. Peter says that we were not redeemed with mere silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ.

Something to think about, isn't it?

Saturday, May 27, 2006

Now, Where Could They Have Gone?

On Monday, May 22nd, and Tuesday, May 23rd, I wrote about clearing junk out of my shed.

Remember that?

I wrote it down.

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I mentioned throwing out three garbage cans of useless, no longer needed items.

On Wednesday, May 24th, I mentioned delivering a pick-up truck full of useable goods to one rescue mission. Then on Thursday, May 25th, I sent another car-load of donations to another mission.

These mission donations are not acts of charity because I was not giving anything I treasure myself, but stuff I no longer have any use for. I think charity means actually giving the best, not castoffs.

Be that as it may, I actually put down in writing this statement:

For a man who is not a materialist, I own a lot of junk. Books, old computer parts, file drawers, fossils, statues, teaching gimmicks, natural history samples, broke things that need to be glued back together, a clock for me to repair, tools I'll need someday, and who knows what all else fill this shed.

I filled three garbage cans with stuff I'm sure I will never need again — until next week when a need for it is sure to arise.

Well, yesterday as Ginny and I prepared for a family cookout on Monday, my beautiful, understanding wife, who looks so young and vivacious, began washing lawn chairs — and looking for the cushions that go in those chairs.

“I know they’re around here somewhere,” she said.

“Where did you put them?” I asked.

“I’m sure we stored them in your shed after the last cookout,” she said.

Do you want to tell her?

Or do I have to?

Speaking of cookouts, yesterday I spoke with my brother on the phone and told him that I do not plan to attend that reunion. I feel no animosity toward any of the folks involved. I wish them all well. But the extended family has not been part of my life for close to 20 years and I feel uncomfortable about renewing contact.

I told David, “I do not want to go”.

Saying “I want to” or “I do not want to” is all the reason needed to explain almost any morally neutral action.

Didn’t Jesus say, “Let your yea be yea and your nay be nay” or something close to that? We get in trouble and fall into the danger of lying when we try to elaborate more than that.

“I want to — I don’t want to”.

Those two honest phrases cover all that needs saying.

Monday, May 29, 2006

Thinking About Indonesia



Over the weekend I’ve been thinking a lot about Indonesia.

Last year about this time a company in Indonesia published a translation of a little book I wrote on prayer. (The Indonesian publisher’s website is www.perkantas.org/literatur.)

Before I got word about this translation, I could hardly find Indonesia on a map.

It’s about as far away from where I live as you can get and still be on this earth. Since the publisher first

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contacted me I have followed the fate of the people of this beautiful country daily in Google news and on tv.

The news has seldom been good.

In January, 2005, the tsunami struck killing 200,000 people in Indonesia.

In February, another earthquake killed another 9,000. Humanitarian relief workers have been shot as they tried to help.

An outbreak of polio killed over 50 children and crippled scores of others. A car bomb set off in a Christian market place killed 25 and mangled many others. Churches have been burned and Christians live in daily jeopardy.

Five teenaged Christian girls on their way to school were beheaded by a Muslim mob.

Another earthquake on March 28th, 2005 killed another 900 people.

In East Timor civil war erupted. What began as a schism within the military spilled over to the general population, which is divided on geographical lines of east and west, or those perceived to have been pro-Indonesian against those who wanted independence.

Rival gangs torched homes and battled with machetes for a third day yesterday. Fire across the city filled the sky with smoke, and the streets were strewn with smoldering debris while Black Hawk helicopters roared overhead. The United Nations evacuated personnel over the weekend.

Also, over this past weekend another seven people in a single family died of bird flu. All had earlier tested positive for the H5N1 virus in a local laboratory. Bird flu has now infected 48 people in Indonesia, 36 died.

This morning's news says another five people in Indonesia have tested positive.

Some of the bird flu victims avoided hospitals and sought help from alternative medical sources which news reports call witchdoctors. \

Indonesia has had three major bomb attacks in the past two years. Bombings at a Bali nightclub killed 202 people in 2002, a bombing outside the Australian

Embassy in Jakarta in September killed nine people and a blast at the Marriott Hotel in the October left a dozen people dead.

All three attacks were blamed on an arm of al Qaeda.

This past Saturday morning another massive earthquake hit Indonesia. At least 5,000 people died instantly and over 20,000 injured people overran hospitals. Doctors and nurses flattened cardboard boxes on the ground in parking lots to use as hospital beds.

According to Google News, Rani Indrawati, from the village of Bagulon Kulon, said, “We’ve got no clean water, no food. No one has come to help us so we’re going to eat air to survive.”

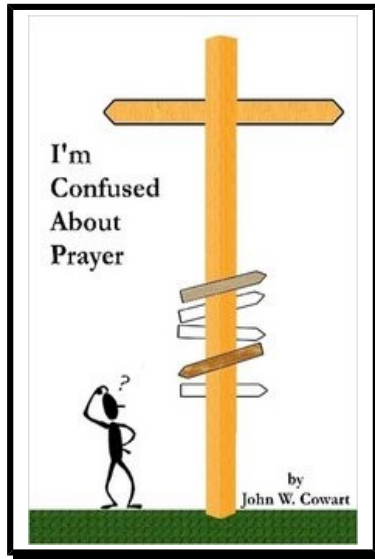
Another survivor said, “We’re short of everything—clothes, food, water, all are gone. We are poor people, but our lives matter.”

In the midst of all that anguish and turmoil, I question how my little book fits.

The title of my book in Indonesian is *Mengapa Doaku Tidak Dikabulkan*.

I have no idea how to pronounce that.

In English, the title of the book is: *Why Don't I Get What I Pray For?* Or, in a more recent edition, *I'm Confused About Prayer*. It is a frivolous religious humor book with hardly any redeeming social value.



Yet the translators and folks who produced the book over there have been through Hell to bring this bit of froth into print.

Over the years a number of bits and pieces of my work has been translated into various languages but none of the others have captured my attention as this one in Indonesian. Indonesia is, I think, the most populous Moslem nation on earth.

I'm not so vain as to think that people over there are sitting in the rubble reading copies of my book on prayer, but I do hope that my books is of some comfort to somebody there and that it may act as a protoevangelium to some person thinking about becoming a Christian.

I think about Indonesia a lot.

If you are inclined to pray for the troubled land of Indonesia, please ask the Lord to use this little book to honor Himself and to help troubled folks in pain.

Tuesday, May 30, 2006

Let Not The Sun Go Down ...

Donald's girlfriend had nor read my blog yesterday but when she arrived at our Memorial Day cookout, she handed me this hand-woven silk bookmark from Indonesia.



How's that for coincidence?

She and Donald also brought her parents to meet us for the first time.

Humm.

Remember the chair cushions I mistakenly sent off to the mission last week? Well, Wes arrived at the party bringing his own chair, one large enough to fit his robust form. So no problem with chairs.

Remember how I'd sent two loads of stuff to the mission last week? Well Barbara brought six huge bags of clothes for us to take to the mission; so our house is again full of mission donations!

Warren and Carol brought in so much food that they needed a garden cart to transport it. Helen's mother brought Ginny flowers. Eve brought buns. Donald brought drinks. Jennifer brought ice cream sandwiches. And the girl next door brought the baby which outshined even Matilda the duck as star of the show; never have I seen a better behaved baby, A real charmer.

I'd read an internet article about how to make a 15-foot high gusher by adding Mentos breath mints to a bottle of diet Coke. As soon as I read the formula, I realized that this could be used to illustrate a Bible verse: "Let not the sun go down on your wrath".

During our devotional time after the meal (we've followed this custom for ages) I spoke on this phrase.

Here's, more or less, what I said:

Last week I yelled at a book.

It was a self-help book and a phrase in it touched a nerve.

Last week the news said south of us In Miami, a man threw his two children out of a 15-story hotel window, then jumped himself.

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Last week a young man just north of us ran his car into a family at a McDonalds, then backed up and ran over them again.

Last week at a public event in Germany a young man went berserk, pulled out a knife and stabbed more than 20 strangers as he ran through the crowd.

I don't know about the other guys, but I yelled at that book because I've been holding some anger inside, harboring it in my heart.

I hold grudges and I still feel angry over slights that I received 50 years ago. These little white mints represent different things I feel angry about:

This mint is one of my first memories — my mother swatted me with a broom and knocked me down a flight of stairs. I still feel angry about that.

This one is for a boss who told me to shut a window.

This one is my first wife.

This one...

Holding grudges inside, keeping anger in my heart, builds pressure and frustration and depression. I've heard that depression is anger turned inward. Or if anger breaks out, then you end up yelling at books or other violent things.

This bottle of diet coke bottle represents my heart.

Let's see what happens when I hold all these petty slights, resentments, bitterness, anger in my heart.

Do not try this at home! I am a professional!

(When the first mint hit the coke, the foam spewed 15 feet in the air. Spectacular! Thanks Jamie. I wish I'd got pictures.)

Well, we see what happens when I regard iniquity in my heart. "Let not the sun go down on your wrath".

How?

I have three suggestions:

One: when I feel anger over something somebody does to me, I need to remember the Lord's Prayer. "Forgive me my trespasses as I forgive those who

trespass against me". I ask the Lord to remind me of a time when I have done the same sort of thing to someone else as is being done to me. And Bingo! He does that. He shows me times when I have been unjust to you children, of times I have been unreasonable with Ginny, of times I have belittled, cheated —made life harder for someone than it needs to be. Forgive me of my trespasses just as I forgive so and so for pissing me off right now.

Second: And I think this is the hardest thing any Christian is ever called on to do. In His sermon from the Mount, Jesus said, "If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift".

Go directly to the person involved and get straight. Don't complain to your friend. Don't tell your wife. Don't seal it inside. Go directly to the other person and straighten things out face to face.

Third, the same passage that says "Don't let the sun go down on your wrath, says, "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind". This passage is from St. Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, chapter 4, verses 21 through 32.

Be renewed in the spirit of my mind. A thing that helps me with this when I begin to feel anger, to feel bitterness and resentment build, when my train of thought goes negative — I say the word STOP! I say it out loud. I break that train of thought by the word STOP! and put my mind on a new track. And I do this as often as necessary.

Don't let the sun go down on your wrath.

Last week, I saw a tee-shirt in a mail-order catalog that came in; the shirt said:

**Don't Go To Bed Angry
Stay Up All Night Plotting Revenge!**

After the devotional talk, some folks sat chatting, some took a nap, some strolled next door to visit dogs, some exchanged recipes, some splashed in the pool, some clipped cuttings from garden plants to root, some ate more goodies...

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Some talked travel: Yosemite, Arkansas, San Francisco, Blue Springs

And one stole Ginny's lucky bamboo and a birdfeeder.

But I'm not angry at him. Not me.

Just told him to get out of town by sundown!

Wednesday, May 31, 2006

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.

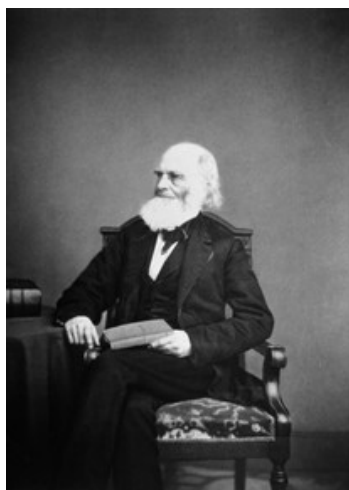
Yes, we prayed for a duck.

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 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

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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.

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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.

Oh well, Hurricane Season begins tomorrow.

Here in Florida, we're now ready!:



JUNE

Thursday, June 01, 2006

When the Big haNd is On the floor..

2day Hurrrecane Season officially begins.

Here in Floreida we are readdy with a new state map and mottto:



Wendesday mourning I woke up groggy and looked at the clock — 4 a.m. already, time to get to wrok.

I staggered out to the living room, turned on the computer, checked out Googled news, posted a blog entry, checked e-maul and started my exercises in a self-help book, Dr. Fill's *Cures For Kinks*.

I glansed up at the clock again... It said 2:15 a.m.

How could that be???

Oh, I get it.

When the big hand is on the 12 and the little hand is on the 4, then it is 4 a.m. but when I first woke up, it was the big hand on the 4 and the little hand on the 12 so that means I got up and started work at 12:20 a.m. instead of at 4 a.m. o'clock.

Thet explaines a lot.

Friday, June 02, 2006

A Dirty Old Man At Prayer

Thursday as Ginny left for work, she erected our hurricane warning flags to mark the first day of the official 2006 hurricane season. We fly these flags to remind the neighborhood to finish preparations.

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As is my habit, I woke at a reasonable 4 a.m. — not 12:20 as I did yesterday!

I read Google News and fiddled with blogs and such to start my day. I'm reluctant to say this, but I also prayed a little.

The reason I'm reluctant to mention prayer is that Jesus said our prayers should be a secret thing between us and God. They are not for public consumption. But I'll let you in on the secret to this extent:

I pray that the hurricanes will hit somebody else instead of me.

See why Jesus said to keep our mouths shut about such things?

In my November 7th journal entry last year, I kick this odd idea of Christ's around a bit.

Two things got me to thinking about prayer today:

First, this afternoon T.T. called asking me about Drive By Prayers.

In a church I used to attend, a bunch of us would load up in a van on Friday nights and drive slowly through the neighborhood pausing to pray about various things we

saw. For instance when domestic violence spilled into the street, we'd pray for that couple; when a prostitute lingered on the corner, we'd pray for her; when we saw a drug deal going down, we'd pray. We'd pray for homeless guys on the street, for cops, for drunks, whatever..

Please don't get the idea that pious thoughts were all we expended. That church group also sponsored anger management classes, AA group, a soup kitchen, drug counseling, tutoring, family services, AIDS support, etc. to help in a hands-on manner in the things we prayed about.

Here's a funny aside:

At that church the prayer group put out wooden boxes where folks could place written anonymous prayer requests. On Fridays we'd meet, open the boxes and pray for the specific things people submitted.

One evening I drew a slip from a lady named Mary who wanted to have another baby. I prayed long and loud for Mary to get pregnant.

When it came the next guy's turn to pray, he started, "Lord, if it was my wife Mary who put that slip in the box, please disregard everything Cowart just prayed for!"

Anyhow, the second thing to make me think of prayer yesterday was that my eldest daughter took me to lunch.

Remember how last week I sent out all that stuff to the mission?

Well, over the weekend another six or eight bags of stuff gravitated to our foyer for the mission and I called Jennifer to deliver it for me since I didn't have the car.

We enjoyed a nice lunch at one of the places Ginny and I often go. Back six or eight weeks ago a young lady there, one of the waitresses, had asked for our prayers about a life-threatening surgery she faced.

Well, as Jennifer settled the bill and I started out the door, a voice shouted, "John! John!"

I turned and this beautiful, well-endowed young woman threw herself into my arms hugging me and pressing against me and crying on my shoulder and thanking me for my prayers.

We stood there entwined in the doorway, half in and half out with all the folks in the restaurant watching.

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Now, please understand that the young woman acted in sheer, innocent, youthful exuberance, relief and spontaneous joy.

But also remember that I am a certified, card-carrying dirty old man.

So, as she praised God for her successful surgery and clung to my chest continually hugging me, I, being a devout, pious, spiritual Christian gentleman, entertained one thought:

“Wow, is she really stacked”!

Now my daughter, who had never seen this woman before in her life, stood watching from maybe ten feet away. She of course knew nothing of the background of the situation. She looked embarrassed and puzzled about why this voluptuous young woman would be hugging her father right out there in public

She was so embarrassed in fact that she couldn't say a word. She coped by ignoring the scene and didn't mention it as we got in here car and drove away.

She wanted to ask me what that was all about so bad she could taste it.

I remained silent. I saw no need to offer an explanation.

The subject of prayer should stay a secret.

It's good to keep your kids off balance. Keep 'em guessing. Besides, I have my reputation to maintain.

Saturday, June 03, 2006

Usual Friday Night Date A Bust

I spend too much time getting ready to do other things.

Friday I began getting the yard ready to enjoy over the weekend and getting the house ready so Ginny and I can have quality time without chores hanging over us.

For ages we've made a practice of enjoying a regular Friday Night Date to make a transition between workweek and weekend so we can get reacquainted.

Going out for dinner, walks in the moonlight, leisure conversations — Friday night things to clear the air for romance and time just to ourselves to enjoy eachother.

But, by the time she got home from work last night, I'd worked so hard in blazing sun and pressed so hard to get everything done ahead of time, that I felt wasted, depleted, physically sick.

Too sick and tired to go out.

We ate a bowl of chili in front of the tv. Put in a vcr movie, *Ghostbusters*, and I fell immediately to sleep. Work up at 3 a.m. to find Ginny watching our vcr copy of *The Stand*— the whole thing!.

I feel guilty for letting her down.

There is such a thing as getting too prepared for a thing.

Sunday, June 04, 2006

Where, O Where Shall I Spend My Money?

Pig BBQ
Bono's BBQ
Woody's BBQ
Georgie's BBQ
Blackjack's BBQ
Kansas City BBQ
Cross Creek BBQ
Sonny's BBQ on Lane
Sonny's BBQ on Blanding

Each of these BBQ restaurants features different special qualities and atmosphere. All lie within a three-mile circle of the one we chose to go to for lunch Saturday

Ginny and I have eaten there every month or so for about ten years (It used to be named Riche's BBQ when we first started going there).

Therefore we anticipated a pleasant experience and good food.

When we arrived two-thirds of the restaurant's tables were empty. I requested the table we favor, but the waitress snapped at me.

She said, "You have to sit where I put you".

I am a soft spoken person and I thought she may not heard my request so I repeated it.

She snatched up two menus and marched down another aisle saying, "You have to follow me".

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Oh, do I?

I took Ginny's hand and turned around so that as the snotty waitress marched in one direction, we walked out the door in the other.

Standing in the parking lot we could see down the street to Wendy's, Fishlip's Grill, Taco Bell, New China, China Beach, Jimmy's Fried Chicken, East Buffet, a Caribbean restaurant, Dairy Queen, Krystal, and two donut shops. There are other restaurants in that strip too; I just can't remember all the other names.

But we had a taste for BBQ.

We drove over to Sonny's BBQ on Lane where we enjoyed a delicious lunch — succulent barbeque, baked sweet potato, cold cole slaw, garlic bread, huge frosty glasses of tea ...

Delicious!

The waitress was courteous, efficient, cheerful, and attentive. We left her a generous tip as is our custom.

We have worked in low-paying jobs in the past and we care about people who do such work now, so we are big tippers according to our lights.

If one place doesn't appreciate your money, someplace else will.

Monday, June 05, 2006

Ghost Writer

Over the weekend a gentleman from down state called asking me about ghost writing a book for him.

He has read one of my history articles on line and thought I might be interested in writing his project. His research turned up information about a triple homicide here in Jacksonville in the year 1900 and he sees material for a book in that information.

I said, no. thanks.

Several times over the years people have approached me about ghost writing for them. I did it a couple of times but the project never was satisfactory.

I think everyone has to tell his own story.

Once years ago, a publisher called me because his company signed a contract with a famous singer (whom I had never heard of before, but then, I'm not a music person).

The singer had a book idea and sold the idea to the publisher without writing a word. Fame gives you that option. The singer could sing but he could not write. Hence, the publisher wanted to recruit a ghost writer.

Problem was ... the singer was a religious man. He felt God had inspired his idea, thus, he wanted stringent control over every word (even though he could not write himself!)

So the publisher offered to recruit three ghost writers. Each would submit a sample chapter and the singer would chose the writer he wanted to work with.

So, the singer came up with this test for prospective ghost writers:

He dreamed a dream.

He wanted each ghost writer to write a sample chapter and outline about his dream — but he would not tell us what it was that he had dreamed!

He felt the Holy Spirit would reveal his dream to the chosen writer.

The sample chapter and outline had to be written between Christmas and New Years.

Would you believe that I actually tried to guess this guy's dream and write a chapter based on it — Yes, big bucks were involved.

Well, the Holy Spirit must have told me the wrong dream.

My sample did not make the grade.

Someone else was chosen to write the singer's book.

I don't have what it takes to be a ghost writer.

Another time, a publisher called asking me to ghost write a book for a movie producer. The man had a solid idea and we exchanged phone calls and information.

For a while it looked as though the project was a GO.

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But then Ginny and I went to a video store and rented six or eight of the guy's movies. They made me feel leery of associating with him on the project.

I prefer a good honest skin flick to the sort of movie that undercuts morality in the guise of a main-stream, family, romance or adventure film – you know, the sort of thing that appears in so many tv sitcoms. Corrupting ideas and attitudes subtly without being honestly pornographic.

Even though that ghost writing project would have paid big bucks and we needed the money, nevertheless, I decided that I wanted to do nothing to promote that producer's kind of movie.

Like I said, everybody has to tell his own story.

Tuesday, June 06, 2006

Fire! Ready! Aim!

Over the weekend I took on a garden project that I could not finish. Either it was too big, or I'm too lazy to get it done in one session.

I began to dig out a number of bushes and flowers and hedges to re-order the entire back fence line. By the time I ran out of energy, I still had major plants out of the ground, so I filled a tub with water and let them soak till Monday when I resumed work on the plants instead of resuming work on writing my fire history book.

Drought conditions baked the soil into hardpan covered by a layer of talcum powder-line dust. Water just pools on top of this dust instead of soaking in.

Last night at the grocery store, Ginny and I bumped into a lady who once supervised one of our daughters at work in a former job.

"You must be Eve's parents," she said, "You look just like her".

That's a nice compliment.

We have no identity of our own; for years we have only existed as "so and so's mom & dad".

This lady talked quite a bit about the policies of agency she now works for. Instead of moving forward, the agency careens. Policy reacts to conditions and

complaints. Political maneuvers dictate budget. Apathy grips workers. Employees just hold on till retirement. No body looks forward to going to work in the morning. Students are neither learning nor behaving. Chaos reigns.

After the lady unloaded to us, she parted saying, "The board's motto should be Fire! Ready! Aim!"

Like the reverse orders of a firing squad.

I think she meant first they act, then they try to justify that act, then they decide what the act is for.

Her quip apply describes my garden and my life.

I do something.

Then I arrange things to justify what I've done.

Then I try to fit what I've already done into a reasonable plan.

Think of all the work and scratches and bug bites and sweat and dirt and energy I would have saved if I had envisioned that back fence line, then planted the bushes in order, then relaxed to see them grow —Before just sticking plants in the ground and now having to uproot all.

I mean, how hard is it to start off with tall plants in back, little plants in front?

In my life there is so much haphazard stuff that has grown up here and there, now and then — like the guy in the Bible who had both wheat and tares growing in the same field. It took the angels of God at the end of the age to sort that mess out.

In day to day stuff, I loose track of God's purpose in letting me be a Christian in the first place.

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

We shall be like Him.

We shall be Christ-like.

The goal for us is to be conformed to the image of His Son. Like paperclips rubbed against a magnet, we are to take on the qualities and character of Jesus while still being true to our paperclip-selves.

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That is what Christianity is all about.

I lose sight of that. I fire, then ready an explanation, then try to squeeze it into the over all plan.

When things get that out-of-hand, like that haphazard collection of plants along my back fence, it takes a major uprooting to get things straight.

Uprooting is painful. I want to avoid it.

But is uprooting any less painful than to allow the tangle to grow unchecked?

To living life more and more disordered?

To letting precious relationships be choked by weeds?

To existing starved for sun light, overshadowed by wild stuff that grows out of control?

All things will be uprooted eventually. No getting around that.

To become Christ-like, that's the goal.

Ready! Aim! Fire!

A POLITICAL RANT:

As I dug in the hardpan soil and chopped entangling roots yesterday, I thought of how hard it must be to dig a hole in the middle of a road in Iraq to plant a bomb.

Makes noise. Creates dust clouds. Takes a lot of effort. Generates a lot of activity.

If in the dark of night I were to dig a hole to plant a bomb in the middle of my street, some neighbor would be sure to notice.

Recently some U.S. Marines have been accused of killing “innocent civilians” when a road-side bomb murdered one of those soldiers.

Investigations have been launched by both U.S. and Iraqi governments. The soldiers may stand trial — Yet, no one launched any investigation to see who planted the bomb.

Makes me wonder!

Looks to me that somebody somewhere had to have seen that hole dug and that bomb planted. Any “innocent

civilian” could have reported it to keep the Marines from being blown up. Any friend would do that.

An enemy would let you step on the bomb to get your legs and balls blown off, leaving you to bleed out in the dirt beside the road.

Hummm....

Do you suppose that if every time a road side bomb goes off, the soldiers shot everyone in all the closest houses, that maybe some “innocent civilian” might be motivated to start reporting the digging in the middle of the road?

If our troops are not there to kill enemies, then why are they there?

Wednesday, June 07, 2006

Bits & Pieces

No single thing dominates my journal entry for Tuesday; it was a day of bits and pieces of significance to no one but me.

In my garden project I potted flowers until I ran out of potting soil. So the project is finished until after payday when I can buy more. I’ve been ordering the project not only to clear accumulated debris and to maximize the flower displays, but also with future ease of maintenance in mind.

Two purple finches came to the feeder today, first I’ve seen in weeks. And I stumbled across a 4-foot gray and black snake sunning himself by the steps; I hadn’t seen this one before.

As I worked I thought a lot about our plan of Christian giving. That’s something for Ginny and me to talk about again soon.

I also thought about the next stage in getting my fire history book written. I’ve delayed that book too much; I’d intended to finish it two months ago, but life intervened. My discipline as a writer lacks... well, discipline.

Speaking of discipline: Until today I have not looked at a photo of a naked woman on the internet since last October or November!

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This means a triumph for my deepening spiritual maturity and purity of heart — or it means that I'm getting too darn old to get turned on by much of anything.

But for about 20 minutes this afternoon I checked out a site I remember to see if there had been any changes. I discovered that the lady still has no clothes.

Danni claims to be the most downloaded woman on the web. I can see the reasons for that — both of them.

When Ginny got home she clued me in to a neat site called Hurricane City.com.. This site contains everything you'd possibly want to know about hurricanes past and future.

A couple of times every year we face decisions about approaching hurricanes: will it hit here? Or south of us? Or north of us?

Is this one close enough that I should take all the pictures off the walls? Sink lawn chairs in the pool? Run for the hills?

The tv weathermen update us with various probabilities and graphic maps showing percentages of possibility.

Well, the folks at Hurricane City used one of these cones of uncertainty of a tee shirt which is a hoot! I howled when Ginny showed me this thing:



We drove to the library to return this weeks book and a lady there greeted us with, "Say, aren't you Eve's parents"? She proceeded to say all sorts of good things about our daughter; we knew she is great but it's nice to hear that from others too.

In local news: I heard the sirens but I didn't know what had happened till I watched the evening tv news — a minivan filled with kids ran a stop sign and was T-boned by an SUV killing a driver and mangling ten kids who are in the hospital with life-threatening injuries. Another 7-year-old child who witnessed the crash from the side of the road also had to be hospitalized for shock and trauma; and two firefighters required hospitalization when they were injured as they rescued the kids.

In national news, there is the usual furor over a constitutional amendment about gay marriage. As I look at the couples around me and as I browse blogs on the internet, I think we Christians ought to focus on strengthening our own shaky marriages than worrying about somebody else's marriage.

A lot of Christian people endure miserable relationships and lead sad, miserable lives at home. This saddens me. In our first 38 years, Ginny and I periodically set aside a day for no other purpose than to work on our marriage and make sure things are well between the two of us. That doesn't solve all our problems, but it certainly helps.

Some wise Englishman, (Lord Chesterfield? Churchill?) said, "The chief end of all human endeavor is to be happy at home"!

We Christians tend to ignore the log in our own eye and worry about the splinter in the other guy's eye.

In international news: Indonesia's Mount Merapi volcano threatens to erupt adding to that nation's misery. About 6,000 people died in the earthquake last week with 36,000 wounded; and the volcano has caused an additional 11,000 to evacuate. This on top of a measles epidemic and bird flu and riots causes enormous disruption and pain. But I wrote about my interest in Indonesia's sufferings back on May 29th & 30th.

Indonesia has the world's most volcanoes with 128 of them being active.

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Anyhow, that's all I have for today's journal entry which tracks my mature (check spelling, not *manure*) development as I grow toward sainthood —or degenerate into a dirty old man getting worse.

I can see my own daily progress: For instance, I used to be indecisive; now I'm not so sure about that.

Thursday, June 08, 2006

Out Of The Blue

I'm back working on my Jacksonville fire history book.

Please notice the lower bridge in on this old postcard:



Here's why:

An automobile fell out of the sky and hit Army Private O.C. O'Conner as he stood guard on the roof of Jacksonville's Educator Biscuit Co warehouse.

This happened shortly after midnight on December 12, 1941, just five days after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

The Educator Biscuit Warehouse stood at the north end of the Jacksonville-St Johns River Bridge. From that strategic vantage point an Army sentry could see down Broad Street into downtown Jacksonville; he could also see activities around the Monticello Pharmaceutical company.

The sentry post atop the building overlooked the car barn for the Jacksonville Streetcar Line, hub of the Jacksonville transportation system. A sentry could watch for saboteurs intent on evil amid the bridge pilings. He could also observe boat traffic in the river.

What he could not see was traffic on the bridge itself.

In 1921 the Jacksonville-St Johns River Bridge (later renamed the Acosta Bridge) opened to traffic. It ran parallel to an earlier train bridge but for 20 years, it was the only automobile bridge over the river. Within three days after it opened, the toll-taker had logged 5,000 cars crossing the river, an amazing amount of traffic for those days. Jacksonville gained a second bridge, the Main Street Bridge, in 1941.

The north foot of the Jacksonville-St Johns River Bridge ended in a T-bone on the Riverside Viaduct, 13 feet above the roof of the Educator Biscuit Warehouse.

The Army considered the warehouse a strategic vantage point.

An automobile approaching from the south could turn right on Broad Street into downtown Jacksonville. Or it could turn left toward a residential section.

A wire and concrete barrier prevented cars from going straight unless...

On that fateful, cold December night, a car sped across the bridge.

It did not turn left.

It did not turn right.

It crashed through the barrier, flew through the air, and landed directly on roof of the Educator Biscuit Warehouse, directly on top of Private O'Conner.

At the crash, Jacksonville police and military assumed another sneak Jap attack.

Troops called out.

Sirens and searchlights.

Newspaper reporters swarmed.

A great commotion ensued until authorities discovered that the car on top of the warehouse had not been dropped by enemy aircraft. It was a drunk driver, an

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insurance salesman from Marietta, Ga., who did not make the turn and flew his car off the bridge onto the roof.

Police charged him with driving while intoxicated, driving recklessly and carelessly, damaging city and private property and resisting arrest. He was jailed and fined \$250.

Although the car falling from the sky landed on all four tires directly on top of Private O’Conner, he only suffered a broken ankle. He was considered Jacksonville’s first home front casualty .of World War II.

The following night, the Army doubled the guard.

Friday, June 09, 2006

Medical Ping Pong

Early Thursday morning I carried my Bible out in the garden by the fountain and read the section of John’s Gospel (Chapter 11) where Jesus raised Lazarus from death.

In a nutshell: Someone told Jesus that His friend Lazarus was sick in another town. But Jesus stayed where He was for two days before going to see Lazarus. Once He got there, He found Lazarus was dead and brought him back to life.

The Gospel writer says that Jesus delayed those two days because “This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby”.

I think the apostle was wrong.

I think I know the REAL reason Jesus waited till after Lazarus was dead to show up — Jesus did not want to get involved with medical professionals!

Undertakers are so much easier to deal with.

Now, I have the utmost respect for physicians and nurses; I have written several historical articles in tribute to them. But today, the medical professionals and my health insurance company played ping pong using me as the ball. Perhaps these are all decent, god-fearing people caught in an evil system themselves, but I’m a bit frustrated.

The reason I think Jesus did not want to get involved with the medical community was that after my Bible reading, I spent hours and hours on the phone playing medical ping pong with my physician's office and my insurance company.

This involved a four-page email print out from the insurance company filled with such phrases as "titrated doses".(Is that something to do with breasts?) And it involved six or eight phone calls. And each phone call had to go through an automated phone tree menu:

"If your call involves a life threatening emergency, first make out a check to our company, be sure to use the correct postage, mail it, then call 911," the machine tells me every time I call.

Then it says, "For prescription refills press 1... For appointment changes, press 2... For office hours, press 38.... For sports scores... For local weather..."

Then, once I pressed #286, the phone machine would transfer me to another automated menu: "For Doctor A's secretary, press 1... For Dr. A's lab, press 2... For Dr. B's nurse, press... To place bets in the third race, press 47... or stay on the line and someone will help you shortly".

Once I actually got a live person, she said, "Please hold, or call again later because I have someone more important than you on the other line."

Then I hear music.

When the lady came back I asked if she'd give me an actual real phone number for the doctor's nurse and she said, "It's against our policy to give out our office phone number".

What kind of business refuses to give customers its phone number?

It's a good thing sick people don't ever try to call my doctor's office.

No, I'm not sick.

Last month my doctor gave me a prescription for some medicine to treat some something he says I have but I never feel (I think he made it all up off the top of his head just so I would not think I'd wasted my time in an office visit).

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I sent his prescription to the pharmacy to be filled.

My pharmacy refused to fill the prescription because my insurance company refuses to pay for this medicine (number 1) because they say that this other medicine (number 2) is better for me than the one my doctor says is good for me.

So, I contacted my health insurance company.

Their representative assured me that when I die, the company will be sure to burn Ginny alive on my funeral pyre with my dead body because that's the colorful native custom where he lives.

I called my doctor's phone machine again and punched in the launch codes.

My doctor says medicine number 2 will cause me to strangle, gag and die in a pool of blood and pus if I take it; the insurance company says, "No it won't. Besides his premium is paid up."

After I made six phone calls about this (the charge in my cordless phone died and started beeping) my doctor knuckled under and wrote a prescription for medicine number 2 and his nurse called that in to the pharmacy.

About three hours later, the pharmacy called me. They can't fill this prescription either. It seems that the insurance company has denied payment on medicine number 2, the very one they insisted that my doctor prescribe.

I can call again tomorrow to straighten this out... or I can follow the example of Jesus.

He decided it was easier to raise the dead guy than to deal with the medical community.

All joking aside, the raising of Lazarus is the hinge for the entire Gospel of John because at that point enemies decided that Jesus must be crucified. "It is expedient for us that one man should die for the people... From that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death".

They intended to make sure Lazarus was dead a second time also.

Heavy stuff.

On a lighter note, here, just for fun is one of my favorite jokes:

Dead Healthcare Professionals

Three healthcare professionals, an ophthalmologist, a cardiologist, and the chief executive officer of a health maintenance organization, all died in an accident and appeared at the Pearly Gates.

The Admitting Angel greeted them saying, "Welcome, gentlemen. Welcome! I'm glad to see you here. But before I can admit you, each must give an account of his life and reasons you should get into Heaven. Who wants to start?"

The first man spoke up. "I was an ophthalmologist. I helped people better see the glories of God's creation."

"That's wonderful," exclaimed the Angel. "That's really something. You go right on inside".

The second man said, "In life I was a cardiologist. I repaired weak hearts, extended people's lives, I even did a few heart transplants greatly improving my patients' quality of life".

"That's wonderful. How impressive," said the Angel. "You go right on inside. Now, what about you?"

"I was the CEO of an HMO. In my executive capacity I helped provide low-cost health care for thousands of clients who might not have otherwise had access to hospital care. At the same time I provided optimum profits for our shareholders".

"That's wonderful," exclaimed the Angel. "You go right on inside... But..."

"BUT! What do you mean But?" demanded the CEO.

"Well, you are admitted to Heaven, but you're only allowed to stay for three days".

Saturday, June 10, 2006

A Lovely Day

Ginny took Friday off work just so we could spend time together. We shopped a little. We added more goldfish to our aquarium. We gardened a bit. We napped.. We watched the *King Kong* remake dvd. We dined at an

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Italian restaurant. We strolled around Five Points watching the rising moon. A perfectly lovely day.

Sunday, June 11, 2006

Another Beautiful Day

Saturday morning Ginny and I transplanted a few trees and bushes in the garden.

At lunchtime we didn't even clean up or dress but drove up to Dave's Diner in our gardening clothes; the waiters teased us about looking like bums. Very perceptive of them.

Ginny carried a murder mystery and I carried a book on Florida fossils; we spent a couple of hours sipping tea, munching fries and reading our books hardly speaking. True intimacy.

Back home we went swimming and talked about bees.

The stupid bugs drown themselves trying to drink from our pool even though I put shallow bowls with sponges on the deck for them. We constantly rescue floundering bees but we miss a lot of them. The hive must be nearby but I haven't found it yet.

After a nap we browsed through a book on Florida shrubs trying to identify some flowers we grow in our yard but don't know the names of.

Thus we spend a day of intense intimacy and communication hardly doing or saying anything.

This amounted to another of our best days ever.

Sometimes marriage gets better and better.

Monday, June 12, 2006

"Let There Be Spaces In Your Togetherness"

Over the years Ginny and I have discovered that times of distancing always follow times of intense intimacy.

Over this past long weekend spent together in intimacy, we bonded even more, then Sunday we spent our time in withdrawing, regaining our distance, and reestablishing our individuality.

This pattern in our 38-year-long love affair resembles the ebb and flow of an incoming tide. Each individual wave reaches a little higher on the beach before it

recedes. Yet the overall level of the sea continues to get deeper and deeper.

That's the way I see it.; Ginny words it a little differently.

At breakfast yesterday her starry eyes sparkled with loving adoration as she gazed at me holding held my hand across the table and she said, , "I'm sick of you. I don't want to be cured. But I've had all of you I can stand for right now".

I understand that perfectly.

Tuesday, June 13, 2006

A Barometer In My Joints

Except for rain last night and this morning, even though Jacksonville was projected to be in the direct path of Tropical Storm Alberto, we would not know the storm existed if we did not watch tv news.

Broadcasters wet themselves in excitement over the storm, but from my own windows I see no sign of it.

The rain falls in a steady drizzle soaking into the ground in a way that our grass and garden appreciates because we have seen virtually no rain in the past 40 days. But TS Alberto now breaks the drought.

On the down side, the weather aggravates my arthritis something fierce. I normally live with a constant low-grade pain that hardly ever relents (a great excuse for my grouchiness). I've never before seen any correlation between pain and weather so this upsurge surprises me. But it gives me something new to gripe about.

I'd like to blame my spiritual malaise on chronic pain. But in reality I find little connection between body and spirit; most times, I can be a grouch when I'm not hurting at all. Other times, I feel close to the Lord even when I'm in pain.

I'm making too much of this.

I'm never in that much pain.

My doctor's advice is to stop whining, live with it, and when it gets bad to take an Aleve . He says I have only a mild case of degenerative arthritis.

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All I can say is, “God bless the poor souls who have it bad”.

Wednesday, June 14, 2006

God, Goldfish & Gulls

Two of the goldfish we bought over the weekend died.

In the past our goldfish have lived an average of three years each, and we once had three fantails that lived in our aquarium for six or eight years.

Our fish thrive on neglect.

Recently Ginny and I have been thinking about our giving plan and the goldfish remind me of an incident when Eve was a child (maybe six or seven years old). She had acquired a treasure trove of money and wanted to give ten percent of it to God.

At the time we attended this old church near the waterfront. The churchyard (where they buried dead members) featured a huge fountain and a reflecting pool.

Eve decided that she would spend her tithe buying some goldfish for this pool.

I drove her to an aquarium supply store where she explained to the man what she wanted. Her tithe amounted to \$3 and he sold her 30 goldfish at ten cents each; he threw in a can of fish food for free.

This was on a Saturday afternoon.

I drove her to the church where we followed the aquarium guy's instructions about setting the plastic bags in the pool to equalize the temperature, etc. And Eve gave the can of fish food to the gardner who promised to feed the fish on his daily rounds.

Finally Eve released the fish into the pool.

Flashes of gold in the dark water added charm to the peaceful churchyard.

My little girl felt very satisfied with her gift.

Sunday morning we went to church early to visit the gold fish.

Odd.

We couldn't see a single one in the fountain pool.

The sexton approached and beckoned me off to the side.

He said that almost as soon as we had left the courtyard on releasing the gold fish, that a flock of sea gulls descended. Flashing goldfish against the dark bottom of the pool proved irresistible targets for the hungry gulls.

They ate every single one of the goldfish in a matter of minutes.

Then flew away.

Eve wanted to know what happened to the goldfish.

I explained that in ancient times when people offered bulls and rams to God that they burned the animals on a huge flaming altar; the rising smoke of the sacrifice was taken as a sign that their gift had been accepted. That it had risen into the heavens.

I told her about the seagulls eating the goldfish.

Nothing we offer to God is wasted.

He regards not the greatness of the gift but the love of the giver.

Jesus once commended a widow who offered two mites, who put her two cents worth into the offering box in the temple at Jerusalem. Her contribution went to the very people who days later would lift Jesus up on the cross. Yet He commended her for the love with which she gave, not necessarily the purpose the money went to support.

I don't believe we can give God anything.

We are always on the receiving end of any transaction with Him.

Yet our gifts represent some measure of love or thanksgiving or appreciation or value toward Him. Like the paper cards kids make in school to give Dad on Father's Day, our gifts have virtually no intrinsic value, yet, God appreciates the sentiment.

Like the smoke of a burning lamb, or a goldfish rising to the sky in a gull's beak, when offered with love, our gifts are accepted in the Beloved.

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Not too long ago, Ginny was making out a check for our own tithe.

The church we now attend had just announced a change in policy which seems to us to be in poor taste and stupid, if not actually anti-Christian.

Instead of making out the check to the church, Ginny made it out as a contribution to the local zoo.

Thursday, June 15, 2006

A Brick Wall



The past few weeks I've been butting my head against a brick wall.

Nothing unusual about that.

Except this session has gone on longer than such things normally do.

My frustrations range from dealing with minor, aggravating medical problems to troubles with my own short-term memory.

After continuing to fight the automated phone systems of insurance company and doctor's office, I've determined that the best way to lower my high blood pressure is to stop taking medicine and never call either

office again ever! I suspect that that's just what the insurance company wants.

Malaise also permeates my work at the moment.

I have numerous projects to work on but none of them seems worthwhile.

Even when work-related projects have been broken down into manageable chunks, I balk at undertaking them.

The memory thing particularly bothers me. For instance, many times I have scanned historical pieces into my computer. I've done whole books based on this stuff. But yesterday when I attempted to scan a background history pamphlet into my files, I forgot how to do it!

That's crazy. I've done it time and time again, but now the memory escapes me.

Prayer represents another brick in my wall.

It feels as though my prayers sink like bricks. I believe, but I feel as though it doesn't matter whether I pray or not.

I understand that for most people, times of difficulty drive them to prayer. I've heard that many people forget God in times of prosperity.

For me, it works just the opposite. Times of joy springboard me into prayer, times of trouble sink me into sulking and wanting to avoid God.

Our public library offers many self-help books promising to help me reconnect with my authentic self, discover my potential, put me in touch with my feelings and cure my fallen arches. I checked out one book that seems reasonable and began the written exercises... about five of them. Then I absolutely balked. I found every excuse possible for avoiding that book – which is now overdue.

The only thing I've gained from the book is a library fine.

Last night during our devotions after supper, Ginny read Psalm 70. It rang a bell for me:

“Make haste, O God, to deliver me. Make haste to help me, O Lord.... I am poor and needy. Make haste unto

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me, O God. Thou art my help and my deliverer. O Lord, make no tarrying”.

That Scripture reading reminded me of another Psalm, one of King David’s military references (18:29), which says, “For by Thee I have run through a troop; and by my God have I leaped over a wall”.

I suspect that I am my own brick wall.

Friday, June 16, 2006

Wind, Trees & Alberto The Pruner

Trees surround our home.

Tropical Storm Alberto trimmed these trees for me.

Although the winds abated by the time the storm crossed Florida and passed over Jacksonville, yet their strength broke off weak and dead branches high in our trees.

This is a good thing.

A full canopy of leaves acts as a giant sail during a hurricane and the force of the wind can knock the whole tree over crushing homes, cars and people in the fall. In the past few weeks in Jacksonville a child playing in her yard, a lady in her yard raking, and another lady who was sitting in her lawnchair reading, have all been killed or seriously injured by falling trees.

Thursday I picked up four trashcans full of sticks and leaf clusters and gathered a pile of larger branches for trash pickup.

As I worked I thought of an irreligious, back-handed put-down/compliment I once used on a guy studying for the ministry.

Being judgmental, I regarded him as an overbearing, pious, buffoon, wind-bag as he bragged about his insider relationship with God and the power of the Holy Spirit working through his ministry.

I told him, “Jim, you are a real Tree Of The Lord”.

As he preened at the compliment, I referred him to Psalm 104:16.

He was not familiar with the verse so I told him to look it up in the King James Bible (none of the other translations word it the same way).

What?

You aren't familiar with that verse either?

It says, "The trees of the Lord are full of sap".

Ok, I'm a mean, petty, wicked, evil person to use Scripture like that.

He He He He ...

Anyhow, back to my windfall sticks and branches: a tree in full leaf catches wind like a giant sail, but as Tropical Storm Alberto passed through, it broke the leafy cover of our trees and punched holes in that sail so that when stronger winds come through, there should be less chance of a tree falling on the head of your friend John.

So I'm thankful for Alberto The Pruner.

My dictionary defines the verb *prune* as to cut back superfluous parts to promote growth and fruitfulness.

When I am acting like a real Tree Of The Lord as described in that Psalm, the wind of the Spirit cuts back some of my superfluous parts.

That hurts.

But it benefits me.

Jesus once said, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit".

Seems to me that our only choice in the matter it to be pruned of the superfluous by the gentler power of the wind now, or to be uprooted when the strong wind comes.

I just wish Alberto had raked up the scraps it pruned instead of leaving it to me to clean up the mess.

Monday, June 19, 2006

Animal Funerals

Sunday, our grown children threw a Pool & Pizza Party for me at Jennifer's house.

As we splashed and floated around on water toys, I talked about vision problems and dog care with Pat;

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prescriptions and landscaping with Jennifer; computers and horseshoe crabs with Donald; books and hotel accommodations with Eve; and WDOs (wood destroying organisms) and real estate with Helen.

No word from either Fred or John today.

This was the first time I've seen Patricia, our youngest, since she began her new job in a medical lab where she tests bio-hazardous materials. She told me that when she runs the tests, especially those for life-threatening conditions such as AIDS, she often prays for the person whose samples she is testing.

This really pleased me.

She wears a white lab coat at work and we all teased her about staring in the next Dr. Frankenstein movie.

As soon as Ginny and I returned from the Father's Day get-together, as soon as we pulled in the driveway, our neighbor Dennis ran over to get me. He was all excited because of a snake in his front yard.

Dennis is not a Florida native and did not recognize this sort of snake.

He feared it might be poisonous.

It wasn't.

It was a common red rat snake, an animal found all over north Florida. It eats mice, lizards, etc. It's harmless, although as a protective mechanism it will coil, hiss and strike imitating its meaner cousins..

This clever snake did not want to be caught so it wove in and out of the chain link fence to avoid capture but once I got my hands on it on one side of the fence, Dennis unwound it from the other side.

Before I released it in a flower bed at our house, Ginny snapped this photo of me and the unhappy snake.



This event seems an appropriate ending to my Father's Day celebration because as the family paddled in Jennifer's landscaped pool and the kids reminisced about their raising, the conversation turned to pets we had over the years.

Dogs included Sheba, Skunk, Cleo, Polycarp, Daisy, Chicklet, Becky, et al.

Cats included Jessica, Diamond, Sin (as in the phrase "Ugly as..."), Martin, Tiger, Snowball, et al. — Guess which cat I named.

Other creatures included hamsters; mice; goldfish; a rabbit named Chloe; a flying squirrel named Secret; and, most recently, Matilda the Duck. — a parade of animals have passed through our lives and many of them died after years of tender loving care.

The kids reminisced about how I buried these animals, including some stray dog that got hit by a car as Donald and Eve walked home from elementary school. They saw it happen and ran to get me to bury it. I carried a shovel down and buried that dog in Panama Park beside the road.

Were archaeologists to excavate our house in distant future years, they'd say, "To protect themselves from evil

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spirits, these primitive people sacrificed small animals and buried them in a circle all around their home”.

Of course not all the animals got buried. The kids remembered the spectacular Viking Funeral we once gave a goldfish. I made a paper boat with sails. We placed the dead goldfish on a cotton bed in a matchbox, took the funeral ship down to the river, set it afloat. I lit the sails with a match and we set the burning ship adrift on the water.

Best sendoff since Beowulf!

Yes, we have gone through a lot of animals over the years.

At the close of our trip down memory lane, various kids said how much I meant to them as they were growing up and Patricia summed it all up by saying:

“Thank you, Daddy, for killing all our pets”.

Tuesday, June 20, 2006

Don't know why I thought of this:

Once I worked with a guy who lived with a girl who had a baby boy. They got into an argument about child support even though they were living together.

The matter ended up in court where my coworker told the judge, “I don't believe that baby is mine. He don't look nothing like me”.

The judge said, “Son, you take that baby back home and you feed him every day. The more you feed him, the more he'll get to look like you”.

Wednesday, June 21, 2006

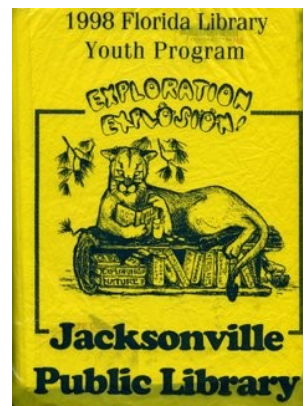
In The Bag

Tuesday night my son Donald taught me the intricacies of computer scanning —again. As I've mentioned last week, I'd forgotten how to do it.

One of the first things we scanned was a 1998 plastic bag.

This bag is important to me because of what it contains.

Every year the Jacksonville Library culls its collections of out of



date material and offers these at a book sale. Ginny and I have attended these sales for years and years. The sales offer over a hundred thousand books and items either donated to the library or culled from the shelves.

As a local history buff, I keep an eye out for things related to Jacksonville history and a couple of years ago during one of the sales I acquired this plastic bag filled with old sepia photographs of Jacksonville homes and buildings.



I've intended to scan these and post them on my website (www.cowart.info) but life intervened so I never got around to doing it.

After Donald's patient teaching last night, I suspect that I can have these available on line soon. I'll keep you posted.

Speaking of my website, last night I added a classy, tasteful, refined graphic featuring a happy squirrel to that site to refer readers to my blog site. Donald thinks it's ghastly but what does he know about good taste?

I think squirrels are nice.

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We also talked a lot about church stuff. Why God puts up with churches is one of those divine mysteries the Bible speaks about.

I think Martin Luther had it wrong. If he'd nailed 95 bishops to that door, things might have improved.

This morning is the Summer Solstice, the longest day of the year. I tried to convince Ginny that we should go out in the back yard and dance naked in the grass to greet the dawn but she refused. She's a prude. I guess we'll have to leave it to the bishops to do that sort of thing.

Thursday, June 22, 2006

I shoulda been a hermit

After breakfast and conversation with my friend Wes Wednesday morning I continued scanning in that bag of old Jacksonville photographs. There are about 50 of them in the bag and I'm puzzled about how to organize them for posting on my website.

I have a thumbnail-making program that I haven't used for a while but with so many photos, I'll have to split the collection to make it manageable.

I suspect that for me this project is a way to avoid writing. Had the photos ended up in a dumpster, no one would have missed them but I feel that since they fell into my hands I should try to preserve them in case some future historian may find them useful.

I keep a lot of stuff like that for my imaginary future friend.

Spiritually I'm about as low as I've ever been.

I need a refresh button.

Actually, I suppose what I need is resurrection because I feel as dead and dry and lifeless as that bag of old pictures.

Other Christians express such confidence, but I have none. I don't mean confidence about Christ, I'm convinced He is God come in the flesh; but I mean confidence in life and church and social issues and stuff like that. I'm not at all sure when it comes to matters like that. I think I'd have made a great hermit, sitting in a cave untouched by humanity.

It's when I stick my head out of the cave that I get confused.

Friday, June 23, 2006

Ten Pounds Of Meat

Last night my neighbor brought us ten pounds of meat.

I'd done him a minor favor expecting no payment but he brought over this meat as a reward; his wife works for a restaurant food supply company where employees get a good deal on premium quality cuts.

This influx of meat presents us with a problem:

Where do we put it?

Ginny and I prepare a menu and shopping list two weeks in advance, and we'd just been to the grocery store so our refrigerator is stuffed with food already.

There is just no room for an additional ten pounds of meat.

Ginny shuffled things around and pulled out some things she usually keeps in the freezer but which can stand to be unfrozen. But there was still not enough room for all this meat.

Food storage has always been a problem for
humanity.

Back when Florida Indians hunted mastodons, or when Eskimos harpooned a whale, everyone for miles and miles around would assemble to feast on the meat before it spoiled.

I once wrote an inspirational book, *Strangers On The Earth*, about men and women whose faith got them into trouble. I tried to use the letters and journals of the Christians involved as source material. One chapter is titled "The Admiral Of Mosquitoes", it's about Christopher Columbus.

His diary shows that when he reached the Indies he discovered the cannibals there solved their lack of refrigeration problem with ingenuity.

The cannibals ate prisoners they captured in battle
with other tribes.



It's tough to eat an entire human being in one sitting; and in the tropical heat the flesh of a dead human does not last long. So the cannibals kept the person they were eating alive. For supper, they'd just slice off a steak or two at a time. For larger gatherings, say for Sunday dinner, they cut off a leg to roast.

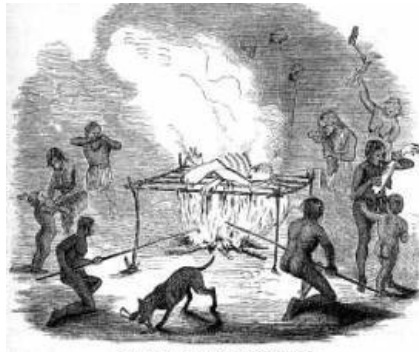
They'd cauterize the wound so that the eatee remained alive, and they feasted on some meat while saving the rest fresh.



Of course there was no sense in trying to chase down the food every time you wanted a fresh slice, so they smash his or her legs and arms with a club to keep him from escaping.

And to nourish the victim, they'd feed him leftovers.

Using these culinary practices — which are not necessarily approved by Martha Stewart — a family of four could eat fresh meat for a month or two from a single captive.



Just goes to show that there's no problem which can't be solved if you really put your mind to it.

Ginny insists that I give some of the neighbor's meat away.

The woman has no sense of history.

Sunday, June 25, 2006

Shovels

I own four shovels; two duckbilled shovels and two flat-nosed shovels. My duckbilled shovels are for digging holes; my flat-nosed shovels I use for moving loose materials such as sand. I don't even own a snow-shovel, but I do own a spade. Many people confuse spades and shovels but they are quite different. A spade is a cutting tool used when you are

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transplanting sod or cutting roots. A shovel on the other hand is used to dig. I also own an entrenching tool; that is a small shovel with a hinged blade which can be used as a hoe; it's handy for work in small spaces. I sharpen my shovels on a bench grinder so the blades are knife sharp and I oil the blades to reduce friction and preserve the metal. Then there are my trowels, which can be classed as small hand shovels and used to ..."

Love is such fun.

Even though we've been married over 37 years, Ginny still surprises me now and then.

For instance, Saturday morning as we sipped coffee outside in the garden she said something I don't recall ever hearing her say before. She said, "I'd like to buy some new clothes. I don't need anything but I'd just like to buy something new".

Cloth plays a tiny small part in our life.

As long as a cloth thing is clean, comfortable, presentable and I haven't burned too many holes in it with sparks from my pipe ashes, I pay little attention to cloth things.

Ginny pays more attention to such things, but not much more.

However, Ginny wanted some new cloth, so we went shopping for some. She bought four dresses, a jacket, a bunch of new blouses, and a lizard-skin handbag.

Poor lizards.

Took a bunch of them to make this bag.

Anyhow, after the cloth stores Ginny took me to lunch at this seafood place where the folks from her office go now and then to celebrate birthdays, retirements, promotions, and such.

As we ate, I was telling her all about some book I've been reading when I noticed that she was not listening to me. She was looking over my shoulder paying intense attention to something that was not me.

I perked up to hear what was so fascinating behind me.

There was this tv above the bar. It was tuned to the Discover Channel. It aired a program about the history of shovels.

That's what Ginny was watching.

That's what she was paying attention to — A. History. Of. Shovels.

On television.

Shovels.

I listened for a moment and I said, "I own four shovels; two duckbilled and two flat-nosed. My duckbilled shovels are for digging holes; my flat-nosed shovels I use for moving loose materials such as sand. I don't even own a snow-shovel but I do own a spade. Many people confuse spades and shovels but they are quite different. A spade is a cutting tool used when you are transplanting sod or cutting roots. A shovel on the other hand is used to dig. I also own an entrenching tool; that is a small shovel with a hinged blade which can be used as a hoe; it's handy for work in small spaces. I sharpen my shovels on a bench grinder to the blades are knife sharp and I oil the blades to reduce friction and preserve the metal. Then there are my trowels, which can be classed as small hand shovels and used to ..."

That got her attention.

"John? What in the world are you talking about?" she said.

"I'm showing you that I can be as fascinating a conversationalist as that guy on tv," I said. "This is the speech I'll use if I ever want to pick up a woman in a bar where the tv is playing..."

We got to laughing and snorting so hard that the waitress ran over to our table to see what was the matter. She thought we were choking on an oyster or something.

That made us laugh even harder.

Too hard to explain what was so funny.

The young woman backed away wondering about this old married couple holding hands and apparently having an attack of some kind.

Love is such fun.

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When we got home, Ginny modeled her new clothes for me.

On hangers in the store, they're just cloth; on her, they're beautiful.

Monday, June 26, 2006

Leery and Weary

Church wearies us.

Church attendance never played a huge role in my religion. I feel following Christ in day to day living is more important than meeting with others one day a week but I've gone through the motions of church activities for years because it seemed the thing to do.

But recently changes in our group's theology and practice have changed the basic tenants of the historic faith and Ginny and I feel both leery and weary of attending. Not that there's not a church of some kind on every corner in Jacksonville, we could worship with another group if we chose, but we are just weary and, at the moment, choose to exercise our faith at home, in the neighborhood, at work, and with the people whose paths cross ours.

We may be wrong about this but that's where we are at the moment.

All that leads up to the fact that Sunday instead of going to church anywhere, we chose to spent the morning walking at the zoo.

Here is a photo of me (on the left) and a giraffe skull:



I attended high school in an old building. For 50 years past generations of students and teachers placed natural history samples in huge mahogany, glass-fronted cases in the biology lab. No one had kept track of what these samples were or where they had come from.

My biology project was to examine the large accumulation of animals skulls in these floor-to-ceiling cabinets, to identify and label each skull. I learned dentation formulas so that (back then) I could tell a possum's skull from a raccoon's or a dog's. I even tracked down one monkey's skull to a specific species.

Some of the happiest days of my youth were spent among the skulls in that lab. — Which says a lot about my youth.

So, yesterday I was thrilled to get to examine a giraffe's skull; I've never seen one before.

Doesn't take much to thrill me.

The zoo's landscaping and gardens pleased us enormously. We enjoyed the plants as much as the animals.

Here's a photo I snapped of Ginny among the flowers:



Saturday night my friend Dolly died.

In all the years I've known her, I never once spoke to her about Christ.

Tuesday, June 27, 2006

A Pain In The Neck

Monday, I scanned a book on the history of Baldwin into my computer.

Today, my neck and shoulders hurt.

Apparently the constant odd movement of turning pages and punching buttons and clicking the mouse exercised muscles I don't normally use, so I'm sore.

Ah. The burden of preserving history for future generations. Who knew that studying and writing history could be so physically taxing?

Oh, in case you didn't know, Baldwin, Florida, is a tiny rural community to the west which has been incorporated into the city limits of Jacksonville. It developed from a stage coach stop on the King's Road and was a staging area during the Civil War.

As I scanned history, a neighbor stopped by to tell me of some tensions about Dolly's death. Apparently some of the family do not want any outsiders to be involved. They have vigorously rejected overtures by various neighbors.

It seems to be a racial thing.

I intend to walk down to the house anyhow to pay my respects and honor a lady I liked.

Back on February 7th, 2006, I posted a blog entry about an adventure Bubba, Dolly and I shared.

I can't remember the reference, but somewhere in my journals tells about Ginny and me attending a birthday party for Dolly a few years ago. Not realizing that she never learned to read, I gave Dolly a signed copy of my book on prayer. She was so pleased. She said it was the only book she'd ever owned.

I tend to think of my writing as my witness to Christ.

That's a fallacy.

My writing is my work not my witness.

On reflection, I think that our testimony to Christ lies in three or four areas:

First, of course, is to walk with Him ourselves. It's hard to lead someone else closer to God than you are yourself. I need to receive from Him before I can pass anything on to others.

Second is the overall tone of my life. My actions speak louder than my words. To glorify Christ, to win others to Him, I need to live my faith from the backbone out — guts, feathers and all. Example counts.

Third — and here's where the faith hits the fan — is to actually speak about Christ. Observers may think I'm a nice guy or a religious nut or an absolute ass depending on what they see in my life; but unless I actually speak up and verbally share what Christ means to me, then I'm just a slinking Christian. This part is the hardest for me to do. I don't want to come across as a buffoon boasting about being on an inside track with the Almighty.

In a nutshell I need to spell out the truth as best I'm able. I believe that we, individually and collectively, has screwed up the life God gave us and damaged ourselves terribly in the process. The consequences of what we have done and are doing demanded no lesser Person than God Himself to step in to deliver us. Christ came in the flesh. We killed Him for His trouble. But as Lord of Life, Christ could not be kept in a hole in the ground. He came out of the tomb under His own steam. He is preparing a new start for us. He promised to return and in the meantime He expects for us to behave.

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I need to speak up and share these things in actual conversation with the people whose paths cross mine.

Finally, and this stands way low on the list, I need to reflect His presence in my work. Paul advised Christian slaves in the Roman Empire to be the very best slave their masters owned. The way I work may not always be skillful, but it should always be honest.

For instance, I'm often tempted to embellish history, to make events more dramatic than they really were, to make our Brave Southern Boys victors over the low, no-account, sorry, thieving yankees. It galls me to admit they were right on major issues and we were wrong.

If I am to witness to Christ, I feel I need to be honest, vulnerable, transparent, and, yes, even vocal.

All this goes against my grain. I'd rather read about outstanding Christians than even intend to be one.

Be all that as it may, I think my duty today involves walking down to see Bubba and offer what comfort I can, and if the family wants me to leave, I'll walk away without bothering them and I'll slip by to see Bubba one day after the funeral.

I'm not looking forward to any of this.

Scanning documents is not the only thing that gives me a pain in the neck.

Wednesday, June 28, 2006

Listen To Your Heart

A couple of hours after I posted this journal yesterday, I shaved, showered, combed my hair, dressed and walked down to Bubba's.

I felt more than a bit of trepidation because of what my neighbors told me yesterday about how the family was taking things and acting hostile.

Bubba and Dolly have scads of children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, a huge extended family. Some of the grandchildren are the size of linebackers.

I feared that I might be walking into some belligerent confrontation.

I'd been told from several sources that the family had chased off some visitors and had threatened to come to blows with others. I'd been told that one lady had thrown a casserole in the face of the neighbor who brought it.

As I walked down the block, I feared that I just might get my ass kicked,

When I arrived the family welcomed me graciously with every possible courtesy. They could not have been any nicer to me. The rumors and gossip about belligerence proved to be a load of carp as far as I'm concerned.

I'm glad I listened to my heart about going instead of to what my neighbor had said.

As I walked down I had rehearsed possible Scripture verses that might be appropriate. Not being a preacher, little came to my mind.

In fact, nothing did.

I just knelt beside Bubba's chair and we hugged and we both cried.

I sat outside with him smoking my pipe and while we talked someone his daughter identified as a "Bible Woman" called on the cell phone. Apparently she wanted Bubba to read a ton of Scripture references but he cut her off saying her, "My doctor told me not to read any Bible verses 'cause he didn't want my blood pressure to get all excited up".

I'm glad I'd forgotten any quotes I'd intended to work into the conversation.

I'm glad I listened to my own heart instead of to my neighbors or to my fear, or to my intellect.

The Spirit of our holy God is not limited in the ways He speaks to us — or through us.

Thursday, June 29, 2006

A Lighthouse, A Flower & Desire

Wednesday I continued scanning Jacksonville history materials into my computer. I've finished the Baldwin section covering the western extreme of the city, and began scanning materials on the community of Mayport, the extreme eastern part.

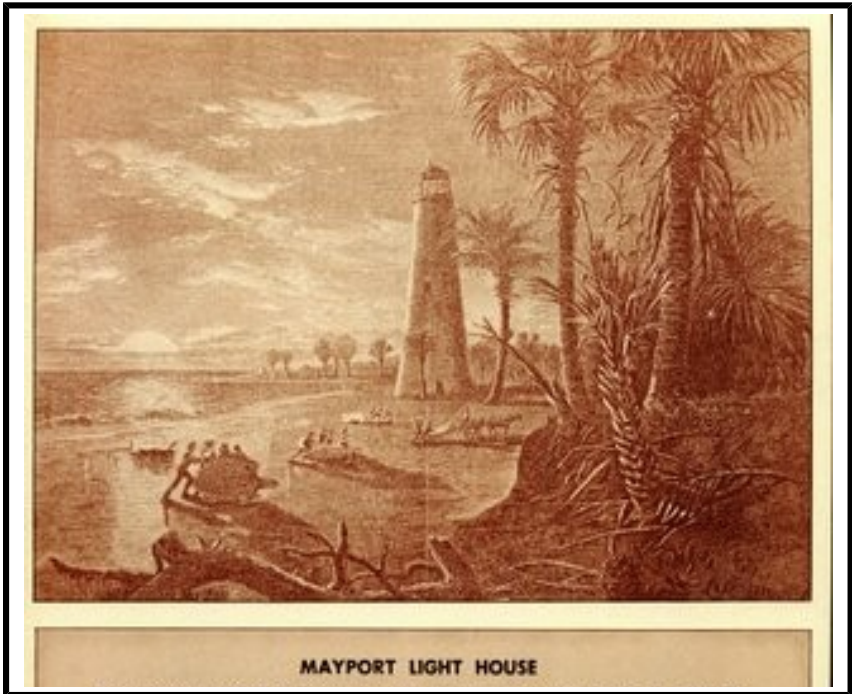
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At one time, the city of Jacksonville held the record as being the largest city in the U.S. as far as land area was concerned.

I'm not sure if we still hold that record.

Here's an early picture of the Mayport Lighthouse:



Last night Ginny's Nightblooming Cereus plant (sometimes called Queen Of The Night) blossomed.

We've had this plant since the mid 1970s and it blooms erratically. Some years we get just a single flower; once we had 22 bloom in the same night.

A bud will start opening after dark; and the flower wilts permanently at daybreak so you have just a few hours of darkness to see the beauty. The flower opens fast enough to see it move as it blossoms releasing a haunting aroma which permeates the whole neighborhood.

Last night Ginny and I saw a tiny, pure-white spider busy inside the bloom; that's something we've never seen before. If we had not seen movement, we'd have never spotted the spider inside this natural cathedral. The Lord builds His own church.

Here is a photo of one of the blossoms:
This flower got me to thinking about desire.

Desire, wanting
something, indicates
that that something
exists.

When we thirst, we
desire water. And
water does exist to
satisfy that thirst.

When we feel
hunger, we desire food.
And grits do exist to
satisfy that desire for
food. (Dry beans satisfy yankees).



We feel horny. And sex exists to satisfy that desire.

Sometimes we desire Something we can not define or identify. We yearn for the eternal. We long for the touch of Something or Someone beyond nature, above anything in our experience.

Every once in a while something strikes a cord. We hear a strand of music; we see a misty landscape; we catch the haunting scent of an unseen flower — and this desire wells up in our hearts.

We want that beauty. It calls to the depths of our hearts.

To desire something means that somewhere in the universe that something exists.

Just as thirst means there is water and hunger means there is food, then our desire for God means ...

We never want something that does not somehow, somewhere exist.

We want what is, not what ain't.

What a horrible tragedy to desire something vital and not get it. That does happen. People die thirsty. Some starve. Some live without sex. Some perish without God. What a horrible, horrible tragedy!

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An ancient Psalm comes to mind:

Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. Delight thyself also in the Lord; and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.

Friday, June 30, 2006

America's Two Greatest Writers



This newspaper clipping is fake but fun.

I used the *Newspaper Generator* website to create it.

I did it because Stephen King is my favorite writer and I just finished re-reading his book *Desperation*, yesterday. I think it ranks among his finest.

If I tried to list my favorite Stephen King books, I'd include about 30 of his 40+ novels. And, as a writer, I find his non-fiction *On Writing* and *Danse Macabre* inspiring.

Reading his books, I admire his skill in removing me from my world and getting me totally involved in his. I marvel at his command of English and at his thought processes as he takes ordinary people and places them in extraordinary situations.

Since I read *Carrie* when it first came out, I've bought two shelves full of Stephen King books. Obviously, Mr. King has never bought one of my books but if he reads this fake clipping, I hope he gets a kick out of it.

JULY

Saturday, July 01, 2006

Energy, Enthusiasm and Vivaciousness

Friday I edged and mowed our neighbor's yard for the last time(long story) and I mowed our own yard too.

This morning I feel stiff and sore and old and decrepit.

Why is it that characters in books have so much more energy that real people do?

Why, Agatha Christy's Miss. Marple acts peppier than I do!

Sunday, July 02, 2006

Party Time!

First, a modern day miracle:

Saturday Ginny & I drove to Abandon-All-Hope-All-Ye-Who-Enter-Here-Mart. It only took us 20 minutes to escape the clutches of the ghost of Sam Walton! Has that ever happened to anyone else in the history of the world? Only 20 minutes in Wal-Mart and we were out again! Wow! Guardian angels must have been working over time for us.

Last night we attended a 4th of July cookout at Warren and Carol's. Carol cooked for a multitude but since the multitude didn't show up, those of us who did ate it all.

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Two different styles of baby-back ribs, burgers, salads, and every conceivable trimming. We gorged ourselves at the feast.

I met many of their friends I'd never met before. I do not do well in groups but I talked with an attorney and a restaurant owner for a while about fishing and shrimping, jury selection, and childhood memories.

Several of us at the party knew Bubba and Dolly's family and we shared happy thoughts about them..

Later, a fan who had bought four of my books -- ok, I'll admit, it was my daughter, but it sounds more impressive to say a fan -- brought them over to our house for me to autograph. Even though I write all the time, when it comes to putting some pithy saying with my signature on a title page, my mind goes blank. I can never think more witty to say than "Best Wishes" or something equally inane.

Eve volunteered to help me with research needed before I can post the stuff I've been scanning about Baldwin and Mayport. I'd be stymied without her. She's such an encouragement. When her plans to work overseas materialize, I'll be lost.

I got an excellent start on the holiday weekend by falling asleep in front of the tv.

Party till it hurts!

Monday, July 03, 2006

Getting Out The Door

The Bible contains an odd turn of phrase that I've wondered about.

It's "...Thy coming in and thy going out".

As I recall that phrase is used a number of times; it's never made a whole lot of sense to me. I've written it off as a quaint old English expression from 1611 when the King James translation was published. I figured it meant something like God keeping track of our progress or something like that.

Sunday morning after breakfast, Ginny and I decided to enjoy our coffee out by the fountain in the garden. I started out the door when I remembered my shoes. I turned around and went back inside to get them.

I walked outside again and realized that I had not turned off the coffee pot.

I went back inside to do that.

And came back out again.

Ginny came out, said, “oh, I forgot my cigarettes” and went back inside.

She came out again, sat down in her chair, said, “Oh, I didn’t bring my lighter” and went back inside.

And came out again.

I remembered that I had not taken my pill.

I got up and went back inside to swallow it.

Then I came out again.

She said, “I need to stop at the bathroom” and went back inside. Then came out again and sat down, only to realize her lighter was out of fluid.

I went back inside to fill her lighter..

And I came out again.

About then I thought of that odd phrase of Scripture.

“The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore”.

Oh, I get it now!



No matter how confused and befuddled and screwed up we get, no matter how we run back and forth, no matter how big a circle we run in, no matter many times we run in and out without getting anywhere, no matter how disorganized life seems, the Lord watches over and preserves us.

I think perhaps He’s amused.

Ginny and I sat in the garden sipping coffee,

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watching birds, smoking and talking for about three hours.

A wonderful time in a pleasant place — once we got out the door.

Tuesday, July 04, 2006

My 4th Of July Projects

First a patriotic history quiz::

Everyone knows that Revolutionary War hero Ethan Allen led his Green Mountain Boys against the British in the battle of Fort Ticonderoga in May, 1775 -- but can you name Ethan Allen's most famous conquest?

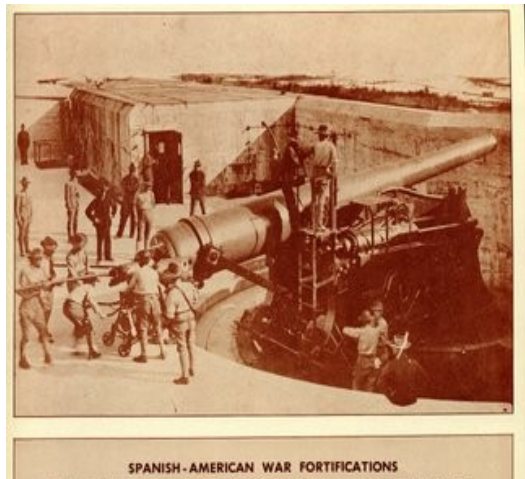
Yesterday I met a goal for my website: I wanted to post a series of 50 historic photographs from my hometown's earlier days by the 4th of July.

I fear the loss of such materials and I feel they should be preserved.

Every year the Jacksonville Library culls its collections of out of date material and offers these at a book sale. Ginny and I have attended these sales for years and years. The sales offer over a hundred thousand books and items either donated to the library or culled from the shelves.

As a local history buff, I keep an eye out for things related to Jacksonville history; a couple of years ago during one of the sales I acquired this plastic bag filled with old sepia

photographs from Jacksonville.

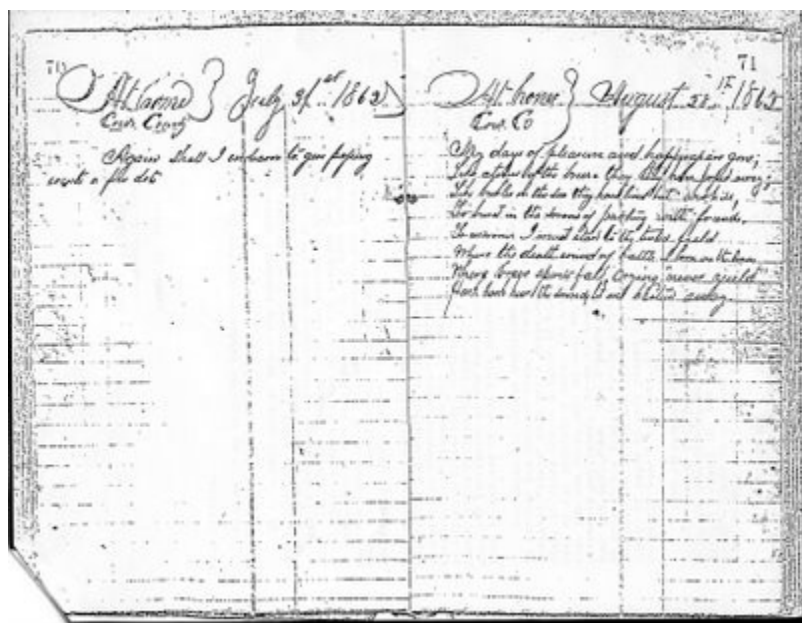


The 50 photographs are much older than the bag they came in and the captions are not always correct because many of the buildings shown have been moved or torn down.

After many hours of scanning, resizing, re-naming files and making thumbnails, yesterday I finally managed to post these 50 photographs.

I'm proud of me. John Cowart, King of the Geriatric Geeks!

During the afternoon I also scanned in 180 pages of a hitherto unpublished diary of a Civil War soldier. That will not be ready to show for a couple of months, but I've got a good start on it now.



Yes, the 4th of July awakens my spirit of patriotism and as I worked on the photo thumbnails yesterday I thought about appreciating having the right to vote.

I have voted in every election, national, state and local, since I turned 21 (that was the legal voting age back then).

As I recall, only one time has the guy I voted for won the election.

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Yes, in 1972, at the height of the Viet Nam War, I actually voted for Richard Nixon.

And he won.

I don't think anyone else I ever voted for has won an election.

My vote for Tricky Dickey was based on a political slogan I read on the wall of a men's room at a truck stop in Phoenix, Arizona. The graffiti read:

**Don't Change Dicks In The Middle Of A Screw,
Vote for Nixon In '72!**

Yes, on such profundities as that is democracy based.

God does bless America!

Otherwise, voters like me would run the place.

Oh yes, the history quiz:

Can you name Ethan Allen's most famous conquest?

Betsy Ross!

That joke breaks me up! I know. I'm wicked. Truly wicked. Really, really wicked — but I have fun.

Friday, July 07, 2006

A Week With Three Mondays

The holiday threw my sense of time out of whack.

Monday was Monday. Then Tuesday was a holiday which felt like a Sunday. Then back to work on Wednesday which felt like Monday all over again. Because of threatening weather, I did my normal Friday chores on Thursday which tricked my mind and body into thinking Thursday was Friday. But it's back to work again today — which feels like another Monday to me.

Does that make sense?

No. It doesn't to me either. But that's what it feels like.

The highpoint of the past week was that one of those nights, I think it was Wednesday or 2nd Monday, Ginny & I went to the library and afterwards enjoyed a super long conversation. We talked about books, birds, problems at her work, my interest in pornography, a party the kids have planned to hold at our house, our own vacation

plans, the space shuttle (which was supposed to launch on Monday), and a bunch of other subjects of interest to us.

My work continues to focus on that Civil War diary; I've put the fire history on a back burner for another few weeks.

Spiritually low this week. No sign of God in my universe. That's not unusual. Sometimes you have to keep on doing the right thing (or the wrong thing) just because it's the right thing even when there's no spiritual lift involved. He's still here, I'm just not aware of Him at the moment.

Or, maybe God takes Monday's off.

Monday, July 10, 2006

An Egg Shell and Our Generic and Geriatric Wild Birthday Party

Birthdays for four members in our core family fall in July, so Donald and Helen threw a generic birthday party at our house Sunday — which was nobody's actual birthday.

As Ginny and I cleaned up the yard ahead of time, she discovered the shell of a tiny bird egg.

She speculated that the baby bird has hatched and now flies free in the trees;

I speculated that a snake attacked the nest, cracked the egg and ate the baby bird.

Seeing the same evidence, the open egg shell, we arrived at different conclusions.

We evaluate evidence according to our individual worldviews.

Thus, presented with the same evidence about the resurrection of Christ from the grave, different people arrive at different conclusions; some believe He rose from the grave, others believe He rotted in the dirt.

Unfortunately, our views can be clouded.

The Scripture says that Light enters the world but men love darkness rather than light because our deeds are evil.

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So, Ginny envisions a happy, flapping little bird, I envision a happy, sleeping snake.

Compatibility of worldviews is not the main strength of our marriage.

Come birthday party time, Rachael, the quintessential party girl, arrived dressed in a black shroud carrying her sword and intoning:

“John Cowart, you are now a year closer to dying”.



What a kick-off for a party!

Donald and Helen brought me a new grill (could it be they felt guilty about burning the handles off the old grill at the last cookout?) and they provided all the goodies for kabobs.



I provided a lovely table centerpiece appropriate to a burger cookout. And yes, I designed this centerpiece myself. Talent will out:



Rachel's costume springboarded us all into a 45-minute conversation about funeral customs. Are we party people, or what!

Then we feasted.

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Afterward, as is our custom, I presented a devotional though. I based it on Psalm 31:15 “My times are in Thy hand”. To illustrate my thoughts, I’d sawed up lengths of paint-stirrer sticks to represent days and weeks and months and years. These formed a puzzle that everyone had to piece together to spell out John Cowart’s Meaning Of Life, which — while not up to Monty Python’s standards — works for me.

What a hoot!

Donald and Helen donned silly hats:



The hats are actually fishing caps with plastic frames to display a fishing license, but Ginny and I put photos of the kids in those spaces.

Now, for my own wonderful presents:

Jennifer and Pat gave me a set of lottery scratch-off tickets, thus making me a potential millionaire. When I pack Ginny’s lunches next week, I’ll put a ticket a day in her bag so that when she scratches off a winner, she can pick up her coffee mug and walk straight out of that office and never go back.

Patricia designed a card for me based on an idea from my book *Strangers On The Earth* which contains a chapter about how Roman soldiers burned Christians at the stake:



She also presented me with this lovely dog skull entwined with lime-green ribbons. (See June 26th posting to see why her gift is so appropriate).



For my birthday present, Eve made a contribution in my name to Mission Aviation Fellowship, one of my favorite charities. I'm not sure if she bought a whole airplane or what, but I'm greatly honored at her thoughtfulness.

Then some folks splashed in the pool. Barbara and Lisa (both music nuts) discussed opera (*ad nauseam*). Younger folks gathered around my computer (I think they were visiting sites parental blocked at home). One girl arranged a date on-line with a guy claiming to be an attorney (I advised her to tell him that her Dad is a Marine

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Corps instructor in small arms combat — hey, on-line I can be anything). Other folks discussed the merits of various horse-back riding schools. Randy and I marveled at being friends for over 30 years and how cheating, low-life, yankee insurance companies are raising home-owner rates in Florida by close to 75% this year. Pat and Jennifer told everyone about how one of their Chihuahuas catches houseflies in its mouth and places all the bodies in one pile??? Ginny let it all swirl around her (I wonder if she'd turned off her hearing aid?)

So, we partied for six hours.

No neighbors called the cops (this time).

Cake, ice cream, Barbara's pie, strawberries, avocado, and straw for the vegetarian among us.

Then they all finally went home.

Partied out, Ginny and I retired to the back room to read (me, Florida history; she, a murder mystery) and we did not even speak to each other for hours and hours.

Party till it hurts!

Tuesday, July 11, 2006

Guilty!

I'm ashamed to confess it.

Guilt nags at me.

I shouldn't have done it. I knew better, but I did it anyhow.

Yes, again on Monday, when I had other, more constructive, things to do, I spent the whole day reading.

No, I was not reading some sleazy bodice-ripper, I was reading a book on the history of Florida.... Yet I feel guilty.

Why is that?

What is there about reading that makes me feel guilty?

I guess it's my upbringing.

My parents hated for me to read. "Johnny, get your nose out of that book and do something useful" is a statement I heard over and over again as I was growing up. Thus, I've never been able to associate reading with "doing something useful".

Even in this journal I attempt to hide how much time I spend doing nothing but reading; I don't want people to know how much time I spend with my nose in a book. It's something I'm ashamed of, something I feel guilty about.

As a mature adult I realize that my folks disdain for reading was a cultural thing reflecting their own background. They were concerned that I did not fit the pattern they were comfortable with in a son. They wanted to see me with a shovel in my hand. Doing something useful. Not with my nose stuck in a book.

So I feel guilty about doing something that objectively I have no reason to feel guilty about. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with reading a history book. Reading is neither illegal nor sinful.

A lot of times, I feel guilty about doing perfectly innocent things.

And I don't feel a bit guilty about doing things that are wrong!

I've been known to steal without batting an eyelash. No qualm of conscience at all. I can justify my theft with a shrug and a flimsy thought.

The heart is deceitful above all things.

Feeling guilty about reading a state history book, not a qualm about stealing, lust, blasphemy, cheating, lying, you name it.

I feel guilty about the wrong things.

My heart and mind are just that twisted.

Straightening it all out is beyond me.

The story about the wheat and the sandspurs comforts me a bit. You know the one. Jesus said a guy planted a field of wheat but an enemy came along and planted sandspurs in the same place. The fieldhands wanted to root out the sandspurs but the owner said to leave wheat and tares to grow together till harvest.

Then they can be separated without stomping the wheat.

Traditionally, preachers liken the wheat to good guys and the tares to bad guys all growing in the field of the

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world till the end of the age and Judgment Day. They're probably right.

But for myself, I see the field as my own whole life with a bit of good wheat growing in the midst of all these sandspurs. It's such a tangle that I am not able to sort it all out.

But at harvest time, God Himself will separate out the things I really am guilty of from the things I feel guilty about.

And He will take care of the whole mess.

In mercy.

So. That's where I am today... Still with my nose in a book.

Wednesday, July 12, 2006

Two Fair Damsels In Distress

Screams in the night woke me.

I staggered awake and realized that Ginny was screaming in her sleep. A bad dream. I shook her awake and walked her around the room. I got her calmed down and poured her a glass of water.

She said she can't remember all her dream but that it involved an alligator as big as an elephant sneaking up on her.

With a bit of soothing, she went back to sleep about 2:30 and spent the rest of the night peacefully.

Yesterday my e-mail brought in this message from another damsel in distress, a young lady close to me that I care about very much:

I need a favor. If you've glanced at my blog, you'll know that someone said something that upset me today.... He called me today at work and asked for my updated address and phone. He'd had it before so I didn't see any problem on giving it to him.

Then he asked me to be his mistress.

I told him no but was so shocked that I am not even sure what else I said. I should have just said no and hung up the phone. He had mentioned about coming around and talking but I really want nothing else to do with him. I

had been feeling so good about my day and now feeling such the opposite.

I am not sure what to do about it. I really don't want him coming to my house or my work. I figured writing you would be easier on me (than) talking on the phone when I am upset... I'd not talk but sniffle.

I need some advice on how to handle it.

The guy who is harassing her is an older married man with grown children. I know both parties as well as his wife.

I suppose that such harassment comes with the territory of being a beautiful young woman but such things ought not to be.

I've promised her that I'd speak with him.

Any other ideas?

Short of MACE, that is?

Thursday, July 13, 2006

Practicing A Bit Of Scary Christianity

I did something scary yesterday. It caused me great trepidation and anxiety.

I would not have done it if I were not a Christian.

This really upset me, turned my stomach. I avoid confrontation.

Isn't being a Christian supposed to bring you peace and joy and love and all that crap? Isn't the burden supposed to be easy and the yoke light?

Such stuff is beyond my experience.

I felt so upset about what I had to do that butterflies the size of 747s fluttered in my stomach. I tried to figure some way to avoid doing it. I racked my brain trying to think of some Bible verse that would ease my mental anguish, but I couldn't think of one that would let me off the hook.

How am I as a Christian father supposed to deal with the stalker who made that indecent proposal to one of my daughters?

The only Scripture I could think of to guide me in this was Matthew 18:15-17; that's where Jesus says,

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“Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother...”

Ok. Ok. Light burden. Easy yoke. Other cheek and all that jazz— easier said than done, Lord.

I felt, on the basis of Scripture, that I was to go to the married man who approached my daughter as a whore and confront him face to face without anger, in Christian compassion, remembering that I too am a sinful man with plenty of beams in my own eye.

I shaved, dressed, and took a walk to think out what I wanted to say. Then I came home and wrote down exactly what to say. I did not want to speak in anger or ad lib words and I certainly did not want to prolong this unpleasant duty. I wanted to say my piece 60 seconds or less, so I wrote it down as a statement to read to him.

I cast about for an excuse to delay this duty but could think of none.

When you know that you absolutely, positively have to eat a frog, it's best not to look at it too long before hand.

I drove to his office and asked him to talk with me privately — but in a public place.

Here, with three changes to disguise the names of those involved, is the statement I read to him face to face:

Statement I read to The Guy on July 12, 2006, at 9:10 a.m.

Guy, I feel upset.

Very upset. And, in accordance with Bible teachings about how a Christian man is to protect his family, I come to you in person first to read this statement.

This morning I received an e-mail from my daughter telling me about the indecent proposal you made to her yesterday at her workplace.

I feel that our friendship has been violated and held in contempt by your addressing her as a whore who would consent to becoming your mistress. She assures me that she has given you no encouragement whatsoever for your

low, no-account, despicable, sorry behavior. She was surprised, shocked and reduced to tears.

I assume you were drunk when you spoke of cheating on your wife and degrading my daughter. Even drunk, this is the act of a cheat and a dastardly sleaze.

At this point this is only between you and me. I see no need to tell your wife, or to call the police, or to bring this up at a congregational meeting, or to post you name and address on the web —Yet.

However, if there is one more phone call to my daughter, if you go by her house or show up at her workplace for any reason, I will call your wife, and I will advise my daughter to file legal charges against you for sexual harassment of a government employee in the workplace. A recent memo from the administration takes a dim view of such sexual harassment. There is to be zero tolerance of such low-down behavior.

I feel disappointed to think that you hold our friendship and a member of my family in such low esteem. I thought you and I were friends but I feel you have treated us with contempt by your despicable words and actions.

John Cowart

The guy seemed stunned.

He cried.

He apologized profusely.

He displayed every evidence of remorse and contrition.

I offered to leave him a copy of my written statement in case he wanted to share it with his wife. He declined.

I felt like vomiting.

Sometimes I wish I were not a Christian, or that, since I am, that I wouldn't take the words of Jesus so seriously. But, He is Lord and there's not a bit of sense in calling Him Lord and not doing at least some of what He says once in a while.

This experience left me (and the guy) depleted. The guy promised to never again contact my daughter under any circumstances.

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We'll see.

Scripture outlines the next step if he does.

We dads are sometimes good for something.

I drove back home and ate a slice of left-over birthday cake for breakfast.

Friday, July 14, 2006

A Good Weekend Ahead

Spent Thursday morning doing yard work; afternoon, reading.

Ginny is taking some time off so we hope to hike, er, make that stroll, out in the woods for a bit over the long weekend.

Saturday, July 15, 2006

My Happiest Day Ever

Slept an hour late Friday; I did not wake till 5, Ginny slept till 7.

We carried our coffee outside by the fountain and began a free-range conversation that lasted all day.

We drove to Dave's Diner for a long, leisurely breakfast and we lingered over coffee for almost two hours.

(Oh, by the way, Dave's will close Monday and Tuesday because another crew is filming a movie using Dave's as a set.)

Back home, Gin and I continued in intimate conversation for hours.

I can't remember everything we talked about but some topics included: birds, our garden, Mark Twain, sex, the Gold Standard, the Roosevelt administration, hair styles, race relations, romantic memories, archaeology, eschatology, cactus, how proud we are of our children, Iraq, great tits, car repair, Florida history, erections, problems at her office, the *Titanic*, the nature of Heaven, biblical views of property, negligees, college degrees, blogging, Rock Creek Park, and sources of joy.

The day was one of those special times when we meshed together perfectly and enjoyed time to explore and get to know each other better. You'd think that after 37 years of marriage we'd be somewhat acquainted, but

our relationship today was like that of a couple on their first or second date when they are feeling each other out to discover who this person is, liking what they find, and beginning to fall in love.

It felt so good to get beyond our usual conversations of “What’s for supper” or “How are we going to pay that car insurance bill” or “You need to fix that broken hinge”. We did discuss such things but we moved beyond the mundane into soul intimacy.

So, on one level, we did nothing special today.

Just talked and touched and dipped in the pool and drove out to supper and got reacquainted and found each other fascinating.

When we see Jesus face to face, that may prove to be a joyous happy day, till then, I don’t recall having ever spent a happier day than this one.

Kinda nice to be in love.

Sunday, July 16, 2006

Our Mini-Adventure On The Straight and Narrow Path

Saturday Ginny and I strolled on the Jacksonville-Baldwin Trail, a paved path through the wilderness as straight as an arrow, as straight a taunt string, as straight as a broom handle, as straight as a train track.

In fact, the trail once was a train track.

When the railroad company abandoned the right of way, it was paved over as a hiking trail running the 15 miles between Jax and Baldwin straight as... well, straight as a railroad track.

Here’s a photo of Ginny resting; you can see the straight and narrow path stretching East behind her:

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Here's another photo of the trail stretching to the West in the other direction (the flowers are mimosa):



Say, this straight and narrow path reminds me of a Bible verse.

No, not that one.

The other one.

The one from the prophet who said that God would provide a road for us through bad places, “A main road will go through that once-deserted land; it will be named the Way of Holiness... God will walk there with you; even the most stupid man cannot miss the way”.

That’s Isaiah 35:8 in the Living Bible.

As I recall, the King James Version renders that last bit of the verse as, “A wayfaring man, though he be a fool, can not miss the way”.

To me that means that God’s way is not hidden, twisted, winding, mysterious, or obscure, but a multi-lane Interstate, not easily missed by the dullest of us unless we are willfully deliberately obstreperous.

His way is right in front of our noses.

That’s a comfort to me because, straight as the Jax/Baldwin Trail is, it’s possible (with deliberate effort) for some idiot to wander off the trail and into the bushes.

Wonder who that could be?

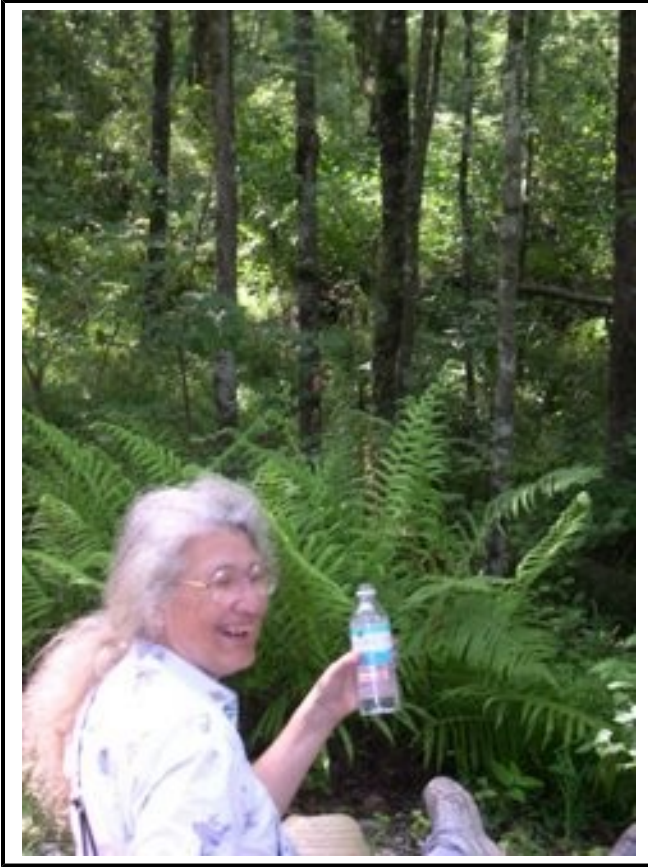
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Ginny took this photo:



Dense forest flanks both sides of the straight and narrow trail, and mid-July heat wilts hikers. Followers of the trail need some refreshment along the way:



I found tangles of wild grapes in the jungle beside the trail and I sampled a cluster. Ginny refused to eat any though I assured her the grapes were good (if a bit tart). But she doesn't trust me just because one time — only one time, mind you, I let her take a single taste of a wild orange —which looks just like a regular orange, but tastes like the most sour, bitter fruit in the whole Universe!

Here's the photo I took of her tasting that one single orange (and yes, those are tears in her eyes):

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Why wouldn't she trust me again? Trust is so important in marriage. (so is knowing your partner's idea of teasing)

Anyhow, here's a photo of me and the wild grapes I found:



And, no, we did not hike the whole 15 miles of trail. We strolled three miles, which, considering our age and condition and the heat, is quite enough of an adventure.

And to prove that Indiana Jones has nothing on me when it comes to adventure, I boldly stood right next to a

cow, a big one, with only a slender strand of wire between me and the beast:



What's that behind me?

Right over my shoulder in the photo?

As Ginny snapped the picture, she notice another wild animal creeping up to attack me and she took a photo of it too. Yes, a wild creature was lurking right there behind me camouflaged by the cows:



Once we trekked into Baldwin, we discovered that the local library was hosting a first class shindig.

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Who could resist such festivities? Ginny and I rushed over, following the crowd to Maxville, so we wouldn't miss a thing.

Here is a photo of three happy clowns at the library:



No, wait, that one in the middle is not a regular clown; she's the head librarian.

Our middle-daughter, the Head Librarian!

Here she is again, this time with a few members of the Defenders Of Faith Karate Club — which gave an excellent demonstration of their skills:



The other Defenders of Faith karate students clustered in the main library room eager to check out books because of their thirst for reading (or maybe just to scarf up the cake and cookies):



Ginny and I returned home to continue our day of adventures in recliners in front of the tv all evening — another wonderful day!

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There's a lot to be said in favor of walking on a straight and narrow path.

But remember: grapes, yes; oranges, no.

Tuesday, July 18, 2006

Nothing Much Happening (but I Feel Grouchy Anyhow)

I've missed two days journal entries for two reasons:

Nothing much is happening in my life at the moment.. I have little to say — not that that has ever stopped me from posting before.

After a weekend of intense intimacy, Ginny and I are regaining our distance. This is normal, like waves lapping the shore and receding as the overall tide rises. As the poet said, "Let there be spaces in your togetherness". So we are talked out for the moment and spend our time together in companionable silence each reading our own books.

We intend, God willing, to consolidate man cactus plants into one bed next weekend. My friend Wes came over yesterday and used his truck to haul in some building materials for the bed. Once it's made, any cactus that shows its head outside the boundary, gets weedwhacked without mercy. I'm tired of thorns in my ankles when I do yard work.

I'm even tempted to transplant the thorn bushes we have planted under each window in the house. They make great security barriers. Any burglar who presses on past a batch of Bougainvillea thorns or Spanish Bayonets deserves anything he's able to steal afterwards.

Problem is that if God gives me life and strength till Fall, I plan to paint the house and then it'll be me, not the burglar, who has to contend with the thorn bushes and hornet nests. I'm not sure what to do about these sticker bushes.

The main reason for any security precaution is to make a bad guy think that my neighbor's house is an easier target than mine.

In the news: The space shuttle landed safely yesterday — much to the disappointment of the media

who proceeded to run down America's accomplishment even though the ship didn't crash.

Arabs and Israelis are fighting, but that's hardly news since the same war has been going on for thousands of years.

The latest spark to set them off was the kidnapping of some Israeli soldiers and the Jews responded by bombing.

If the Moslems did not want to get bombed, they should have kidnapped Americans; nothing seems to happen when they do that.

Yesterday another earthquake and tsunami hit Indonesia. I wonder about the people who may, or may not, have read the Indonesian translation of my book on prayer.

I pray in a vacuum.

Wednesday, July 19, 2006

My Greatest Accomplishment Today

After browsing at the computer before lunch yesterday, I decided to take a 20-minute nap — I slept for four hours!

No wonder I never get anything done.

Ever feel troubled, need help, and pray -- but nothing happens? Next time, instead of praying, try this:



The graphic comes from www.worth1000.com

If you click on that link,, be prepared to spend some time being fascinated because you won't get anything else done.

Thus, between drowsing and browsing, my life passes.

Thursday, July 20, 2006

My Historic Shirt

Ever notice this handsome photo of me that is the avatar on my blog?

It shows me fiddling around as I built a model ship in a bottle.

But the thing you should really notice is the historic shirt I am wearing.



I bought this shirt 37 years ago today — on July 20, 1969, at Sears in Indianapolis, Indiana. I still wear this historic shirt regularly.

When I bought it, the shirt was a bright red plaid; over the years, it's faded a bit into more of a dull rust color.

Come to think of it, I've faded a bit myself.

I bought the shirt just minutes before the store closed that night. As I walked back from the Sears store toward the terminal where my truck was parked, people thronged the streets. Practically every business stayed open late and the owners had run extension cords out the door and set up television sets on the sidewalks.

Some private homes had televisions set out on the front porch. People clustered around each television set blocking the sidewalks and entrances to the stores.

I remember a gaggle of strippers in costume and patrons spilled out of one bar to watch Walter Cronkite's news broadcast on the tv sets in an appliance store window across the street. Cronkite had been on the air for 27 continuous hours. He shouted, "Go Baby Go!" near the start of the program.

But now we were getting toward the climax and nobody wanted to miss it.

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Everybody talked to each other as the tension mounted. Complete strangers gripped hands on the sidewalks.

Then, at 10:56 in the evening, the hatch opened and Commander Neil Armstrong climbed down the ladder to touch foot on the surface of the moon.

“That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind,” he said.

People in the streets of Indianapolis cheered and danced and slapped backs and hugged each other in exhilaration. America Had Done It! We Reached The Moon! Apollo 11 was a success.

The rocket did not explode!

The landing module did not sink under the soft dust of the moon surface.

Our guys did not die.

They made it!

They made it!

Thank God, they made it!

I had the shirt I just bought still in the bag as I glad-handed a bunch of people on the sidewalk in front of a shoe store's tv. Jubilation! Eagle had landed. America was on the moon! America was on top of the world. Everyone was thrilled. Drinks were on the house.

I still wear my historic shirt. But not because I bought it on the same day America first landed on the surface of the moon. I still wear it because when I first tried it on, Ginny said, “That looks really nice on you”.

I treasured her compliment, so I’ve worn this shirt ever since.

But I do remember the night I bought it.



Friday, July 21, 2006

All-Seeing Dad Knows All!

First, a little background: picture five young ladies in an SUV with a cell phone.

Thursday as I mowed the lawn, I kicked around ideas about writing a Bible study based on the Book of Esther and I toyed with ideas to make editing the Civil War journal easier.

I like to think as I do yard work.

When I came inside for a sip of ice water (monster hot out there) the phone rang.

My oldest daughter, Jennifer, explained that she was driving with some other girls to a pet store when a Bible question came up among them, so she called me for an answer.

"The Bible says something or another about a mustard seed, but I can't remember what it says," she said. "Pat has this necklace with a mustard seed inside clear plastic and we were taking about what it means. Do you know what the Bible verse about that is?"

"Sure," I lied.

"Just a second," she said, "Let me put this on the speaker phone".

"There are two references to mustard seeds," I said. "The first is in Matthew 13:31 where Jesus said, 'The kingdom of Heaven is like to a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field: which indeed is the least of all seeds; but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof'.

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“The second reference is in Matthew 17:20. The disciples tried to cast out a demon but were not able to, so Jesus did it Himself. And when they ask why they couldn’t do it, He said, ‘Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. Howbeit, this kind (of demon) goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.’”

“Thanks, Dad,” Jennifer said. “I knew you’d know the answer”.

And she hung up the phone.

The funny thing is I did not know the answer.

I had no idea.

I cheated.

I keep a concordance and a Bible within easy reach of my desk and even as she asked her question, I had flipped open the concordance (a huge index of every word in the Bible) to the phrase *Mustard Seed* and opened my Bible to Matthew’s Gospel so I could read from it directly.

My daughter and the girls drove on thinking that I know the Bible so well that I could quote such references, without even thinking about it, right off the top of my head.

Maybe it’s the devil in me, but I see no reason to let her know otherwise.

Hey, I’m building a legend here.

Saturday, July 22, 2006

Yesterday Was A Bit Bizarre -- Even For One Of My Days

After Ginny left for work Friday morning I edited about 20 pages of the Civil War soldier’s diary. But by midday I encountered two unusual situations: one involved romance; the other, my death.

Love comes first.

This is not a tale of long lost love, but of postponed romance.

Long ago a guy, lets call him Alex, and a girl, lets call her Ellen, grew up near Jacksonville and went to the same high school where they were sweethearts.

Both are now over 80 years old.

After high school they went separate ways: he into the service, she to college in another city. They met other loves, married other partners, and raised families. Alex and his wife were married for 55 years; I'm not sure how long Ellen was married.

Then each of them lost their respective spouses.

He lives out west; she, up north..

A chance phone call.

A renewed acquaintance.

Romance bloomed again.

My friend Barbara brought them over to my house to meet me and stroll through my garden. I had never met them before; they are visiting Barbara in the old folks home where she lives.

Alex and Ellen are visiting Jacksonville on a sort of pre-honeymoon vacation trip together.

"We may get married legally, or we may exchange private, personal vows, and live in sin," Ellen told me using her fingers to put quote marks around that last phrase.

I sympathize with their dilemma.

They face tough choices.

No particular Scripture appropriate to their situation pops into my mind, only a phrase from Shakespeare's sonnet:

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments".

And these folks face plenty of impediments.

The couple is thinking of marriage but they face problems concerning social security benefits, health insurance, property, input from grown children, financial arrangements, tax issues, etc.

If they marry legally, each will loose all kinds of benefits.

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Benefits they can ill afford to loose.

Oh well, even for the young, love is costly.

It was a pleasure meeting the couple, giddy with new-found love.

My friend Barbara and the couple all got to talking about what they were each doing back in 1950. My only contribution to the conversation was that in 1950, I'd been sent to the Principal's office. I was in 4th grade!

Yes, lunch with them felt a bit odd because I was the youngest person at the table!

That's a switch.

And it brings me to the other odd situation of the day:

The four of us went to a Chinese restaurant where I have been going off and on for years. There I ran into my friend Peggy, a beautiful young woman whom I have not happened to see for four or five months.

Seeing me walk in the door stunned her.

As I entered the restaurant, Peggy gasped and ran to hug me. She acted delighted to see me again. She trembled as she told why she was so startled to see me.

Until quite recently Peggy, who is considerably younger than me or Ginny, worked as an aid at a local hospital, a massive facility that covers a couple of city blocks.

Among her duties at the hospital she delivered supplies to the upper floors and wheeled patients who died down to the morgue.

About two months ago, in delivering supplies to the cardiac floor, she noticed that some equipment was for a John Cowart in Room so and so. She noticed on the papers that the man's wife was Ginny.

Cowart is not an uncommon name here in the southeast, but what are the chances of another John Cowart also being married to a lady with the same name as my wife, Ginny?

Peggy assumed that I was the patient. She intended to visit Ginny and me, but work kept her so busy that she did not get up to the room.

Two days later, her supervisor told her to pick up John Cowart's corpse from cardiac and wheel it down to the morgue.

Peggy just could not do it. She broke down and cried. She told the supervisor that she knew that patient and asked if someone else could pick up my body so she would not have to look at me.

"I just could not stand to look at your body," she said.

(When it comes to girls, that's the story of my life).

She cried and cried and mourned for me. She felt ashamed and guilty about going to comfort Ginny because she'd been too busy to visit me in the hospital room.

For ages Peggy has owned a copy of the book I wrote on prayer, but she'd never gotten around to reading it. She said she got out her copy of the book and read it cover to cover weeping at various reminders about what a nice guy I was.

So seeing me walk in the restaurant shocked her. Her hands trembled as she told me about this. She felt so flustered to find me still alive when she thought I had died..

I felt flattered, honored, that this young woman mourned for me so.

But the only thing I could think of to say about her tale was, "I'm sorry to disappoint you".

Monday, July 24, 2006

Succulents Suck!

Over the weekend Ginny and I constructed the gigantic cactus bed we have been talking about for weeks.

Sometime somewhere over the 38 years of our marriage, we may have had a dumber idea but, if so, I don't remember what it was.

Thing is, in the years we have lived in this house, we have accumulated various succulents in our yard. We dutifully put these cactus, firecracker aloe, prickly pear, aguavay, pointy things I don't know the name of, and a giant century plant in various nooks and crannies of the yard where they snag our ankles as we do yard work.

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We thought it would be a fine idea to get all these plants into a single bed where we will never have to touch one again.

Sounds smart — but it isn't.

We bought lumber to make a cactus corral eight inches high, by ten feet wide, by twelve feet long. That's 8X10X12 (I'd put in the little " or ' marks to show feet and inches but I can't remember if " is feet and ' is inches or vice versa).

I cut sod squares from the defined area and re-planted those squares in spots here and there where the lawn looked thin. We dug out weeds. We chopped roots. We tilled the soil. We hauled fill and shoveled dirt to raise the level of the bed providing good drainage for the plants.

The temperature pushed a hundred degrees and cactus-like plants like full sun with no shade so that's where we put the bed.

We started work at 6:30 a.m. before the heat got too bad, wore straw hats, took frequent breaks and drank lots of water. During our breaks we discussed aspects of our prayer life. (Isn't there some Scripture or hymn somewhere with the line "Nor Thorns Infest The Ground"?) Even with our taking such frequent breaks, nevertheless, the task proved grueling.

Time came to plant the cactus things.

Took us seven hours to un-pot (root-bound suckers!) and re-plant the various cactus.

We took seven hours to plant the bed; then it took an hour and 40 minutes for me to pluck thorns out of Ginny's hands (She had worked with the Prickly Pears while I dug out some heaver succulents).

And yes, she did wear gardening gloves.

Don't tell the Iraqis, not a whisper now, but the thorns of a Florida Prickly Pear can pierce Kevlar!

I had to go over each of her fingers separately with a lighted magnifying glass and three different kinds of tweezers — tools left over from my model shipbuilding days — plucking thorns.

Now it's great we had the model-building tools on hand, but because of the unaccustomed physical labor of digging out the bed and our general decrepit old-age, both of us have shaky hands. And my dimming eyesight led me to have to feel for the hair-thin thorns, and there were hundreds.

Ginny hardly ever screamed.

Florida Indians used to eat Prickly Pears. They dug the plant up by the roots, threw it whole on the fire to burn all the thorns off, then roasted the fruit and flesh. If we ever have to transplant another cactus, I'm borrowing a flame thrower!

Anyhow, we got the massive job done. We survived the thorns. We enjoy the result (I'll post photos when the cactus bloom). And we enjoyed working together.

Thanks be to God.

But with all that rooting and digging and lifting and bending and carrying and planting — today, if my dick were to get half as stiff as the rest of me, life would be perfect and the Viagra company would go bankrupt.

Tuesday, July 25, 2006

Another Wasted Day In A Wasted Life

My Monday added up to just another wasted day in a wasted life.

Even before Ginny left for work I'd written up my 2do2da list of nine things I wanted to accomplish during the day.

I assigned a priority to each task on the list. This resulted in my identifying the A-Number-One Most Important thing for me to do.

But ... Here were eight priority B, C, and D items on the list.

What to do? What to do?

The easy things won hand down. I frittered away a day of life doing things of hardly any importance while leaving the most important of all untouched.

"The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing".

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I think that's a quote from a cowboy movie that's stuck in my mind. It's not the way I do things, but it's stuck in my mind.

In my spiritual life I'm just as bad. I fritter away life acting on vague semi-religious, semi-moral or social things — convenient do-goodism and feel-goodism — and thus avoid contact with the Almighty.

Yes, Christ ranks as prominent in my life (I use Him as an excuse for a lot of things) but He is seldom preeminent. I dabble at devotion. The word *Lord* does have a meaning, and *my Lord* is the phrase I use in referring to Him, but all too often the term *my sidekick* might be more accurate.

When I'm in my right mind, I reflect on Psalm 27:4 which says,:

One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life to behold the beauty of the Lord...

What is more important than that?

One thing!

One thing.

One A-Number One thing. I should remember what that is.

O well. Tomorrow is also a day.

.Wednesday, July 26, 2006

My Forgetery Works Real Good

My name is John —J-O-H-N.

The *Titanic* sank on April 14, 1912.

Jacksonville, my hometown, was founded in 1829.

Polycarp was the immediate successor to Christ's apostles.

My wife's name is Virginia and we've been married for ??years for a long time.

I remember important facts like those above. I tend to forget little, less important facts.

For instance, Tuesday morning my youngest son — who is thirty-one or 32 or 33 or 34 years old (I forget exactly) — called me.

“Dad,” he said, “Do you know which hospital I was born in?”

I racked my brain. I couldn’t remember. I think I remember being able to smoke in the expectant father’s waiting room back then, but which hospital that waiting room was in escapes my memory.

I suggested he call Ginny at work. She might possibly remember where he was born — women are good at remembering little details like that..

He wanted her office number. I call her once or twice every week. But I can never remember her work number. I put Donald on hold while I looked it up; I have it written on the wall in the kitchen.

“Why do you want to know which hospital,” I asked him, once I’d looked up her phone number.

“I need to know the name of the hospital to get a copy of my birth certificate,” he said. “I need it to get my passport,” he said.

“What do you need a passport for?” I asked.

He told me that he is going to Europe this fall.

First I’d heard of it.

Ever.

He told me that not only is he going himself, but he is taking six other members of our family with him!

“What!”

“Yes,” he said, “Seven of us are going. Me and a friend from work will attend a computer conference — the company is sending us — and the girls are going to tour”.

“Wow! When did all this come up?” I asked.

“Dad, I told you all about it. Don’t you remember?”

“This is the first I’ve heard a word about it,” I said.

“Dad, we told you all about it at the birthday party (see my July 10th blog in the archives). We planned the whole thing right there and told you all about it”.

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I don't remember ever hearing anything at all about a minor thing like seven members of my family all going to Europe

That's news to me. He says they told me, but I don't remember.

Ginny would know all about when and where our children were born; she remembers little things like that.

And she remembers my address too.

I remember that the Greeks fought off the Persians at the battle of Thermopylae.

And I remember that yesterday Donald told me that everybody is going to either Sweden or Switzerland.

I can't remember which.

They both begin with Sw...

Thursday, July 27, 2006

A Blatant Appeal For You To Buy My Books:

I write useful books.

My books are useful because they are thick.

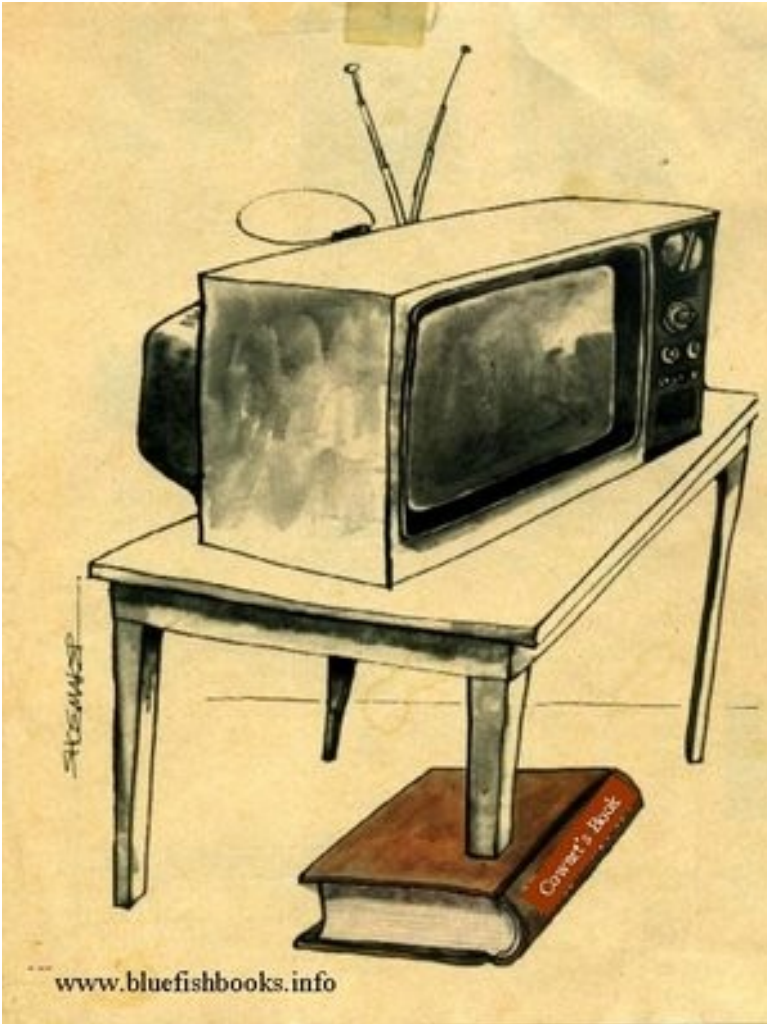
Most of them anyhow.

Some of my books only run to 130 pages; but others are close to 400 pages thick.

My books are not only thick but they are also educational, inspirational, entertaining, funny, informative, thick, and cheap.

Mostly thick.

Therefore, my books lend themselves to a variety of household uses For example:



Please look over my on-line book catalogue at www.bluefishbooks.info

The thick book you buy will be useful to you.

The money you spend will be useful to me.

Thank You for your support.

NOTE: I clipped out this hilarious cartoon years ago and put it on the frig; it's been up there so long the paper has yellowed. I no longer remember where it came from. The title of the book originally was "Great Ideas Of Western Man"!

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Friday, July 28, 2006

Coincidence — Or Something Else

First, many thanks to those who checked out my on-line book catalog yesterday; I appreciate your interest. Life would be bleak without you.

After I posted my journal entry yesterday, I prayed about whether or not I should make a phone call. I loath making phone calls; I have to steel myself to make one. I avoid phone calls whenever possible.

No big deal, that's just another little quirk of mine.

Something I live with.

As I've been editing the Civil War diary, I ran across a familiar name amid the ephemera in the old file. "*Say, I used to know that guy,*" I thought. "*I have a few questions about the autograph of the diary, if this is the same man I used to know, maybe he can answer my questions*".

But, I did not really want to call him. *John Merritt is an important person, a busy lawyer who is running for judge in the September elections. It's probably not even the same John Merritt I used to know,* I thought.

So, I put off calling.

Instead I walked out on some errands.

A horn tooted as a car pulled up behind me.

John Merritt was driving to his office after a breakfast meeting with some of the area's movers and shakers. He saw me (one of the area's moved and shook) walking and stopped to give me a lift.

It turns out that he is indeed the same John Merritt mentioned in the supporting documents in my Civil War files. He helped the old lady who found the diary transcribe it back when he was a college student. He supplied me with all sorts of background information and proved enormously helpful with my questions.

And here, I had decided not to call him at all, not to bother him.

Remember earlier, when I had prayed about whether or not to call him? I realize now that what I'd really been praying for was for God to give me an excuse not to call because of my aversion to the telephone.

The Lord God Almighty does not always cooperate with me.

I've noticed that.

John and I were close friends years ago but gradually drifted apart and I had not seen him, except to wave to, for the past three or four years. Our conversation this morning was necessarily shallow — work, wives, kids & cars — but perhaps this marks an opportunity to get reacquainted.

O, I do plan to vote for him on September 5th. Everything I know about him encourages that. He impresses me as an honest man with good judgment and high standards. I think he would make a great judge.

It just seems odd that I prayed, decided not to bother him, then ran into him within an hour.

Coincidence — or is something else at work here?

Saturday, July 29, 2006

But, I did promise.

Friday I neglected my usual yard chores to browse all day in the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library Of Congress.

LC's massive collection represents some of the finest Civil War photographs available and I was looking for prints to illustrate the Confederate soldier's diary that I'm preparing for publication.

When I was young, I worked for about ten years at the library; at the time I knew my way around what was then the 14 million volume stacks.

But now the library has expanded.

Now I find the digital collection really difficult to navigate.

And, once you do find something, you'd better bookmark it well.

I'm continually saying, "Now, where did I see that? I know I saw it just a few minutes ago. What happened to it?"

Work on the Whatley Diary nears completion.

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Good thing.

I'm getting sick of it. Discrepancies in dates and place names drive me to verge madness.

It's all the yankees' fault!

Just look what they did:



The War has been over for years but still the invaders rape and plunder and burn and pillage. When that bastard Sherman passed through, he ordered his marauders to burn the crops, chop down the fruit trees, poison the wells.

Today, even occupied Iraq fairs better than the American South did.

Sherman even ordered his men to shoot all the cows shot so Southern babies would have no milk.



And I think his spirit hinders my work on this Confederate diary!

Yes, Sherman's ghost muddles the diary of our guy, so that I've been having such a hard time preparing it for publication.

In fact, if I had not promised the old lady who owned the diary that I'd do what I could on this, her pet project, then I would have dropped the whole thing long ago.

This is not my baby so why should I raise it?

But I did promise.

And although the old lady is long dead, my promise is still alive so I'm doing what I can, even though I'd rather be working on something else.

As literature or history this soldier's diary does not rank up there with the *Rose Cottage Chronicles*, or Mary Boykin Chesnut's *Diary From Dixie*. No, the diary I'm working on falls in the area of things "not good enough to keep but too good to throw away". Essentially it's Civil War ephemera and I hope to preserve it mostly in my self-appointed roll as an archivist.

But I did promise.

So I track down facts and reconcile discrepancies and I pray and curse and fuss and fume. I cut. I paste. I delete. I insert. I go nuts. So the work does progress -- in spite of the damnyankees.

Oh, here's a tip, if you want to look at LC's Civil War prints, go to the Library of Congress website at <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html>.

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They are all in there somewhere.

I suppose that the most positive thing about my experience in searching for Civil War photos at the Library of Congress is that while I'm browsing for those on my computer, I can't be looking at pictures of naked ladies on line.

That's something.

Sunday, July 30, 2006

Some Sayings:

When Donald came over yesterday bringing a load of stuff for the poor at the mission, he saw the state I've let the yard degenerate into and offered to hire a young man to help me catch up on the backlog of yard work next week. Over the years, many times I've helped other people that way, so it feels really strange to be on the receiving end of such help.

When Ginny and I went out for breakfast, we talked about a news item which encourages diabetics to become vegetarians. This has no appeal at all for us. But when we went out on the parking lot we saw a new van, I think it belonged to the owner of a near-by BBQ restaurant.

The bumper sticker proclaimed:

**I did not claw my way to the top of the food chain
just to eat vegetables!**

The sight of this got us to talking about other sayings, slogans, bumper stickers, quotes, etc. Here are a few I remember:

From a noodle package::

To lower sodium content, add less salt

Grandpa's comment on a politician:

**He's so greasy that when the world ends, he'll burn
a week longer than anybody else.**

Another of Granpa's observations:

**Some folks would complain if you was to hang 'em
with a brand new rope.**

Wasn't it Winston Churchill who said, :

**The chief end of all human endeavor is to be happy
at home.**

Saint Paul said,
The love of God is shown towards us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Bumper sticker:
All Men Are Idiots — And I Married Their King.

Overheard in checkout line:
If I'da killed him when I met him, I'd be a free woman by now.

Jesus said,
He that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out!

Army sergeant said to recruits,
Don't just stand there. Mill around!

General said,
You can kiss the king or you can kill the king, but you can't kick the king and get away with it.

A redneck's famous last words,
Hey there y'all, Watch me!

Line from a b-grade movie as the monster approaches the village:
I guess we'll have to sacrifice Alice; she's about the closest thing we got to a virgin in this whole town.

Monday, July 31, 2006

A Typical Weekend

Our weekend involved adultery.

And lust, passion, back stabbing, manipulation, betrayal, deceit, orgies, corruption, poison, stabbing, envy, fighting, incest, cheating, and murder.

Yes, you guessed it. Ginny and I watched all 13 episodes of the Derek Jacobi VCR tapes *I, Claudius*. back to back.

It's a saga about how the first five emperors of the Roman Empire grabbed power. — best BBC television miniseries ever made!

Thirteen episodes back to back.

Enthralling!

And who says we don't have a life?

How has this marathon bout of tv watching influenced my worldview?

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Well, I have this overwhelming desire to lay back on the couch with my head in Ginny's lap while she feeds me clusters of grapes.

AUGUST

Tuesday, August 01, 2006

My Life As A Grapefruit

Monday I withdrew a book from my on-line book catalog; I discovered that the text contained two fatal errors. My friend Wes pointed these out when he took me to breakfast at Dave's.

This devastating news means that the time and work I put into publishing that book was wasted. The whole project must be dismantled and revamped from scratch to correct the errors. Fortunately, Wes discovered the errors in time for me to pull the book out of the catalog before it could circulate. Whew!

Nevertheless, I'm discouraged.

I did check and double-check but still screwed up with that book. I hate thinking I've finished a project only to have to go back and do the whole thing over again.

Futility is my middle name.

This came on a day when I was down in the dumps anyhow.

I feel I've spent my whole life pissing against a strong wind.

In spite of my giddy optimist worldview, I often feel useless.

Remember that series of quotes and sayings I posted Sunday? Here are two to add to it:

"Johnny, you're as useless as teats on a boar hog" — that's something I remember my grandfather saying.

The other one comes from a former boss:

"Cowart, you're not worth the water it would take to flush you down".

Yes, I have generated a tiny bit of constructive criticism in my day.

Of course, those sayings are nothing compared to what my own mind tells me about myself all the time.

So, in the light of such strokes to self-esteem, why do I dare feel loved and valued by God? What makes me think that the Lord cares about me?

It sure ain't cause I'm a teddy bear.

Yet the Scripture says, "The love of God is shown toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us".

He did not suffer, die, and rise to life again for successful, wealthy, beautiful people only.

"Whosoever will may come".

When I look at my failures in the light of His love, even then I question my value. I wonder, if I'm a Christian, then why do I still get bitter, discouraged, angry, grouchy, envious, etc. Why am I so attracted to pornography? Why do I still sin every time I get a chance? Why am I a sneak, a cheat, a liar, a hypocrite?

Shouldn't having Christ as my Lord make some visible, evident difference?

Like say, if I were to loose a hundred fifty pounds then shouldn't folks mistake me for Mother Teresa?

That's not too likely.

I remember that once a missionary told me that a Christian's life can be viewed as a grapefruit.

Yes, a full-grown, mature, ripe grapefruit is perfect, sweet, colorful, delicious — but a baby grapefruit is also perfect. Even though it's the size of your thumbnail, hard as a hickory nut, bitter as bile — yet it is still a perfect grapefruit.

I am a baby grapefruit Christian — petty, hard, bitter, sour — yet accepted in the beloved. Perfect, at least in potential. No fatal errors. Just forgiven. Just as I am.

Wednesday, August 02, 2006

Looking For Women On The Internet

Yesterday I needed a picture of two ladies to illustrate an entry in the Civil War soldier's diary that I'm editing for publication.

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No problem; there are hundreds of thousands of pictures of women on the Internet. (I know).

So all I had to do was google for “Ladies” in the Library of Congress photo files.

I discovered that there are no Ladies at the Library of Congress.

The term “Southern Belles” produced no better results. OK. I tried the search term, “women, 1864” and “Dresses” and “Girls, 1860s” and “Fashion, Civil War era”.

None of the pictures Google offered struck my fancy.

Good Heavens! Are there no photos of dressed women on the Internet? You know, “females wearing clothes”.

What I wanted was a picture of two ladies in a garden, a haunting picture like the one in — Light bulb above my head!!! — like the picture hanging in our back room, a picture I found in the trash about 40 years ago when I walked by an old house that was being torn down.

Pulling down the old picture from our own back room, I dusted it off and scanned it into my computer, frame and all.

This is just what I wanted.

Sometimes, in your own backyard.



Thursday, August 03, 2006

Beware The Rice!

In today's news: Monday night at the home of John and Ginny Cowart in Jacksonville, Florida, a bowl of rice exploded causing great confusion but little damage.

Although the explosion created great panic, no one was killed or injured in the explosion.

The incident happened just after Mrs. Cowart removed a glass casserole dish from the microwave and placed it on the dinner table.

At first the bowl of rice just sat there looking white.

But as the Cowarts joined hands across the table to give thanks to God for the meal, as is their custom, the

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dish shattered with a loud crack spreading slivers and shards of sharp glass all over the dining room.

“Eeeek!” said Mrs. Cowart.

When the steaming rice hit Mr. Cowart’s lap, he, being a Christian gentleman of the old school, said, “Oh, my! Oh dear! This is distressing” — or words to that effect.

Mrs. Cowart told this reporter that she has used this same glass casserole dish in exactly the same way for over twenty years but that it has never exploded before.

As the Cowarts cleaned up the resulting mess, the incident remains a mystery. It is still under investigation.

At the time of the explosion, I had cooked my Famous Sausage, Rice & Tomatos.

Here is my receipt:

Take a big cast-iron skillet and get it hot.

With a knife or your kitchen scissors cut a long hickory-smoked sausage into half-inch circles. Fry them up in a bit of olive oil.

Shake in a whole bunch of black pepper (the sausage has enough salt in it already)

When the sausage is brown, cut up a couple of onions into chunks and add to the frying sausage. Fry them till they begin to get soft. Maybe dice up some celery stalks and half a bell pepper and add those at the same time; I also like to add a can of mushrooms to the brew.

Ask your wife to microzap a big bowl of rice (Never have been able to cook rice!)

About ten minutes before you’re ready to eat, dice up two or three or four large tomatoes and dump them in the frying pan... if you don’t feel like fooling with fresh tomatoes, open a can of stewed ones and use those. A dash of hot sauce doesn’t hurt either.

Serve this over a bed of white rice.

Garnish with some green thing you can throw away like thistles or brussels sprouts or broccoli.

To add a touch of grace and elegance to your table, serve with a sparking bottle of Mad Dog 20/20, the wine

of preference among Jacksonville's elite. (Last Thursday's vintage has a unique bouquet).

But beware of the rice.

If it explodes, go out for dinner and clean up the glass the next day.

Friday, August 04, 2006

Donuts and Divine Guidance?

"I've got a hankering for a donut and coffee this morning," said my buddy Wes.

He'd arrived at my house early to take a truck load of donations to the mission and to work revising his great great grandfather's autobiography.

We loaded the truck and set out driving.

We drove right past a bakery on Edgewood Avenue. They sell donuts but every time I've ever been in there, the owners acted snotty and I refuse to buy anything from them.

We drove right past the old Krispy-Kreme Donut factory because it's closed for renovations or something.

We drove right past the Dunkin Donut shop, because we were jabbering so hard that I forgot to tell Wes where to turn.

We drove out of our way to the Donut King on Normandy Avenue. A Korean family opened it recently. They make the best donuts I have ever tasted, and believe me I've tasted quite a few. In fact, donuts have made me the man I am today. Just look at any photo of me for proof.

Now, here's where this gets odd.

Wes noticed that the young Korean man behind the counter was reading a book. "What's that you're reading," Wes asked.

The counterman showed us a beautifully bound and printed Bible, a real work of art. He said his mother had sent it to him from Korea.

As we admired the squiggly incomprehensible oriental letters in this Bible, the young man told us about how he sends money home to his Mother who is a Christian.

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He told us how he is a highschool student and wishes to enter the Air Force Academy — or to become a dentist (Typical highschool student!). He told us how happy he is to be in the United States.

Wes asked a favor, “Can you read a verse for me in Korean? I’d like to hear how John 3:16 sounds in your language”.

The young man searched the table of contents in his lavishly ornate Korean Bible trying to find the Gospel of John.

He couldn’t.

A customer came in and while he waited on her, Wes took the Korean Bible. From the printing he recognized the separation of Old and New Testaments. He counted off the first four books of the New Testament — again without knowing a word of the language or Korean alphabet — just by recognizing changes in typeface. (Wes is a retired master printer).

Then he counted the first three chapters of that Gospel by heading typeface; then he counted 16 verses down!

When the young man came back from serving the lady he exclaimed in surprise that this foreigner had indeed located John 3:16 in the Korean language.

The young man had never read or even heard of that verse before.

I can’t swear I’ve got the right on-line verse 16 here, but in case you’re wondering, it looks something like this:

16 그러나 내가 태어나기도 전에 나 를 택하시고 은혜로 나를 부르신 하 나님이 자기 아들을
나에게 나타내 어 이방인들에게 그분에 대한 기쁜 소식을 전하게 하시기를 기뻐하셨을
때니는, 사람과 의논하지 않았으며

In English that’s, “For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life”.

That’s all there was to this incident.

But when we left the Donut King, the young man was studying his Bible intently.

Makes me wonder if we had been guided to that spot for some purpose more than our own carving for donuts..

As we got in the truck I told Wes, “Now I know how God guides us in the modern world — He gives us a hankering for donuts”.

— — —

After delivering the truck load to the mission Wes and I returned to my house and spent the morning scanning, resizing, captioning and inserting newly-recovered family photos into the second edition of Wes’ book.

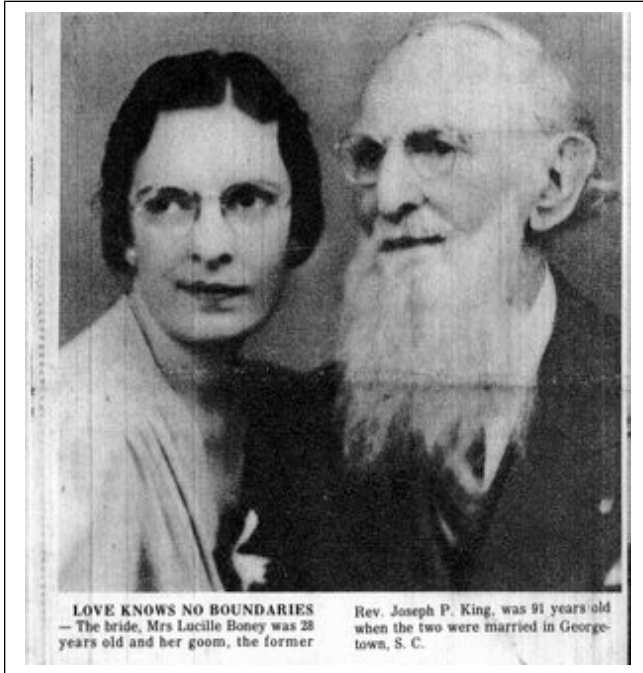


Doesn't seeing such a photo make you want to rush right out and buy a copy of Wes's book?

No? How about this next one?

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This photo is from a 1971 newspaper clipping about the Rev. J.P. King, M.D. Yes, Wes' great great grandfather was both an evangelist and a medical doctor. Unfortunately Dr. King wrote and finished his autobiography long before this interesting marriage took place. The couple were married for nine years. Dr. King lived till just days short of his 100th birthday. The full clipping quotes the bride as saying, "Those years with Mr. King were the best years of my life — No matter what happens to me, I'll always remember him".

Saturday, August 05, 2006

Cut and Paste — Big Time!



You'd never guess it from reading my journal but books excite me.

I read them. I write them. I admire them.

But I watch tv too and the tv weather report Thursday night started this train of thought for me:

I knew it was warm here in Florida before I even turned on the tv. Then the weather guy told me how hot it really is. He said, "The Heat Index today reached 110 degrees".

What's he talking about?

Have you ever heard any human being except a tv weather guy say the phrase "heat index"? When I looked at the back porch thermometer, it only read 96 degrees. That's the real temperature. But television, in its determination to increase viewers' anxiety level, has to make the heat sound even worse than it really is.

I believe those in control of tv stations have that agenda.

That's my rant.

So broadcasters use terms like *heat index* in summer to make it sound hotter, and *wind-chill factor* in winter to make you feel colder than you really are, I thought.

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Never heard the term *wind-chill factor* anywhere other than on tv either.

Ahgghh! I thought.

Wind Chill Factor! I thought.

Winter is coming, I thought.

Christmas is coming, I thought. *And here it is August already I still haven't put together my Christmas book!*

In order to have a Christmas book ready for the market before Thanksgiving shopping season, I need to kick in the afterburners or I will be too close to Christmas for readers to be able to buy my book in time to send it as a gift.!

That alarming realization startled me.

For ages I have intended to ~~slap together~~ carefully craft some of my columns and holiday magazine articles into a single Christmas book. But I keep putting the project off and I never get around to actually ~~gluing the thing together~~, assembling the manuscript.

So, Friday, I stayed out of the heat by working on a Christmas book from bits and pieces and magazine articles I've already written. (Never sell anything but one-time rights to any magazine so you retain your copyright).

I know that each article makes a stand-alone chapter for the book all I have to do is cut and paste and string them together.

But, when I did that at first only an 86-page manuscript resulted.

Rats!

That's not long enough for a book... let me think.

I know. I'll add Thanksgiving articles. Halloween articles. Easter articles, 4th of July, Veteran's Day.... It will be a Holiday book. I've been writing this sort of thing for 20+ years, so I have plenty of material.

Again I cut.

Again I pasted.

Now the rough draft of the holiday book came to 228 pages. Not too shabby. By the time I edit, add graphics,

proofread, get an ISBN, design the cover, write the promo text, register copyright with LC, and all that, this book should be ready — by the 4th of July!

But that's only if I put the *Civil War Diary*, my *Fire Department History*, my *Dirty Old Man Gets Worse* manuscript, and my entire life on hold, dropping everything else and concentrating on just the holiday book.

It's going to be a cold day in — Somewhere they don't usually talk about a wind chill factor — before I get all that done.

Yes, books excite me. So this morning when I stumbled across a web site about the Archimedes Palimpsest, it thrilled me! You can read all about it at <http://www.archimedespalimpsest.org/> . Their site is wonderful! Great! Don't miss checking it out. It's thrilling.

Now you should know that I know less Greek than a radish. I took first semester Greek four times in college failing the course each time. Hey, it was a 7 a.m. class after I'd worked till 2 a.m. each night. At least that's my excuse.



But scholars at the Department of Energy's Stanford Linear Accelerator Center have unraveled a Tenth Century Greek manuscript of a

text by the mathematician Archimedes.

Like many biblical manuscripts, the Archimedes Palimpsest was written on velum, a sort of paper made of animal skin. Since velum was a rare and expensive material, in some ancient time, a scribe decided to scrap the ink off the book's pages, cut them into smaller sheets, turn them sideways, and write a new text on those pages.

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Thus making a new book —But his cutting and pasting destroyed the old one.



Here's what a news report from the EE Times said:

SAN JOSE, Calif. — Using X-ray imaging technology, the Department of Energy's Stanford Linear Accelerator Center (SLAC) claims to have deciphered the last unreadable pages of the works from ancient mathematician Archimedes.

Scientists at SLAC (Menlo Park, Calif.) used X-ray fluorescence (XRF) imaging technology to decipher Archimedes' "scientific secrets" written on goatskin parchment manuscripts. Until now, the manuscripts have been unreadable for more than 1,000 years. ...

The text of the "Archimedes Palimpsest" presented a major challenge to decode. In the 10th century, an anonymous scribe copied Archimedes' treatises in the original Greek onto the parchment.

Three centuries later, a monk was said to have "palimpsested" the parchment. In doing so, the monk scraped away the Archimedes text, cut the pages in half, turned them sideways and copied Greek Orthodox prayers onto the recycled pages. The result was the near obliteration of Archimedes' work, except for the faintest traces of ink still embedded in the parchment.

In 1998, this manuscript was purchased by an anonymous collector at international auction, who then entrusted it to the care of The Walters Art Museum (Baltimore, Md.).

Using modern imaging techniques, the faint traces of the remaining original ink brought to light stunning discoveries about Archimedes, according to SLAC. But certain pages resisted even the most intensive attempts at deciphering, according to SLAC.

SLAC, in turn, used an X-ray beam produced at its Stanford Synchrotron Radiation Laboratory (SSRL). "We're getting a vastly better understanding of one of the greatest minds of all times," said SSRL scientist Uwe Bergmann, in a statement. "We are also showing it is possible to read completely hidden texts in ancient documents without harming them."



This display of scholarship and technology awes me.

I have know about palimpsest Bible manuscripts for years and I have seen a couple in museums. Bible scholars have recovered many such texts. But to see how these great scholars at SLAC have treated this mathematics text — well, it just blows my mind.

King Solomon said, “Of the making of many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh”.

Maybe so.

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But I like books.

I can tear them apart and paste them back together too.

I feel I'm part of a great tradition.

Sunday, August 06, 2006

My Reputation As A Dirty Old Man

I have a daughter — let's say her name is Grendel.

I have another daughter — let's call this one Broomhilda.

I have a third daughter — but she doesn't enter into this because she's off attending a gay pride parade at the beach today. I also have three sons — they're not involved in this incident either.

I have a wife — her real name is Ginny. She's deaf and wears a hearing aid — but not always around the house.

That's the playbill.

Grendel called me last week saying that Broomhilda would be in town from down state this weekend and they wanted to have a cookout at our house Sunday.

Ok.

Grendel said that both she and Broomhilda wanted to introduce me and Ginny to their respective boyfriends. You know, a It's-Time-To-Meet-My-Parents sort of affair.

Well, yesterday about noon the phone rang.

Ginny answered it — she was not wearing her hearing aid — got that?

She thought the caller was our neighbor Carol but when she realized it wasn't Carol, she handed the phone to me saying, "I think it's Broomhilda".

I said, "Hi Honey. Are you in town already".

The woman on the other end said, "Yes, I'm here at the library. Grendel was supposed to meet me here to drive me to the cookout".

"That's tomorrow," I said. "Is your boyfriend with you"?

"I don't have a boyfriend any more," she said.

“Oh... I’m sorry you two broke up,” I said.

I proceeded to urge her to come to my house so she could tell me all about it. I mentioned that my wife was not wearing her hearing aid and couldn’t hear us talking. I urged her to come to my house again.

She sounded terribly upset.

She said she did not want to come by the house. She seemed reticent about talking about the situation with her boyfriend.

My dad-genes sparked to red alert. I perceived my little girl was upset. In my consolatory roll as concerned father I think I addressed her as Sweetheart, Honey, Princess, Darlin’, and maybe even Babydoll.

You know, Dad-Speak used for when my little girl falls off her bike and skins her knee or something.

I suggested that she come to the house to cool off in the pool. “If you don’t have a swimsuit with you, I’m sure we can find something or another around here for you to wear,” I said.

She didn’t want to come to the house.

Her reticence confused me.

What was wrong? This split with the boyfriend must have really hurt.

She came across as so reserved and uncommunicative that I really worried about her.

I tried to comfort her and said if she would come to the house, we’d go out to lunch. I asked her for details about the breakup with her boyfriend. I urged her to come to my house. I offered to come get her and drive her here.

She said she did not want to come to my house.

She said she was going to call Grendel.

These two confide in each other.

She sounded strange and leery.

She hung up abruptly.

I told Ginny all about this odd conversation and we speculated on what could have happened between Broomhilda and her boyfriend. We thought they were happy. We thought she was bringing him to meet us. This

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breakup must have happened just last night. She sounded really confused, upset, dismayed.

We speculated that in the split, the boyfriend may have beat her and she was ashamed to come home with a black eye. I began thinking how I might explain to ex-boyfriend that it's not wise to beat a Christian father's daughter.

But that was pure speculation.

Ginny and I just could not understand why she didn't want to come home at my urging.

About thirty minutes later, I called Grendel at work to see if she knew of some explanation...

She did know.

She explained it all right!

How was I to know that she had invited a girl friend — a girl I'd never even heard of before — to attend our cookout also?

How was I to know that there are TWO young women in the world with the same name — Broomhilda?

How was I to know that the one I was talking to was not my daughter but a girl I'd never met or talked to before the phone rang?

My mind ranged back over my conversation with this unknown young lady.

Understand why she got more and more upset the longer we talked?

Ever wonder how I gained my reputation as a dirty old man?

Monday, August 07, 2006

The Party's Over, Time For A Joke

Sunday's cookout rocked.

The young lady I'd talked to Saturday did come and we laughed over our mutual embarrassment. She took a printout of yesterday's blog home to show her mother. She hails from Maine and actually met Stephen King there. She told about his benevolence toward the town where she lived. She was a hit! Our kids want her to go to

Europe with them in the Fall — that would make for not two, but three girls all with the same first name going.

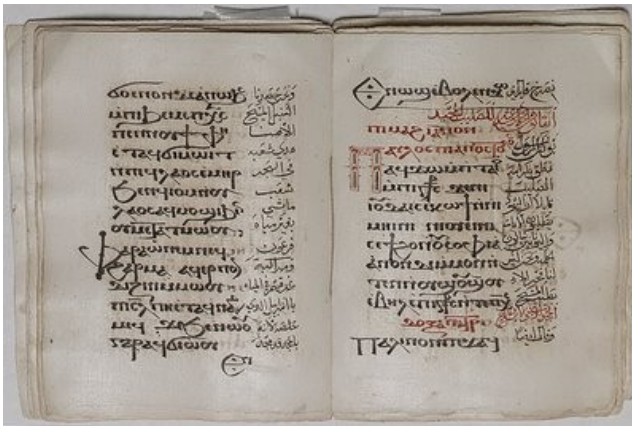
At future cookouts, we’re going to make them all wear numbers!

We met my youngest daughter’s new friend.

I always feel as though we are under inspection in these situations and I hope we met with his approval. He seems like a great guy and treats our daughter with kind respect and attentiveness. He hails from north Africa. He works as a waiter at an upscale restaurant and he aspires to be a printer. He explained the intricacies of process called web printing, which, if I understand what he said, involves running paper through a press eight times using a different color ink each time in register to produce a fine crisp quality.

He said he is a Coptic Christian and explained that some traditions trace that faith back to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba; other authorities trace it to the eighth chapter of Acts where the Apostle Philip talked with the Ethiopian eunuch in the chariot. Still other authorities say that faith is of more recent origin.

He also explained the difference between idols and icons, but I have a hard time distinguishing the difference. Coptic artists created a unique, exquisite and intriguing artistic style. Here is one example of Coptic calligraphy in a book of prayers:



The one glitch developed at our cookout.

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Certain women in the family — let me re-word that -- All the women in the family complained that the jokes I post in my journal are tasteless and terrible.

What do they know?

Anyhow, to avoid offending delicate female readers, instead of telling one of my jokes, I'll just present one from my e-buddy Gene in Oregon. He is known through the web world as a man of culture, and good taste.

He says that he is an atheist and that he's enamored of dung beetles. Although I am a Christian, I enjoy his refined, genteel humor. He posts at <http://oldhorsetailsnake.blogspot.com/>

Here (instead of one of mine) are two of Gene's recent jokes:

The blonde walks up to the librarian and asks, "How do you spell 'tequila'?" So the librarian obliges, and the blonde leaves.

Pretty soon, the blonde is back. "I still can't find it," she says.

The librarian says, "Find what?"

"Tequila Mockingbird."

So, this guy named Wayne is a painter, and a sly one at that. He discovered that he can make his paint go farther by thinning it with turpentine. And he thinned it a lot.

One day he got a contract from the First Baptist Church to paint their huge edifice. So he got out his scaffolding and began painting away. When he got near the end of the job, there was a horrendous clap of thunder, the sky opened and the rain poured down. It washed the thinned paint from the church and Wayne slipped to the ground, surrounded by telltale puddles of the thinned and useless paint.

Wayne is no fool. He got on his knees and cried out: "Dear God, forgive me! What should I do?"

And from the thunder, a mighty voice rang out: "Repaint! And thin no more!"

Satisfied, Ladies?

Wednesday, August 09, 2006

Matters Of Faith

Historical evidence convinces me that Jesus Christ is trustworthy.

Spiritual experience convinces me that Jesus is reliable.

My internal feelings negate both of the above.

Neither history nor spiritual experience outweigh negative things I learned at my mother's knee.

Topping these negative things is the precept that — Nothing Matters.

I think I heard Mama say the phrase, "It doesn't matter" millions of times as I grew up. That was her mantra for coping with life's problems. She felt that nothing really matters, and she ingrained that idea into me from my youth.

Approaching life with that mindset influences how I interpret life experiences. Even though I now believe as a Christian, yet that undercurrent of thought drags me down. Rather than picturing life as a progression toward beauty, the joy of Heaven, the radiant presence of Christ, the vision of God — my inclination is to see myself, and everyone else, as circling the drain, the dark hole to nowhere.

I have tried so many things in life, strived for so many goals, exerted great effort —only to see it all come to nothing. Watched so many of my dreams turn to vapor. Pissing against the wind. Wasted effort. Futility.

Why keep trying?

What's the use?

It doesn't matter.

Nothing I do matters.

Historical evidence convinces me that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to earth from Somewhere else, that He fed the hungry, healed the sick, taught the ignorant, made right whatever was wrong. He died because of, and for, our sin. And He, as Lord of Life, rose again from the

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tomb under His own steam before going back to where He came from for the moment.

Spiritual experience convinces me that Jesus is reliable, that contact with Him enlivens people, that knowing Him generates joy, that spiritual realities exist and that they are wonderful. That He is wonderful.

But... But, in practical day to day living, my core feeling, belief, mindset, whatever-you-call-it undermines every facet of historical evidence and spiritual experience.

For me the crisis of belief always boils down to “What Does It Matter?”

The opposite of faith is not doubt but apathy.

I wallow in that stuff.

Not a pretty picture is it, John Cowart, Christian warthog.

But it's an accurate picture — high pixel, digital quality, focused, real.

How am I supposed to attract other troubled souls to Christ when I'm such a mess myself? How can I let my little light shine, when my batteries are dying dim?...

Wait, do I have some inner glow? — No, that's just indigestion.

Never mind.

On some level, I do want to shine for Christ, to be a beacon attracting people to Him. Yet, I do not wish to contribute to the aura of Christian fakery rampant in society. We've all seen too much of that. Fading glowsticks just don't cut it.

So I seek and acknowledge reality, my reality at least.

I do what I do because I do it.

In spite of all my feelings and my interpretation of life to the contrary, what I do matters. That's a matter of faith.

So yesterday I watered the garden, it matters whether the flowers survive or wither in the drought. I formatted the Christmas book, that matters to me. I checked whether that date should be 1926 or 1929 in the King autobiography, accuracy matters. I browsed a porno site. I

learned more about that new software program Ginny is teaching me. I cooked supper. I took a nap. I read a history book. I ranted and cursed over headers and footers. I prayed. I lived out my own little can of worms.

On some level, good or bad, I believe all that stuff matters.

That's a matter of faith.

Thanks be to God.

Thursday, August 10, 2006

Thinking Inside The Fox

Ever notice how no one on earth is too stupid, too ignorant, too uneducated, or too dense to be a Christian?

Case in point:

Wednesday Ginny had two doctors' appointments, one in the morning, other in the afternoon. In between, she and I ran errands — drug store, Office Depot, etc. We also ~~engaged in a generous act of Christian Charity~~ — er, make that, we cleaned a bunch of junk out of our house and carted it to the mission for the poor to use.

We also killed some time at the Fox Restaurant in Avondale, Ginny's favorite place for breakfast. Here she is at the door:



Newspaper reviews frequently rate the Fox among Jacksonville's best. Crowds of people line up on the sidewalk every weekend waiting to get a booth in the Fox. It's worth the wait. Even this

midweek morning people stood waiting to get in:

Various unique wall hangings contribute to the charm and ambiance of the Fox. I'm not sure if the restaurant

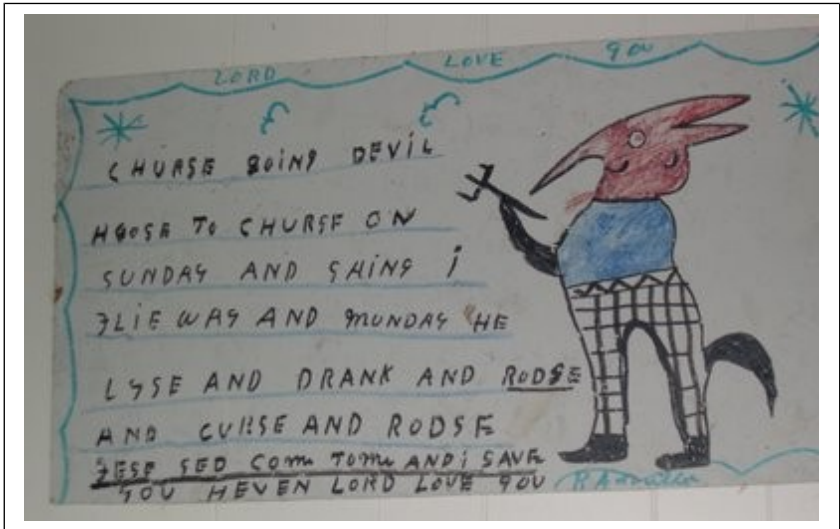
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draws its name from the fox hunting pictures among the other decorations or for the foxy waitresses — either way, the name is appropriate



As we enjoyed our lunch, I noticed, among other things posted on a rear wall, this intriguing sign:



I reacted with scorn; *How ignorant*, I thought.

I reacted with mockery; *That's dumb*, I thought.

I dismissed the sign with vain arrogance; *How quaint*, I thought.

But the more I ate, the more I thought; the more my thinking changed.

In this crude poster somebody tried to the best of his ability to honor Christ.

Do I do as much?

Really? To the best of my ability?

The sign-maker tried to testify, to share his faith, in the best way he knew how.

Do I do that?

In my scornful, mocking, arrogant manner, here I was putting down someone who tried to witness to Christ. Yes, his idea of a great hymn is *I'll Fly Away*, but that last line of his message is clear — Jesus said, Come to me and I save you.

The guy who made this sign probably never earned a degree in systematic theology, but he made the Gospel as clear as he knew how to make it.

Brother Lawrence said that God does not regard the greatness of any deed so much as the love with which it is done.

The guy who painstakingly printed this sign stands tall above me in expressing love.

When I try to witness to Christ to someone, I subject my poor target victim to arguments about teleology and ontology. I want to show off that I'm not your run-of-the-mill Scope's Trial hillbilly fundamentalist.

I want to rank right up there with mankind's smartest thinkers, to link my name with Calvin and Aquinas and Kepler and what's-his-name — you know that real brainy Danish theologian nobody reads or can spell.

I don't want to be perceived as a dummy but as a smart ass guy. So, I show off me more than I display Christ.

(Incidentally, you can tell the folks to whom I witness by that glazed, haunted expression in their eyes.)

But I wonder if victims of my evangelistic efforts ever get the message: that Jesus said, "Come to me and I will save you".

I do so want to be in the Christian smart set.

What a crock!

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There is no Christian smart set.

In fact, there is no human smart set. We all miss the mark and fall short of the glory God intends for us. Stupid fuzzy sheep go astray no more often than we do.

Saint Francis of Assisi told the intellectuals of his day, “Try to realize the dignity God has conferred on you. He created and formed your body in the image of His Beloved Son, and your soul in his own likeness. Yet every creature under heaven serves, acknowledges and obeys its Creator in its own way better than you do.”

That’s right.

The dumbest dodo never sinned.

We, of all God’s creatures, are the only fallen ones.

Collectively and individually, we blew it. We screwed up royally. We sinned. Then we rolled in it like a happy dog in cat vomit.

There’s not a teddy bear in the lot of us.

Head lice, warthogs, and roaches have no need of a Savior, only smart guys like us.

So, while I first mocked and scorned and dismissed the sign in the Fox as the work of an ignorant lout, the more I thought about his message, the more I realized something:

I could not have said it better!

Jesus said, “Come to me and I will save you”.

Lord, please be merciful to John Cowart, a sinner — and a smug know-it-all.

Friday, August 11, 2006

An Insidious Plot

O God, who on the mount didst reveal to chosen witnesses thine only-begotten Son wonderfully transfigured, in raiment white and glistening; Mercifully grant that we, being delivered from the disquietude of this world, may be permitted to behold the King in his beauty, who with thee, O Father, and thee, O Holy ghost, liveth and reigneth, one God, world without end. Amen.

That was the prayer Ginny and I read last night as part of our regular devotions after supper.

Appropriate.

Thursday was a day of disquietude.

On the Cowart home front, the doctor says Ginny's heart murmur sounds worse; even though she's had this same condition for over 30 years, he now recommends she visit a specialist.

According to the tv news police in England arrested 24 moslems who intended to board a dozen or so airliners as passengers and explode bombs in mid-flight over American cities. Apparently the plotters intended to manufacture the bombs by combining ordinary household items, hair gel, peroxide, toothpaste, etc., into an explosive mix; they would carry the ingredients aboard then mix the stuff in flight to kill themselves, everyone on board, and anyone on the ground where the plane crashed.

This news generated chaos and disquietude, especially at airports, all over the world as thousands of travelers were screened for hand lotion, sun block, perfume, any sort of liquid or gel. In fact the news per se created almost disruption as the attack itself would have.

No real surprise in any of this.

Jesus once told His disciples, "They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service". (John 16:2)

The murder and disquietude that goes on in this world is to be expected.

The old saying, To Hell In A Handbasket originated for a reason.

No one needed hairspray baby formula or toothpaste to disrupt my day yesterday — Google did it for them. Yes, Google hatched this insidious plot to undermine my life and work.

When I started to work intending to produce great literature in the morning, I clicked on my Google homepage and noticed a new feature: Google video. Curious, I clicked the link to see what's new now.

Thumbnails appeared so I could watch video clips. Thousands of video clips.

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I watched two guys drop Mentos breath mints into 115 bottles of diet coke — Spectacular!

I watched canoeists crack up on rocks, buildings implode, kids ride bikes into bushes, and an oriental guy fold a tee shirt.

I watched guys throw darts at each other, people lip-sync songs, a volcano erupt, a cute puppy with a ball, and a spider eat a bug.

I watched a motorcycle jump a moving truck (almost). I watched a guy do a split trying to board a row boat. I watched a thief snatch a purse, and old lady ride a merry-go-round, and a girl in a bikini vigorously bounce on the edge of her bed without coming out.

In the interest of research I watched that last one three times.

Even with buffering, each Google video search clip only lasts from eight seconds to five minutes, but there are thousands of them. When you click any one, a menu with dozens of others appears in the sidebar. Like potato chips, you can't eat just one.

Instead of working, I watched mindless video clips for hours.

If God had not created me with kidneys, I would have never left the computer (in a rush, running toward the back, bursting).

If ever doctors, moslems or Google-related terrorists want to disrupt and destroy my life, mind, and productivity, they don't need to fiddle with the mess and bother of hair gel, all they have to do is provide me with more video clips.

I'll take it from there myself.

Saturday, August 12, 2006

Reason # 873 Why I Never Get Any Work Done

Yesterday I confessed to having frittered away most of my workday watching Google videos.

None of that nonsense today.

No siree!

No more of that guilt trip for me.

Today I frittered away most of my workday listening to Internet bird calls. Here's how that happened:

All set for an intense day of no-foolin work, I opened the file of the Christmas book. I actually started editing the Table Of Contents when the phone rang. Jennifer my eldest daughter said, "Dad, what kind of bird is bright yellow with a pink face?"

No native Florida bird I know of fits that description.

About 6 a.m. as Jennifer and Pat sipped their morning coffee by their pool, they heard a commotion — blue jays squawking and attacking a small bird near the bird feeder. Jennifer ran out, chased the jays off and rescued the small yellow bird with the red face.

The jays had frayed the little bird's tail feathers. It quivered in fear as Jennifer picked it up. She handled it freely and it appeared comfortable in her hands. Obviously this bird escaped from a cage somewhere.

Jennifer turned it loose inside the screened porch. She checked with neighbors to see if anyone had lost a bird. She called first a pet store, then me. She asked if I wanted this bird. She and Pat already have five dogs, two cats and a ferret so there's no room for a bird in their life.

Her call to the pet store identified the bird as either an Australian Cinnamon or a Peach-faced Lovebird.

Lacking cash to buy a cage, Jennifer and Pat drove to pick me up. We drove to the pet store where I bought a cage, a packet of caged-bird seed, a 40 pound bag of wild bird seed, and gas for their SUV.

I figured a love bird would make a great For-The-Hell-Of -It gift for Ginny.



I decided to name the new bird *Fancy* — short for Fancy Feast Cat Food.

Yesterday someone at Ginny's office gave her the yellow flowers in the background.

After lunch Jennifer and Pat drove me and Fancy

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back to my house where Pat promptly fell asleep in my chair. Jennifer and I browsed the internet looking for information on lovebirds. Jennifer located a site that plays bird calls.

When Fancy heard these birdcalls, he/she went crazy trying to answer the birds she/he was hearing on the computer.

Fancy chirped and sang and preened and bobbed and bounced around trying to contact these other birds.

Jennifer and I laughed so hard we woke Pat who had to see Fancy's performance too. The three of us spent close to three hours listen to computer bird calls and laughing at Fancy's antics.

I never did get back to work.

That table of contents can wait. Who reads it anyhow?

As I write this journal entry, Ginny is not home from work yet. I'm anticipating her pleasure. She loved Matilda the Duck so, that I think Fancy will delight her too.

Then I'll just have to turn the computer back on and go through the bird call sites again. I'm tempted to call her to come home early.

Work, who need it?

So, if I never get my next book finished — it's all the bird's fault.

Sunday, August 13, 2006

The Dazzling Smile Of God

Saturday morning at 4 a.m. I lay on an air mattress in the pool looking into the pre-dawn sky for shooting stars. Yes, the annual Perseid Meteor shower explodes today and tonight. I expected to see something like this display from an 1833 engraving:



What I actually did see was two shooting stars — maybe.

Perhaps all I saw was a glint of light reflected from the line in my bifocals. I prefer to think I saw two meteors.

The full moon dominated the sky with so much light the stars were nigh invisible.

So, the morning panned out as a bust for astronomy but it proved valuable in another way. You see as I floated in the pool watching the faint stars, I sang.

And I worshiped the Creator of stars and moon and me.

I sang in a low voice so as not to alarm the neighbor's dogs but I sang half-remembered hymns of praise to the Lord God.

I floated on water and on thoughts of His majesty and love.

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No one else in the world seemed awake. Just me and the Beautiful Lord Christ.

I sang that ancient, 7th Century Crusader hymn, *Fairest Lord Jesus*; and the recent hymn, *How Great Thou Art*; and a song I have never known the name of about an engineer's worship while blasting rocks to build the Panama Canal.

As best I can remember that one goes:

Got any rivers you think are un-crossable?
Got any mountains you can not tunnel
through?
God specializes in things thought impossible;
And He can do what no other power can do.

And I prayed. I know I'm not supposed to mention my prayers because that is one of the things Jesus commanded that we keep secret. So suffice it to say that I did not ask Christ for a single thing; I just appreciated Him and told Him that on some low level, I love Him.

And as I sang and prayed I thought about Judgment Day and I remembered this woman I saw once in the Post Office:

A line six or eight people long ahead of me stood waiting a turn at the window. Many more inched along behind me. Each of us minding our own business. Each of us carrying our own packages. Each of us shifting from foot to foot. Suddenly the clerk behind the counter shouted, "Oh, My God! Would you look at that!".

As one, we all turned to look.

The most exquisite, gorgeous. woman I have ever seen, any person in the Post Office had ever seen, opened the glass door and stepped into the crowded lobby.

All conversation stopped. All business halted. A reverent hush settled over the place. And as she walked forward, the crowd parted before her, men and women moved aside and turned to face her like nobles making way for a queen.

She gave the tiniest of nods in modest acknowledgement for our adoration and proceeded unhindered to the counter. No one objected. Our line of

people just stood on either side like an honor guard. I've never seen anything like that happen before or since.

But, here's the oddest thing.

This regal woman looked in my direction and her face broke into a dazzling smile.

Dazzling!

Her smile radiated. It haunted. It glowed. It stunned me.

My spirit soared. This magnificent creature recognized me!

Then I realized that she was smiling at someone behind me, someone she knew.

Disappointment crushed me.

I saw her smile, it was aimed in my direction, but it was not for me.

I felt so ashamed at my mistaken presumption. That dazzling smile was not intended for me.

When she left the building conversations resumed, lines reformed. Life went on — but with something wonderful missing. I felt a sense of incredible loss.

Oddly enough, not once person mentioned what we had all seen and felt. Some things are just too important, too serious, to talk about.

Last night, as I floated in the pool below the stars, I recalled the opening chapters of the Bible where God smiled at His handiwork and pronounced it Good.

The thing He had done pleased Him.

Then I thought of that great and terrible day of the Lord when every person ever born will stand in resurrection before the throne of the Almighty and every single one of us will see Him smile.

We will see that dazzling holy smile of pleasure.

But some of us will realize that His smile of recognition is not for us; it is for someone behind us in the line. It is turned in our direction but passes right over our head and alights on someone else.

It could have been on us.

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But it's not.

Need any more horrid definition of Hell?

In the early days of U.S. history, in that 1883 meteor shower, some people panicked, thinking the falling stars signaled the end of the world. They confused the merely spectacular with the reality of judgment.

What a shame.

What are only a few falling stars compared to missing God's smile?

I learned one important lesson during my dip in the pool — even when the day time temperature here in Jacksonville reaches 98, it's still possible to freeze your ass at 4 a.m.!

Ginny woke at 6:15 as usual and she spent the first hours of her day coddling Fancy. That is one pampered bird. Ginny made kissy sounds and tried to teach the bird to talk. She wants it to say wimpy stuff like "Pretty Bird" and nonsense like that.

I hold higher aspirations for Fancy. I figure that a bird living in a writer's living room should say something literary. I want Fancy to say:

Once upon a midnight dreary,
While I pondered weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of
forgotten lore.

If that bird is half as clever as Ginny thinks it is, then it should soon be able to recite all 18 stanzas of Poe's Raven. When I explained my idea to Ginny, she laughed till she about fell out of her chair.

Of course the silly bird never says a word; it just chirps.

Guess how we spent the next five hours of our Saturday?

Shopping for a mirror and cuttlebone for Fancy's cage! Yes, we searched two pet stores and a cosmetics store before finding just the right the mirror that suited Ginny for her bird.

She doesn't spend that much time shopping for my birthday present!

But, since we had absolutely nothing else planned for today, we shopped for bird stuff and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. It's been a glorious Saturday.

I'm writing this journal entry about 2 a.m. Sunday morning. I've just been back outside to look for shooting stars again, but rain clouds hide the sky tonight.

I hunger to see the stars again and think about Who created them. I hunger to recapture last night's sense of wonder and worship. I just remembered that long ago I wrote a fluff piece about this kind of hunger once. Sometimes, most times in fact, I forget that we daily walk amid ordinary wonders.

Oh, by the way, earlier this evening the Jacksonville Jaguars won their first pre-season football game.

And, as sportscaster John Madden said, "One in a row is a streak".

And on that giddy note, giddy John Cowart is going to bed.

Wake me if the stars fall.

Tuesday, August 15, 2006

Book Tag

Over the weekend someone tagged me for a meme, a questionnaire related to books and reading.

The person who did this used to use his real name in his blog, but a few months ago he decided to hide behind a secret identity and just be known to the outside world as Career Guy!

I suspect that the reason for this change is that he is in the Federal Witness Protection Program ...

But if anyone anywhere really wants to locate him for any reason whatsoever, you'll find him at <http://careerguy.blogspot.com/>. He lives in Ohio where he claims to be a Eucharistic minister.(must be one of those mafia things). He wrote a book called *Careers In Action* published by Kendallhunt — that should give you enough information to ~~gun him down~~ track him down.

PS: if you pay him a visit, he owns a dog (thot you'd want to know) Please don't hurt his family, they're nice people.

PPS: Is there a reward?.

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Anyhow, enough about him, here's the book and reading questionnaire which is all about me me me me! Nobody but me meme!

First off I should say that I read all the time for both business and pleasure and I keep an annotated bibliography of everything I read in my journals so I can find a book again when needed. Checking this list, I see that so far in 2006 I've read 58 books, mostly fluffy suspense novels.

So I'm hard put to narrow my answers to single books in this questionnaire; but since it's all about me, I'll answer as I please and skip the hard questions.

1. Name one book that changed your life:

Of the several books which have most influenced me, Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula* tops my list. Stoker wove several purported diaries into his narrative. When I first read *Dracula* in about 1954, I had never even heard the words *diary* or *journal*. The idea that a person's daily life was worth recording captivated me. So much so that off and on from my teen years till now I attempted to keep a daily journal.

Two years ago my youngest son introduced me to the word *Blog* and encouraged me to record my days and thoughts on line for other people to read. It feels odd to make journal entries knowing that others read over my shoulder so I've cleaned up my language, stopped recording erotic encounters with that woman, and stopped using real names in most cases. Other than those changes — and the fact that now people comment — my journals continue just as they've all ways been.

And, no, I have not kept them all. Scads of them were lost through divorce, fire, moving, and general wear and tear. But I still have a closet full of the ones since the late 1970s.

Therefore, I feel I owe *Dracula* a great debt. I wouldn't have done it without him.

2. Name a book you've read more than once:

The Bible. Watership Down. The Chronicles of Narnia, The Practice of the Presence of God by Brother Lawrence.

Nevil Shute's novels. Stephen King's *Desperation*, etc. etc.

3. What one book would you want with you on a desert island?

I'd want a 1951 edition of the *Boy Scout Handbook*, which, as I recall, contained extensive chapters on how to trap animals, identify eatable wild plants, and distill drinking water from the ocean.

4. Name a book that made you laugh:

Donald Westlake's wonderful series featuring the Dortmund Gang: *Hot Rock*, *Bank Shot*, etc. I liked *Drowned Hopes* the best.

Anything by Dave Berry! My favorite is *Babies And Other Hazards Of Sex*.

5. What book made you cry?

This may sound odd but I can't remember ever writing a single one of my own books that I didn't cry over. *Glog* and *The Lazarus Projects* especially. Heck, I've been known to cry when I wrote blog entries. Utter damn wimp!

6. Name one book you wish had been written already:

For years I've dabbled at writing a book set in London in the 1660s. It features an apprentice cook and includes adventures, news stories and recipes current at the time. The thing looks to run about 900 pages and I keep starting and stopping work on it as life intervenes. I wish I had finished that book. That's one I'd really like to get done before I die. My working title for it is *The Cook's Book*.

7. Name one book you wish had never been written:

False religious works that lead people astray spring to my mind first, but I loath censorship. Even false works deserve to be published in a free society. Besides, if the book doesn't lead us astray, something else would. It doesn't take much to corrupt us.

So I would not censor any work. I may chose not to buy it or have it on my shelves, and I would encourage anyone who asked me to read something better, but I think every person should have the right to publish his ideas. God is perfectly able to correct false ideas —He's corrected me many times.

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8. What are you currently reading.

Doug Lowe's *Powerpoint 2002 For Dummies* — I just wish he'd made it simpler.

9. Name a book you've been meaning to read but haven't:

I can name tons of them! Eleven bookcases infest our house, every one of them chock full of things I hope to read — someday. Heading my list would be: William Law's *A Serious Call To A Devout And Holy Life*; Jeremy Taylor's *Rules and Exercises For Holy Living And Holy Dying*; Francois Fenelon's *Christian Perfection* and other works. But if another Dave Barry or Stephen King or Donald Westlake book comes out, I'd read that first..

10. The last book you read because it would "be good for you":

Last month I tried a self-help book by a noted psychiatrist whose book has sold millions of copies. My mind balked at the very first exercise and I couldn't stomach going any further. This says nothing about his book; it says a lot about me.

11. The book your ninth grade English teacher raved about, but that you vowed you would never read precisely because of her recommendation:

Ah, contraire! As an adult I have read Caesar's *Commentaries*, *Beowulf*, most of Shakespeare's plays, and, my favorite, the complete *Canterbury Tales*. Loved 'em all!

It's a waste of time to tell kids about these adult pleasures, and early exposure spoils them — the books that is, the kids might be improved by the practice.

12. Best essential desk reference books:

Here are the three I consult almost every day: the *Holy Bible*, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance Of The Holy Scriptures*, and *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*.

Whew!

Doing this exercise felt like taking a test back in school!

Thanks, Career Guy.

Friday, August 18, 2006

There's A Snowman On My Mug

Here it is 4 a.m. on August 18th and the picture on my coffee mug shows —

A snowman.

This hints that it's time for me to wash that sink full of dishes.

A pile of 50 dirty coffee mugs awaits my attention.

Here's a copy of that snowman picture:



You could film a Tarzan movie in our back yard. Perhaps I should cut the grass and whack the weeds. And final formatting for the manuscripts of the Civil War journal and my short story collection nears completion; another week's work should see those two books close to publication.

It dawns on me that I have to live some life before I can write about it.

What a drag.

But much urgent work demands my attention.

Besides that my batteries are drained. I stand in need of recharging.

So, what I'm leading up to is that I intend, God willing, to take about ten days off from writing journal entries.

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I wish my hiatus were a vacation time, I'd rather go fishing, but it looks to be an intense work time. I've neglected ordinary duties much recently. I need to catch up on that reality I'm always writing about.

If God gives me life and sight and strength, I intend to resume posting on Tuesday, August 29th.

Tuesday, August 29, 2006

John's back

In the ten days since my last journal entry I've accomplished a lot, but there was little to write about unless you count 20-hour days spent sitting in front of the computer.

As a result of the intense work, all the dishes mugs are washed; we are no longer drinking August morning coffee from the Christmas mugs.

And the printer now holds the text for both the holiday book and the Civil War soldier's diary. Proof pages should arrive in a few days ready for final tweaking.

Of course, with the Civil War diary, since it's been hidden away for 140 years, I don't suppose a few more days will make much difference for it's unveiling.

I'll say more about these two books after I've gone over the proofs.

Just for fun, I entered a contest for books based on blogs. It's for the 2007 Blooker Prize.

This is the first writing contest I've ever entered.

Usually, Lotto is my game.

I like to feel I'm a potential millionaire.

I'm praying for wisdom about making several business policy decisions that have me stumped. Insights from Ginny, Donald and Eve proved invaluable but the final decisions are mine. Jesus once said, "Don't let your right hand know what your right hand is doing" - or something like that.

That's one almost-scripture I truly follow all the time.

Ginny has been teaching me a new software program and I'm experimenting with graphic design for book jackets.

My son Donald fixed two new things on my website — actually, they're old things that have been broke for months but he came over last week and got them working again:

First off, you'll notice in my blog sidebar that the photo gallery is working again. Donald repaired it so that now every time you click on my blog or refresh the page, you get to see a different book cover. That's just a pure vanity but I get a kick out of it.

If you click on the link it opens the gallery where I posted those photos of our visit to the junk yard last December.

Donald also repaired the Webalizer counter showing how many visitors came to my site. That's been down since the last hurricane and it's nice to have it up again — although I don't believe the information it presents. According to Webalizer over 130,000 people have spent at least ten minutes each on my site since last September.

Unless these visits are all from robots or webcrawlers, I can't imagine that many real live people actually visit my site.

I can only conclude that somebody needs to get a life.

Hurricane Ernesto approaches.

Guess where I live?

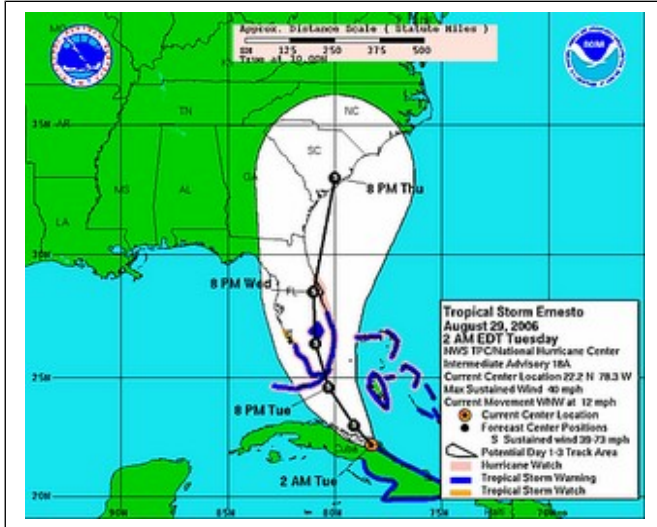
The weather people call it the **Cone Of Uncertainty**.

That's what I call it too.

Here is this morning's National Weather Service projected storm track:

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Wednesday, August 30, 2006 **Brains In A Blender**

Now let me see if I've got this straight???

Abe married Bo.

Abe and Cat work together in the same office.

Abe and Bo have two kids: a son, Xerxes, and a daughter, Yolanda.

Cat is married to somebody or another (but she's not satisfied with him) and has one daughter, Zelda.

Abe, Bo, Cat and Cat's unsatisfactory husband are all four college professors. Real brainy people. Intellectuals. Smart. Cultured. Refined.

Have you already heard this story?

No? But you can guess where it goes, can't you?

Cat sets her eye on Able. They stay late at the office. They fall in love. Start an affair.

Cat leaves what's-his-name. He's been dallying with a grad student.

Abe leaves Bo. He never learns that she's been having an affair with a clergyman.

Cat marries Abe.

After three years, Cat's daughter Zelda suffers a breakdown and is admitted to a mental hospital. Therapy

there uncovers that she has been molested by Abe. They tell Cat that her daughter has been molested.

Cat confronts Abe.

Abe says there's nothing wrong as it's all in the family.

Cat leaves Abe... but she gets to thinking, "If he did this with Zelda, then I wonder if he did it with Bo's children before I ever met him".

Cat calls Bo. They talk. Bo asks Xerxes and Yolanda about their father.

Sure enough, it comes out that he molested them too. Both of them grew up, earned PhDs, started careers, lost jobs, turned alcoholic, live with their mother. And Zelda has been in and out of mental hospitals and drug rehab for years.

Abe escaped prosecution by having a convenient heart attack and dying.

Cat has been diagnosed with breast cancer.

The other victims also survive — if you can call it that.

These were all smart people. Brains. Intellectuals. Cream of the crop. Educated.

But life takes more than brains.

And it looks to me as though these folks put their brains in a blender and hit the puree button.

From personal experience, I know how that feels.

The only fiction I've made up in the above story are the alphabetical names.

Yesterday a friend I've known for years revealed how all this had happened in her life. I bumped into her at the hardware store; both buying hurricane supplies. We stood in the parking lot beside our cars talking for an hour.

Catching up on family news..

Yes, I've known her for 20+ years but she'd never told me about all this before. She's been carrying it all alone. She felt too ashamed of her role in the matter, and her own illicit affairs, to ever talk about it before.

Is her tale unusual?

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Not hardly. With variations as to details, I've heard it many times before from many different people. In fact, in some chapters of such a sordid tale, I have played my own starring role.

At some time in our lives virtually all of us have been victims, perpetrators, or instigators in such a tale. Sometimes we play all three roles in the drama.

Is it any wonder that we all need a Savior?

Desperately.

Well, "The Father sent the Son to be the savior of the world". That's what the Bible says.

But how would the Savior of the World handle such a can of worms as the typical slice of life story I've just told?

Jesus never once said, "What you should have done is..."

Never once.

He never told anyone that!

What He did say — often — was, "Thy sins are forgiven thee. Thy faith has made thee whole. Go and sin no more".

The Scripture calls Jesus "The Deliverer" and what does a delivery man do?

He takes things from where they are to where they ought to be.

Jesus takes us from where we are right this minute, not from where we should be ideally, but from where we really are. It's from that point that He begins to move us toward a specific happy destination.

The Christian life is not a story about our destination; it's the story of the process.

We have to fight God tooth and claw to avoid being delivered.

And we do do that. We do just that.

Our weapons?

Apathy and indifference more often than overt hostility..

But God doesn't rape anybody.

He respects the choices His creatures make — to go where He would take us, or to make our own way to where our own way leads.

The ball's in our court now.

Thursday, August 31, 2006

A Man After My Own Heart

In his research, my friend Wes uncovered more ancient family photographs belonging to an elderly relative who had them squirreled away.

Yesterday Wes came over to my house to work on the autobiography of his great grandfather Joseph Pyram King. (I mention this work on August 4th.)

Now Wes had ten “new” photographs to insert — photos virtually no one has seen before.

Here is one of these photos. The story that goes with it touches my heart:



This is a turn-of-the century photo of Joseph Marian King, the eldest son of Joseph & Eliza King.

“Uncle Joe” was an inventor; he’s holding one of his inventions in the photo. It was taken at his brother’s home. “Uncle Joe” lived with his brother, Archie, his sister-in-law, and their numerous children.

Here’s a 1912 photo of that family:

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The mother sewed all the clothes in the photo by hand including the suits and shirts all the young men are wearing. Family legend says she could just look at a picture in the Sears Catalogue and immediately sew a replica of that store-bought clothing.

Her name was Laura.

After her husband died, Laura took in sewing jobs to keep the family together and she continued to let “Uncle Joe” live in the home. The inventor seemed a bit eccentric because he practically lived in his bathrobe while inventing his devices.

The children loved him. They said he told magnificent bedtime stories.

The kids wanted a dog.

Mama said, “No dog. We can’t afford a dog”.

The children ran upstairs to his bedroom and appealed to Uncle Joe. After all, he was an inventor with degrees in both engineering and chemistry. He’d convince Mama to let them have a dog.

Uncle Joe glanced out his bedroom window and called all the kids over to see. A neighborhood dog squatted on the lawn “leaving his calling card”.

“You see what that dog is doing,” Uncle Joe asked.

The clambering children nodded.

“What you need to do,” said the master inventor, “Is take a coffee can. Fill it halfway with sand. Scoop up what the dog left in the can. Top it off with more sand. Put it under the edge of the porch. Then water it every day — and grow your own dog”.

The excited children bounded down the stairs intent on growing themselves a dog.

SEPTEMBER

Friday, September 01, 2006

Proof Pages

My own work shames me.

Yesterday afternoon as I napped, the UPS man delivered the proof copy of my Christmas book. I was scared to cut the package open. I feared the knife blade might cut too deep and scar my precious book.

The phone rang just as I cut through the first layer of tape. I left the package on the kitchen table and ran to answer. I felt relief at the reprieve. I suppose a mother giving birth feels this same sort of fear — that this hitherto unseen thing, while you hope it’s ok, is going to be horribly deformed when it comes out and you see the thing in the harsh light of day.

Phone call over with, I returned to finish opening the package. At first glance the books looks ok. Actually, the book cover, one of the first I’ve ever designed myself, looked more than ok. But what about the insides? Does some horrible defect lurk between the covers?

I check headers and footers (the bane of my existence) and they are where they’re supposed to be. I check pagination against the table of contents — like counting the number of fingers and toes and other appendages. Thank God, they do correspond.

Then, I check each graphic... Ut Oh, I see pixels showing in some of the clip art; I enlarged it too much.

Will anyone else notice?

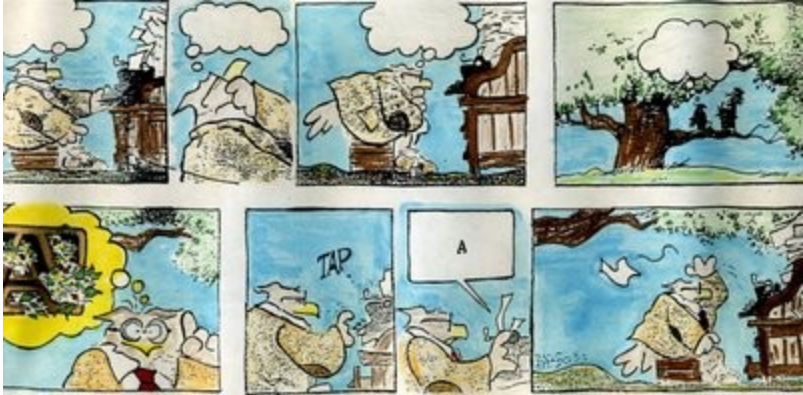
Can some doctor fix that or is my book doomed to live with pixels showing for it’s entire shelf life?

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I feel sick to my stomach. I feel ashamed. I don't want to look at it. I don't want to read the words inside. I thought they were good when I wrote them but now I cringe at how banal they seem.

An old Shoe cartoon springs to mind:



Here I envisioned a wonderful book, an illuminated manuscript on fine velum, a book that would enrich people's lives, entertain readers, honor God and uplift humanity.

And all I get is ink on paper.

Mediocre ideas. Stumbling words. Redundancies. Hatch eyed phrases. Pasted-together, warmed-over chapters that weren't all that good in the first place. Redundancies. Just a plain old sit-on-the-shelf book like thousands of others.

It makes me ashamed of myself.

It doesn't measure up.

Inadequate.

Once, I wanted everyone to buy it; now, I want no one to even see it.

I did the best I could but it's not good enough because I did the best I could.

Does that make sense to you, it does to me.

O God, I am heartily sorry for these, my misdoings... I'll never do it again...

But, who am I kidding?

I will do it again..

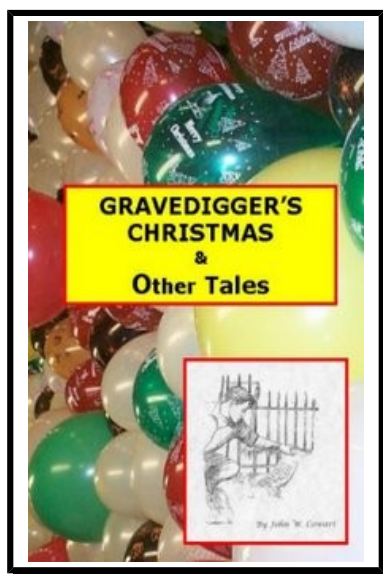
I know I will.

I'm a writer and this is what writers do.

Actually, I'm looking at the proof copy again. It's got the cutest little spine. Perfectly straight. My name's on it. And, come to think of it, the pixels are kind of cute too, they give it character, individuality.

Well, I'll be!

After a while, the damn thing grows on you.



Give me till the middle of next week to go over this proof copy for corrections and if I don't screw up too bad, then *Gravediggers Christmas & Other Tales* will be available in my online book catalog at www.bluefishbooks.info

Saturday, September 02, 2006

The Insatiable Groping Woman!

Yesterday in our bedroom as Ginny and I dressed for a doctor's appointment I thought she was doing something intriguing.

Looks like after 38 years of marriage I'd have known better.

All she was doing was pointing out a hole in my underwear.

Darn!

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Sunday, September 03, 2006

Whine Of The Day

Since this is a holiday and no one is likely to read today's journal posting anyhow, I intend to whine a bit.

Yesterday for the first time in my life I paid a young man at the garage to check the air pressure in the car tires. I just could not see well enough to read the tire gauge and my arthritis hurt too much to get down on ground level to do the job.

I have what my grandmother would have called Galloping Corruption She only recognized two diseases, Galloping Corruption and Creeping Corruption; those two terms covered the spectrum of human illnesses.

Bits of bad news filtered down to us this weekend.

So I feel entitled to whine.

Life is not treating me as I deserve.

Perhaps I should be thankful for that.

God's mercy keeps any of us from getting what we deserve.

Nevertheless, various petty aggravations make me whine.

First, medical tests show that Ginny's diabetes is less under control than we thought it was. This dictates certain life style changes and stronger medicines which contain potentially worrying side effects. This news puts Ginny down and out of sorts from her usual cheerful, bubbly self.

In proof reading (Again!) the Christmas book, I uncover typos on virtually every page. How could I have missed these? (Well, learning to type would help.)

News arrived that the professional committee at the local library decided that two of my books they were considering buying are not good enough to make the grade to include in their collection of local authors. This from a library system that spends millions each year buying books! That puts me in my place, doesn't it.

On the other hand, they did choose to buy copies of my friend Wes' book about his great-grandfather. Good for Wes! Quite a feather in his cap.

I intended to mow the lawn yesterday in preparation for a family cookout Sunday — Eve is bringing her boy friend to meet the family for the first time and I wanted to make a good impression on him... But Rex is hosting a cookout too and had the lawnmower tied up so our yard remains raggedy.

There's an election next week so our phone rings continually as automated voice messages from politicians talk to our answering machine. I keep a list of the politicians who have machines call disturbing my home and I vote for any candidate who has NOT insulted us this way. Actually, there was one man I intended to vote for but I crossed his name off the sample ballot when he had a machine call my home. I will not stand for this degrading practice; I will now vote for his opponent.

How is a Christian supposed to handle the normal aggravating vicissitudes of life, all these petty annoyances which gall me like a stone in my shoe? No one small thing warrants getting upset about, but taken collectively they stultify.

First, Ginny and I talk over all these petty grievances and admit they have us down. Just airing things out helps, even when we can do little to remedy any specific situation at the moment.

We talk over what we can change and what we have to live with. What's our fault, and what's just the way life is.

Then we try to focus on immediate duties. No matter how down and discouraged we feel, the fish still need to be fed, the birdcage liner has to be changed. Eve's young man still needs to be impressed. The typos still demand corrections.

As the poem says, "Life goes on; I forget just why".

And somewhere buried in all this crap is sustaining faith in Christ, our belief that He is in control and that He knows what He's doing.

That was easier for me to believe last week when things were going well than it is this week. But truth is truth whether it is easy to believe or not..

And when faith fails, I can always fall back on good, solid, satisfying whining.

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Say... maybe after the election I could buy one of those politician's automated phone machine and start a new service:

John Cowart's Dial-A-Whine.

Sounds like a winner to me.

Monday, September 04, 2006

Seeing Ourselves Through New Eyes

Yesterday's cookout proved a great success.

For one thing, for the first time in ages I did not present a devotional talk/demonstration. Amazingly, no one appeared to miss my lecture at all.

The family met Eve's friend Mark for the first time. I hope he did not find us too crazy. He appears to be an accomplished young man with many varied talents. He speaks enthusiastically about his work helping folks who were exposed to radiation. And he designed a website for his parents' Arabian horse farm (You've probably seen their equestrian units on tv Thanksgiving Day Parades). The site Mark designed can be found at <http://www.harmonyacresparadehorses.com/>.

Mark hails from Michigan; he is a newcomer to Jacksonville. Ginny and I were amused and amazed as he told us what he considers the best features of the city, features we would have never even thought of in describing our home town. He certainly enlightened us with his insights as to how new comers see our provincial little world.

Another newcomer also attended the cookout with Jennifer and Pat. The young man ran away from his family at church Sunday morning and turned up at their house seeking temporary asylum from the pressures of just turning 16.

God, What a painful age!

His birthday was yesterday so our friends and family put together an impromptu birthday party for him. Shocked and amazed the young man. I knew he collected coins so I pulled out an old \$2 bill as a gift. I don't think he'd ever seen one before. Eve baked a cake for the party. Ginny gave him an odd electric fan with flashing colored lights on the blades. We gave him an autographed

copy of one of my books (Didn't thrill him as much as the fan). Everyone signed a card for him. And our friend Randy, who is an expert at origami, folded him a paper dragon with flapping wings.

After the short appearance at our party, Jennifer and Pat drove him back to his parents.

On a personal level, Randy (we've been friends since the early 1970s) remarked that he thought of me as a Christian mystic.

This shocked me.

I can't imagine how he came up with such an idea. At best I see myself as a mystified Christian. Ginny and I got a good laugh out of his remark.

When Donald and Helen, God bless them, came inside the house for more potato chips, I asked a simple question about the computer and those intrepid souls spent the whole party laboring over some mistake I'd made. I bitch and complain about their "fooling" with my computer all the time, but I'd never be able to anything without their help. I need to show more appreciation and not ask them stuff so often. I don't want them to dread coming over because I do enjoy their company for non-geek things also.

Now, Ginny & I have the rest of the long holiday weekend to ourselves.

Tuesday, September 05, 2006

Can't Pick A Favorite

Last week Funky Bug, an accomplished photographer in her own right, introduced me and her many blog readers to the photography of Jerry Uelsmann.

I found the samples of his work which she supplied so intriguing that I visited several of his sites at <http://www.uelsmann.net> .

I intended to click in and out of the sites — but when I found myself exposed to his world, I stayed wondering at his photographs for over an hour.

"This one is my favorite," I said.

"No, here's an even better one," I said.

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Mr. Uelsmann produced so many great pictures that I must have said, “This is my favorite” a dozen times. Here are three samples:





Wednesday, September 06, 2006

Lost Treasure



At the library the other night I checked out the book *Sunken Treasure On Florida Reefs* by Robert Weller.

If I were not a Christian, I could easily get annoyed with this guy!

He and his buddies found my treasure.

On July 31, 1715, a hurricane wrecked a fleet of twelve Spanish galleons on the east coast of Florida. Seven thousand crewmen and passengers died in the shipwrecks.

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These ships carried 14 million gold coins, tons of gold bars, thousands of chests full of silver, caskets brim full of emeralds, gold chains, fine porcelain, jade Aztec statues, and all sorts of other goodies.

Were there any justice in the universe, all this would be mine.

But it isn't.

None of it is because of the hornets.

You see, back in the 1950s when I was a Boy Scout, I won many swimming and diving competitions. Those days were precursors to my present-day shape like a beached whale. Nevertheless, I swam like a fish and a former Navy frogman trained me in underwater techniques. I knew my way around under the surface.

Even in those long-gone days of my youth I expressed an interest in Jacksonville history and local archaeology. I'd helped excavate an Indian burial mound with a local society and written a report of the excavation for Florida State University. And I dove with a group conducting an archaeological survey of the Ichnetucknee River.

I thought I was hot stuff.

Met this guy, an insurance agent. I'd never heard the term "wheeler dealer" but that describes him. He wanted a diver to go treasure hunting at a shipwreck site near Sebastian Inlet. He looked to recruit a diver who would work "for the experience".

Can you spell sucker? — J.O.H.N!

There were other adults involved in the enterprise but I remember nothing about them. I recall that we made several practice runs to archaeological sites I knew about in the Jacksonville area. We recovered a human skull with a Spanish colonial period bullet rattling around inside it, a knife blade, and a few other artifacts.

The older guys made one trip down to Sebastian and returned with several cannon balls proving they had located the Spanish shipwreck under less than ten feet of water. Visions of gold occupied everyone's thoughts.

But, to finance a dive on the 1715 treasure wrecks of Sebastian, we needed cash money.

The grownups came up with this scheme to film an educational movie for tv, a whole series of movies about these two kids who rode their bikes to Florida historical sites and discovered things.

I was to write the script and to act as cameraman – all without pay, of course.

The grownups came up with these two kids, Buffy and Biffy, ten-year-olds, white shorts, pith helmets, shinny bikes.

The group traveled out to Fort George Island to film these kids exploring slave cabins, shell middens, and a couple of mysterious stone tombs which legend attributes to pirates, patriots, or plantation damsels.

I filmed Biffy and Buffy at the slave cabins, with a whale vertebra, at the mound... then we went to the stone tombs deep in jungle undergrowth.

I set up the camera tripod. The kids approached the tombs — and began screaming.

They had blundered into a huge nest of ground wasps, hornets, yellow jackets — stinging bugs.

I shouted for them to freeze. Wasps attack movement. But the kids danced and swatted and screamed — and each of them got stung over 20 times. The wasps swarmed around me, I froze and did not get stung once.

We loaded the kids up for a drive to the hospital (stopping at a corner store to buy meat tenderized to rub on the stings — told you I was a Scout and knew about such things).

The two kids' mothers put their foots down (how else would you say that?)—No more ventures into the wild woods for their precious little darlings. Intimidated grownups drifted away to play golf or whatever insurance agents do. Without a ripple the film project turned belly up. So did the treasure hunt in Sebastian Inlet.

I never got to dive on *my* treasure wrecks.

About ten years later Kip Wagner's dog found a Spanish well which wreck survivors had dug on the beach. Wagner swam straight out to the wreck of the *Nuestra Senora de la Regla*.

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He recruited divers and his group recovered, “a flowered gold chain 11 feet six inches long...and silver coins that could not be counted, they could only be weighed... over a ton of silver, and 3,000 ounces of gold coins”. They also recovered diamond and emerald rings, a gold cross, silver plates, cannon, silver candlesticks, clay tobacco pipes and ...

And all sorts of stuff I would have found ten years earlier if those dumb kids had not kicked that wasp nest.

So I never dove on the wreck; never recovered the Spanish treasure.

Perhaps God had other plans for my life.

Come to think of it, if I had brought up the treasure, I would never have finished high school, never gone to college, never joined the army, never moved up north, never met Ginny, never sired my children, never lived this life, never written this journal.

So I suppose I have discovered a treasure after all, one sweeter than honey, more to be desired than gold...

Nevertheless...

Nevertheless.... I don't know how to end this sentence.

Oh yeah, Robert Weller, the guy who wrote the book that dredged up all my petty grievances all these years later, he found a lot of treasure in the same area.

But, somehow, I don't want to read any more about his findings

Thursday, September 07, 2006

Frozen In Florida

As I drove to the doctor's office yesterday the temperature sign above the bank read 92 degrees, but once I got into the office I was frozen.

Not all of me, you understand, just bits and pieces, here and there.

The doctor applied cryosurgery to a number of actinic keratosis places on my arms, legs and face. That is he squirted me with liquid nitrogen to freeze various precancer growths which I'm sprouting like a field of mushrooms after a three-day rain.

Apparently as a typical Florida boy 50 years ago, I ran around for all summer every summer without a shirt, and sunlight damaged my skin but it's not showing up until now.

The medical community calls such damage to the skin "actinic keratosis" which sounds so much better than "dirt warts". They say it's caused by sunlight, not by never washing behind your ears.

Doc says actinic keratosis is a precursor to squamous cell carcinoma,

Which is a precursor to subclinical lesions,

Which are precursors to a metastasizing spread to internal organs,

Which is a precursor to dying.

However, he squirted many of them with Raid or whatever was in that canister and zapped them all. Except for a few that he'll have to cut off and biopsy at a future visit.

In essence, my health situation remains in the nuisance stage at the moment. There is no immediate danger of my dying. I'll probably live for hours yet.

A bigger nuisance for me involves my progress proofreading the Christmas book. I read over each chapter in this manuscript dozens of times before I sent it off to the printer. Yet, in the proof pages I find typos on practically every page!

How can this be?

Perhaps if I learned to type... Yes, although I've earned my living as a freelance writer for 25 years, I've never learned to type. Amazing. Shameful but amazing.

25 years of writing without learning to type!

God must look after drunks, fools and writers.

Another odd nuisance is that the proof pages for the Civil War diary have not arrived yet. The post office tracking number shows the pages have been in Philadelphia since September 2nd and have not moved from there.

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The only thing I can figure is that some clerk in the Philadelphia Post Office is reading the whole book before he sends it on. I hope he enjoys it.

Meanwhile, I'll continue to proof the Christmas book, even though the temperature is 92 degrees outside.

Friday, September 08, 2006

The Proof Of The Writing ...

Going over the proof pages of *Gravedigger's Christmas & Other Tales*, I discovered 146 mistakes in only 230 pages.

I've got to learn to type someday!

Most of the mistakes fall in the category of misplaced comas (or is it commas?) and simple typos. But occasionally I made a dilly.

For instance, although I have been over this text many many times, in the proof pages I found a sentence beginning, "This morning as Ginny and I walked to the bus stop yesterday..."

Walking from this morning into yesterday is a pretty good trick.

Some words I consistently misspell or mistype.

It often comes out as *Is* or *if*. Almost every time I type the word *from* the letters read *form*. *So* becomes *os* even when I'm not writing about bones. *Our* and *Out* get mixed up all the time. *Or* becomes *of*. ... Yet, words like Tertullian, Suetonius, Alexamenos, Thibiuca, and Dionysis get typed without error!

That means I pay attention to big things but let little things slip — and those little things change the meaning of everything.

Could there be some spiritual lesson for me here?

But the grueling task of proofreading the Christmas book nears completion. All that's left is to re-check pagination and table of contents. Then the book will be ready for publication (at www.bluefishbooks.info Hint. Hint.).

God willing, I'll have it online Friday afternoon — unless I walk into yesterday again.

Saturday, September 09, 2006

More Proofs, Sun, Fun & Jewelry Girls

For the past two weeks I worked diligently correcting proof pages of my Christmas book, *Gravedigger's Christmas*. I'm sick of proofreading!

No sooner had I uploaded the finished copy Friday than the postman delivered the proof pages of the Civil War diary. So, next week's work is cut out for me already. This incident got me to thinking about the word *proof* in its varied meanings; I intend to write something about how to prove that God does not exist (or maybe He does) one day next week. I'm kicking various ideas around.

Saturday, Ginny and I (and several thousand other people) browsed in the broiling sun at the 35th Annual Riverside Art Festival where 150 artists, craftsmen, musicians, writers, and dog trainers displayed their skills.

Honest, there were a lot of people there — including this Meter Man; I think his false teeth look so cool.:



Ginny preferred to admire seascapes:



I found by far the most interesting booths in the show were the jewelry displays. Being a keen observer -- and a card-carrying dirty old man -- I noticed that girls in low-cut blouses lean far over the counter to examine the jewelry. Years ago I paid good money to see strippers who displayed less flesh than the girls at the art show did for free.

Were I not a stalwart pure-hearted Christian, I could really become an aficionado of fine jewelry. But since I am, I only visited eight or ten jewelry displays. ...

Er, at least I suppose there was jewelry in those cases.

Of course, not a single one of the young lovelies bending over the jewelry counters even spoke to me. However, I did spend some time sitting on a park bench talking with an 84-year-old lady from Oklahoma who was just passing through town on her way to her brother's funeral. Really, I did not say much to her, but I did listen and let her unload.

Normally I avoid crowds because I'm subject to panic attacks, but perhaps the Lord inclined my heart to attend this festival, which I usually wouldn't think of going to, in order to consol this old lady a tiny bit.

Not all our plans are our own.

I'm fairly sure He did not send me here to ogle the jewelry girls.

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Here's a photo of three beautiful women. Guess which one I'm married to:



Hey, you don't think I'm crazy enough to take photos of the jewelry girls do you?

However, this a young man gave me permission to photograph him with his parrot — which attracted much attention:



That may be one of the dogs from the frisbee show in the background.

Long before we'd seen it all, the heat wilted us and we quit browsing to seek iced tea. It seems appropriate that the last booth we visited contained a shadowbox wall hanging entitled *Sun Worshippers*.



This evening after supper, Ginny and I prayed for our children and the various trials, troubles and things they are involved in this coming week.

As we washed our dishes, Ginny remarked, “You know, they give you an epidural when you’re giving birth, but it only lasts for a few minutes; they ought to invent an epidural that will last you for 30 years”.

Monday, September 11, 2006

A Productive Sunday

Well, yesterday my son Donald made it to Europe OK.

Turns out he went to Switzerland not Sweden.

Hard to keep those places straight in my mind, both begin with the same letters, Sw....

Switzerland is where they yodel, host numbered bank accounts, and make chocolate.

In Sweden they can’t yodel worth a darn, but they gave the world Anita Ekberg.

Here’s a picture of her:



Tuesday, September 12, 2006

The Previously Unpublished Civil War Diary of John Thomas Whatley, C.S.A.

Little Susie came home from school saying, "Mama, guess what? In school we learned how to make babies today."

The mother, more than a little surprised, tried to keep her cool.

"That's interesting," she said, "How do you make babies?"

"It's simple," replied Susie, "You just change the Y to an I and add ES".

Oh the joys of grammar!

You guessed it — I'm spending the day proofreading again.

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Oh the thrills and excitement!

Spelling. Punctuation. Subject/verb agreement. All the reasons I became a writer!

Surges of creativity sweep through my veins as I edit the text of *Rebel Yell: The Civil War Diary Of John Thomas Whatley, CSA*, — a book I hope to have published online by the end of this week.

How did a nice guy like me get entangled in such a project? After all, Whatley's diary sat around in a box unpublished for 150 years, how did I happen to get involved?

The introduction I wrote for the diary explains:

Tracing A Promise:

In 1952 Mrs. Florence Pagnini O'Flynn, of Jacksonville, Florida, bought a box of books. In this box she discovered a small ledger, the kind farmers once used to keep running accounts of their expenses.

The ledger had a worn, faded brown cover. The stationer who printed the pages ruled lines, marked columns, and stamped consecutive page numbers at the top of each leaf. The pages measured five inches wide by eight inches tall.

Confederate soldier John Thomas Whatley of Coweta County, Georgia, used this farmer's ledger as his diary from March 2, 1862, till November 27, 1864.

Whatley recorded his daily experiences in the first pages of the diary; he used the back pages to jot down lines of poetry and historical facts he wished to remember.

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 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.

Attorney John Merrett, who transcribed the text, said, "The diary opens with an extremely poetic, quite well written, series of entries detailing the life of a garrison recruit. Later entries however, have a deeply sobered tone. With his naiveté worn away by disease and battlefield experiences, Whatley describes the feelings of a veteran in somber hues rather than in the greens and golds of his early entries. The process implicit in the change in tone is no less fascinating than the facts and words by which it is conveyed... Whatley describes the common experience of soldiers with uncommon depth."

This diary captivated Mrs. O'Flynn.

For years she kept it locked in a safe deposit box to protect it. She launched a campaign to recruit help in publishing the diary. She enlisted many, many volunteers to help her in this task. She contacted officials of the National Park Service, various historical societies, genealogical groups, and a whisky distiller as she sought aid in publishing the diary.

Included in the names I find in the Whatley file folder are attorney John Merrett, historian Smith Scott, genealogist Walter Stovall, novelist Eugenia Price, and historian and Congressman Charles Bennett. All these people contributed time, talent and energy to Mrs. O'Flynn's project. They exercised great patience and deserve great thanks.

However, volunteers involved in the project labored under an odd constraint: as Mrs. O'Flynn grew older, she came to believe the ghost of John Whatley issued her specific instructions about the publication of his diary. She was adamant about following the envisioned instructions, but in 1987, her health failed and she abandoned the project — almost.

By then she was in her 70s and well-known as a political activist. She appealed to Congressman Charles Bennett again for help publishing.

Congressman Bennett authored a number of books on the history of Florida. I had written a few newspaper and magazine articles on Jacksonville history which he had read. One Sunday afternoon he called me and asked if I'd talk with Mrs. O'Flynn about the diary.

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I found the old lady in poor health yet full of determination to publish the diary exactly, precisely, without exception, as the ghost she saw dictated.

While John Whatley was a fine writer, his ghost seemed to know little about the constraints of publishing.

I could not put my life and work on indefinite hold to get enmeshed in Mrs. O'Flynn's project according to her rigorous specifications.

She did not take readily to editorial suggestions. Once when she was sick and bed-ridden, as my wife and daughter tended her, she got so angry that she threw a bowl of hot soup in my face when I suggested a way to treat the text.

Yet, the sheer force of Mrs. O'Flynn's personality extracted a promise from me. I promised her that if it were ever in my power to see John Whatley's diary into print, that I would do it.

She let me examine the original autograph and gave me a Xerox copy of a diary transcript along with a file folder full of bits and pieces of research various people had done over the years.

I stuck all these papers away in a file drawer for years; I encountered them again recently in an office cleanup and I remembered my promise to Florence.

This present book fulfills that promise to the best of my ability.

I have no idea what happened to the original autograph of the diary upon Mrs. O'Flynn's death several years ago.

Notes I added to this text are clearly marked. I've inserted appropriate drawings and photographs from the Library of Congress' on-line collection in places related to events Whatley mentions.

Since Whatley confined each day's entry to a single page, I have broken the text into reasonable paragraphs; but I have retained his abbreviations, spellings, capitalization, and other punctuation.

And — except for keeping Mrs. O'Flynn's title, *Rebel Yell* — I pay no attention whatsoever to the instructions

and directions she claimed John Whatley's ghost had given her.

If Florence Pagnini O'Flynn is out there somewhere reading this — here's the book I promised. ... and, it's ok about the soup.

— *John W. Cowart*

Wednesday, September 13, 2006

Another Victory for Sin, Overeating & Sloth

Woke up at one o'clock Tuesday morning and since I couldn't get back to sleep and didn't feel like praying, I resumed proofreading the Civil War diary.

In the quiet hours of the morning I struggled with words and punctuation — What in the world did he mean saying "to-night when a Muta has assumed full sway of the universe" — I have no idea in the world what a *Muta* is. I checked to see if it were a reference to a Greek or ancient Egyptian goddess because Whatley uses many classical allusions, but I came up empty.

Stet!

I just have to make sure I accurately convey his words, not that they make sense.

About noon I finally finished proofreading and began making corrections for the PDF download.

That done at last, I celebrated my victory over this difficult project in a truly Christian fashion — I browsed naked ladies on the internet, over-ate with two tv dinners and a bowl of chocolate ice cream, started reading a new murder mystery, and took a nap.

Funny that I would chose to celebrate a minor triumph by giving in to any and all elements of my carnal nature. Am I the only Christian that does that sort of thing?

Even weirder is the fact that while I was doing all that, I also continued kicking around ideas about the word *proof* as it relates to the existence (or non-existence) of God. Back last week I said I wanted to think about those things a bit before writing about them; so, amateur theology bounced around in my head along with the bikini girls and chocolate ice cream. — Oh well, "unto the pure, all things are pure"; everybody else thinks like I do.

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Oh, I expect sample copies of the Civil War diary from the printer in a few days; I hope it turns out as well as I think. I think the book will really be beautiful.

Two people called asking for prayer: One, a 17-year old girl with a malignant tumor the size of a watermelon; the other a lady undergoing exploratory surgery for possible colon cancer....

Sometimes I get so involved with my own little world of history and writing alone at my desk that I forget there is a real world of hurting, scared people out there.

Thursday, September 14, 2006

A Bear In The Woods: About The word *Proof*

As Jack and Jill hiked up the hill
They found a baby bear.
They lifted it from off the path'
And tossed it in the air.

The bear cub grunted, squealed and mewed.
Such fun, that little ball of fur,
As Jill tossed Jack the little cub
And he tossed it back to her.

Jill thought the little bear so cute,
She clutched it to her heart.
What Jack and Jill were doing,
Do you think that it was smart?

Yes, I composed the above poem myself. If you know of a job opening for a Poet Laureate, I am available.

The muse inspire this poem because of the proofreading I've been doing over the past couple of weeks; as I worked, I got to wondering about the meaning of the word *proof* especially as it might relate to the existence or non-existence of God.

As usual when confronted with such a knotty problem, I turned to the best Bible study tool anyone can ever own, a dictionary.

The word *proof*, my *Webster's 9th Collegiate* tells me carries a variety of meanings. For instance, when we read the phrase *90 proof* on a whiskey bottle it means that the actual alcoholic content in the bottle is half that number, i.e. only 45%. — I didn't know that.

I did know that *proof* also means a copy of a text made for correcting mistakes. Boy, do I know that! I'm bleary-eyed from proofing two book manuscripts back to back.

But I didn't know that there are proof coins as well, a set of test coins struck in cheaper metal so the mint can see what the finished product will look like in gold or silver.

Then there are legal, mathematical and philosophical uses for the word *proof*.

Which brings us back to the baby bear of my poem.

Is it smart to tease a baby bear you find in the woods?

Proof is "the cogency of evidence that compels acceptance by the mind of a truth...the process or an instance of establishing the validity of a statement... something that induces certainty".

That's what the dictionary says, but I'm stymied because I've never heard the word *cogency* before. Back a few pages : "*Cogency: the quality or state of being cogent*".

Well, that's no help at all!

Back a few more listings: "*Cogent: appealing forcefully to the mind or reason, convincing, having power to compel or constrain*".

Oh, I get it.

A powerful force that convinces...

Say like meeting Mama Bear in the woods.

What Mama Bear?

Did my poem even mention Mama Bear?

Did Jack or Jill see any evidence of a Mama Bear?

No. All they saw was baby bear.

Baby bear is a result; Mama Bear is the cause of that result. (Let's leave Papa Bear out of the picture for now).

Whenever we see a result, the cause of that result is not far behind. But that cause itself is the result of a previous cause (Mama Bear's own parents).

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When you follow that trail backward far enough, you come to the First Cause of all results. What could that be?

Here's a quote from an essay in my *Gravedigger's Christmas* collection:

The Greek philosopher Socrates used a mule, to reason about the existence of God.

It didn't work.

His enemies executed him anyhow — Made him drink poison hemlock.

When Socrates was on trial for his life in Athens, he pointed to a mule plodding past the Theater of Dionysus where the trial was held. He observed that mules never have baby mules. All mules are sterile. Mules are the offspring of female horses mated with male donkeys.

Therefore, the philosopher argued, every time you see a mule, that proves the existence of at least one horse and one donkey. And since all life only springs from life, then those animals must have parents too.

Then the parents must have parents and so on an on till you come to an original source of life -- God.

When you see any effect, you know it must have a cause, and the First Cause of all effects is God, Socrates reasoned.

"Who in the world would believe in sons of gods if they did not believe in gods," Socrates asked? "That would be just as odd as believing in sons of horses or asses, but not in the horses or asses themselves!"

His enemies responded to his reasoning with a sophisticated argument of their own.

"Here, drink this. It won't hurt a bit," they said.

Theologians say that Socrates' mule illustrates an ontological argument for God's existence.

But, while some folks say that the First Cause is God; others say the first cause is the universe per se.

Either way, it's not smart to tease Baby Bear.

Friday, September 15, 2006

Such Things Ought Not To Be!

Remember the 17-year-old girl I requested prayer for on Wednesday?

A few minutes ago her relative who requested prayer e-mailed me this photo of the tumor doctors removed from her abdomen:



The young lady, Sandra, is doing as well as can be expected under the circumstances.

The removal of this tumor revealed another large one wedged in behind her kidneys.

These malignancies have metastasized into her lymph nodes also.

I have never even met Sandra but her condition outrages me.

When I see a thing like this tumor, my immediate reaction is **This Is Wrong!**

Why do I feel that way?

Because I have some idea of what is right.

We all have this sense of what is right and what is wrong.

Where does that come from?

It comes from knowing that there is some kind of order to the universe and that some things fit into that order, — and others do not.

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If we did not recognize an order to the creation, then we would not recognize when something is out of order; we'd just consider that tumor, (or oil spill or war, or rape, or murder or betrayal or molestation or cheating) as the way things normally are.

But we do know that it is wrong for a lovely 17-year-old girl to have such a malignancy growing in her. We do know that certain things are just plain wrong.

If we did not know that something is catastrophically wrong, then we would never try to make it right.

We'd let sick people suffer. We'd let starving people starve. We'd let terrorists terrorize... but we don't let such things go on without opposing them. We recognize that there is a pattern to creation; that that pattern is good; and that something has screwed it up big time.

So we try to the best of our ability to set things right again.

Today I'd started to write about proof and the existence or non-existence of God but receiving that photograph set me off on a different tract ...

Or maybe it didn't.

Could it be that we feel certain things are wrong because they are wrong?

We see a pattern in creation; that means a Creator has a hand in it.

I've had sophomores ask me, "Can you prove that God exists".

"No, I can't," I say. "Can you prove that He does not exist"?

Inevitably, they launch into a litany about war, deformed babies, retarded children — things which have virtually nothing to do with God but which prove that evil exists.

That's no surprise to anyone.

We know that evil exists because something within us tells us that the pattern has been broken, that things were not meant to be this way, that there is an anomaly, a twist, a perversion — we know that something is wrong when we reasonably expect it to be right.

Why in the world would we expect anything to be right unless we harbored some idea that God not only exists but that He is good?

I'm pissed about that tumor right now and I don't know if I'm making any sense writing in the heat of the moment like this.

I'll worry the idea of proof around again some more tomorrow. — God willing, of course.

Oh, about the other lady we prayed for Wednesday: I called and she won't get her test results till next week. She said they did remove some polyps from her esophagus. AND they are doing a biopsy on places from her colon ...

Er, which makes me wonder just how long the probe those doctors used was?

Saturday, September 16, 2006

Before...

Friday I mowed the grass, what's left of it after drought and chinch bugs. The UPS man delivered two sample copies of my Christmas book and I gloated over it for a while; it looks good.

Ginny's boss evaluated her work as exemplary — that's next to the highest rating on the scale.

My doctor called saying he wants me to see a specialist because my lab work came back with a high PSA reading. I get to have a more thorough prostate exam. O Goody, goody! Just what I always wanted!

Those are things happening in my material world. In my thought world, things prove a bit more interesting as I continue to kick around the concept of proof. For instance, I have a problem with teleology, i.e. the argument of design in nature as a proof of God's existence. I wonder if some defenders of this concept don't stretch the point a bit too far.

Every week someone sends me an e-mail photo of a cloud formation which supposedly shows giant hands in the clouds blessing America.

I'm skeptical about such things.

Those clouds, from another angle, could just as well look like bunnies. But I always suspect that the photos

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have been doctored, enhanced, faked by some overzealous fan of God's. Aren't there real wonders enough in creation?

One of the deepest experiences of worship I ever had came while dissecting a cat in a biology class. Seeing how the cat was put together inspired in me a pure wonder at God's design. He's really pretty smart, you know.

Joy wells up with in me on seeing the intricacies of a spider web in my garden or the flight patterns of birds in my backyard or the color spectrum in a dew drop or the power of an ant — tiny nudges to worship all.

Yes, a design calls for a Designer.

A plan reveals a Planner.

Love originates with a Lover.

Good comes from God.

I grasp these ideas.

It's just that I think they don't go far enough. Creation reveals a much bigger thing, a wonder beyond my imagination.

I picture the universe as a giant airplane flying to a lavish vacation resort. The arch terrorist used his box-cutter tongue to slash Eve, the first stewardess; he seized the controls, and crashed the whole thing into the ground.

In spite of his villainy, stunned survivors stagger around the crash site. You and I blunder around wreckage as children of those earlier survivors.

We descendents of those original survivors have never actually flown in the plane, but we try to make sense of the debris around us. We use what we can as we survive from day to day. This has been going on for years now.

Tangles of wire and cable litter the area. Scraps of aluminum cut our bare feet.

We find what is obviously a seat. We can tell what that is. We use it.

We find a shoe, but there's a foot still in it. We discard it.

We find a fold-down tray; we can make use of that.

We find a black box; no telling what that thing is for...
But every once in a while, we spot a piece of the wing.
And we realize that we were made to fly...
That we were headed Home ...
Before the crash.

Monday, September 18, 2006

Blessed Be The Tie That Binds

One of our rain trees leans toward the power lines.

Not good. Every hurricane season we loose power for a week or two; no sense jeopardizing our electricity with extra branches which might fall on the lines.

As Ginny and I dabbled in our garden Saturday, she asked me to straighten the rain tree. So I drove in a metal stake and tied the tree back.

When Ginny ties a plant back, she prefers to cut the legs off old pantyhose.

Tacky.

Not me. What better to tie back a plant than with a real tie?



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Back when I worked in an office I wore a necktie to work each day. I prided myself on never wearing the same tie twice (no reason, just a vanity), so I amassed hundreds of the things.

Now that I work from home, I no longer wear a different tie each day.

I know that when anyone pictures me as a writer in my study, they envision me in a smoking jacket with satin collar and trim — like Alistair Cooke hosting Master Piece Theatre.

That's not entirely accurate.

In fact I usually write wearing debonair swim trunks and an Etcher tee-shirt like the one in the photograph.

When gardening, I use my old neckties to tie back plants.

Here's a photo of me (in writer's garb) selecting an appropriate tie for the rain tree:



When she was in high school, my youngest daughter, Patricia, took a dozen or so of my brighter neckties,

ripped out the stitching to remove the liners, and sewed the ties together lengthwise to make a skirt. Because all the wide points were down, Patricia's skirt flared and swirled when she danced and she gleaned all sorts of accolades whenever she wore it.

Once my three sons and I got together in a late-night bull session and among the things we discussed was which son would get what heirloom when I die. Fred gets the engraved sword with the eagle-head pommel. Donald gets the Civil War sword and my great-grandfather's shotgun. Johnny gets the other shotgun and my bowie knife...

Then, I mentioned the problem of what to do with my massive necktie collection.

The strangest expression fell on the faces of my three sons. They looked at the floor. They looked at one another's faces. They looked at me. They burst out laughing.

One of them, I think it was Fred, said, "Dad, when you die we're going to wind those ties around your body to wrap you up like a mummy and bury them all with you".

Nice fellows, my sons, but alas, not a one of them has inherited my exquisite taste in gentleman's apparel.

As we gardened Saturday, Ginny wore shorts and a tee-shirt. Since it was just the two of us, she did not wear a bra.

As the day grew hotter and hotter, she worked up a sweat, I teased her suggesting that she remove the tee-shirt and work topless.

She said, "I do not expose myself in view of any passerby".

I assured her that the vine hedge which surrounds out backyard insures privacy.

"I will not take off my top in either the front yard or the back yard," she said.

"Nobody has asked you to take off your top in the front yard," I said.

"A lot you know," she replied.

Sunday we skipped church and drove around downtown to view some architectural features in slum neighborhoods.

Afterwards, we strolled along the Southbank Riverwalk viewing the city skyline.

Since the day was so hot, we decided to ride a water taxi over to the northbank to Donna Maria's Mexican restaurant for lunch.

As we waited for the water taxi, we sat on a sea wall between two levels of dock; there is about an eight-foot difference between the two levels.

When we saw the water taxi round the point, I encouraged Ginny for us to drop down over the wall onto the lower level to meet the boat, but she refused.

"It's only a few feet down," I said. "Jackie Chan makes jumps like that all the time".

"Jackie Chan has better insurance than we do," she said.

We walked around the seawall.

We enjoyed a long leisurely lunch on a terrace overlooking the river, then, instead of taking a water taxi back to the other bank, we strolled over the Main Street Bridge then sat a long while talking in the park by Friendship Fountain.

38-years married and still deeply in love.

What a blessing!

Tuesday, September 19, 2006

A Long, Long Post About Religious Violence

This morning, I intended to write a light fluffy post about my hometown fire department. Instead, I came up with this — which is long, and neither light nor fluffy:

A long line of men shackled by their left wrists to a heavy iron chain trudged up the mountain. Guards armed with crossbows and blunderbusses prodded the line along. One of the prisoners stumbled. Sick, he dragged on the chain delaying the forced march.

A sergeant examined the sick man, found him unfit, and ordered a soldier to release him from the line.

The soldier didn't trouble to look for a key to the shackles.

He drew his sword and hacked the sick man's hand off.

Free of the hindrance, the line moved on to the mine leaving the sick man to bleed out beside the path.

I vividly recall this incidence from William Prescott's monumental book *The Conquest of Peru*. The men in chains were Inca Indians, heathen sun worshipers; the guards were Spanish conquistadors, Christians under the leadership of Francisco Pizarro.

Although frequently in history books, and more recently in the news, for their violence, Mohammedans have not cornered the market on evil, inhumane treatment of people whose beliefs differ from theirs.

On Christmas Day, 1657, as John Evelyn and his wife worshiped in Exeter Chapel, a Church of England church in London, his diary records that the church was surrounded by non-conformist soldiers (Presbyterians, Anabaptists, Puritans). The soldiers interrupted the service and took the names of all in attendance. They allowed the service to continue but when each worshiper went forward to receive communion, a soldier pressed a musket to the back of his head "as if they would shoot us at the altar... I got home late the next day; blessed be God," Evelyn wrote.

Yet, when the Anglican church returned to power, they persecuted the Puritans so intensely that many boarded the ship *Mayflower* and fled to the unsettled American colonies to escape religious persecution.

Yet, on June 1, 1660, in Massachusetts, those same Puritans who had sought religious freedom hung Mary Dyer on Boston Common for being a Quaker. Among the evidence presented against Mrs. Dyer was that she had given birth to a deformed baby; it had four horns, thus proving her wickedness. But they hung her not because of the baby, but because she was of a different religion.

No one faith corners the market on violence against those of a different faith.

A Dirty Old Man Gets Worse

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The pattern seems to be that when a group is weak, they are persecuted; but when they become strong, they persecute others.

The Egyptian Pharaoh persecuted the Jews ordering midwives to strangle all newborn Jewish males. The Jews entered the Promised Land conducting a campaign of genocide against the heathen already there. In New Testament times the Jews stoned Stephen to death, beheaded James, and hounded Paul the length of the Roman Empire.

In turn Christians persecuted Jews. The Spanish Inquisition. Auschwitz. Bergen-Belsen. After World War II, Jewish patriots assassinated British officials and carved out a new homeland ousting Palestinians.

In the 1500s, astronomer Johannes Kepler in Austria tells how Lutherans hung scores of Catholics from the same tree.

In China, Buddhists pitch-forked medical missionary Eleanor Chesnut to death then went on to slaughter hundreds of Christians in the Boxer Rebellion. And Tibetan monks murdered Dr. Petrus Rijnhart.

(My book *Strangers On The Earth* tells their stories along with the stories of several other Christians killed for their faith).

And suicide bombers are nothing new, remember the Japanese Kamikaze pilots of World War II who crashed their planes into American ships.?

And in ancient times when the Shinto's of Japan and the Buddhists of China went to war, captains of returning Japanese ships nailed naked Chinese or Korean women spread-eagled to the prows of the sailing ships as living figureheads.

The Hindus of India killed their share of Christians and their long-term war with Moslem Pakistan threatens to turn nuclear.

Mormons were persecuted and in thurn persecuted others; one of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories (I forget which one) is based on this phenomenon. American Indians staked out preachers on ant hills; and our ancestors in turn deliberately gave blankets and clothing

from people who died of small pox to Indians in biological warfare.

Advocates of no religion at all claim that religion generates violence, war and untold human misery.

They have a point.

From whence come cross burnings, abortion clinic bombings, exploitation of immigrants, snide remarks and haughty looks, gay bashing, job discrimination?

“From whence come wars and fightings among you?” the same James who was beheaded asks, “Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?”

From my own lusts.

From my own internal frustrations.

It's easy to say that the people who committed all the historic atrocities I mention were not REAL Christians. It's easy for me to say that they were not Christians like I am.

But they were.

At least a lot of them were.

I want to distance myself from such creeps. But I can't. Not really.

How could a Christian, a follower of the Prince of Peace, the Lamb of God, resort to violence?

To see, all I have to do is look at my own heart, look at my own intolerance, my own narrow-mindedness. My own fear.

I think the root cause of religious violence is a low view of God.

A view that believes that God Almighty is too weak and namby-pamby to defend Himself. Therefore the true believer feels compelled to step in and do the job.

That's because such a person is not a true believer in anything —. He dares not hear a dissenting opinion because he fears truth.

A person who is comfortable with God feels no need to discomfort others even when he feels they are wrong. God is perfectly capable of correcting wrongs in His own good time – in His Time. He is not without strength. He is not dependent on me for anything.

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Another dynamic works when I feel violent — my own lusts which war within my members.

If I recall correctly, the most violent thing I have ever done was grab one of my teenagers and try to shake some sense into her.

I was wrong.

I apologized to her later, but I am heartily ashamed that I resorted to such violence even when provoked by a typical teenager's behavior.

I'm probably the only parent in history to do this.

Mea Culpa.

I am a dad.

She survived and I survived but I was 100% wrong.

And, what's worse, I knew it at the time. But I shook her anyhow.

On a deep level, that violence had little to do with her inane behavior; it had to do with my frustration and lack of trust in God to guide her.

She forgave me and we are best of friends now in spite of my pig-headedness then.

So, the question is: Am I, a man who calls himself Christian, capable of religious violence?

I certainly hope not.

There have been a few times in the past when irate people have threatened my life because of my being a Christian. In each case, the danger passed not because of anything at all which I did, but through outside circumstances intervening. I reacted calmly and with reason to make peace with the street thugs, mental patients, mob, or whoever. I did not resort to any violence myself.

But maybe these folks just didn't push the right button to get me going.

I wonder.

I know of only one Scripture (Matthew 5:29ff) where Jesus advocated violence:

“If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee... If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is more profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish...”

I am permitted the violence of self-discipline when needed.

And that violence only!

None other!

Can't say I've exercised that discipline, or any other, much. Still got around with both eyes and both hands. When it comes to my own members, I'm not easily offended.

But, Lord, what about them? Those other guys? What about all those violent, mean, nasty, bad dudes? What should I do about them?

“Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy, But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in Heaven...”

Those are hard words, Lord.

Hard words.

Wednesday, September 20, 2006

The Flower Fadeth

Last night our Night Blooming Cereus opened.

About 35 years ago my mother gave us this ugly plant. The tropical cactus resembles a dead bush most of the year, but when it blooms, the flower is called The Queen Of The Night.

Rightly so.

Each blossom measures from four to ten inches across. They begin to open after dark. The buds open fast enough for you to see the movement. Fully open the flower spreads a haunting aroma which permeates the whole neighborhood. Then the flower fades to a limp dangle before the sun rises.

The beauty lasts but an instant, a single night.

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Here is the progression:

The bud curves up:



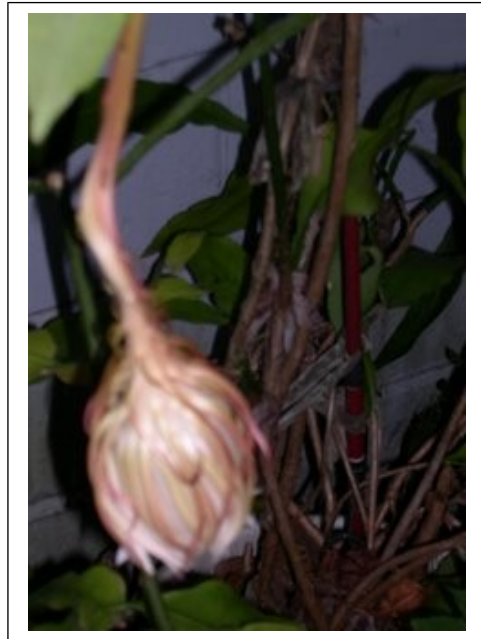
It starts to open:



In the night it spreads fully:



Then the flower fades to a limp dangle as soon as light touches it:



The beauty of that flower is lost forever.

Reminds me of an erection.

Also reminds me of the Scripture which says, "All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the Spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever".

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Usually on the night our Queen of the Night blooms, Ginny and I sit on the back deck in the moonlight watching the flowers open and fade as we think and touch and talk quietly. But last night was too rainy ,so we just darted out now and then to take photos in the dark.

My friend Wes came over for breakfast. We broke out a dictionary and had a great time talking about words and pronunciation. We chewed over words like *poignant*, *harassment*, and *paradigm* — a fascinating conversation.

We also talked about how our love and enthusiasm for Christ has dimmed over the years since we first became believers.

Wes just returned from a trip to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. On his way back, he stopped in the town where he'd been to school 25 years ago.

He found his school closed and a new one opened in those buildings.

He went to the student hangout he'd enjoyed so much.

Found it boarded up.

He drove out to the lonely beach where he and his friend used to go to talk amid blowing sea oats and soaring gulls.

He found strip malls, casinos, burger stands, tourist traps, and tacky-condos — instant development and decay.

He said it all makes him weary.

You can't go home again.

Yes, the flower fadeth.

But the Word of God stands forever.

Thursday, September 21, 2006

On The Remembrance Of Important Things - Like Underwear

The other day I wanted to use a quote from the diary of John Evelyn, a contemporary of Samuel Pepys. I'd read Evelyn's diary about 15 years ago and I recalled that on Christmas Day in the year 1657, he told about an incident I wanted to use.

I walked over to the right bookcase. I reached out and chose the right volume (I have several editions of Evelyn's diaries).

I looked at my index. And there was the quote I wanted.

Oh, about the index: I always read with a pencil in hand and write my own keyword index of ideas (not specific words like a printed index, but ideas) in the back cover of any book so I can later find things that strike me.

Such penciled notes help me remember where I read what.

Anyhow, I felt very clever at being able to immediately lay my hands on a 400-year-old quote that I haven't thought of for at least 15 years.

On the other hand...

Saturday night my wife asked me to transfer a load of clothes — almost all our underwear — from the washer to the dryer.

I forgot.

I remembered it this morning, four days later.

What is the dynamic at work here?

One obscure Christian teaching is that the Spirit of God will help us remember anything we really need to remember.

This belief is based on something Jesus said to His disciples at the Last Supper:

"The Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you".

Of course most Bible scholars say that this promises refers only to the people present at the Last Supper, and that even then it only applies to their memory of the words of Jesus.

Others of us believe that indeed the Spirit of God will help us remember what is truly important even today.

I got to thinking about these things because of a blog post by my e-friend Jellyhead in Australia. On September 19th. She wrote a lovely post about visiting her elderly

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grandmother whose memory is fading. (Her blog can be found at <http://jellyheadrambles.blogspot.com/>)

As I grow older myself, the thought nags me that my mind and memory may also fail. That I'll forget pots on the burner, appointments, feeding the fish, One-Way streets, paying bills, faces I love, people who care about me, locking the back door, laundry in the machine — a host of other important things.

All of us at any age exercise a selective memory; we hold onto certain striking things and forget others. For instance, we all remember just what we were doing on Nine Eleven when the World Trade Center was destroyed; but can you remember what you were doing on, say, Nine Nine, two days before?

No matter our age, we still forget or block out certain things.

"Did you do your homework?"

"No, Mama, I forgot".

But even for those of us approaching senility, I believe that, while some things may indeed flake off and be lost, those things are, in the long-run, trivial things.

I believe that the Spirit of God enables us to remember the feeling of loving and of being loved. Yes, even when we grow old, afraid, frustrated, forgetful, and cantankerous (My kids say I'm already there) I believe that deep down, love is always remembered.

Faith and Hope may, or may not, abide, but love never fails.

But what about those clothes in the dryer?

Why did I forget those for days on end?

Could it be that the Spirit is not overly concerned about reminding me about underwear?

Three Quick Book Notes:

- This morning UPS delivered sample copies of that never-before-published Confederate soldier's diary I've been editing. It turned out BEAUTIFUL!!! I'm delighted. This thing was a bear to work on but the result really pleases me.

- This afternoon, my book *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad* was featured, along with fine works by other authors, on the Lulu Blooker Prize site. The Blooker is a literary prize for books, i.e. books based on blogs. The listing just means my book is being considered by the judges.

- Having cleared my desk for the moment, Thursday, I'll finally be able to resume work on my history of the Jacksonville Fire Department... Maybe, God willing, I'll finish that book before Christmas. This excites me because it means I will have accomplished everything in the writing work schedule I mapped out for the year last January.

A Word To The Wise: For jock itch and chaffing between your legs, I don't know what you should use — but rubbing alcohol ain't it !!!

Friday, September 22, 2006

A Dead Elephant ... and vultures

"Class, I want each of you to write a sentence about a firemen," said the teacher.

Joey's sentence said: "The Fireman climbed up the ladder and came down pregnant."

The teacher took him aside. "Do you even know what pregnant means?" she asked.

Sure," Joey said, "It means carrying a child."

That's it. That's as far as I got in writing my history of Jacksonville's Fire Department yesterday. Then the project overwhelmed me.

Back in 1986 I began gathering materials for this history book. I wrote one version for the local Fire Museum, but that book is long out of print. Ever since, I've intended to expand and update my fire department history, but this and that interrupted the project and I put it on a back burner.

Not a wise move.

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Now I face an enormous mass of notes, half-written chapters, files of photographs, and tangles of information — all of it accumulated; none of it organized.

OK. Ok, I know.

How do you eat an elephant?

One bite at a time.

But here I stand, knife and fork in hand, and no idea where to start.

The dead elephant lies before me and I can't tell whether to bite its ear or its ass. But, I've made promises. Some few people expect me to produce this book.

I should know better than to ever make a promise.

But I did.

As Scarlet said, "I'll think about that tomorrow".

Meanwhile, I spent Thursday reading a murder mystery. Not a single fireman in 400 pages.

In the afternoon, my elderly friend Bubba, who lives on a meager Social Security check, came by to sit and talk.

Ours is a strange friendship. I'm a writer and my world revolves around 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.

I wrote a blog about Bubba and Dolly, his wife, in my February 7th post, and about Dolly's death in my June 27th journal post.

Bubba tells me that the life insurance company is still dragging its feet over paying for Dolly's death; to this poor old man who can't read, they cite fine print about this and that — section 18, clause 42, line 13, etc.

The mortuary duns him daily for the funeral expenses.

Not only that, but title mortgage companies hound him daily. These exploiters deface every telephone pole in Jacksonville's poorer sections with signs luring the poor to sell their homes: "We Pay Cash For Houses". These

“businessmen” read Dolly’s obit and call Bubba saying that since his wife died he may want to sell his home and they have a great offer for him.

The Bastards!

And on top of that, some relatives in Bubba’s huge extended family seem to me to be lined up to spend a piece of Bubba’s insurance money whenever it finally does come through.

And since he has more room in his house now, already a niece and a nephew have moved in with him — rent free, of course.

It’s not that any one person deliberately determined to do this old man dirt; but they oppress him with thoughtless evils in their normal, everyday way of doing business.

Shudder for the souls of the thoughtlessly wicked.

The Scripture says, “Rob not the poor, because he is poor: neither oppress the afflicted in the gate: For the Lord will plead their cause, and spoil the soul of those that spoil them”.

I listened to Bubba’s woes as we sipped iced tea in our rockers — two old farts bitching. I urged him to get a library card so he can check out free VCR and DVD movies; I’ll go with him to fill out the paperwork.

Then our conversation moved on to higher realms as we shared chili and barbecue recipes.

Some things are more important than writing history — at least, that’s my excuse for not really working today.

Saturday, September 23, 2006

The Funniest Blog I Ever Wrote

Last night I wrote the funniest blog I’ve ever written.

It involved a friend Ginny and I care about.

Ginny and I practically rolled on the floor laughing when we read it over together.

Then we got to talking. Although my entry was the funniest thing I ever wrote, it might hurt our friend’s feelings.

I erased it.

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That was painful.

Very painful.

I hated to do it.

It's harder for me to live Christian than to write Christian.

Damn!

Sunday, September 24, 2006

Caged!

Wow! A whole weekend with not a thing in the world scheduled for us to do! Ginny and I felt a free as birds.

Except... We have this free bird; I mean a bird which cost us nothing.

Ha!

Remember back on August 12th when my daughter rescued a peach-faced lovebird from bluejays attacking it in her backyard? She gave the battered bird to us. Free. No Strings Attached.



Well, I spent about \$60 that day on accouterments for the free bird.

I named the bird Fancy after Fancy Feast Cat Food. But Ginny noted the bird's propensity for hanging upside down from the roof of its cage like a bat in a cave, so she said the bird's name came from its being nothing but a fancy yellow-feathered bat.

A few weeks later, we paid another \$20 for books about raising birds.

We wanted to treat our free bird right.

Turns out that the cage I had bought was far too small. So today we spent our free day shopping for a larger cage. Spend another \$70 for cage, birdseed, mirrors, etc.

Some free bird!

It gets more and more expensive to keep this fancy yellow bat.

Like buying a Barbie doll for your kid, the doll itself costs little but when you buy the gowns, car, dream house, accessories, etc., you've spent a fortune!

(An Aside: In the dark of the night, barefoot in your own home, when you step on a Barbie spike-heel shoe on the floor, it hurts worse than a Lego block! Guess how I know that?)

Anyhow, we brought the larger cage home.

It dominates our living room. Takes up more space than my recliner!

Now came time to move Fancy to its new home.

Terrified that we were Colonel Sanders minions from KFC in disguise, Fancy squawked and fluttered and snapped and struggled to escape being transferred to the new environment. We forced the poor defenseless, helpless (except for biting with pliers-like beak) little creature into the larger cage ... and suddenly the bird thought it was in Heaven.

Now it has room to fly.

Now it has a birdbath.

Now it can fight not one but three mirrors!

In the new cage, Fancy chirped and explored and sang more than at any time since the bluejays ripped off its tail feathers.

Makes me wonder about those times when I resist the Lord Christ with all my might as He forces me into a new environment? Could there be any parallel?

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While Ginny attached shiny danglies to the new cage and fiddled with her bird, I fell asleep in my chair, pipe in hand, book open in my lap, coffee cup at hand, feet propped up, snoring away — Free as a bird.

But wait; there's more to this Free As A Bird thing.

When I roused from my nap, I woke thinking about how much money we'd spent on this free bird and I remembered that Scripture which says, "If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed".

But that's a different sort of free:

Earlier this year I published a book called *Strangers On The Earth*. One of the chapters is a brief profile of Madam Jeanne Marie Guyon, a wealthy French aristocrat who lived as a Christian in the court of King Louis XIV — reputed to be the most corrupt, lascivious, degraded royal court in French history.

She taught Bible studies, held prayer meetings and counseling sessions for the King's courtesans and court playmates.

Madame Guyon became noted as a leading figure in a Christian movement called Quiteism. Essentially, she recognized that God is all; nothing else counts. She felt so identified with His will and His love that no lesser thing deserved her attention. A person in love thinks about the Beloved all the time, no matter what else is going on.

King Louis XIV demanded that Madame Guyon give her 12-year-old daughter in marriage to the Marquis of Chanvalon, an old rake to whom the king owed money; the girl's estates would pay off the King's debt.

Madame Guyon would not consent to the marriage.

The King caged her in the Bastille — reputed to be the worst prison on earth.

Madam Guyon believed that no second causes exist, that everything which comes into our lives comes directly from the hand of a loving God.

She endured years of torture and solitary confinement — yet she was free, free as a bird.

Here is a poem she wrote while caged in the Bastille:

A little bird I am,
Shut from the fields of air;
And in my cage I sit and sing
To Him who place me there;
Well pleased a prisoner to be,
Because, my God, it pleases Thee.

My cage confines me round;
Abroad I cannot fly;
But though my wing is closely bound,
My heart's at liberty.
My prison walls can not control
The flight, the freedom of my soul.

Oh, it is good to soar
These bolts and bars above,
To Him whose purpose I adore,
Whose providence I love:
And in thy mighty will to find
The joy, the freedom of the mind.

Monday, September 25, 2006

All Bouncers Welcomed!

“As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.” — Proverbs 25:25.

Server problems have blocked me from receiving e-mail from my website for close to a month now.

I'm not ignoring you; I just haven't read your message yet.

But, my youngest son, Donald, returned from Europe last week.

He's been attending an international conference on computer stuff related to his job and he has returned honed and ready to do whatever it is he does. He told me about it, but I understand little beyond cut and paste.

He and Helen took us out to lunch yesterday.

They came back to our house where they resumed their roles as computer gurus to fix the server problem — found 105 unread messages in my inbox! — and did other stuff to my computer.

Don't know what I'd do without them.

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Donald also brought intriguing gifts from his sojourn in the Alps.

Here's a photo of a crystal hedgehog he brought Ginny:



His souvenir gift for me is a new pipe.

The mouthpiece is vulcanite; the stem, cherry wood; and the bowl, briar with silver appointments.

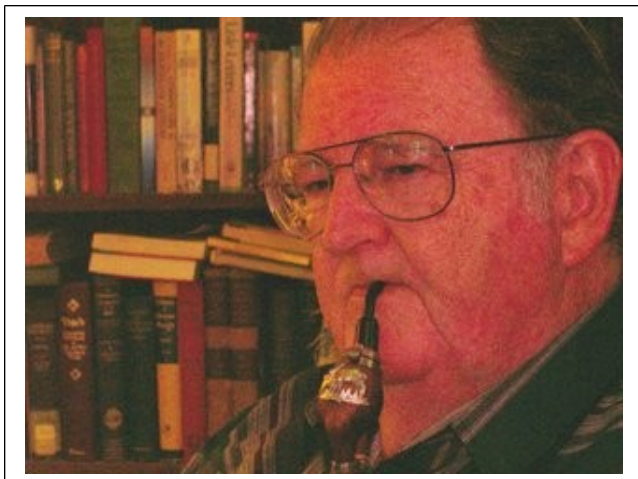
A majestic stag decorates the pipe and a silver lid keeps ashes from falling out and burning more holes in my shirt

Ever touch a hot stove?

Well, that beautiful silver lid gets just that hot.

Guess how I found that out?

Here's a photo of my new pipe:



Looks positively Teutonic, doesn't it?

Now, if I got a pointy red cap, I could qualify as a garden gnome.

While Donald was overseas, my e-friend Seth suggested that I sign up with Google Analytics, a counter program, for my website. I didn't know how to do that but Donald and Helen did it for me yesterday.

I've been using Webalizer as a visit counter for my site.

I'm not sure how to read the information on either Webalizer or Analytics — but I'm afraid I disappoint a lot of Google searchers out there in the world. Apparently I use a lot of words which potential readers associate with porno sites so they click on my listing, see what I offer, then bounce away as quick as they can.

And the visitor counter lists these folks as "Bouncers".

For instance, if you need a spare tire for your car and enter "Spare Tire" in a search engine, you might just end up with a photo of me overlapping my swim trunks!

You'd bounce away from that in a hurry.

I'll spare you the photo.

But it seems that my use of the term "dirty old man" in describing myself confuses some readers.

It shouldn't, because that's exactly what I am.

You see, I believe in sin. That is not a word I use very often but I live in it all the time. I know deep in my own

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black heart that there is no sin so despicable or sleazy that I am not capable of doing.

Yes, even that one.

The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who can know it.

I believe that there has never been any awful thing committed by anybody anywhere that I am not capable of committing myself. I have either done it. Or wanted to do it. Or may do it yet.

I find within myself two reasons for being the degenerate that I am: natural inclination and individual choice.

Natural inclination because I am a descendent of Adam. He is the root of the human family tree; I am a leaf way out here on a branch far away from him. But if you poison the root, then you've poisoned the leaf also, it withers and dies. Sin poisoned the root. And although I had no say in the matter, I'm infected too.

Deal with it.

Our first father was sort of the President of the human race. And just like I've never met the U.S. President and didn't even vote for the current one, and although he never consults me about any policy — yet when he says our nation is at war with some other country, then I'm at war with that country too.

That's what the President decided.

I enjoy the benefits, or suffer the consequences, for things the President did.

Then there are the things I choose to do all by myself. Can't blame Adam or even George Bush. I choose certain things all by myself.

I will think of some thing I want to do.

I'll know good and well that this thing is wrong.

I'll chose to do it anyhow.

The only difference between me and the traditional picture of a dirty old man is that I have a different taste in temptations from his. And just as different people have different tastes in music, different ones of us have

different tastes in temptations. Therefore I can't condemn anybody else for what he does. It's just a shade different from the things I do. We all have our favorites. We are all under sin.

And that's not Adam; that's me.

And the truly awful thing about this can of worms is that we live in it all the time and become acclimatized so much to sin at work in the world and in ourselves that we think it normal. Background noise. Just the way things are.

Who needs a Savior?

Jesus died for nothing.

Didn't He?

His coming to earth, being crucified, rising from death — all that was just a bit of unnecessary heroics on God's part, wasn't it?

Why should I be grateful?

I'm doing fine.

Just as I am.

I gotta be me.

That's why readers will reach my site when they search for "dirty old man".

I'm the Poster Boy

But I've got this really neat full-bent pipe with a silver stag on the bowl. That puts me a cut above your run-of-the-mill dirty old man.

Doesn't it?

Lord, please be merciful to John Cowart, a sinner.

Tuesday, September 26, 2006

An Exasperating Monday

Exasperated in three areas, so I don't know which one to start writing about. Perhaps a chronological approach may be best:

I've been formatting a book manuscript for a friend who added stuff to the ms and making structural changes. Each time I thought the work near finished, here she comes with another eight or ten pages of text, or a new additional batch of photos.

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Monday I thought my friend was coming over to make the final corrections herself. But some family crisis intervened and she told me to present the final draft myself.

This necessitated an abrupt restructuring of my day.

I thought the ms ready to go to the printers for a proof copy but I could not change it into a pdf. On re-examining the ms I discovered that the last 15 or 20 photographs had been processed by a commercial firm before I scanned them into my computer.

I had blithely inserted them into the book text.

Turns out each photo proved large enough to paper a highway bill board! I had to cut each one out of the text, resize it, then re-insert the smaller version which changed the pagination, the headers, the footers, the section breaks...

Like the lines on an old clipper ship, when you change the tension on one rope, you must change the tension on them all.

My computer ran out of virtually memory.

It crashed utterly. Not even the on/off button worked.

I had to unplug it from the wall while the screen was lit up — something I understand you're never supposed to do because you could lose everything on the hard drive. By that time, I didn't care if I did — but I didn't.... And on and on and on... then I found the printer has changed the size perimeters for the book covers and they will have to be re-done from scratch...Again...

On some future Monday.

They say tribulation is good for your soul.

They lie like dogs!

When Ginny came home, her day had been a mirror image of mine. Only hers involved more people.

(I wrote several long paragraphs about this but I'm deleting them. I doubt if anyone at her office reads my site, but why stir the crock?) If it had been me, I'd have shredded the work I'd already done on it and let the guy in Clearwater figure out the mess.

Ginny, of course, tried to help and do what is best for all concerned.

Ginny is much more of a Christian than I am.

Finally, right at supper time the phone rang. Our daughter, Jennifer, and Pat are splitting up. Jennifer is moving out...

Tonight.

— with the five dogs.

She did not even know where she'd be sleeping tonight.

Apparently a gun is involved in the split.

This has been on the horizon since before last Christmas but it's hard to guess which way the wind is blowing in these things.

A lot of pain, anger and anguish.

Sometimes these things blow over — or blow up.

As the situation comes to a head, the lives of a lot of people look to be disrupted.

Ginny and I are not sure what our role should be — if any.

Five, yapping, undisciplined, noisy, neurotic little dogs.

OK, John Cowart, your blog heading says you're a Christian "looking for spiritual realities in day to day living".

Let's see how the Lord and you handle this crock.

Or not.

Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, what did you think of the play?

Wednesday, September 27, 2006

At All Times... In All Places.

My daughter Jennifer came over fresh from her breakup with Pat.

She fluctuates between remorse and relief as is normal in such situations. I took her out to breakfast at Dave's where she broke down crying when the waiter ask her whether she wanted toast or a biscuit.

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Such major decisions come hard for her at the moment.

At least she kept only one of the five dogs.

The fact that Jennifer faces spinal surgery next week complicates the situation. She may need hands-on care for a week or two after the operation and since she is now homeless and couching — all this presents a logistical problem for the rest of the family as to how we will take care of her.

I comforted her by telling her that I know of a doorway in a downtown warehouse where she can huddle out of the rain with her dog at nights. And from my work with the mission, I know all the best dumpsters where she can scrounge for food.

She got the giggles.

Nothing like a supportive Dad in times of trouble.

Ginny and I prayed things over and figure that if we throw away some furniture, which we intended to get rid of eventually anyhow, we can put her up in the back room for a short time. I am the logical person to do any needed nursing care because of my working at home.

Jennifer said she does not want to put anybody out. I explained that somebody will have to be put out; it's just a matter of who and when and how much — this is called life. We are a family. We make do.

It looks to be a pain in the ass, but it's manageable.

Yesterday also our middle daughter (I have 3 sons and 3 daughters) Eve announced plans to move in with her boyfriend. She said, "We've really been talking about it pretty thoroughly and making sure any issues are taken care of beforehand".

My goodness. Any issues to be taken care of beforehand? What could they be?

Like maybe marriage?

Oh, Dad is just an old fuddy-duddy.

However, she is an adult and responsible for her own decisions.

Eve says that she and Mark have never had a fight. To me that bodes ill for a stable relationship. They have not known each other long enough to have a fight.

Although Ginny and I have been happily married for 38 years, we are not marriage counselors. Never even talked to one. But at times young couples come to ask our advice about love and marriage and getting along.

Our standard advice: Buy A Bicycle In A Box!

That's right. Buy an unassembled bicycle still in the box. You are going to give this bike to some poor kid at the mission.

But first, the two of you put together the bicycle. If you still want to get married after assembling a bicycle, I'd say you have an excellent chance for a long, joyous life together.

The chief end of all human endeavor is to be happy at home.

If you don't have that, you don't have diddle squat.

And one element in being happy at home is the security of commitment, an Us Against The World attitude based on the intention of a permanent commitment.

Of course a marriage ceremony hardly guarantees that. Look at the failed marriages right and left (I should know, I failed miserably at my first marriage), but I've seen even more split-ups and heartbreak in live-in situations. They sometimes work, but why chance it? Stack the deck in your favor. Give yourself every chance at happiness.

On another happy note: an old friend I have not seen for months and months came by yesterday to pick up his copy of the Civil War diary.

When he arrived, he first removed his hat and placed it on the coffee table. Then he shed his suit coat and draped it over the back of a chair. He took out a pack of unfiltered Camels and his lighter and placed them on the table. Then he unhooked his cell phone from his belt. Then he reached down and drew his pistol (revolver?) from his ankle holster (he's in law enforcement), opened the chamber, and placed that on the table too.

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I began to perceive we were in for some serious conversation.

We enjoyed a delightful talk about sex and politics and prayer.

The gist of our talk is that since God is omnipresent, He is at all times in all places, and since much prayer involves talking with Him about specifics, then we can enjoy prayer at all times in all places too.

He and I discovered that we both practice conversational prayer.

This is not get-down-on-your-knees, bow your head, fold your hands and close your eyes kind of prayer, but it means keeping up a running mental conversation with Lord all day long, whatever else you might be doing.

Typically mine goes something like this:

Good morning, Lord... Please help me find my glasses... What should I do about this?... Please keep Ginny safe as she drives to work this morning... Thanks for that idea... Lord, You do remember that the Lotto drawing is tonight, don't You?... Please help Ginny with whatever she'd doing at work...Old Mr. Jackson, he's on oxygen, asked me for help mowing his yard. I just can't do it. Please send him somebody who can... This damn computer crashed again! What should I do now?... Thank You so much for Ginny. I'm glad to be her husband... There goes the phone ringing, please give me wisdom to say the right thing to whoever it is... How should I word this?...This paragraph just is not working, how should I fix it?...I feel bitter and resentful about so and so, please forgive me. Again... Wow! That girl is really stacked! But her face looks troubled; Lord Jesus, please help her with the problem that's bothering her most...What would You have me do about this can of worms? Is it really any of my business? Do I need to do anything about it?...Ginny should be getting off about now, please keep her safe in rush hour traffic ... I think they should go for a field goal, don't You... All praise and glory and honor be unto Thee O Lord... On some level, I love You... This is really good corned-beef hash, Thank You... The Viagra is not working Lord!... Good night Lord Jesus. Thank you for a good fuck, a good day, a good life!

Well, you get the idea.

At all times and in all places, no matter what is going on within us, around us, in spite of us — we are loved.

He is there — All times. All places. All circumstances.

Lord, please make me more aware of Your happy presence.

Here.

Now.

Today.

Friday, September 29, 2006

Ichabod

Most Americans know the word *Ichabod* only as the funny name of the fop schoolteacher in the tale of the headless horseman in Washington Irving's *Legend Of Sleepy Hollow* .

Generations of readers have been amused by the pratfalls of song leader Ichabod Crane as he covets the lovely Katrina Van Tassel, and her father's fortune, only to be outdone by the Herculean Brom Bones and his pumpkin.

Actually, in the Bible there was a real man by the name Ichabod. He was the grandson of the priest Eli who fell off a stool and broke his neck the very day the boy was born. That was the day the wicked Philistines captured the Ark Of The Covenant. The child's sad name means "The Glory Of The Lord Has Departed".

Ichabod.

The Glory of the Lord has departed.

I know that feeling.

For the past week I've been too down and depressed to do much of anything. When I try to pinpoint why I feel this way, I come up with all sorts of answers — and no answer at all.

Can I blame this low-down feeling on abysmal book sales? On the problems I had formatting that manuscript last week? On troubles I foresee for my children? Health problems? Laziness? General malaise? Change of seasons? Needed home repairs I can't afford? That mouse I saw yesterday? The office's exploitation of Ginny? A

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chemical imbalance in my brain? Sin? Lack of sleep? Lack of prayer? Not enough chocolate in my diet? Demonic attack? Realizing how I failed in life?....Lots of answers — no answer at all.

I don't know what triggers it.

I just know the result:

I mope around too listless to dress for the day, to write, to work in the yard, to read, to pray. I feel a mess. I just mull things over continually as ideas sluggishly chase their own tails around and around in my mind.

I'm too apathetic to either pray or surf porno sites: My prayers seem to go no where and the ladies seem not worth the trouble of clicking.

That is down.

One of the things I vowed last year when I decided to start posting my private journals as a public blog, was that I would be honest. I obligated myself to writing about the Christian life not as it *ought* to be, but as it really *is* for this one particular Christian.

So I write about my life, my spiritual experience, as it is, not as it's supposed to be.

I do this because I 100% believe that Jesus Christ is Lord, the Son of God, and that He infuses His Spirit into people who trust Him. Therefore I see no need to pretty up the Christian life for public consumption.

But doesn't it dishonor Christ to show the downside of my Christianity?

Well, on some level I do want to honor the Lord, but, honest to God, how could I do that if I lied about Him and His dealings with me?

If Christianity is true no need to sugarcoat it; if it is false, forget it.

I believe that Christ is real.

I want to be real too.

And my reality right this minute is that being a Christian doesn't seem to help me one bit.

Bummer.

Will this feeling pass?

Sure. Based on my past experiences I suspect it will. But whether my depression passes or not, the truth of God hardly depends on my moods, whims, or fluctuations.

The joy of the Lord does return. He does restore the joy of salvation

But, for me, in the meantime ... Ichabod.

Saturday, September 30, 2006

A Man I Greatly Admire

Friday I drove Ginny to her eye doctor; everything checks out fine.

Pat called very distressed over the breakup with Jennifer and telling quite a different story. I don't know who to believe and really there is no reason for me to believe anything about this can of worms.

They are adults.

Their affairs are no concern of mine.

Nevertheless, all their pain pains me.

Bubba came by and I encouraged him to seek legal aid for the elderly. I tried to explain the advantages of free legal aid as suggested by M.H.'s comment last week, but Bubba wants no part of it.

Ginny and I visited the library then went to Dave's Diner for lunch to nibble fries and read books for an hour. The waiters gathered around our table asking questions and expressing concern about the J/P breakup.

Mister Saint stopped by our table also.

He'd led a blind man into the restaurant for lunch.

Even though I think Mister Saint is a nut, he's also a man I greatly admire.

He dresses in collar and clerical garb even though he is not ordained. He sports an enormous cross on a heavy chain around his neck. He also sports a striking Mohawk haircut.

For some reason he really likes me and Ginny. I imagine that every person he meets feels that he really likes them. He tells me that when he was younger, before

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he became religious, he fried his brain on drugs and I think I detect some lingering mental problems.

But even with his mental problems, this man displays more hands-on Christianity than I ever have.

During the 15 or 20 years I've known him he has worked as a dispatcher for a taxi company to earn a living and devoted every spare minute ministering to street people. Kids with green or purple spiked hair, winos, derelicts, pimps, prostitutes, druggies and clean-cut youth — all stop to talk with Mister Saint, tell him their problems, cry on his shoulder.

Sometimes he teaches Bible lessons or holds sing-fests in a converted theater. He drives sick kids to the hospital. He bums food for the hungry. He talks folks out of suicide. He stays available at all hours.

Since Ginny and I last saw him a couple of months ago, he's lost 60 pounds. To breathe, he lugs around an oxygen tank on wheels. He tells me he has to go in for dialysis three times a week now ... and still he ministers to the poor misfits and downtrodden.

I think he is a nut because of his strange garb and haircut and a couple of suspect mannerisms. He has applied to become a lay brother in some Roman Catholic order but they turned him down so he began his street ministry on his own.

He feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, comforts the distressed, and is there for anybody.

Long ago I was active in rescue mission work, but recently the only Christian thing I do is write about it now and then. I feel I've abandoned my true calling but the mission work just overwhelmed me. It really gets filthy.

Mister Saint makes a difference every day.

He's a nutcase but a far, far better man than I am.

OCTOBER

Sunday, October 01, 2006

Wear Steel-toed Boots

For years I've tried unsuccessfully to break our family from the habit of exchanging Christmas gifts, but I'm overruled every time. The habit of gift exchange remains too

firmly engrained to be removed. So Saturday Ginny and I browsed a church rummage sale, thus beginning our Christmas shopping for cheap treasures.

When we returned home, I found a friend had e-mailed me a set of photos of a church constructed out of Lego blocks:



Ms Amy Hughes, a computer programmer, with the help of her cat, Precious, constructed this seven-foot long model of a fictional church. Her website is at <http://www.amyhughes.org/lego/church/>.

Seeing this unusual act of devotion reminded me of a website showing Bible stories illustrated with Lego blocks: Brick Testament at <http://www.thebricktestament.com/>

The range of all this creativity astounds me.

It inspires me to do something creative myself — like maybe eat a donut.

The only thing I know about Lego blocks is how they feel when you step on one barefoot on a hardwood floor in the dark of the night when checking on a child.

Therefore, heed this warning if you're tempted to construct a cathedral or something out of Lego Blocks — wear a hard hat and steel-toed boots.

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Monday, October 02, 2006

Losing My Grip

Last month Patricia, our youngest daughter, turned 27, but logistics prevented us all getting together to celebrate till yesterday when ten of us gathered at a Chinese restaurant to feast and rejoice with her.

The family showered her with useless gifts — and even more useless advice about how to live her life.

I feel enormously proud of her. When she was a teen, I despaired of her surviving to adulthood. We grated on one another and tensions ran high. I'm so happy she proved me wrong in my dire predictions for her future. She now displays wisdom and insights and maturity I never guessed at. Sometimes water does rise higher than its source.

After the birthday feast, we re-assembled at our house for a family conference over several issues that concern all of us.

I pontificated as usual but I made sure that each and every person in turn had a chance to put in their two cents worth. The collective wisdom of the whole family far outshines my old-foggy opinions.

These wonderful people amaze me.

I'm honored and humbled to be a part of this group.

At times our conference turned uproariously funny as we teased and taunted and offered outrageous suggestions; at other times our meeting turned solemn and silent as we prayed and gave thanks for one another, committing ourselves on some level into God's hands.

Speaking of hands...



Say you park in the grocery store's crowded parking lot and walk with your four-year-old toward the store holding hands.

A parking lot is a dangerous place for four-year-olds.

The child holds your hand — sometimes. Maybe. But sometimes the kid fidgets and even tries to pull away and run off into traffic.

The adult guardian also holds the child's hand all the time and does not let go.

I read recently that this is a picture of our walk with Christ.

We are the children of God, but we are not grownup, adult, responsible members of His family; — we are the four-year-olds of God.

Sometimes we hold His hand. Makes us feel big, in charge, in control of things. But often we pull away. We lose our grip.

God never loses His grip.

I find that a comfort.

After the family left, Ginny and I lounged in front of the tv watching football.

The Jacksonville Jaguars lost their football game to the Washington Redskins led by Mark Brunell, a former Jaguar quarterback — one they treated shabbily and fired before trading him to the Redskins.

Do I detect a bit of justice here?

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Tuesday, October 03, 2006

A Divider Of Stuff

Jesus is smarter than I am.

Once when He was teaching, a man in the crowd yelled, “Master, speak to my brother that he divide the inheritance with me”

Jesus replied, “Who made me a judge or a divider over you”.

In other words, Jesus knew better than to get caught in the middle as people bickered over property. He refused to get involved. “For a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesses,” He said.

This Scripture came to mind when my daughter called Monday afternoon asking me to go with her to load her possessions. Jennifer and Pat split up last week.

Bitterness, rancor, and pain seem to exist on both sides as you might expect when a couple breaks up after 12 years together.

On the good side: Jennifer’s spinal operation, scheduled for tomorrow, has been postponed for a couple of months.

I’m relieved.

On the other side: Jennifer had talked with two counselors in the morning; they advised her to remove her stuff from the home as soon as possible. Since Jennifer says a gun is involved and she felt threatened, they advised her to ask a policeman to go with her when she picked up her stuff.

She rented a U-Haul trailer, hooked it to her car, then called me to go with her to help load the stuff “To divide the inheritance”.

I had 20 minutes to prepare.

Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

Here goes good ‘ol dad, right into the middle of the division.

As we drove over there, I envisioned myself being gunned down in a hail of bullets, caught in a crossfire

between cops, disgruntled lovers, and irate neighbors — What does any of this have to do with me?, I wondered.

Two police cars, with Officers Davis and Rothweiler, escorted us to the house. When Pat came to the door, the officers explained why we were there. Pat's son, his wife, and their baby came over to be there during this ordeal. Pat had already packed most of Jennifer's stuff in the garage, so I loaded boxes with plenty of supervision.

Department policy prohibits the police from moving stuff during these domestic disputes; they need to keep their hands free. Jennifer's cripple arm keep her from lifting.. No one else had a vested interest in the process.

I felt as though I were walking on eggs as I loaded boxes alone while seven people watched my every move.

But I got it done.

I hate to see people in pain. And there was so much pain and anguish and so many emotional entanglements in this can of worms.

When I finished loading the trailer, Pat hugged me and sobbed on my shoulder.

When we got away, Jennifer hugged me and sobbed on my shoulder.

No wonder Jesus did not want to be a divider of stuff.

He's smarter than I am.

I had urged Jennifer to just forget her stuff, to treat the breakup as though she'd suffered a house fire and lost everything. To just walk away and leave it all. You can always buy more stuff.

But she worried over Christmas ornaments, medicines, childhood toys, stuff, possessions. And although she said she feared a major confrontation, meltdown, and maybe even getting shot, she still wanted this stuff.

Lord, the things we do for stuff!

The two police officers told me they go through these domestic dispute calls all the time, so they were the coolest customers on the site... These guys deserve a raise.

A Big Raise.

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Even though it all went smoothly as such things go, I'd never want to go through such a thing again. Ever!

Maybe I should write an Advice To The Lovelorn column. Here's my advice — You two work this out and leave me the hell out of it!

When there's an opening on the Jerry Springer Show, I am available.

No sooner had I arrived back home than Dan Scanlon, a well known reporter for the *Florida Times-Union* newspaper, called to interview me cold turkey about my memory of Dr. Robert Whitty, a local pastor who celebrates his 100th birthday next Saturday.

So I walked straight from loading that trailer in tension, fear and trepidation to trying to think of something coherent to say to the reporter.

I have no idea what I said — but I talked a long time.

Backtracking to early this morning: I had intended to spend the day working on my history of the Jacksonville Fire Department, but my friend Barbara drove over from the old folks home and we went to breakfast at Dave's Diner then we sat in my garden and talked for almost two hours about doing little things for the love of Jesus.

I didn't know it at the time, but that peaceful conversation prepared me for a rigorous day of cops and trailers and boxes and distraught lovers and people weeping on my shoulder and a newspaper interview. Plus some important phone calls missed.

And the mailman delivered a notice that our homeowners goes up another \$200 next month.

And besides all that stuff, this afternoon I was supposed to set up an appointment with my urologist for an additional, in-depth, prostate exam.

Sure hated to miss that.. I was so looking forward to it.

Anyhow, in the midst of all this upheaval, distress and turmoil around me, what is my deepest, most heart-felt prayer?

Dear Lord, please let there be something good on tv tonight!

Wednesday, October 04, 2006

Busted!

On November 26, 1925, Jacksonville's city-owned radio station broadcast its first program.

In those days, few homes had radio receivers.

My father told me that the city installed speakers on poles in city parks; in the evenings, families would walk to a park, spread blankets on the grass, and listen to the radio.

That radio station carried the call letters WJAX.

WJAX —That's important to something that comes later.

Early Monday I enjoyed an hour-long phone conversation with Pat, who assures me that the gun I mentioned in several earlier posts only came out of hiding because of brief, fleeting suicidal thoughts, and that Jennifer has never been threatened or abused in any way.

Pat told me that Jennifer's interest in a married man triggered the break up. I don't know who to believe about what, and it really doesn't matter to me. The only question for each of them is "What to do now?"

The busting up of a relationship is like the sinking of an ocean liner. The torpedo hits. The ship sinks to the bottom. It's over and done with...

Yet, for weeks or months or even years afterward, things float to the surface. Body parts pop up out of the wreckage. Deck chairs, bottles, empty life vests, bits and pieces of wood and insulation — debris keeps surfacing.

If you survive the wreck, your concern should not be about floundering in the debris field but in making it to a lifeboat. To survive.

Later in the morning Jennifer and Eve took me to breakfast. Eve took a "Mental Health Day" off work to comfort her distraught sister. I told Eve that its insane to spend a Mental Health Day hanging around her crazy sister!

Jennifer does not know what she's doing or where she's going at the moment. One second she talks about moving down state, the next she plans to hunt an apartment here.

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My main concern is that she not drag the rest of the family into the debris field any deeper than we already are.

The UPS man delivered the proof pages for the autobiography of Wes' great-grandfather. The manuscript is not too shabby. Wes came over immediately to pick up a copy to proofread again. I hope to have it published on-line next week.

I made an appointment with the urologist for that prostate exam...

Remember those radio station call letters? WJAX.

I live in Jacksonville, Florida.

For some reason — I suspect it goes back to those 1925 radio call letters — most folks who live here abbreviate the name of our town to Jax.

That's reasonable.

JAX for Jacksonville.

Well, my physician, the one who wants me to get a more thorough prostate exam, is named, Dr. Jackson So&So, a fine doctor.

Well, the papers authorizing this other doctor, whose name is Mohamed, to probe my nether regions with a 4-foot-long, barbed steel spike came to me yesterday.

The papers were signed — Dr. Jaxson So&So !!!

This means that some illiterate clerk signed the physician's name to the orders — or that my doctor does not know how to spell his own name.

Neither explanation inspires confidence.

This brings me to another subject altogether:

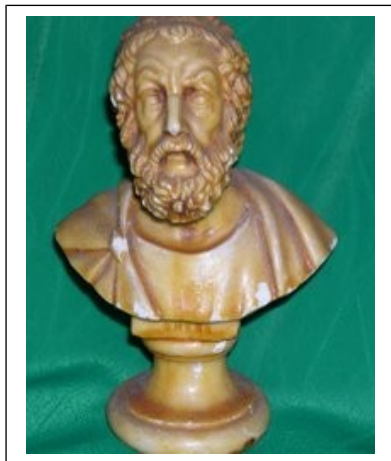
As a writer I draw inspiration from other writers.

The works of my favorite writers fill my bookshelves.

Their faces flash on my computer as a screensaver.

And, whenever I find a bust of a great writer at a garage sale, I buy it.

Last night I snapped a photo of my bust of Shakespeare, and another one of my bust of the blind poet Homer, author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*:



So when Ginny and I visited a church yard sale last Saturday, you can see why I got excited. Across a church hall lined with row after row of tables laden with junk, I spotted the bust of a man. I immediately recognized him as Jack London, author of *Call of the Wild*.

I pushed and shoved and elbowed my way through gaggles of blue-haired old ladies — hardly knocked any of them to the floor — I grabbed the bust and clutched it to my chest.

Mine! All Mine! My very own bust of Jack London!

I paid 50 cents for this literary treasure and brought it home to place it in honor with the busts of Shakespeare and Homer...

Then I got to looking at the thing...

Did Jack London sport a mustache?

Did he smoke a pipe?

I'm sure that I once saw a photo of him wearing a cap and sea-coat like that ... didn't I?

A Google image search broke my heart. Jack London looked nothing like the bust I bought.

Who is this guy?

Why, he's nothing but a green-ware, generic old sea-dog.

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There is no engraving on the base of the bust to identify this guy.

Well, I have an engraving tool. I plan to inscribe the statue myself.

I think I'll write the inscription to read:



JAX LONDON

Thursday, October 05, 2006

A Deer In The Headlights

When my kids were little we were so poor that we lived in HUD housing, a government charity place which was regularly inspected for safety, order and cleanliness by a HUD official.

To prepare for an inspection, the girls erupted in a frenzy of cleaning and straightening their rooms.

Not little Donald — he'd simply unscrew all the light bulbs in his .

Earlier this week I enjoyed lunch with a preacher friend who is active in Alcoholics Anonymous. The preacher told me about a young man addicted to drink

and drugs, who came to him terrified. This young man had done something terrible and when he realized what he'd done, felt horrified at his own actions.

"He looked like a deer caught in the headlights," the preacher said.

Yesterday as I washed dishes before Ginny got home, I remembered how Donald would "clean" his room, and the phrase the preacher used, and a Bible verse about light.

The Bible says that Jesus is, "The true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world".

I've never thought about that verse much. On the surface it seemed to me as though it meant that every baby born brings a little divine spark, a light that can be fanned to flame — or flicker out.

If the True Light lightens every man that comes into the world, then we can all be like one of those Thomas Kincade paintings, snug little homes glowing with light and warmth.

Or maybe, this Scripture can be read to indicate that every person everywhere at some point or another in their lives, catch a glimpse of Divine Light and have a chance to accept Christ and be saved. I even thought the fact that the True Light lightens everybody might hint at some sort of universal salvation for all.

Giving it more thought, I believe I was wrong about this.

The Bible also says that "Men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil".

I often pray for light in dark situations (And yes, even with all the stuff I've written about my family recently, I'm still struggling with depression myself. But with all the crap that's been going on, I just haven't had time to indulge it much)...

But in praying for light, just what is it that we pray for?

To be glow-in-the-dark Christians?

My friend's choice of phrase to describe the man's terror "Like a deer in the headlights" reminds me of another aspect of Light.

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Light reveals things we'd rather not have revealed.

Say you're parked in Lover's Lane with the car windows steamed up and the cop taps on the roof and shines that six-cell flashlight into the window blinding you. (Voice of experience speaking here, Kiddies)

We'd all like to be in the spotlight when we're onstage performing... but say you're hanging 30 feet above the ground on knotted bed-sheets dangling over the prison wall when the spotlight hits you.

Say, you're elbow deep in the safe clutching the diamonds when the homeowner turns on the light and levels his shotgun...

Jesus is the True Light that spotlights every person in the world.

In the brightness of His presence everyone of us is caught in the act. I am revealed for just what I am — a deer caught in the headlights.

What hope is there for me now?

I can't even see God because His light shines in my face. I stand condemned, blinded by light.

How can anyone escape the intense shining glory of God?

Isn't it all hopeless?

There's a certain masquerading angel of light who'd like us to think that.

"If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost," St. Paul said, "In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine upon them".

Yes, light exposes things we'd rather keep hidden, but Light also reveals a way out of the darkness, the glorious gospel that Christ came to destroy the works of the devil, that He died for us, and that He rose from death because He is the Prince of Life.

That's the good news!

Or, as Paul words it, "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts,

to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”.

Yes, we are hopelessly lost walking along this world's Interstate highway to hell, but that light bearing down on us is not an 18-wheeler — it is the light of the Rescuer searching to bring us safely home.

“To give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”.

But what about the darkness?

Walking away from the Light, the darkness is cast by your own shadow.

So, don't be afraid.

It's ok.

The more we are exposed, the more He is revealed....

OH! Goody. It's 4:57 a.m. and the mousetrap just snapped in the kitchen. I think I got one!

I'll stop writing now.

Friday, October 06, 2006

I Am Master In This House!

As you know, yesterday's post was interrupted at 5 a.m. when the mousetrap snapped.

The filthy beast broke its neck and died.

Here is a photo of the vile creature and the trap that killed it just before Ginny disposed of the body and re-set the trap.

Ginny disposed of the dead rat?

Darn right!

Let's get this straight. I am brave, strong, handsome, and pure-hearted.

I am the head of this house.

If the car stalls, I jumpstart it.

If the drain stops up, I unplug it.

If firewood needs chopping, I chop it.

If Ginny needs loving, I love her.



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If the lawn needs edging and mowing, I cut it.
If the all the windows need washing, I wash them.
When the world intrudes, I chase it away.
I wear the pants around here.
I am patriarch of the family.
I am Lord of this Manor.
I am Head of the House.
I am King of the Castle.
I am Master of the House — but I don't do rats!
They terrify me!

On a serious note: Word came last night that Sandy, the 17-year-old girl I wrote about in my September 15 blog, was likely to be dead this morning. It was just too much for her young body to handle. Thank you for your prayers and concern.

Saturday, October 07, 2006

They Are Sorry Rascals! ... But I Have An Excuse!

Today's post rants philosophically against my garbage men.

Yes, Friday they collected our yard trash.

City law mandates that a yellow light flash on top of the truck to warn passersby that jerks roam our streets scattering more trash than they collect.

All the garbage men have to do is dump the cans into the maw and put the can back where they picked it up from. Then the job gets complicated; they have to punch a button and the hydraulic jaws compress the trash.

But, can these guys do all that?

No.

Some people are just too sorry to be garbage men.

Yesterday, they managed to dump the cans and press the button, but putting the cans back at the curb proved beyond their level of skill.

Instead, they threw the cans into the middle of our driveway blocking in our car so I had to traipse out barefoot to move the cans out of the drive before Ginny could leave for work.

I grumbled mightily, accusing them about their slovenly, sorry, low-down, conniving, degraded, uncouth, degenerate, highly over-paid, work habits.

That's when the Holy Spirit of God chose to remind me of a Bible verse. He does that you know.

He picks times I'm peeved to remind me of times when I have not been the peevee but the peever — of times when I did the same thing I'm griping about to someone else. And He usually does this via some half-remembered Scripture passage.

He picked a dozy for me this morning:

"Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things!"

So as I bitched about the garbage men, I was reminded of times when my own work has been slipshod and slovenly, when I cut corners, when I made life a little bit harder for somebody else than it needed to be.

Not a pretty picture.

But wait! I have an excuse!

In fact I have a whole bundle of excuses:

That job didn't pay me what I was worth! That boss was unreasonable. The other guys on the job did it the same way. I had a headache. They were rushing me...

Now, here is an interesting fact:

When we accuse somebody of something, we acknowledge the existence of a natural moral law. And while local custom and culture varies as to detail, natural law is universal.

For instance everywhere on earth deeds of bravery are praised while deeds of cowardice are condemned. A loyal person is highly regarded while a betrayer of friends or family is regarded as contemptible. Nobody no where loves a hypocrite.

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You don't have to read a Bible to acknowledge the existence of such standards, everyone everywhere has a highly developed sense of "ought".

"They ought not to invade," we say.

"She ought to control her kids," we say.

"He ought not to break in line ahead of me," we say.

"They ought not to put the garbage cans in the middle of the drive," we say.

We accuse them because they have not met some standard, transgressed some law, broken some rule — which makes them Bad People.

On the flip side, every time we offer an excuse, we are also acknowledging the existence of some recognized natural law written within our hearts. We acknowledge it exists, but we offer good reasons why it applies to other people, but not to ourselves.

"My wife doesn't understand me," we say.

"She deserved it," we say.

"They'll never miss it," we say.

"The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat" we say.

With every excuse, we acknowledge that a law exists and that we have broken it, but we don't want to be held accountable.

We want wiggle room.

Even godless nations do this:

"That land belongs to us because our people used to live there before these new comers settled," they say.

"The treaty is invalid because the previous regime signed it," they say.

"Yes, we said we wouldn't but now we need atomic bombs to defend ourselves," they say.

"Dumb A-rabs were cooking their supper over fires of dried camel dung before we showed 'em what oil was for," they say.

So we accuse others.

We excuse and justify ourselves.

And God sees through all our smoke and mirrors.

St. Paul said of the Gentiles, “(They) shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another; in the day when God shall judge the secretes of men by Jesus Christ...”

Jesus Himself worded that same thing even stronger, “Judge not that ye be not judged. For with the same judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged; and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again”.

Then He went on to talk about the speck in my brother’s eye and the splinter in mine.

By His standards, I am too sorry to be a garbage man.

You suppose that sort of thing is why we need a Savior?

So, with these thoughts in mind yesterday morning, I quit complaining about the garbage men and walked out to the end of the drive, picked up the empty cans, and put them back over the fence...

But, that didn’t stop me from blogging about it today — Did it?

But, wait a second.

Here’s a thought:

Going back to that measure for measure thing...

Do you suppose that somewhere out there in the blogosphere, my garbage man is posting a rant on his blog about this fussy, prissy customer on his route who wants things done just so?

If you’re out there, Buddy, may God have mercy on us both.

Sunday, October 08, 2006

The Third Time In 100 Years

Yesterday I got so worked up ranting about my garbage cans that I forgot to get a newspaper. So I missed seeing the article that quoted me!

How dumb is that?

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Here the reporter had interviewed me last Monday for an hour but I missed seeing what he did with my eloquent words in print because I was so worked up over trash.

Fact is, the reporter trashed most of my words and only used a single snippet from our hour's conversation.

The occasion for the article is that one of my old college professors turned 100 years old on Friday.

Dr. Robert Gee Whitty served as a prominent Baptist minister here in Jacksonville for over 70 years.

He also was founder and president of Luther Rice Seminary.

It was funny Scanlan chose to interview me because I was one of the few non-Baptists ever to study at the school. The reporter tracked me down from a reference to Dr. Whitty in one of my Jacksonville history books.

Here's the passage concerning Jacksonville's Bay Street back in the 1950s when I was a kid sneaking into the movies:

On Friday nights we'd have to stand in line to get into the movies at the Palace theatre and across the street -- on the steps of City Hall -- Dr. Robert Whitty, pastor of Central Baptist Church, would preach to us sinners going into the movie

"Turn Ye. Turn ye; for why will ye die," he would plead.

And the line into the Palace would inch along.

"Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts and let him turn unto the Lord," the preacher said.

And we boys saddled close behind some tall grownup.

"Come to Jesus, tonight," he called.

But for us boys, Bob Steele, Nyoka the Jungle Girl, and Bulletman called harder.

In the '70s when I enrolled at Luther Rice Seminary where Dr. Whitty was president, I reminded him of his street preaching days.

"What took you so long to come forward," he asked.

Anyhow, sinners that we were, my buddy and I never thought of going onto Bay Street until my Mother warned us not to.

Here's a photo of Dr. Whitty taken two years ago:



From Dan Scanlan's article I learned that even at his age of 100, Dr. Whitty maintains a website; his address is www.rgwitty.com/.

To me, the two most interesting of many features on Dr. Whitty's site are his published diary and his flash presentations in the Meet Jesus section.

His "Roman Road", is typical of his life-long message.

He bought his first computer at aged 80 and taught himself how to use it to establish his website!

I'm impressed.

I seriously doubt that Dr. Whitty would remember me; I was an unimpressive student.

And until the reporter called, I had not thought of Dr. Whitty for ages.

So I find it strange that our paths cross a third time in the course of his 100 year career and that he still has important things to teach me.

Monday, October 09, 2006

The Shortest One

Back in the early 1950s in the Jacksonville public schools, teachers made us endure a thing they called Opening Exercises. This meant we had to answer role call,

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listen to announcements, pledge the flag, repeat the Lord's Prayer and read a Bible verse.

This last one was the kicker.

Alphabetically by name, every kid in class had to read the Bible verse of his or her choice to the whole class - Aloud.

A cruel and unusual punishment dreaded by kids of all faiths.

But the practice soon made Bible scholars of us all — I don't remember any other Bible fact from those days, but we all learned that the shortest verse in the Bible is John 11:35. It is only two words:

"Jesus wept".

That's it.

That's the whole verse.

Up and down the alphabet, day after day, kids of all faiths, creeds and conditions chose to read this single Bible verse — Jesus wept.

Try to force religion down our throats will they!

I remembered this verse again last Friday because Donald and Helen came over in their capacity as computer consultants (who usually charge in the neighborhood of \$100 an hour) to work on my computer. They spent three hours at my keyboard then took extra work home with them to finish.

Thank God, they were helping out of love for me because I could never afford to hire them!

Donald's professional site is at <http://www.rdex.net/>
Helen's is at <http://www.elemental.name/>

Just to fool around, Donald brought over his new webcam. He plans to post movies on his site someday soon.

Relax, no one at my house took off clothes for his webcam movie... Although I must admit that I did undo my top button just to thrill viewers.

Seriously, among the other things Donald and Helen did was to install some special fonts so that I can now write in calligraphy script.

To experiment and to see if Blogger will take such fancy writing, I'm going to try a Bible verse in a couple of scripts. Of course, you can guess which verse I chose to type:

Jesus Wept

Jesus wept

Jesus wept

Jesus wept

Jesus wept

When I post, we'll see how (or if) this experiment works; if it doesn't, I won't use it any more. No sense quoting Scripture people can't read.

The verse comes from the passage of Scripture which tells how Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus even though He knew that in a few minutes He would call Lazarus out of the grave alive.

I think it not only shows the compassion of Christ but also the basic obscenity of death. It is one of those miracles previewing coming events.

"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," Jesus said.

Even knowing that, Jesus still wept.

I thought that was the only place in the Bible that says Jesus wept, but the other day I ran across a second verse that tells about Him weeping.

At the Triumphal Entry when Jesus approached Jerusalem riding on a donkey and while crowds waved palm fronds, Luke 19:41 says:

"And when he was come near, he beheld the city and wept over it saying, 'If thou hadst known...(but) thou knewest not the time of thy visitation.'"

Jesus wept because they did not know the day of their visitation.

That's an unsettling phrase.

I wonder how many times I have ignored the day of my visitation?

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Jesus comes to mind before us. We feel a vague attraction. We put it off to think about at some more convenient time.

Then we go our own way and forget Him in the normal course of life. And if we think about the incident at all again, we wonder what it was that attracted us in the first place.

Jesus said, “No man can come to me except the Father which hath sent me draw him.” He also said, “If I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto me”

Each of us has a personal “Day of Our Visitation”.

If we ignore it ...

Jesus wept.

Tuesday, October 10, 2006

A Truly Beautiful Day

Monday I intended to resume work on my book on the history of the Jacksonville fire department but...

How many times in the past month have I started this journal with those words?

I often repeat myself.

Instead of working on the fire history, I enjoyed a perfectly beautiful day.

Clouds overcast the sky and a tiny nip of chill laced the air, so I sat in my chair with pipe, tobacco pouch, tin of matches, ashtray and coffee mug right at hand, and a book open in my lap — and I dozed off and on all day.

Not a single phone call.

Not a single visitor.

I imagine Heaven must be a lot like my day today.

When Ginny got home from work we went out for supper before going grocery shopping at Publix. I’d planned our two-week menu so there was a lot of stuff to buy.

As Ginny finished up our list, I meandered outside the store to sit on a bench, watch the stars come out, and smoke another pipe.

A couple walked by and the beautiful young woman commented on the aroma of my pipe.

He went inside the store but she strolled back, joined me on the bench and began to ask questions. As a curvaceous young blond, she was fashion-model beautiful but she also proved to be a brilliant conversationalist.

By that I mean she asked leading questions to draw me out and keep me talking about my wife, my books, my blog, my website ...

As I said, she was a brilliant conversationalist.

Her show of interest gave me a real lift.

No, she was not hitting on me — just a nice young lady being kind to an old man.

Speaking of beautiful girls, let me record what happened Sunday:

Ginny and I attended a church which has these huge stained glass windows. I suppose they depict biblical scenes but I really couldn't say because I didn't pay that much attention to them.

The preacher expounded on the meaning of the Ten Commandments, but my attention focused on how the light passed through those slivers of colored glass and bathed Ginny with an ethereal, angelic glow.

We attended an early service. When we arrived the church was dim. But as the sun rose, it poured through facets of colored glass and focused on Ginny's almost pure white hair. This gave her a glow of gold or red or blue as the sun moved higher and higher illuminating her as she prayed.

I've never seen her more beautiful.

That's another phrase I use all the time "I've never seen you more beautiful". I remember that I told her that in Dave's Dinner on Saturday as she sat across from me engrossed in her library book.... And Friday morning as she drove off for work.

I've said that phrase more and more over the past 38 years as I see more and more facets of my beautiful wife.

I have never understood what such a beautiful woman saw in me to want to keep me around for all this time.

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Must be the aroma of my pipe.

Yeah, that's it.

There can be no other explanation.

My pipe is a chick magnet.

Wednesday, October 11, 2006

Thoughts On A Ladder About The Evolution Of The Mouse



Tuesday I intended to work on the fire history book, instead I spent much of the day on top of a ladder nailing metal plates up on the roofline of our house to seal holes the mice have gnawed in the siding.

They can't come inside anymore.

And as a special treat for the ones who may already be inside, I put rat poison in each hole — Welcome to My Magic Kingdom, rat!

Regular blog readers know of my battle with the beasts ravaging our house. Of course as I worked, I pondered the evolution of the mouse.

I've mentioned my love for biology before. Never have I felt any deeper sense of worship than in a biology lab dissecting an earthworm, frog, pig or cat; and once I was privilege to witness the dissection of a human cadaver. To see how living things are put together inspires me to worship the Creator of such wonders.

Therefore when my kids were little and came home with biology assignments from school, I wanted to help them with their homework.

They hated that.

They never believed my explanations of how things work, such as evolution.

The process of evolution is perfectly logical.

For instance, take a mouse.



A mouse scampers around in the fields all summer eating seeds. Come Autumn, the mouse burrows into a deep burrow and goes to sleep. This deep sleep is called hibernation. It takes a long time. As the creature sleeps, it

evolves; its hair grows thicker and its tail longer, until come Spring the creature emerges as a rat:



It is the same animal, but over the course of time it has evolved. The rat spends the summer avoiding cats and eating trash. At the approach of another Winter, the rat snuggles in its nest and hibernates. During the long sleep, evolution continues as the fur changes from black to gray and the tail grows longer.

The following Spring it emerges from its den as a Possum:

Anyone can see the resemblance the possum bears to its evolutionary ancestors.

The possum spends Spring and Summer foraging in fruit trees, But come Winter, the happy creature again hibernates and again evolves. Evolution takes a long time, but after months of sleep, the possum greets Springtime with thicker fur which by now has evolved to cover its tail. Yes, every spring a new crop of raccoons emerge from hibernation and evolution:



The raccoon is known in some places as a wash bear from its habit of rinsing anything it eats in water. No wonder. Raccoons will eat anything.

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But in the cycle of life, Winter again comes. Mr. Raccoon goes to sleep in a cave and evolves as it sleeps for a long, long time. The animal becomes more complex, it increases in size, and its tail just about disappears. The animal emerges from its den in Spring as a bear:

Do you see the progress here?

A simple animal becomes more complex and larger as it evolves.

Now bears do certain things in the woods, including eating berries and hunting bee hives. But bears also hibernate deep in the caves of the earth. And as they sleep for a long long time, certain changes take place. Evolution is a complicated process and for reasons no scientist really understands, sometimes a bear will emerge from the cave as a rhinoceros and sometimes as a hippopotamus. In either case, notice how the tail has reverted back to it's original rat-like appearance.



Of course, even with all the time in the world, not all creatures evolve.

Some degenerate.



Lizard, p. 1264.

Consider the lizard:

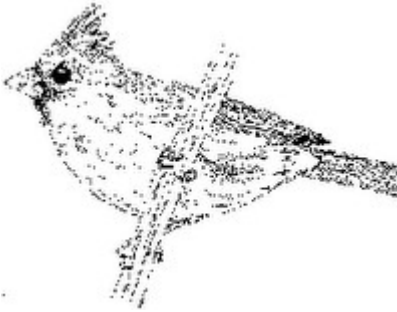
Were this creature to hibernate properly it would evolve into a noble Gator and go to Florida State University where it would eat bulldogs every season.:



But for some reason sometimes evolution goes horribly wrong and perfectly nice lizards degenerate into insurance salesmen:



Such tragic mutations have been known among birds



also.

God intended every titmouse to evolve into an eagle:

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But this upward progress does not always happen in evolution; sometimes creatures fall. Sometimes they degenerate lower and lower. Sinking below insurance salesman, the once happy titmouse falls:



Yes the avian unwed mother falls into a gutter to pick purses on the street while its victims are distracted by the fatherless offspring.

But there is hope for fallen birds... and for fallen people.

"Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing?" Jesus said. "And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.

Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows.

“Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in Heaven”.

Anyhow, that’s what I thought about up on the ladder sealing possible mouse holes to keep potential hippos or insurance salesmen out of our attic.

Maybe tomorrow I can get back to work on that fire history book.

Saturday, October 14, 2006

For Sande Dawn Jordan

My friend Wes stands beside himself in grief and anguish over the death of his 17-year-old granddaughter. Wednesday. She died of a particularly virulent form of cancer. Wes, who has worked in intensive care units, described her dying as the most gruesome he’s ever seen.

In the midst of his anguish, Wes restructured the dedication page of the book he has been working on, *Adventist: The Autobiography of Joseph Pyram King*, so that the page includes a line of tribute to Sande Dawn Jordan.

King, a minister and a physician, lived a hundred years from 1848 to 1948 and was a founder father of the Christian Adventist movement. He stood trial for heresy over his views of the afterlife in 1880 and wrote a defense of his stance which is reprinted in Wes’ book.

Sande lived only 17 years and was just at the threshold of life. Today, she knows as much about the joys of the afterlife as the good doctor.

Yesterday, Wes and I made the last minute changes from the printer’s proofs and published the book on-line at www.bluefishbooks.info .

Wes has collected all this material, text, photographs and anecdotes, mainly as a labor of love toward his extended family to preserve elements of family history which would otherwise be lost.

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Ironical that tributes to the 100-year-old great-great-grandfather and the 17-year-old granddaughter lie in the same little volume.

However, for those of us who have not crossed the finish line yet, the race is still to be run; the duties of this day remain.

As some poet said, "Life must go on — I forget just why".

Tuesday, October 17, 2006

For The Kid In The Attic

Monday afternoon, Jennifer, my oldest daughter came out of the courtroom hysterical with fright.

A weeping, deflated, trembling, frightened shell

Apparently the judge did not believe her testimony.

Apparently the judge did not believe the testimony of her sister.

Apparently the judge did not believe my testimony in the matter either.

One person in the courtroom referred to my blog and told the judge that I lied in my postings. Computer terminals surrounded the bench but I have no way of knowing whether or not the judge actually read any of my blog or whether she just accepted the other person's word about my lying.

The incident makes me feel like Cassandra.

So be it.

I can live with that.

Perhaps the other folks feel vindicated and now peace will reign.

On the brighter side, as Eve talked with some cops outside the courtroom, they gave her a length of official crime scene barrier tape for a display in the mystery section of her library. This elated her because she plans a mystery event around Halloween and this tape will set it off special.

Ginny and I took Jennifer out for supper and ice cream. She calmed down considerably. I think that ice

cream is the Christian answer to all of life's overwhelming problems.

We advised her to relocate out of state. (I hear Montana is nice this time of the year). But meanwhile, the whole family is pitching in to help her find an apartment, buy furniture, and get reestablished on her own. We're fronting her for a temporary apartment but she'll be camping in there sleeping on an air mattress on the floor till we come up with a bed.

"The Recent Unpleasantness" now past (Southerners will recognize the reference), she can reorient her life to pursue her own dreams.

Once she's recuperated from her trauma and can decide what those dreams are, she has a chance to start anew.

Yesterday two people contacted me asking why I have not posted a journal entry on my blog in the past couple of days

Since I began keeping a daily journal about 25 years ago I've tried to record things that are important to me or things that strike my fancy, jokes I hear, news that catches my attention, trains of thought — or whatever.

Normally I wake up about 4 in the morning and write my journal as a springboard into my regularly writing. It's a warm up exercise for working on my books.

Occasionally, I write up the happenings of my day in the afternoons while they are fresh in my memory, then I post the entries to the internet the next morning.... (Of course today my server was down till almost 2 in the afternoon!)

When things happen which are too bland or too painful for me, I don't post a journal entry at all.

Essentially I haven't posted recently because I'm bone weary, bland, discouraged and disheartened. Last week something came up — unrelated to anybody else — which makes me realize what a total failure I am in every area of life.

So I've felt too ashamed to write about it.

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As far as I know I have no secrets; but I do regard certain things as private and do not record them in a journal entry accessible to the public during my lifetime.

Mystics call what I am going through by the fancy term “The Dark Night Of The Soul”. Ginny calls it “Adjusting to the normal aging process”. Personally, I call it “floundering chin-deep in mushy liquid shit”. (But then I have always been a giddy optimist in my worldview).

Whatever you call it, its hardly any fun at all.

But, it is survivable.

Sometimes, survivable is the best you can expect in this life.

And yes, I do know about Victory in Jesus, the Abundant Life, the Joy of The Lord, and all those other religious buzz words. If other people feel all that, good for them. Such things, at the moment, are beyond my reach and experience.

Yet, as Job said, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him”.

For Job, that’s faith.

For me, it’s pigheadedness.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, at precisely 7:48 this morning a baby was born who officially makes the population of our country to now number 300 million people.

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

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

I dream that the kid in the attic will look at all the crap in what’s-iz-name’s diary and that this kid will see through

it all and see that what I write about is real. I dream that he will see through me to the beauty of the living Christ and commit his life to Christ 100%, without reservation.

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

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

Wednesday, October 18, 2006

A Writer In The Family

Tuesday my computer server shut down for most of the day — a great excuse to read all day instead of working.

When Ginny got home we went to the library for more books then stopped at a new pizza place to munch and read for the evening.

I thought I was a writer, but my daughter Eve's blog posting for Monday about the situation with her sister makes me wonder just who is really the writer in our family.

Thursday, October 19, 2006

Beauty Through Other Eyes

When I have a hard time seeing beauty through my own eyes — and I'm not seeing much beauty here recently .

I look for beauty through other eyes.

Wednesday proved an overcast, gray, rainy day.

A day for reading not working.

But I longed to see something beautiful.

Of course, being the dirty old man that I am, I was tempted to browse porno sites and in the morning I did that for a while; but soon I choose to do something else I enjoy so I visited Olga's Gallery.

Of all the courses I ever took in school, my high school art class influenced me more than any other. Except for the fact that I can't paint, draw, or sculpt, I'd like to have been an artist.

Three years ago when my son Donald gave me my first computer, among the first sites I visited were on-line art museums. Olga's Gallery ranks in my top ten.

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This site collects great paintings from all the world's galleries, museums and private collections so the viewer can sample them in one place. It lists the world's great painters alphabetically with hundreds of thumbnails to click on to see their work.

When I see a painting that strikes my fancy, I do a Save As file then transfer them to a Make-Your-Own screensaver program. That way paintings that sell for hundreds of millions of dollars parade across my desktop for me to enjoy.

I have systematically worked my way up to the Ks

Olga's features biographical sketches of the artists, tells the location of the owner, and sometimes reveals stories behind the subject of the paintings.

For instance the Louvre in Paris, France, displays a painting called in *Roger Delivering Angelica* painted in 1819 by Jean-August-Dominique Ingres.



Until yesterday afternoon, I had never heard of Jean-August-Dominique Ingres.

And the only Roger I knew of was a rabbit in a movie.

And who is Angelica? And why are there two dragons in this painting?

With a bit of research I found out that the legend portrayed dates back to the time of the Emperor Charlemagne who lived between the years 747 and 814 A.D.

He beat Moslem terrorists back from overrunning Europe. (Yes, the current war has been going on that long).

Anyhow the terrorists kidnapped the beautiful Angelica (not sure who she was) and chained her to a rock in Ireland (yes, Ireland) for a sea monster called an Orc to rape. Charlemagne's young relative, Roger, tamed a hippogriff to ride to her rescue... but then he left Angelica to go off and marry another lady.

I got all that from seeing this single painting

What a great way to spend a rainy afternoon!

I also learned that all reputable artists paint a self-portrait; I think it's a job requirement.

If I were an artist and I painted my own self-portrait, I'd look something like this:

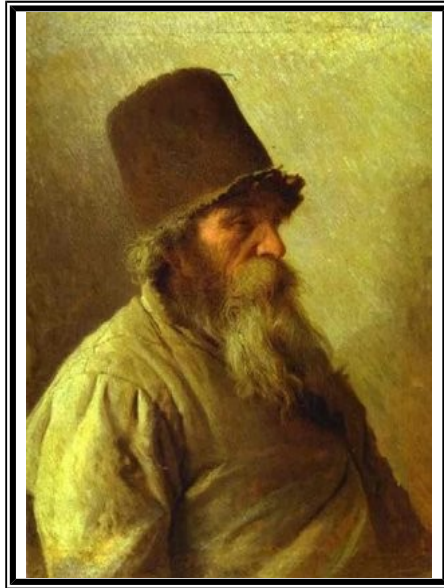


That's exercising a tiny bit of artistic license, you understand.

But if it's realism you want, maybe my self-portrait should look like this:

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Take away the cool hat and the beard and that's my spitting-image.

I marvel at what real artists can do!

Imagine doing all this dress pattern in oils as Ingres did:



Or, if you prefer simpler prints, consider this image called *Fishblood* by Gustav Klimt in 1898:



In 1903 Gustav Klimt did another painting which really speaks to me on this gloomy day when I see little beauty in my world, when dark things hover in the background to cloud my mind. If you click to enlarge it, you'll see why he named his painting — HOPE:



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Sunday, October 22, 2006

A Wild Man In The Swamp

Why should I be the one to apologize?

I didn't do a thing wrong, did I?

I'm sure I didn't.

I'm tired of being the one who tries to reconcile things between us. Why can't she be the one to make the first move sometimes?

When she finally kicks me out, I intend to go into the swamp taking only my pipe, tobacco, matches, a sheet of plastic, a change of clothes, a water bottle, and my net. I'll catch a fish now and then to eat and I'll stay out of sight.

I remember enough of my scout survivalist training, how to find fresh water, eatable wild plants, etc., to live in the swamp for the remainder of my life. And right now, like Glog, I don't feel fit for human contact.

Snakes?

No problem.

The only creature on God's green earth to ever hurt me has always been some other person. There's no reason to put myself through this kind of pain ever again. I'll never see or speak to another person ever again.

To withdraw utterly is my solution to any relationship problem.

My mindset is All Or Nothing. I don't half-way love or hate.

This worldview causes me a lot of anguish.

It's just that I hurt at the moment.

I seriously doubt that she'll kick me out; she doesn't seem to see anything wrong with the way things are. And I doubt if I'd go into the swamp on my own; realistically, I wouldn't last ten days as a swamp hermit. Too damn soft. I love my creature comforts too much.

Inertia is a saving grace.

Now. Seeing as that's how I feel, how does being a Christian help?

Isn't Christ the Prince of Peace?

Doesn't God help?

Doesn't He give hope to the hopeless?

Well, right this second, my being a Christian does not help me a bit. My despair over present circumstances clouds any vision of God's love, any thought of His care.

The mental/emotional trap which entangles me at the moment tempts me to think that while God loves everyone in general, He's indifferent to John Cowart in particular. That while Christ died for the sins of the world, He did not die for me. That while other people are forgiven, God is disgusted with me and given up on me. My heart tells me that crap is not true — but it sure FEELS true to me.

So which is more reliable, my feelings or my Bible?

I may win Lotto tonight and my feeling will rocket to elation. Or my numbers may not be drawn and my feelings will trudge on.

Feelings fluctuate.

On the other hand, even when I feel like I've spent my whole life pissing against a strong wind, what does the Bible still keep saying?

"Beloved, if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart and knoweth all things".

PS: if any of my kids happen to read this post — bug off. This does not concern you! And, NO, I do not want to talk about it!

Monday, October 23, 2006

Poor Starving Kitty

We spent an uneventful weekend with tv, church, laundry and football.

For lunch Saturday we went out to Harpoon Louis, an expensive seafood restaurant where we stayed out on the deck overlooking Fishweir Creek. The high point of the outing was watching a kingfisher bird hunting minnows along the opposite bank of the creek; we identified it from its distinctive flight pattern.

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Ginny and I each ordered fried fish sandwiches and as we ate the restaurant's resident cat wound around our legs begging tidbits which, of course, we fed it. Then the beast moved on to other tables to pester other customers, who also fed the creature tidbits from their plates...The cat slinks from table to table performing its Poor Starving Kitty act for every person in the restaurant.

I figured that if each diner on the deck gave the cat just one morsel as the cat systematically worked the tables, by the end of the day that cat will have eaten \$179 worth of seafood!

Tuesday, October 24, 2006

The Heavens Declare

Sunday's temperature of 92 degrees set a record high, but by Monday night that temperature dropped to 39 degrees for a low with an expected high of only 72 degrees today.

A cold front passing through brought about this change.

As I ate breakfast at Dave's Diner, from my booth at the window I saw the cold front moving through the sky. When I got home, I picked up the camera Donald gave me and went down to the railroad tracks for a clearer view of the heavens.

The distinct lines of the cold front show Winter came to Florida:



My camera will not catch the full panoramic view of these straight lines of clouds running from horizon to horizon straight as the shining railroad tracks

Each evening Ginny and I read a few Bible verses following

a systematic scheme through the Scripture; Monday evening's reading came from the 19th Psalm:

The Heavens declare the glory of God;
And the firmament sheweth His
handiwork.
Day unto day uttereth speech;
Night unto night sheweth knowledge.
There is no speech nor language
Where their voice is not heard.
Their line is gone out
Through all the earth,
And their words to the end of the world.

Wednesday, October 25, 2006

Another Book Added To The Pile

Tuesday my friend Wes came by to pick up the first copy of the book he edited to come off the press. It's called *Adventist: The Autobiography Of Joseph Pyram King*. That's his great-grandfather's autobiography.

Dr. King lived till just days short of his 100th birthday and his autobiography will be of great interest not only to his many descendents but to genealogists and historians.

This brings to ten the number of books I have published in my on-line book catalogue. Many thanks to

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those of you who have encouraged me and bought copies of my books!.

This benchmark causes me to reevaluate what I've been doing.

The King autobiography, along with *Rebel Yell: The Civil War Diray of John Thomas Whatley* and *Letters From Stacy* makes the third book I've published in my self-appointed role as a preservationist. These three works existed only in manuscript form before being put on line; they would have disappeared forever without someone's trying to preserve them.

I feel it was worth the effort to put them in circulation.

That gives me great satisfaction.

The other seven books I offer in the Bluefish Books Catalogue are my own works; three of these were once published by commercial publishers but had long been out of print until I revised and republished them myself.

I'm Confused About Prayer and *Strangers On The Earth* were previously published by Inter-Varsity Press. Both books have been translated into several foreign languages. These two books have sold more copies than any of my other books.

Of all the things I've written, my own favorite is *Glog: A Dinosaur Novel Of Sorts*. That book satisfies me more than any other. This story does exactly what I wanted it to do.

Although the title story is one of my most popular, the book I like least is *Gravedigger's Christmas & Other Tales*. It reveals altogether too much of me. Which is an odd thing to say considering that *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad* is a published edition of my on-line journal which unveils my life and thoughts on a day by day basis.

Another book which has sold well is my *The Lazarus Projects*, a novel in which modern scientists travel back through time to witness the crucifixion of Jesus and determine whether or not He actually rose from the dead.

Then come my history books about my hometown which are hardly of interest to anyone outside Jacksonville, although I'm proud to say that local library

reference collections recommend those books to school kids doing Florida history homework.

Thus lots of kids probably hate me.

My current writing project is an expanded and updated edition of my previously-published history of the Jacksonville Fire Department. I feel as though I'm wallowing in waist-deep mud with this project and I've reached the point — I do this with every book — where I'm sorry I ever started it.

Oh well. All my work may interest few other people, and it certainly is not making me rich or famous, but at least it keeps me off the street.

Thursday, October 26, 2006

Blog Flu Epidemic?

I feel a sense of loss.

Drink got one.

One found a job.

Teenage kids got another.

A jealous husband removed another.

A stalker chased one lady off the net.

Health problems made one too sick to blog anymore.

Another lady stopped her personal blog to establish an on-line magazine for women. Another e-friend whose blog I have followed for months had his son involved in a mess and the ex-wife was using his blog as evidence in the divorce proceedings. A lady whose blog I followed stopped posting when her husband was shipped to Iraq.

I feel a sense of loss. My e-friends are disappearing. People whom I never met, yet feel as though I know and care about, and for whom I pray daily — these people have stopped posting blogs over the past two months.

Funny thing. I have regarded these e-people as my best friends even though in reality I only see words and photos made of pixels. I don't think I've ever met another real live human being (except family members) who keeps a blog, yet these strangers in far places represent life and love to me.

I laugh at their jokes and the cute things their kids say, I worry over their finances. I comment on their ideas.

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I read their life stories with interest. I share their tales with my wife over supper each night...

Yet, here recently, they have been dropping like flies.

I feel a sense of loss.

Friday, October 27, 2006

Random Thoughts About Happy Marriage

Last Tuesday Ginny and I had a long talk trying to get things straight between us.

For the past three weeks we have been at odds and hardly speaking; we circle each other wary as two strange cats introduced into a new home. To mix the metaphor, when threatened both of us deploy out turtle defense systems and withdraw into separate shells — rock solid but with no tender part showing.

This is not an enjoyable way to live.

Our conversation Tuesday went a long way toward re-establishing contact. We realized that in the conflict between us, we'd forgotten some of the basic principles which have kept us happy together for so long.

Once last summer we visited a local restaurant usually haunted by tourists. When she brought our check the waitress asked us, "Are y'all here on your honeymoon"?

Naturally I answered, "Yes".

"How long you been married"?

"Thirty-seven years now," I said, "But we still like each other".

She was amazed. She had really thought we were newlyweds.

By the grace of God we've had more ups than downs in our marriage — but when we hit a down, it's a way down! An estranged Don't-Speak-To-Me down. A Pass-In-The-Narrow-Hall-Without-Touching down.

Our conversation Tuesday went a long way towards fixing that. As I said, we'd forgotten some basic principles which have helped make us happy in the past.

We have not "solved" the problem.

But we are dealing with it.

The first thing we hashed out is that it is not a Me-Against-Her situation; we must approach things as thought it's an US-Against-The-Problem situation.

We are both on the same side VS whatever tries to separate us.

That attitude puts the problem in an entirely different perspective.

Years ago when we decided to marry, practically everyone we knew was against our plan. My parents opposed our union. Folks we knew from church opposed it. Mutual friends opposed it.

This opposition caused us to adopt an US-Against-The-World stance which has served us well over the years.

Once our pastor told us, "You two have a siege mentality".

Ginny replied, "That's because we're under siege".

The first couple of years we were married, we drove an over-the-road tractor-trailer truck. We'd be in Miami one day, New York the next, New Orleans the next, then to Denver, LA, Chicago, wherever... We lived as Gypsies with no permanent home in this world except our truck.

We lived three feet apart, 24 hours a day, every day.

This fostered an enforced togetherness.

We had fun!

We attended art shows in San Francisco, the Field Museum in Chicago, a rodeo in Texas, a street-dance in Little Italy, a Viking museum in Minnesota, Disneyland, Mardi Gras in New Orleans, a school carnival in Ohio, an old home tour in Delaware, Civil War battlefields, National Parks, art galleries and museums all over the country.

We loved doing stuff together.

Till it got to be too much.

Three feet apart. 24 hours a day. Everyday.

We learned how to enjoy spaces in our togetherness. We learned that there are times for private space. We each learned to say, "I love you forever, but I can't stand you right this minute"!

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Two separate individuals joined together by mutual conscious choice.

We discovered that each of us has talents, interests, and inclinations which have nothing to do with the other person. So we learned a bit about how to let our individual strengths compliment the other's weaknesses.

We also learned that, short of World War III, there are certain things we can not, not ever, not under any circumstances, do together!

I can cook.

Or she can cook.

We dare not work in a kitchen together.

Not and stay married.

I've heard, "Communication, the most important thing in marriage"

Bull!

Ginny says, "If we communicated, we'd have divorced long ago".

The most important thing in marriage is assuming the good will of your partner!

Even when she can not communicate what's going on inside her, even when I can't understand what she may try to communicate, even when there is no communication — the most important thing in marriage is to assume the good will of the other person.

That kind of love covers a multitude of sins.

Another statement bandied about is that the couple who pray together, stay together.

I doubt that.

I've seen too many religious couples break up or live in mutual misery for me to give that statement much credence.

Here's an odd thing, while we have been estranged over the past three weeks, we continued to read the Scripture and pray together each night.

But, we cheated.

We worship at a liturgical church which encourages reading written prayers. Thus, each night after supper, we read a Bible passage then read a prayer aloud. That's handy when you're too pissed at each other to really pray aloud about the one thing bothering you most.

By reading a prayer, we can trick God into thinking that we are in love and charity with one another.

What?

You mean that doesn't work?

Darn! I thought I had Him fooled.

Anyhow, that's what we did. But I'm not at all sure of the value of it to us these past few weeks.

Maybe so. Maybe no.

Another time of prayer also proved difficult for me.

For years it has been our practice that each morning right after our morning coffee and before life in the outside world barges in, Ginny cuddles in my lap, I enfold her in my arms, and we pray silently for the other's safety and success in the coming day's activities.

That's hard to do when you're pissed at the left-handed, wrong-headed woman cradled in your lap.

But, we have done this for so long that to start a day without it, would be as bad as facing a day without coffee first. (Also, guys, it's a great way to cop a feel).

I find that the hardest teaching of Jesus to put into practice is the one about how I should act when I have something against someone else or they have something against me. (Want a bunch of references? Try Matthew 5:23, 18:15 and Luke 17:3 — I've read them all looking for loopholes).

In essence, Jesus taught that when I'm at odds with someone, yes, even Ginny, I am to be the one who goes to that person and to be reconciled. He says that this action is more important than giving or praying or anything else.

The part of this that sticks in my craw is the part about me being the one to leave my cash beside the altar, stop praying, or whatever and going to the other person first.

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Why should I be the one?

She's the hard-headed one. She's obviously in the wrong (as any husband on earth would agree). She's the one offended.

But Jesus said that if I am aware of a problem with any other person, then I am to be the one to go and set things straight.

I am the one.

That galls me.

Maybe in the original Greek that teaching is worded different.

Nope. That's what He said.

I am to go to whomever offends me, or to whomever I offend, and set things straight.

Why?

Why should I be the one to make the first move?

Because, like it or not, I represent the character of God to the party I'm at odds with, whether it be my wife, my boss, my coworker, my neighbor.

The Lord always makes the first move.

He's the one who came into the world and died for our sin to reconcile us.

He made the first move and He teaches us to do the same.

Yes, you and I alike, represent the character of God Almighty in everyday petty bickering situations.

"That ye may be the children of your Father which is in Heaven," Jesus said.

We are His children and He expects us to act like He does.

We stand in His stead.

The world judges what God is like based on what they see in you and me.

"But", you think, "We're not worthy"!

No one ever said we were.

Monday, October 30, 2006

Breakfast With A Rhinoceros

Early Saturday Ginny and I packed a picnic basket and drove out to the zoo to eat our breakfast with the rhinoceros.

The stupid beast kept standing in the shadow so I had to lightening the photo:



For a cheap date, you can't beat breakfast at the zoo. We have done this every once in a while for close to 40 years. We are usually the first visitors through the gate and have the zoo pretty much to ourselves for an hour or so.

Jacksonville's Zoo features not only animals but lavish landscaping and walking paths which lure us deeper and deeper into the exhibits. The zoo is one of the city's best features.

Here's a photo of Ginny among the water lilies:

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Yes, those are pumpkins reflected in the water behind her. For their Spooktacular promotion, the staff decorated the paths with displays of hundreds of carved pumpkins. These make a great holiday display and after the promotional event, the pumpkins go for animal food:



We lounged a while at an aquarium exhibit where I grew frustrated trying to pose giant fish in the same photo with Ginny. Stupid fish kept moving. The ones you can't see in the photo are four or five times as large as the ones you can see.

I took a dozen or so photos to come up with just this single one.



The birds in the flight cage weren't much more cooperative.

After ten or twelve shots, I had to settle for this one:



Yes. Ginny is laughing at my frustration. She hates to see me break out the camera. She claims I get grouchy.

Who?

Me?

All I wanted was a perfect photo.

Is that too much to ask?

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Stupid fish!

Stupid birds!

Stupid rhinoceros!

After church Sunday we first pasted a wallpaper border around the ceiling in the bathroom. Balancing on a ladder set up inside the slippery bathtub brings out the best in me (like holding a camera does).

After that chore, we decorated our yard for Halloween.



We use our display to perhaps remind viewers of the encouragement found in the 23rd Psalm, the passage of Scripture most often read at funerals:

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil because You, Lord, are with me.



Actually, Ginny and I are not much when it comes to evangelism; however, when anywhere from 30 to 80 people come to our door trick or treating, we see that as an opportunity to perhaps let some of them give a thought to Christ.

So we put together a Ziploc bag packet of goodies, candy, color books and crayons, toys, spider rings, whistles, etc. and always include a couple of religious comic books. We try to make the gifts we hand out into the nicest thing the kids will pick up that night.

To us, the tract proclaiming Christ is the most important item in the packet but we want the kids to take home a fine lot of goodies (I like the dinosaur gliders best). And we want them to associate the Gospel message with a thoroughly fun, pleasant experience.

Maybe on Halloween night I'll break out the camera and snap some photos.

No. I can't do that — Ginny says I'm horrifying, a real monster, when I get my hands on the camera.

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Here's a photo she took of me with two monsters at the zoo; I'm the one in the middle.



NOVEMBER

Wednesday, November 01, 2006

And On The Third Day...

Yesterday afternoon Donald and Helen came over for lunch to announce that they are getting married... Next Saturday!

Actually, they wanted to get married **today** —they'd just come from City Hall after buying their license — but they'd found that state law requires that no matter how horny you are, you have to wait three days after getting a license to get married... or to buy a gun.

So Saturday is the soonest they can have the ceremony.

No problem.

That gives us three whole days to scrounge up a minister, prepare food for the reception, arrange for music, get flowers — and buy them a wedding present.

That last thing presents Ginny and me with a problem. We're broke.

This is Skimp Week, the week between one payday and the next. Car and homeowner's insurance came out of our last paycheck. So we are a bit shorter of cash than usual.

In fact, if I could afford a crayon, I'd get a scrap of cardboard and write **Will Work For Food** on it.

However, God does provide!

The Spirit reminded me of what's stored away in our back closet.

So, as we sat around the table discussing wedding arrangements, I casually asked Helen, "Say, were you the one who gave us that glass punchbowl for Christmas? The one with the little dangly cups to hang on the rim? I can't remember who gave us that thing."

"No," she said, "I didn't give you anything like that".

"Good," I said. "Forget I asked.... But, we've got your wedding present covered".

Thursday, November 02, 2006

Not For The Squeamish —A Long, Horrible, Gruesome, Sometimes Profane, Post About Thoughts On Religious Tolerance As It Relates To My Prostate Exam

I have heard outsiders say that we Christians are intolerant when it comes to other religions. They say that we refuse to see good in the faiths held by others. They say we are narrow-minded. They say we are bigoted. They say we are exclusive.

They have a point.

Being a Christian is certainly nothing to brag about.

In fact when I say "I'm saved", by definition that means I am in such sorry shape that it took an act of God Almighty to rescue me!

Picture a guy who blunders into a septic tank and is drowning in filth and crap. He frails about as he goes under for the third time and sinks into the sludge at the bottom.

He's a goner.

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Along comes a Savior who runs the edge, strips off His clothes, jumps into the septic tank, dives under the liquid, gropes around in the sediment, grabs the guy by the collar, drags him to the surface, pulls him to dry ground, pounds him on the back till he pukes up the crap he swallowed, presses His lips to the guy's mouth and blows His own breath into the man giving him life.

What does the savee have to brag about?

The only Hero on the scene is the Savior.

A guy whose just been rescued from drowning in a septic tank can look down on no one.

All the saved one can do is be embarrassed about his own plight, and grateful to the Savior.

But what about the unsaved? People believing in other religions? Is the Christian better than them?

The Bible says that there is only one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.

That doesn't leave much wiggle room.

I thought about this stuff a lot as I prepared for a prostate exam yesterday.

Why would a prostate exam set me to thinking about religious toleration?

The Jacksonville phone book contains 34 pages of fine print listing physicians; the one assigned to me is a Mohammedan.

FYI: when a physician talks about a digital exam, he does not refer to pale green numbers flashing on a computer readout. When he says digital, he means digital!

And my doctor is powerful enough to squeeze a football with one hand — and pop it!

I have reason to know that.

And the digital exam is just the first step. Next, he will insert a stainless steel tube shaped like a giant soda straw (but about as big around as a truck tire) into my penis. He feeds a fiber optic light through this tube to see what he calls "abnormal tissue".

Then he runs a delicate precision surgical instrument through the tube to cut away said tissue. You can see a picture of this delicate precision surgical instrument in any hardware store catalogue under the listing for “Chain Saws”.

I think I’ve mentioned in this blog before that I have an strong aversion to being touched. Such a strong aversion that a casual touch in a crowded elevator creates a panic attack that leaves me quivering. So strong that for the past 40 years I have cut my own hair with a razor/comb thingy rather than let a barber touch me.

I would not trust St. Paul with a golden halo to touch my One & Only in the ways this doctor needs to. I cringe and feel nauseated at the mere thought of anyone touching me.

I’m not exactly a people person.

So, when I learned that a Mohammedan would do all this stuff to me, I had second thoughts. I even thought about requesting a change to a Christian doctor; but I didn’t.

For some strange reason I associate Mohammedans with crashing planes, car bombs, exploding shoes.

Aren’t they all like that?

Of course not!

Just because a person is not a Christian, does not mean that he is not a skilled, honorable, noble person.

Don’t get me wrong; I’m not talking about a sort of universalism here.

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man comes to the Father except by me”.

Unless Jesus was a liar, that does not leave us one bit of wiggle room.

It’s Jesus or nothing.

I picture the situation like this: People trapped on the roof of a burning skyscraper. Another skyscraper towers up just 40 feet away; if the trapped folks can jump from one roof to the other they will be safe.

A man gets a running start. He leaps off the parapet. He sails through the air windmilling his arms. His mighty

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jump takes him 39 feet and ten inches! What a leap! His leap is to be applauded. His leap is to be admired. His leap qualifies him for an Olympic record.

That's the way I picture a faithful adherent to another religion.

I give him my applause, respect and admiration.

Only one thing wrong.

The Bible says we have all sinned and fall short of the glory God has for us.

We make mighty leaps.

But fall short.

Christ stretches out His nail-scarred hand to us, but if we ignore Him, our leap falls short.

Are the Christians better than the non-Christians still on the burning roof?

Not a bit.

Even the best leapers among us fall short and are as brands saved from the burning.

We can take no credit. We still smell of smoke. We still smell of the mire from that septic tank.

The only Hero is the Rescuer.

He alone is worthy.

Now, my Mohammedan doctor handles dozens of these prostate things each week.

But, this is my One & Only.

Yes, the doctor's ministry to me may result in the restoration of my vim, vigor, and vitality. After he gets through with me, I may be able to knock the bark off a tree at five paces....

Or, a slip of the chainsaw, a zig when he should have zagged, may leave me utterly impotent and dribbling down my left leg and wearing diapers for the rest of my life.

(The alternative is to let this abnormal tissue inside me grow till I fill with piss, my kidneys back up, my teeth float, and I die.)

OK, John, you say you trust God for your eternal salvation, can you trust His chosen instrument with your precious One & Only?

Chosen instrument? Yes, and I'm talking about the Mohammedan doctor — not the chainsaw.

As a Christian I believe that God is the First Cause of all effects. I believe that there are no second causes but that everything comes to us via the hand of the Father.

I did not choose this prostate trouble for myself.

I did not choose which doctor the other two doctors recommended to handle me. I believe that God Himself, for reasons of His own, placed me in the hands of this Mohammedan. I believe that God means me no permanent harm — yes, even the anxiety, even the chainsaw, even the suffering, even the indignity of diapers, even a painful death — none of those details are permanent.

The troubles of this life are fleeting things in the light of eternity.

I seriously doubt that any guys in Heaven will sit around bitching about having to have had prostate surgery on earth.

It just won't matter to them then.

Nevertheless, I'm feeling a different interpretation of the Bible verse that says, "Father, into thy hands I commit my One & Only".

Or something like that.

So, because I trust in God's will, and my Mohammedan doctor (those folks also believe in submitting to the will of God), I'm in for an interesting time over the next few months.

I'm sure the doctor would describe the medical procedures ahead a little differently from the way I do. And I do not intend to blog about health stuff any more; readers have their own health stories. I thought long and hard about whether or not to go into this stuff today. That's why I'm so late getting this posted today. (And I doubt if I'll post tomorrow because of getting ready for The Wedding).

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Anyhow, until I get more information, I'll let the doctor do whatever he needs to — But you can bet that I'm still going to be cutting my own hair!

P.S: Did you know that the words *testify* and *testimony* that we Christians bandy about are related to the word *testicles*? In the good old days, the Romans would put a suspected Christian's balls on the chopping block and ask him if he still confessed that Jesus Is Lord.

Just thought you'd want to know.

Sunday, November 05, 2006

Donald & Helen Wed!!!



Ever see horny squirrels chase eachother in circles around the trunk of a tree oblivious to all else in the universe?

Well then, you have a good idea of how our son's wedding came off Saturday.

First off, on Friday morning I took Donald out to brunch to give him “The Talk” filled with fatherly advise about women.

But before I could get into it, he dropped a bombshell. He asked me to conduct the wedding — which was less than 20 hours away.

I’m not a preacher. I have never conducted a wedding before in my life.

An old saying goes, “A Christian must be ready to preach, pray or die at a moment’s notice”. It doesn’t say anything about performing weddings!

Besides that , Helen had already asked her friend Winkie, an authorized Notary, to conduct the ceremony.

Friday afternoon I called Winkie who graciously allowed me to take part. Since there was to be no rehearsal, we planned our roles over the phone. I was to make the introductory remarks and deliver a brief homily — telling everything anybody needs to know about a happy marriage in less than six minutes.

No problem.

(I’ll tack my speech on to the end of this posting).

Going to afterburners, I stayed up all night trying to think of anything intelligent to say. The advantage to giving this kind of speech is that I know no one at all will be paying the slightest bit of attention because their feet hurt from standing during the wedding and they are focused on the Bride and Groom, and they’re all anxious to get this over with and get to the champagne brunch reception.

As I tried to think, the phone went wild. Callers asking about music arrangements. Callers asking directions. A caller concerned about a possible brain tumor. Callers explaining why they could not get to the wedding. Callers asking about decorations. Callers wanting to know what to bring.

No problem — After all Donald and Helen had given us three full days to prepare for their wedding.

And the two squirrels circled the tree oblivious to all else..

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The ceremony proved lovely. The girls commandeered a pavilion in a local park without permission. Wellwishers gathered. The music sounded beautiful. Winkie made it all legal. Champagne flowed. Everything all went off without a hitch.

Nervous as could be over making a fool of myself, I gave my pep talk.

Afterwards, I felt so ashamed, shabby and shy that I could hardly stand to be in the reception. I spent that time hiding out in the parking lot too ashamed to be around people. But I doubt if anyone noticed.

The two stars of the show rejoiced with their Dearly Beloved family and friends. Ginny drove me home and set me down in front of a football game where I slept for ten hours.

And the squirrels circle the tree.

Oh, if anyone is interested, here's a copy of the talk I gave:

My Six-Minute Wedding Talk For Donald & Helen:

Bride, what is his name?

(Helen answered, "Donald").

There's something wrong here. According to the card his name is Harry. You mean his name is not Harry?

Groom, What is her name?

(Donald answered, "Helen").

There's something really wrong because the card says her name is Hermione Granger.

If you are not Harry Potter, and if you are not Hermione Granger... Then do you two realize what this means?

It means that you are marrying a person who can NOT read your mind!

But that's OK. Because no one ever marries a mind reader.

That means that if you want her to know what's on your mind, you have to talk, to use real words.

If you want him to know what's on your heart, you have to speak, to talk out loud!

We can not expect our partner to read our minds.

Ever.

That just does not happen in the real world.

"But we're in love. She should anticipate my every whim" he says.

"We are so close that he should know what I want without me saying a word," she says.

Bull!

Now, we all have certain expectations when we marry.

A man who marries expects Anita Elkberg in the bedroom. (She was Miss Sweden in 1950, my adolescent dream girl). He expects to be married to Dr. Joyce Brothers when he wants to talk. And he expects to find Betty Crocker in the kitchen.

A girl expects to find Fabio in her bedroom. When she wants to talk, she expects to be married to Dr. Phil. She expects Ty Pennington from Extreme Home Makeover to do repairs around the house. —

And she expects her husband to say out of the kitchen altogether.

And, every one of us expects the person we marry to be able to read our minds.

That just does not happen.

We marry real people and live in a real world.

The only way your partner can know what is on your mind and in your heart is to talk, to tell the other one. In words. Out loud.

The only way you can know what is in your partner's mind is to ask!

The only way to answer when your partner does ask what you are thinking is to answer HONESTLY!

The road toward Hell is lined bumper to bumper with couples who ask, "What's wrong with you!" and who answer, "Nothing"

Speak your mind.

Ask what's in your partner's mind.

Answer honestly.

Do you know why we hate to do this?

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Pride.

Our pride makes us want the other person to make the first move.

Bull!

Always make the first move. Always.

You can have a marriage... or you can have your pride... but that's all you'll have.

You've heard that marriage is a picture of Christ's relationship to His people.

God does not expect us to be mind readers.

We are to honestly tell Him what's on our mind — That's called prayer.

And we are not left to guess what's in God's mind; He speaks to us through the Bible. He reveals what He thinks in His Word. We can read the Bible to know the mind of God in everything that we need to know.

What does the Scripture say?

"Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands as unto the Lord...

"Husbands, love your wives even as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it...

"So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife, loveth himself...

"For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.

"This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.

"Nevertheless, let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband." — *Ephesians 6:22-33*

You are marring a real person, not a fantasy character.

Helen, he is not Harry Potter. He can not read your mind.

Donald, wonderful as she is, Helen is not Hermione Granger. She can not read your mind.

Therefore, Say what's in your mind. Ask what's in her mind. And, when you are asked, answer honestly.

Let us Pray:

Dearest Father, help each one of us here to be real. To live in a real world. To see real people. To find real peace. To solve real problems. ... and to serve the real and living Son of God, Jesus Christ, who died for our real sins and rose again from a real tomb... to real and everlasting life. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Tuesday, November 07, 2006

In Clear, Unambiguous, Exact Language

Today, Ginny and I, along with thousands of others, will vote.

We vote for Governor, for Senator, for Attorney General, etc.

And we get to vote for our choice for who, among candidates I've never heard of, will hold offices which I did not know existed.

Not only that, but we also vote on something requiring clear and unambiguous language to be used on future ballots — At least I think that's what we're voting about.

I'm not sure because the ballot which ask me to vote *yes* or *no* says:

Referendum For Jacksonville Charter Amendment Regarding The Form Of Referendum Ballots And Financial Impact Disclosure shall section 1805 of the City Charter be amended to allow for a referendum ballot to include only a clear and unambiguous summary of a proposed charter amendment and its financial impact estimate, consistent with state law, when a copy of the complete and exact language of the proposed amendment is posted at each voting location and properly advertised, instead of the current requirement for the complete and exact language of the proposed amendment? Part A. Charter Laws Charter Of The City Of Jacksonville, Florida, Article 18. Miscellaneous Provisions Section 1805. Method of amendment of charter. Subject to the provisions of section 3.01(e) and section 7.103,

The ballot continues to describe whatever it is that it is presenting to me, in clear and unambiguous language, for another five column inches before giving me two boxes where I can check either *yes* or *no*.

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I'm sure you can guess how I will vote about this important matter.

Somehow on Voting Day I take comfort in the words of King Solomon when he said, "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord".

Wednesday, November 08, 2006

TV Upgrade

Television Upgrade — Now that the election is over, instead of running political commercials, last night one local television news broadcast was devoted to how to treat head lice.

I think that's a step up.

Thursday, November 09, 2006

Whatever things...

Certain thoughts, certain anticipations, distract me this morning.

If God gives us life and strength, next week Ginny and I plan to celebrate our 38th anniversary.

Mostly we intend to hang at the house, garden, visit some archaeological sites, do our Christmas shopping, and just generally get reacquainted — Along, of course, with marathon bouts of kissing, groping, lust, passion and sleeping in front of tv football games.

Also, my work calls for some decisions that I want to mull over, so I hope to spend some time discussing these with Ginny.

But, mostly we just need some down time without outside input — if that makes sense.

Today I hope to get donkey work done around the house so that stuff is out of the way before our long weekend.

My Webalizer counter software says that about 300 people read this blog yesterday; but this morning, some Blogger glitch prohibits me from posting on my site or commenting on other people's sites, so it will look to readers as though I've dropped out of sight abruptly.

Sorry about that. I tried.

While I'm out of pocket, please think about browsing in my on-line book catalog at www.bluefishbooks.info to

see if there's any of my work you'd like to buy for someone on your Christmas list or for your own enjoyment. The catalog lists ten books I've written or edited.

My own favorite is my novel *Glog*. On the surface it's a simple action adventure about a dinosaur; on another level it's a tale about how God guides His creatures.

Judging from sales, other people's favorite books are *I'm Confused About Prayer* (the title says it all) or *Strangers On The Earth*, a collective biography of people whose faith got them into trouble.

Or, if you know a Civil War buff, *Rebel Yell: The Civil War Diary Of John Thomas Whatley CSA* was published for the first time ever last month. It turned out to be a truly beautiful book. It pleases me.

But, I don't want to think about work right now, I want to get the grass mowed and dishes washed and laundry done.... I have a lot to think about today...

Kissing. Groping. Lust. Passion.

Those are the important things for a dirty old man like me to think about.

As the Bible says:

Whatsoever things are true,
Whatsoever things are honest,
Whatsoever things are just,
Whatsoever things are pure,
Whatsoever things are lovely,
Whatsoever things are of good report,
If there be any virtue,
If there be any praise,
Think on these things.

I plan to resume posting by November 16th.

Y'all behave yourselves while I'm gone.

I'll behave myself too.... Ha! Ha! Ha! Gloat! Gloat! Gloat! Lots to think about!

Friday, November 17, 2006

Thoughts About A Toilet & A Stained Glass Window

Last week Ginny and I entered the 39th year of our extended honeymoon.

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Yes, romantic love still survives between us even after all this time.

The secret of a happy marriage?

Ginny says it's inertia.

To celebrate our love, we traveled to the ancient city of Fernandina, home of the modern shrimping industry on Amelia Island. I'd planned to post all sorts of photos of our trip but naturally, on our first night there I broke our camera.

Now, I could write to tell about the quaint fishing village, or about the historic Civil War fort, or about the inspiring Veteran's Day parade, or about the exciting archaeological sites of Indian villages, or about the picturesque waterfront, or about the abundant wildlife on the island ...

But my strongest memory of our trip to Amelia Island will be of the toilet in our motel room.

Yes indeed.

Amelia Island's fame resounds with the glories of world-class tennis matches, antique car shows, fine golf courses, and gourmet chiefs. But none of those things impressed me as much as that toilet.

It's the wrong height.

It's too close to the wall.

If they ever make getting up off a toilet an Olympic event, the athletes will train in our motel bathroom.

I am so glad to get back home to a real toilet!

But enough about that.

Another thing which impressed me greatly on our trip was our visit to an old church for Sunday service.

The congregation was formed in 1858.

During *The War* enemy soldiers trashed the place.

In the 1880s the building was rebuilt, but fire destroyed it in 1892. The congregation restored the building again.

Stained glass windows crafted by Edward Colegate of New York City grace the sanctuary. Among stained glass

aficionados, Golegate's work ranks up there with that of Louis Comfort Tiffany.

The coolest window is behind the baptismal font on the North Wall. This window was dedicated to 36 children who died during one of Fernandina's several yellow fever epidemics.

And a panel of this particular window commemorates a kid who was mauled to death by a circus bear. I do not know of any other stained glass window ever dedicated to a bear attack victim.

If I were making a such a window, my picture would show that lovely Bible story found in Second Kings, chapter 2, about the baldheaded prophet, the boys and the two bears. All children should be familiar with this charming tale from the Scripture.

But, apparently Edward Colegate of New York City was a wimp; he did not illustrate that Bible story.

An odd, sad, thing impressed me about the one service we attended: to a packed house of hungry souls, the clergy set up a screen and showed a National Geographic motivational film about recognizing what's right with the world.

Except for in written portions of the service read from a book and in one song, the name of Jesus was not spoken during the entire service.

Maybe it's just me being dense and out of tune, but I felt it strange that a Christian church would present an hour long service without so much as mentioning Christ.

It was like going to a fancy Weight Watchers or Rotary Club meeting in a beautiful room.

Anyhow, I thought the bear window was cool.

I hope to write more about our trip to Fernandina over the next few days, but there are two more things I want to mention:

I learned that depression travels well. Mine went with me and returned home thriving as well as ever. Our



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anniversary vacation trip just changed my depression's environment. I was just as depressed in a new setting. (That low, low toilet seat may have something to do with that feeling).

The other thought that impressed me is that as long as you are struggling with something, that thing has not defeated you.

I've written in the past about some of the temptations I struggle with and recently I've been inclined to just give up my struggle.

But, whether it be struggling with a marital problem, fat, depression, sin, temptation, or a raging bear — If you are still struggling, you have not lost the war.

Your enemy can not claim victory over you as long as you still struggle.

This particular thought is helping me a lot in my own temptations recently.

I'm down, but not utterly defeated.

I can still bite the sucker's ankle!

Sunday, November 19, 2006

Once I Almost Found A Treasure

Security guards blocked Ginny and me from seeing the one thing on Ameila Island we wanted most to see.

Back in 1955-56, when I was a teenager, I helped excavate an Indian burial mound here on Amelia Island. An archaeological society I belonged to surveyed the mound, an adjacent kitchen midden, a Spanish mission site, and an ancient causeway — all compressed into a ten acre area on the south end of Amelia.

Here's a 1955 photo of me holding a surveyor's rod near the top of the cleared mound:



We cleared the mound of dense jungle undergrowth, drew a contour map, and began a test trench through the mound. We uncovered several people's skeletons along with a few beads and potsherds. I discovered an ancient hearth filled with fish, bird and animal bones in the midden.

Those were the happiest days of my childhood, some of the happiest days in my whole life.

Unfortunately, the owner of the property sold the acreage to a developer before we'd hardly scratched the surface of the mound or mission sites and the developer's insurance company called a halt to our excavations.

I wrote a preliminary report on the work — it's included in my history of the Jacksonville area, *Crackers & Carpetbaggers*. — and we shipped the skeletons and artifacts to the archaeology department at Florida State University.

We dug no more.

We had missed the treasures of the site by inches. If only we could have worked a little while longer, just one more season...

Thirty years after I last saw the site, George and Dottie Dorion began construction of a home on that same land. When workers uprooted a palm tree, they uncovered evidence of the Spanish mission, Santa Catalina de Gauale which was occupied around the year 1680, the Dorions stopped construction and called in professional archaeologists to work the site.

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They discovered 120 bodies of Indians associated with the mission, and many artifacts including the seal of the mission which was abandoned when the British attacked and destroyed the mission on November 4, 1702.

Archaeologists also recovered many more skeletons and effigy pottery from the more ancient mound as well as many artifacts from the extensive midden. This site proved to have been occupied by Timucua and Guale Indians and their predecessors for 4,000 years.



The Dorions preserved the site and built their new home in another location. They donated the artifacts to a museum they founded in the old Fernandina Jail where things recovered from the dig remain on display.

Had my friends and I been allowed to continue our work back in 1956, we would have been the ones to find all these treasures.

Story of my life.

How many times I have quit too soon.

My September 6, 2006, entry tells a similar tale of missed opportunity when I quit a project too soon.

Anyhow, while we were on our anniversary vacation I wanted to show Ginny the site of where I'd spent so many happy hours.

Guards stopped us.

That area, which was all jungle and swamp when I was a teenager, is now an exclusive gated community. "We don't allow just anybody in here," one guard said. "Especially since Nine Eleven..."

I think it was my Hawaiian shirt with the swimming sharks, my green cap, and my camera bag that tipped him off.

Can't be too careful these days. Riff-Raff and potential terrorists lurk around archaeological sites everywhere.

I'll get over my disappointment at not being able to revisit the site.

Ginny said, "Don't let it bother you; John. In Heaven you'll be able to talk first-hand with some of the real Indians who lived there".

Yes, but even so, I regret that I could not show her one of the happiest places I've ever been. I regret that my group did not complete our excavations. I regret that I have quit a lot of things in my life when If I had not given up, If I had finished, If I had not dropped the course, If I had held on just a little longer...

This week I've been thinking about quitting some things, throwing in the towel, cashing in my chips, cutting my losses, saying, "To Hell with it", saying, "The game is not worth the candle", saying, "What's the use".

One branch of wisdom says, "When you find yourself in a hole, the first thing to do is stop digging".

But what if you stop too soon?

Jesus Christ once said, "He that endureth to the end shall be saved".

What if the next shovel full of dirt, the next turn of the spade, the next flick of the camel-hair brush uncovers the treasure, the Spanish coin, the effigy pot, the copper necklace, the jade pendant, the book sale, the love of your life, the face of the Lord God Whom you long to see?

What if you'd have held on just a little longer?

Endured?

When I talked about some of this stuff with my daughter this week, she reminded me of a tale I told her about World War II British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

I don't know if it is true or not, but the story goes that he was to deliver a commencement speech at an exclusive boys school.

He walked to the podium and snapped out one thing, then left the auditorium.

What he said, his entire speech, was:

Never Give Up! Never Give Up! Never. Never. Never. Never Give Up. Never!

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Well, I've spent almost four hours writing this posting — most of that time trying to find the accepted spelling of *Timmuquan*, *Timmuqua*, *Timmacanna*, or maybe just *Injunes*

— it's time I quit.

Tuesday, November 21, 2006

Beautiful Places, Holy Places

Sunday I wrote about my disappointment over the guards blocking me from showing Ginny one of the happiest places of my boyhood. I've continued to think about the dynamics of that situation.

What made me want to return to that place so desperately? What had I done there? Who was I with? What made the place magical? Surely it was not dirt and dead men's bones, mosquitoes and sawgrass.

What was it?

I am not the only man ever to try to recapture some enchantment from my past.

Back in the 1960s I worked as a minion at the Library Of Congress in Washington, D.C. Once as I researched something entirely different, I blundered across a poem written in 1846 — long before he became President — by Abraham Lincoln.

I'd never before known that Lincoln wrote poetry, but his thoughts touched me deeply. My own feelings now reflect his musings about going back to his childhood home as an adult 20 years after he left

Here are a few verses:

My child-hood home I see again,
And gladden with the view;
And still as mem'ries crowd my brain,
There's sadness in it too--

O memory! thou mid-way world
'Twixt Earth and Paradise;
Where things decayed, and loved ones lost
In dreamy shadows rise--

And freed from all that's gross or vile,
Seem hallowed, pure, and bright,

Like scenes in some enchanted isle,
All bathed in liquid light--
Now twenty years have passed away,
Since here I bid farewell
To woods, and fields, and scenes of play
And school-mates loved so well--
Where many were, how few remain
Of old familiar things!
But seeing these to mind again
The lost and absent brings--
The friends I left that parting day --
How changed as time has sped!
Young child hood grown, strong manhood
grey,
And half of all are dead--
I hear the lone survivors tell
How nought from death could save,
Till every sound appears a knell
And every spot a grave—
I range the fields with pensive tread,
I pace the hollow rooms;
And feel (companion of the dead)
I'm living in the tombs--
And here's an object more of dread,
Than ought the grave contains--
A human-form, with reason fled
While wretched life remains--
And now away to seek some scene
Less painful than the last --
With less of horror mingled in
The present and the past--
The very spot where grew the bread,
That formed my bones, I see
How strange, old field, on thee to tread
And feel I'm part of thee!

Yes, Lincoln went back — and found a madman.

I recall once taking Ginny to visit my Grandfather's long- abandoned farm in Graham, Florida. When I was about 8 years old, I hunted crawdaddies there in a brook which I called Wonder River where the water flowed

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crystal clear and where I saw my first painted bunting, one of the world's most beautiful birds.

We located the old wooden farmhouse which had fallen in, victim of decades of termite attacks. From there we walked down the overgrown dirt lane to the enchanted spot — only to find that what my eight-year-old eyes saw as Wonder River was only a drainage ditch, the magic cave, only a culvert under the lane.

What had charmed me about that spot?

I felt as you would when you go back to visit the house where you grew up. Even if the building still stands, the luster is gone. What you remember as Beauty, no longer lives in that spot.

I think that it is not the places we remember and long for; it is the feeling we had while in those places that draws us back.

I think we caught a glimpse of Something that we did not recognize when we were on the spot, but which we now yearn to recapture.

The Bible's Book of Hebrews teaches that earthly places, at least some of them, are but dim copies of real places in Heaven, the beauty we seek there is reflected in shadows we sometimes see here.

I believe that when we want to go back, to show someone we love that place where we glimpsed Beauty, that what we really want is to recapture that glimpse of the Heavenly.

I believe that our yearning is not for a place but for a Person.

The place is just where we briefly felt His unseen presence.

We weren't aware that He was there.

But we have never forgotten.

We never will.

We have a hunger that can not feed on this land's bread.

That's why Jesus bemoans those sad, sad people who have left their first Love.

That's why one ancient prophet said,
In quietness and confidence shall be your
strength;
In returning and rest, ye shall be saved.

Wednesday, November 22, 2006

Happy Thanksgiving From Florida



Friday, November 24, 2006

4 or 2?

Thursday, the thundering horde — 14 of us — gathered for the feast of Thanksgiving, turkey, ham, cheesecake, sweet potatoes, casseroles, dressing, pies, — a cornucopia of goodies.

Riotous laughter filled the room, shaking the walls, as we all got reacquainted and caught up on news of family and friends.

Ginny lead a prayer of thanksgiving and one for U.S. soldiers and their families; then we went around the circle and each one told about certain things they are thankful for.

After the feast, I gave a devotional talk which started our as an English grammar lesson. A sentence has a subject, then it has a verb which shows what that subject is or does, then it has an object, direct or indirect or both.

I used a sentence from the Bible to illustrate these features of grammar:

"Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift".

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I showed that while we acknowledge benefits, show appreciation and are grateful for things, the verb “Thanks” indicates that we are addressing a Person. We don’t thank inanimate objects — only Persons.

We are thankful *for* things; but we are thankful *to* God.

I tried to show that the *for* is meaningless without the *to*.

Then I illustrated the unspeakable (too precious to be expressed by mere words) gift by using a Post It note and a wooden pencil.

The family had not seen this object lesson before and later several people commented on how helpful it was to them.

To tempter my solemn meditation, we all played that favorite family game of trying to make Big Sister spew soda out her nose by making her laugh every time she tried to take a drink.

We are really good at this game.

After all that, a bunch of us guys got together and assembled a heavy cement fountain — without crushing anybody’s toes.

We followed a family tradition of writing our letters to Santa saying what gifts we wish we’d get for Christmas — this is a fantasy wish-list with no bearing on reality, but it’s lots of fun.

Then we trooped to Steve’s to view his museum-quality models of planes, ships and tanks. We also saw his collection of medals for bravery — he’s a Viet Nam war hero.

Several new guests I’d never met before attended the feast but in the turmoil I hardly got to speak to them. If they weren’t too intimidated by Cowart revelry and ribality to ever show up again, I’ll get to know them in the future.

Although Steve is younger than I am, yet we are closer in age than anyone else at the feast, so we holed up in a corner to discuss his war and the present one. Eve

talked with him about the possibility of his giving a history lecture at her library after the first of the year.

Finally, fed and familiated out, Ginny and I returned home to snuggle under a blanket on the sofa and watch the Cowboys football game.

Oh yes, in a recent e-mail, someone asked me if, as a fanatic Christian, I had any contact with a compound, like the one David Koresh and his followers lived in out west?

I wish to assure all readers that the only compound I have any association with at all is Preparation H.

Saturday, November 25, 2006

An Unpleasant Thanksgiving Aftermath

Well, the Cowart family Thanksgiving has past and the governor saw no need to call in FEMA... Yet.

Our family is NOT dysfunctional!

Problem is we function like a fire engine careening toward a four-alarm blaze with bell clanging, horn blaring, siren wailing. lights flashing, and guys swinging off the back rail hanging on for dear life as they try to pull up their pants.

Now one of the greatest joys of my life is to see our grown children dwelling together in harmony. They really like eachother and they actually like Ginny and me. They enjoy hanging out together and with us.

That gives me great pleasure.

In small doses.

Then I go into system overload.

I've heard that having a family is like having a bowling alley installed in your brain.

Can't dispute those words of wisdom.

Yesterday our youngest daughter brought over her laundry from college to wash at our house. Our middle daughter returned fire place tools. Our eldest daughter and her dog met us for breakfast, Our son and his new bride came over to meet the others so they could deliver some furniture. We met three for breakfast, then seven for lunch... and Ginny stepped in dog shit and I cleaned her shoes (talk about a day of true love and romance).

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Not that we had plans for this day, you understand, but as Robert Burns the poet once said,

“The best plans of mice and men to get laid, often go awry”.

Or something like that.

Anyhow, we enjoyed another massive family day instead.

Trouble is I get weary.

I recharge my batteries by solitude, and when I don't recharge I turn into a mean, grumpy, complaining, sorry son-of-a-bitch. I snap and grumble and fault-find and make those who love me miserable.

Friday proved my point:

After Ginny and I left Thursday's feast, one of the guests there made some inappropriate remarks to our youngest daughter. The guy pestered her till she felt distinctly uncomfortable.

Finally, just as the party was breaking up anyhow, she told him loudly and in no uncertain terms to Back The Hell Off! And leave her alone.

Then, today, she feels guilty because she thinks other people there only heard her yell at him and they all broke up and went home (after about ten hours of being together).

So she felt that she had spoiled the party!

Yesterday she began to tell me about what happened. She did not want my advice. She wanted me to listen. She wanted to vent her guilt feelings.

Now I feel she did exactly the right thing at the party. I approve of how she handled the situation.

So I assumed it was no big deal. Pretty girls must have to brush off creeps all the time.

But she was not telling me about him — she was telling me about her and about how she felt.

But, being the dense, insensitive clod that I am, I misread her.

And I made light of it.

I assumed she knew that she'd done a righteous deed, that she had not spoiled the party, that other people observed what was going on, and that if anybody should feel guilty it was the drunk who pestered her.

I did not listen.

I talked.

I made some stupid joke.

She broke into tears.

I hurt her feelings.

Some damn dad, huh?

Then, to top things off, as she was explaining what had happened to someone else, I broke into her conversation — again, me thinking she realized that she'd done right — and she felt squelched.

She clamed up and refused to talk about it any more.

I don't think I'll ever learn how to be a good dad.

Then, being on a roll, I devalued the values of Donald's new wife by making remarks about her thoughts on a china setting she wants for her new home. She is trying to introduce our son to a strange foreign Civilization and culture where meals are not eaten from the torn cardboard cover of a pizza box.

Good luck to her with that project.

She's got a lifetime job ahead of her.

Anyhow, after all was said and done, my children forgave me (again).

They still express every facet of respect and love for me.

And for this, even though the holiday has passed, I am truly thankful.

Oh, by the way, the kids are planning for two moves, two birthdays, and at least one more general get-together between now and Christmas.

"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head..." — Psalm 133:1

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Monday, November 27, 2006

The Taste Of Oysters & Honey

Sunday Ginny & I fed ducks in Riverside Park then lounged on a park bench for several hours watching guys dressed in medieval armor swordfight; they are members of the Society of Creative Anachronism, a reenactment group which gathers in the park practically every Sunday afternoon to practice.



The above photo came from Google because my own camera remains broken; Donald is working on it and I hope to have it again soon.

While we lounged in the park Ginny browsed through the Sunday newspaper and I thought about sex, oysters, honey, and God.

Over this long weekend a young man who said he was an agnostic crossed my path. His stance sparked my own thinking in the park.

As I understand it, an atheist believes that no God exists; a theist believes that some God does exist; an agnostic believes that it is impossible to know whether or not God exists. Although I am a theist, I can see that the others have a point.

While the atheist can not prove that there is no god, the theist can not prove that there is. Each can point to

lines of reasoning, logic, evidence and experience which indicate his stance is correct.

The agnostic stands on the sidelines saying that neither stance can be proven conclusively so he prefers not to take a stance, or more simply saying, "I don't know".

I chose not to get into a sophomoric discussion with guy I met. I don't think he was seeking an answer but merely wanted to kick up dust.

While I often need God to defend me, He's a big boy and has no need for me to defend Him.

Nevertheless, the chance encounter set me to thinking.

And the first thing I thought about was oysters.

I love fried oysters. Florida's Apalachicola Bay oysters rank as world class delicacies among gourmets everywhere.

Ginny, that poor yankee girl I married, refuses to so much as taste an oyster. She once saw a raw oyster. To her eyes an oyster looks like something a person with a bad cold might hawk up and spit out.

Well, she's right.

That's exactly what an oyster looks like. But lightly breaded and fried this offensive, disgusting thing becomes a succulent morsel for the discriminating palate.

No matter how much I tell Ginny about how great oysters taste, she refuses to try one. No matter how good they smell frying, no matter how artfully they are displayed on the platter, no matter how colorful the garnish, she absolutely will not taste one.

She will never experience the wonderful texture, nor savor the flavor.

As I watched the knights battle and the ducks feed in the park, I compared the Christian life to eating that first oyster. And to sex. And to tasting honey.

To experience the joy the skeptic must make a total commitment to Christ with no holding back. We hear about the joys of sex but until we go whole hog and

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experience it first hand, nothing anyone has told us about beforehand accurately conveys the joy.

And it takes total commitment, not dabbling, because no one can go back to being a virgin again.

I think of the Christian life in such terms.

Jesus is my Lord — or He is my nothing.

Regarding honey, the initiate can describe the experience as well as he's able. But if I tell you that this yellow stuff is an excretion of buzzing, six-legged bugs, while my description may be more or less accurate, you will never know the sweetness of honey till you taste it yourself.

I think certain things do prepare us for that final plunge.

We see the honey's golden color, we smell the oysters frying, we watch other people enjoying the feast, we kiss and hunger for whatever comes next.

There's a spiritual parallel in those things too.

We encounter some godly person and think, "She has something I don't have". We feel a hunger that can not feed on this land's bread. We detect a haunting aroma. We hear a strand of music or an encouraging word. We see a life lived right before our eyes and it makes us wonder

We feel an attraction to the loveliness of Christ and wish that it were true and real.

But what if it's a bad oyster?

Those can make your sick.

Real ghastly sick.

A lot of people seem to have gotten hold of a bad oyster when it comes to religion. Made 'em sick. Soured them on the whole deal — with good reason!

To them Christians stink!

St. Paul talked about this problem in one of his letters:

"Now thanks be to God, which... maketh manifest the savor of his knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savor of Christ, in them that are saved,

and in them that perish: to the one we are the savor of death unto death; and to the other the savor of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things? “

Yes, to some people, we Christians stink like dead and rotting meat; other people catch a whiff of life.

Who is sufficient for this?

I think God Himself is the only one who can get us past the crap and give us His own beautiful vision of reality.

We'll never know until we come directly to Christ Himself without reservation.

King Solomon advised his son, “My son, eat thou honey, because it is good and the honeycomb, which is sweet to thy taste: so shall the knowledge of wisdom be unto thy soul: when thou hast found it, then there shall be a reward, and thy expectation shall not be cut off”.

And King David sang, “O taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man that trusteth in him”.

And that's something we only can do for ourselves.

No one else can taste for us.

Tuesday, November 28, 2006

John's Wisdom For Today

Warm The Ear-drops First! Guess how I found that out.

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Wednesday, November 29, 2006

In The Shadow Of The Lighthouse



Up extra early this morning to do exciting things to my website:. It may not sound exciting to many other people but as a writer interested in preserving the history of my hometown, I got a thrill out of doing it.

I uploaded a history of Mayport, Florida, to the Jacksonville History section of the site.

Whoot!

Tuesday evening I called Pete Floyd and Beth Gammill, (they both live in Mississippi) and they gave me permission to post an excellent local history book which their mother, Helen Cooper Floyd, wrote several years ago. It's called *In The Shadow Of The Lighthouse: A Folk History Of Mayport, Florida*.

I've only seen one lone copy of this book and I feared that if it were not preserved, it would be lost. So it was important to me to see it posted online so Mrs. Floyd's research would be available to students and others interested in Jacksonville history.

Mayport is the most easterly section of the city, right at the mouth of the St. Johns River. In ancient days Indians inhabited the area and in the 1500s French and Spanish colonists fought over the strategic site.

The homes of Ms Gammill and Mr. Floyd both suffered extensive damage when Hurricane Katrina hit the

Mississippi Gulf coast and they are still enmeshed in repairs.

Ms Gammill said that before the hurricane she only had a few copies of her mother's book stored away and she's not sure if those few copies survived the storm or not.

Therefore I'm particularly happy to play a small roll in preserving the book.

I scanned the text and photos as an Adobe file and it takes a Looong time to download the 149-page file but, for a person interested in Jax history, it is worth the wait

I've asked my brand new daughter-in-law, a computer guru, to take a look at the file to see if she can revamp it to download quicker. We'll see what happens.

Anyhow, I'm as tickled as can be to add this to my website.

In sadder news, yesterday I received a call from North Carolina asking prayer for Reba, a young lady who attempted suicide over the weekend.

She did considerable damage to herself. Apparently this was a serious attempt and she nearly died; it was only the happenstance of God that her landlord chanced upon her body and called rescue.

I have no idea how to pray in such a case. She's a friend of a friend and I have never met her in person. I find it difficult to pray with any intensity or seriousness for strangers. Maybe that's because I have no vested interest in the outcome and am too self-centered to seek the good for others outside my own little circle.

I treat such prayers as a duty but my heart is not greatly in them.

I'm still learning about intercessory prayer.— and everything else in the Christian life.

Thursday, November 30, 2006

The Tyranny Of Affection

I took my friend Barbara to lunch yesterday after she'd attended the funeral of one of her friends at the old folks home.

Although Barbara herself is well up into her 70s; she needs an aluminum walker to get around. She works with

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a hospice unit, drives old(er) people to doctors' appointments, feeds a man who has to be spoon-fed, and visits sick people in her unit.

Her daily hands-on Christianity puts me to shame

None of these activities are unusual; Barbara has done such things for the 25 years I've known her. But, of course, only her closest friends know she's involved in such ministries because she hardly ever mentions this aspect of her life.

As we drove to the restaurant, I asked her about the problem I'd expressed in Tuesday's journal about having a hard time praying for strangers. I particularly had Reba, the girl who tried suicide, in mind.

"I hardly have time to pray for all the people I know and want to pray for," Barbara said. "When a request comes to pray for somebody I don't know, I just say to the Lord, 'Lord, I don't know this person or the details of the situation they're in, but You do. Please do whatever is best for them.' Then I forget it and move on unless the Lord brings them to mind again".

I confessed that my own prayers for people I don't know do not measure up to that standard. I usually pray, "Lord, I neither know nor care diddle-squat about So And So. But (Name) asked me to pray and I said I would, so I'm doing it. Please, bring honor to Your name in So And So's life. And let (Name) stop bugging me about it".

I told Barbara about Reba's suicide attempt and how several folks from Jacksonville jumped in their van and rushed up to Carolina to see about her. I see the suicide attempt as a control ploy. Had the friends asked me before getting on the road, I would have advised them not to go.

I may not understand the situation but as I see it, the family was in Florida on vacation when a tiff arose and Reba went back north in a huff. She wanted the others to return too, but they stayed.

When they learned of her suicide attempt, in a panic of concern and guilt, they piled in the van and drove day and night to get back

By rushing to her bedside offering comfort and consolation, they are rewarding her for attempting suicide.

What will happen the next time they cross her will? How will she manipulate them now that she's learned a sure-fire button to push to get her own way?

Is their affection and concern for Reba actually a terrible enemy which can do her great and horrible damage?

"Ah, yes," Barbara said, "The tyranny of affection—I see that often at the home".

Sometimes, concerned family members put old folks through hellacious bouts of health treatments, procedures that would be considered torture in earlier days, because the family tries to hold on inordinately. Their affection blinds them to the best interests of the patient.

Other times, it's the old person who uses affection as a weapon of mass destruction to control the behavior of people who love them.

Recognize anybody you know?

I do.

I'll even try twist God's love to control Him.

Sometimes, I think we all try to play on God's love for us by the tyranny of affection.

"Lord, if You really loved me, You'd let me win Lotto this week"

"Lord, if You really care, You'd convert my no-account husband.

"Lord, I love my grown children, make them stay home with me".

"How can You say You love me God, when You let my mother die"?

The tyranny of affection...

We hold it out and expect His love will force the Lord God Almighty, the Creator, the King of the universe, to jump through our hoop.

What's the matter with Him? He won't jump at my beck and call? Doesn't He love me?

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Yes God is indeed love...

Real Love.

Love with a spine.

DECEMBER

Friday, December 01, 2006

Alligators, Crocodiles, Naked Women, Old Diary, New Lawn Mower, & The King James Bible

All the stuff mentioned in this post's title came into play in my life Thursday. Believe it or not, it's all interrelated.

Makes no sense.

But then the happenings in my brain and in my life seldom do.

Downstate where my brother lives (he called yesterday) four sheriff's deputies waded neck-deep in swamp mud to rescue a drunk from the jaws of an alligator. They could not shoot the gator because this happened in the dead of night and they feared hitting the thrashing man, so they entered the swamp and fought off the gator by hand, got the guy back on dry land, and discovered he was drugged high on crack and had wandered into the swamp in a stupor. When they killed the attacking gator yesterday, it measured 12 feet long.

Now, instead of working editing my book, yesterday I decided to read. Since earlier this week I finished Stephen King's latest, *Lisey's Story*, and Stuart M. Kaminsky's. *Denial: A Lew Fonesca Mystery*, I chose to expand my mind with some nonfiction by delving into Adam Nicolson's excellent book, *God's Secretaries: The Making Of The King James Bible*. I'm finding it every bit as exciting as King or Kaminsky!

About 150 pages into *God's Secretaries* I came across a reference to a diary kept in the early 1600s by a young Puritan named Samuel Ward; he mentions his thoughts on seeing an alligator for the first time. It had been captured in Virginia and taken to London for exhibit.

Old diaries fascinate me.

Just last month I published John Whatley's Civil War diary that had been hidden away for 150 years. And for the past 15 years or so I've been working on another project involving an old diary.

So naturally I wanted to see a copy of Samuel Ward's diary.

I began searching on-line and when I found a reference to Samuel Ward's Diary, I clicked on the site to discover that it is mentioned at <http://postednotes.blogspot.com/> in the blog of a young man named Iain MacDonald — who was also reading the same book I am!

Of course I could not resist browsing in his archives where I found this odd, odd bit of information in his April 22, 2006, posting:

The worst crocodile attack in history took place on an island in the Bay of Bengal. In the battle for Burma, over 1,000 Japanese soldiers had been trapped in the mire, cut off from rescue and pounded with artillery and mortar fire by the assembled British forces. As darkness fell, another 'army' of huge and voracious crocodiles was attracted to the swamp by the smell of blood on the tide. All night long the British troops could hear the turmoil in the water as the huge reptiles snapped up the quick, the injured and the dead. By morning the battle was over and just twenty Japanese survivors could testify to the victory of the strangest allies the British have ever had. (PS The Guinness World Records site confirms it.)

I had never heard of such a thing before!

Anyhow, I finally tracked down two copies of that 1600s diary and made arrangements for an Interlibrary Loan to read it.

Even in 1600, Samuel Ward's conscience bothered him about having lustful thoughts.

I identify with that.

While I was on-line I browsed several porno sites looking at naked women. I have this fantasy about a dream girl, a lady between 30 and 60 years old, in a specific pose, with a specific hairstyle, and with a specific expression on her face.

I have no idea why what I envision obsesses me so.

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I doubt if such a person really exists.

My wife says I'm a 67-year-old, dirty-minded, adolescent boy.

Wow, has she got me pegged.

Conscience or no, the easy availability of pornography on-line is a constant pesteration to me, so I can identify with my Puritan brother's struggles from 400 years ago.

Sometimes just knowing that another person struggles with the same temptations helps.

I try to excuse myself by thinking that I'm concerned about ending up impotent and dangling from my impending prostate biopsy. But I know that's rationalization and no excuse for my browsing porno sites.

Oddly enough in my search for Ward's 17th Century .diary, I stumbled across an article by William Martin about his own prostate surgery at <http://www.ahealthyme.com/topic/prostateandme3>

Although Martin writes a light tale filled with good humor, believe me, Stephen King has no corner on horror stories!

But, I'm wandering far from my thoughts as a dedicated Christian wanting to know more about the transmission of the English Bible.

It's all part of the same package.

And my blog purports to show nothing more than what God is doing in one ordinary guy's life, so I do try to be thorough.

On two happier notes: Ginny came home exhausted from an all day meeting in government offices downtown. She expects to get a promotion tomorrow and maybe her Christmas bonus too.

Whoot!

Even though it was not the night for our regular weekly date, we went out to dinner and enjoyed a long conversation about our days' work.

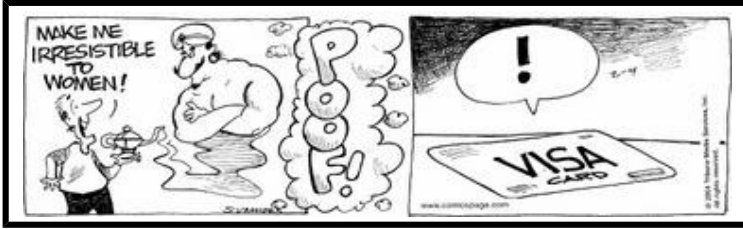
Another cool thing: as I worked late this afternoon, my neighbor passed my window pushing a lawnmower cutting my grass.

I went out to see what that was about and found that he'd bought himself a new lawnmower as an early Christmas present and he was ~~playing with his new toy~~ testing it by mowing his grass and mine as well

I think he should buy a new mower every two weeks!

Saturday, December 02, 2006

Ginny & I Go Christmas Shopping Today



Sunday, December 03, 2006

Be All That You Can Be!

Years ago when I visited my dying friend in the hospital, I asked, "Prince, how are you doing"?

He said, "Well, John, I'll tell you. I'm down to the last few sheets on the roll".

That statement epitomized the crusty world view of my friend Prince Overroad, a grouchy, bitter, sour old man who lived down the street from us.

I haven't thought of Prince in years. Yesterday a lunchtime conversation with my son Donald and his new bride reminded me of him.

Ginny and I relished telling Helen embarrassing tales of Donald's childhood.

When Donald spoke about the relationship between Christianity and masculinity, he brought up a dangerous incident involving Prince.

This morning I dug in the closet trying to find one of my old journals so I could just quote my entry on the day it happened. But all of my earlier diaries were hand written and not indexed. I browsed back as far as August, 1979, when my father died, but I could not locate the entry about the night Prince threatened to shoot his wife, and the cops threatened to shoot me.

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I'll just try to tell this from my own memory. Donald filled in important blanks I'd forgotten, but here's the best I recall:

Bitterness, gall and hatred for the world and all the people in it characterized this sour old man, but for some unfathomable reason, he liked me.

His father had been a North Carolina tobacco farmer and in the 1890s (?) named his son Prince Albert Overroad — named not for the prince of England, but for the farmer's best paying tobacco customer.

Prince sported an odd talent. He remembered every item he'd ever bought, the date he bought it, and exactly how much he'd paid for it.

Much of his conversation consisted of: "Back on July 14, 1943, I bought me an Indian motorcycle; cost me 307 dollars and 32 cents. Sold it in '56 for an even 400 dollars. Used the money to buy That Woman a used Maytag washing machine for 45 dollars, then put the rest of it into a little bit of property over in Arlington..."

"That Woman" was his wife of 50+ years, Nancy. He never referred to her any other way. Than, "That Woman".

Once he even told me all about fluctuations in the price of eggs from 1909 on!

I listened.

Late one hot summer night I was working at my desk in the back room. We had no air conditioning and I worked stark naked beneath a ceiling fan.

Suddenly, out of the blue, with no feeling or thought beforehand, an urgent compulsion came upon me. It demanded, GET UP AND GO OUTSIDE IMMEDIATELY! RIGHT NOW!

I snatched my threadbare robe, which was way too small for me, from the hook on the back of the door and ran barefoot out of the house, down the drive, and into the street.

Here comes Prince stalking along wearing nothing but a pair of boxer shorts. He carried a bottle in one hand and a huge pistol in the other.

"Where you going, Prince," I asked.

"That Woman locked me out again. This time I'm gonna shoot the lock off the damn door then shoot her right between her teats," he said.

He'd been down to the shed on another lot he owned to get the gun.

"Mighty hot night to be doing something like that," I said, "Wouldn't you like to sit on the porch and cool off a bit first?"

He agreed that it was hot and I persuaded him to let me carry the gun for him. I put it in the pocket of my robe.

The pistol's weight made my robe sag to one side.

I got Prince to sit in a rocker on his front porch. I knocked on the door and whispered to Nance to bring us some ice tea or coffee. She said she'd already called the cops.

And here they came: two young patrolmen responding to a complaint of a naked man in the street with a gun.

Guess who was on the steps naked except for a too small, threadbare robe with a pistol in his side pocket.

I reached to pull it out of my pocket to give the first cop.

Bad idea.

His partner whipped out his sidearm and leveled it at me. The first cop reached into my pocket and retrieved the gun himself. They did not need to pat me down because my robe flapped open revealing that I carried no other weapon.

About then Nancy unlocked the door and came out on the porch. She explained that the cops had the wrong drunk pervert.

Prince commented long and loud on the efficiency, intelligence and ancestry of police officers. They hauled him away.

"John, That Woman's nothing but trouble. But you and me, we sure showed them stupid police bubbies a thing or two the other night, didn't we," he later said.

Another vivid memory about my friend:

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One morning Nancy knocked on my door asking me to help her get Prince to a clinic in another city. She'd arranged for him to be committed for treatment but she'd never learned how to drive.

This clinic, world-famous for success with alcoholics and other addicts, catered to movie stars, tv personalities, CEOs, etc. — but it was 120 miles from where we lived.

I found Prince passed out on his bed soaked in filth.

By phone Clinic doctors instructed us not to clean him; they wanted him to wake realizing what bad shape he was in. So I wrapped him in his soiled bedding and I took down their plastic shower curtain to seal the wrappings.

Another neighbor helped me load him in the back of our station wagon and came along with Nancy and me for the 120-mile trip.

Trouble was this neighbor had an inordinate fear of crossing bridges (I've forgotten the psychological name for such a condition). When we approached any bridge on the Interstate, this man would cringe and tremble, or scream in fear and thrash about.

Made for an interesting drive.

Me driving; Nancy crying and praying out loud; the neighbor cringing or screaming; Prince dead to the world but stinking to high Heaven.

The gagging aroma of shit and piss and puke filled the car.

Christian service is so glamorous.

After treatment, my friend survived a few more years till the cancer got him — Down to the last few sheets on the roll.

As I've been writing this, I realize a couple of things Prince taught me about faith.

Serving Christ can take any form He wants. Whether it's as simple as listening to a bore recite the price of eggs, facing an armed drunk naked in the street at midnight, caring for a sick friend, visiting a dying man in the hospital.

When we stop fighting God, surrender unconditionally, and let Christ take His rightful place as King of our lives, then we never know what Christ may enable us to do.

He's boss.

We serve at the pleasure of our King.

I also realized that the abrupt urge, that compulsion I felt that midnight is an unusual thing for me. Of course I have no way of knowing if that were the voice of God or whether I'd just heard some subliminal noise, or whatever.

As a Christian I recognize the supernatural element in our faith; we deal with a risen, living Savior, not a static system.

It's not unheard of for Him to issue direct instructions.

But I think that works the same way it did when I was in the army. Only once did a general speak directly to me; the rest of the time, I just followed common orders. And in the ten years I worked for a large company, only once did the CEO ever speak directly to me; the rest of those years I just followed company policy and procedures.

Why should I expect the Kingdom of God to be much different?

So, no, I do not hear divine voices; I just blunder along minding my own business but keeping an eye out just in case the Boss wants to interrupt my routine.

Nevertheless, whether through mystical experiences, reading the Bible, happenstance, duty, or natural inclinations, I believe that at every moment we brush up against the edges of the unseen world and that God speaks continually.

Only our deliberate selective hearing enables us to ignore Him.

I do not recall that Prince ever made any profession of faith, converted and became a Christian; of course I have no way of knowing his deep heart beneath the whisky.

I do hope that when Prince and I both stand naked before the throne of Christ on the last day, we'll both be shown mercy for our different sins.

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In the meantime, for some reason I think of that Army slogan:

Be All That You Can Be!

Christianity: It's Not Just An Adventure — It's A Life.

Tuesday, December 05, 2006

Fan Mail

Monday morning's e-mail brought this missive from F*** V***:

RE: Aucas

I have never read so much biased and innacurate shite in all my life, you should write for the national enquirer. Fuck me are you stupid, you must be American. Feel free to reply. Please.

Mr. F*** V*** refers to a piece I wrote about five missionaries who were murdered by the Auca Indians of Ecuador on January 8, 1956. All five were associated with Mission Aviation Fellowship.

Their story touched my own spirit deeply, and the motives which led these young men to die for the Aucas interested me.

I wrote this piece about them to inspire readers to a deeper commitment to Christ. I used it as the next-to-the-last chapter in my book *Strangers On The Earth*.

Here is my reply to F*** V***:

*Dear Mr. V****

You are right.

I am an American.

You are also right about my often being biased; that's a sin I easily fall prey to. I'm working on it.

As to inaccuracies in my work, I wrote the Auca chapter about 20 years ago. Since I was not an eyewitness to the events described, I did rely on secondary sources which I believe are reliable.

My notes on this chapter are packed in a box in a storage closet, but as best I can remember, these sources included:

- *Time, Life and Newsweek magazines; The title for my chapter, "The Worse People On Earth" is a quote from Time.*

- *Through Gates Of Splendo*, a book by Elizabeth Elliot, wife of one of the martyred missionaries.

- *The Shadow Of The Almighty* by James Elliot, one of the murdered men; it's a book made up of his diary entries.

- *Jungle Pilot: A Biography of Nate Saint*. Nate Saint was another of the murdered missionaries. I may be wrong but I think his sister either wrote the book or contributed to it. Sorry, but I've forgotten her name.

- I may have also consulted *The Dayuma Story*; a book telling about some of the wonderful things resulting within the Auca Tribe from the martyrs' deaths. Nor sure of the author's name. (Not sure but I may have read this one after I'd already written my chapter).

- I remember using the New York Times Index to locate various newspaper reports about the incident;

- And I also recall at least one phone conversation with an official at Mission Aviation Fellowship (don't remember his name) to confirm details.

I do try to quote and attribute sources accurately — but I can goof.

All of these sources are still available for you to check out for yourself.

I wish you joy and peace of heart in your search.

Sincerely,

John Cowart

Thursday, December 07, 2006

"What Is Truth"?

Tuesday my friend Wes treated me to breakfast at Dave's Diner where a waiter told us they'd been robbed Sunday before last.

The gunman came in ordered a cup of coffee, pulled out a pistol, lined the waiters up, and ordered the cashier to empty the register. One of the guys who'd been working in back saw what was happening through the kitchen door and called the cops on his cell phone. The guy ran out with the money but the cops caught him a few blocks away.

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No one was injured. But the robbery shook everyone up; they closed the diner for the rest of the day.

Wes and I spent the morning discussing prostate cancer, local history, race relations and the Hegelian Dialectic.

Perhaps I should re-word that:

Wes discussed Hegel — I listened.

As I understand it, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a German philosopher of the late 1700s, believed that there is no such thing as absolute truth.



He formulated that our ideas of truth involve becoming, not being; and he taught that our thought processes involved first a thesis, then an antithesis and then a synthesis.

But he said that there is no absolute truth.

To me this statement is self contradictory. When you say, “There is no absolute truth”, then you are stating that premise itself as an absolute truth—which makes no sense.

I’ve probably got Hegel’s idea’s garbled, but then I often garble my own ideas.

Wes, who is a member of the *International Society Of Theologians, Philosophers & Other People Smarter Than John Cowart*, groves on such discussions of ideas.

Wes says that Karl Marx used Hegel’s idea of there being no absolute truth as a cornerstone in developing communism and that Hegel’s thoughts form the roots for much of the materialism, idealism and negativism in the background of today’s general thought atmosphere.

What a downer.

My desk dictionary defines *Truth* as “the body of real things, events and facts... the property of being in accord with fact or reality... fidelity to an original”.

The word *True* is defined as “being in accordance with the actual state of affairs... conformable to an essential reality... the quality or state of being accurate”.

If we do not live in truth, then we generate a world of trouble!

Partial truth just don't cut it.

Say, for instance I were to tell Ginny, “Honey, we've been married 38 years now and I've been true to you 98 per cent of that time”.

Wouldn't she be tickled?

Not hardly — and that's the absolute truth!

On the night in which He was betrayed, during His trial before Pontius Pilate, 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 asked, “What is truth”? and turned away.

But Jesus spoke no further.

That's odd because all the previous evening at the Last Supper, Jesus had talked a lot about truth, especially as truth relates to the Spirit of God:

“When the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth,” Jesus said, “He shall testify of me”.

Later at the supper Jesus said, “Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but... he shall glorify me”.

Jesus equates Himself with absolute truth, with reality, with being in accord with the actual state of affairs.

Once I heard *truth* described as something which does not disappoint you, something which meets your expectations.

Right as that Last Supper was getting started, Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me”

The Way that does not disappoint us.

The Truth of being in accord with reality.

The Life that meets our deep heart expectations.

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Sounds like a winner to me.

Friday, December 08, 2006

Symbols Of Christmas

Yesterday my friend Carol send me an e-mail with this great joke:

Three businessmen died in a car crash on their way home from an office party on Christmas Eve.

The Recording Angel greeted them at the Pearly Gates and said, "In honor of the season, each of you must show me some symbol of Christmas to get into Heaven".

The first guy fumbled through his pockets and came up with a Bic lighter. He flicked it on and said, "This flame symbolizes a Christmas Candle; will that do?"

"Good thinking," said the angel, "Go on into Heaven".

The next man dug into his pocket and pulled out his key ring. He jingled his keys and said, "These symbolize Christmas Bells."

Impressed with the man's ingenuity, the angel admitted him into Heaven.

The third man searched his coat pockets desperately. Grinning sheepishly he lifted a pair of black lace panties up to show the angel.

"And just what to those panties have to do with Christmas," demanded the angel.

"These are Carol's," the man said.

Monday, December 11, 2006

Hodgepodge About A Stellar Weekend

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters..."

The words of that Psalm have been wonderful to live over the past weekend — but they provide little material for blogging. So minor odds and ends comprise today's post:

After a day of heavy shopping Saturday, at 8:47 p.m., Ginny and I dashed out into the backyard in our robes to shiver on the pool deck and watch the red fiery launch of Space Shuttle *Columbia* into the heavens.

Sunday's dawn found me outside in the front yard to see the rare conjunction of three major planets. Astronomers promised that Curley, Moe & Larry would line

up close enough to look like a single bright body in the heavens. Some folks think such a conjunction of planets account for the original Star of Bethlehem observed by the wise men.

I think astronomers like to pull our chain.

I think what happens is: the astronomers rotate the giant Hubble Telescope so it points toward my backyard whenever they announce some comet or eclipse or meteor shower or other spectacular Star Of Bethlehem sort of phenomena.

Then the rascals chuckle to see me standing in the yard freezing in a flimsy bathrobe while they sit inside their observatory warm and dry, drinking chocolate, eating donuts and laughing their heads off at that dumb guy in Florida craning his neck to see thin air without realizing — There are really no planets in the sky.

Yes, it's all a hoax!

If there really were planets up there in the air, then why would our astronauts have to build an *artificial* space platform to stand on?

Answer me that, can you?

Speaking of space exploration, Ginny and I drove out searching for the place the doctor told me to go for my biopsy next week. Turns out that there NINE buildings with the exact same street address!

Thinking that Sunday morning traffic would be light, we wove through a maze searching for this place. We drove amid a frenzy of mall shoppers all searching for a parking space anywhere on this planet.

Took us almost two hours to locate the medical center clinic building!

Good thing we found it before the day we're supposed to actually be there; we'd have never found it in time for my appointment if we'd waited till the same day to go there for the first time.

Speaking of this biopsy thing, we have a lot of preparations to make beforehand, and I'm not sure what shape I'll be in to blog during the week afterward.

Doc says there's nothing to it.

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Of course there's nothing to it from his end of the chainsaw, but from my end... We'll see.

Anyhow, I'll post whenever I know anything for good or ill.

It's all a pain in the ass.

And I'm not speaking figuratively there.

Ginny & I decided to forgo putting up outside Christmas decorations this year; we feel weary and we're keeping things to a minimum till we see how this biopsy thing goes.

I'm nervous — not about the biopsy per se — but about being touched.

I'm so skittish about being touched that for years I have cut my own hair rather than let a barber touch me and I cringe and have to steel myself when a nurse takes my blood pressure. So this is a big deal to me.

However, I realize that I am in God's hands and He'll make sure I get through this minor non-ordeal. People survive being touched all the time.

At least many of them do.

Humm... Maybe I could just go to the airport and stand in front of one of those see-through-your-underwear machines.... Suppose that would work?

Anyhow, when I opened this posting, I left off the next line of the Psalm, the line I count on to get me through whatever lies ahead, even being touched:

“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters — **He restoreth my soul**”!

Wednesday, December 13, 2006

Biopsy Fun

This morning I am happy to report that the physician, his assistant, and both nurses successfully survived my prostate biopsy procedure.

They all are resting comfortably and are expected to fully recover.

I, on the other hand, feel a bit woozy and wobbly.

For one thing my ankle hurts.

Apparently when they tried to turn me over, before they had actually done anything at all to start the procedure, I kicked the edge of the table and whacked my ankle.

Have I mentioned that I don't like to be touched?

I have no idea why I harbor such an aversion to being touched. Ginny speculates that something traumatic must have happened in my childhood but, if so, I have no memory of it.

The doctor gave me four or five shots to relax the general area of interest; but when he started to touch me, I cringed so violently that cramps knotted my shoulders, calves and thighs.

I'm just not a touchy, feely kind of guy.

The medical team backed off and gave me a hefty shot of Dontgiveadamnatole and waited for it to kick in.

I lay there butt naked talking with a young woman from Ohio about northern snow storms for a while.

Then, even though I still gave a damn, my doctor inserted a tv camera (complete with sound boom and dolly) into me and watched the film on his monitor (When my segment runs on American Idol, please vote for me).

He decided to remove some suspect tissue using a spring-loaded device which any scuba diver after grouper would tell you is called a speargun.

This spring-loaded harpoon makes a pinging sound which I found of great interest.

Ping.

Ping. Ping.

Ping. Ping. Ping.

Then a nice young lady helped me find my underwear and get dressed.

I thanked the doctor and nurses for their care for me and I apologized for being such a crybaby wimp. They will tell me the results of the biopsy in a few days.

Then Ginny drove me home and fed me strawberry ice cream and let me crash.

It was not nearly as bad as I expected.

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I did learn a few spiritual lessons from this experience — the main one being that Jesus never cured anybody of old age.

He is Lord even in my discomfort and pain.

God willing, I'll post my thoughts about some of the other lessons tomorrow.

Right now, I just want to go back to sleep...

On my side.

Thursday, December 14, 2006

The Geeks Had A Word For It — Aphenphosmophobia

An old joke asks, "Know the difference between major surgery and minor surgery"?

Minor surgery is anything the doctor does to you;

Major surgery is anything the doctor does to ME!

Yesterday's post about my biopsy neglected to say that the procedure I underwent was a perfectly routine minor affair which my doctor must do for other guys a dozen times a week. It was only my personal skittishness that made it unusual.

I was more of a pain in the ass to the doctor than he was to me.

Ginny knew I'd not feel like doing much after the biopsy, so she brought me a mind candy book to relax with yesterday. She brought me Carl Hiaasen's most recent novel, *Nature Girl*, just released last month.

Hiaasen, a Miami Herald newspaper columnist, writes best-selling novels with a theme of preserving the natural beauty of Florida. He presents kooky characters, bizarre situations and odd world-views with side-slapping humor.

I love his books.

On page 54 of *Nature Girl*, Hiaasen introduces a sleazy character, villain of the piece, who suffers from *aphenphosmophobia*.

I had never heard this word before and I have no idea how to pronounce it — it means a fear of being touched!

Never in my life have I ever met any other person who feels like I do about being touched and here

(I'm writing this about 4 a.m. when the phone rang with a frantic call from my panicked, frightened neighbor saying his home is being broken into. I called 911 to report a break-in in progress. I ran outside barefoot in my robe to hear a loud altercation in their backyard, a fight between the homeowner and the intruder. From our driveway I called police dispatch again and directed officers to the scene. Good thing. Responding officers had gotten lost trying to find the place. Our cul de sac is off the beaten track and hard to locate. I don't know why the neighbor called me instead of dialing the cops directly. Two patrol cars darted up and officers raced into the neighbor's home. They are still there — a normal morning around here).

Now, where was I?

Oh, yes.

Never in my life have I ever met any other person who feels like I do about being touched, and here Carl Hiaasen's novel reveals that not only are there others but that there is even a name for this condition.

I Googled the word *aphenphosmphobia* and found about 800 listings, most of them just lists of phobias. There is even an organization which seeks to cure *aphenphosmphobia*, although I can't imagine why anyone would need curing. After all it is just a background idiosyncrasy in my world.

In fact, I've never thought of it as being a fear, just a quirk, an aversion to being touched. I adjust my life accordingly. No big deal.

Now ours is a hugging, affectionate family and my aversion to touch seldom bothers me around Ginny, our children, or friends. I do not do well whenever we have visited one of those "friendly" churches where members hug and paw and shake hands all the time; such places are agony for me. But since that's an expression of their worship, I endure it whenever I have to go to such a church.

I have noticed that when my duty calls for hands-on compassion, the Holy Spirit seems to lift my aversion so that I can hug and comfort someone in need (see "Tits & Tobacco", in the July 30th, and "Chugging Along With Joy",

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in the November 21st. posts of my 2005 blog archives for two such instances).

So, I manage to function.

Causes me discomfort, but it's no big deal.

It just came as a surprise to me to read that I'm not the only person in the world with this particular quirk. It also surprised me to find that there is a name for it. And it was especially surprising for me to read this the day after the biopsy ordeal (which my mind created for myself).

Weird.

On page 96 of *Nature Girl*, one sexy female character says, "Leprosy is a disease. The fear of being groped is a mental condition".

On reflection, it should not surprise me that I am not the only person to feel as I do. St. Paul once said: "There hath no temptation taken you but such as in common to man".

In King James English the word *temptation* not only means temptation to sin, but the word also carries with it the meaning of problem, or trial or trouble.: So Paul's words can be read as, *There is no problem that you have but that other people go through the same sort of thing.*

He goes on to say, "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".

Or: *God is faithful who will not let you have troubles more than you can handle but will with that same trouble make a way to escape so that you can endure it.*

No matter what trial or trouble or problem or even temptation to sin we face — we are not in it alone.

God will help us to manage, to put up with, to endure, and to eventually triumph.

Well, I see the cop cars have left my neighbor's house. I didn't see them put anybody in the car cage. No shots fired My night has turned dark and silent again. Mine is the only light on in the block. Probably much ado about nothing. I suspect it was not a break-in but a

domestic dispute. I'll call later to pick up the gossip about what happened.

Time for me to put on coffee. Then I'll read some more in the Hiassen book before Ginny wakes up. I can't wait to see how the story ends.

Thanks be to God.

Saturday, December 16, 2006

Biopsy Phone Tag

The doctor told me to call Friday morning to learn the results of the biopsy.

I waited all morning then called about 10:30 a.m.

No results in yet.

The nurse who answered the phone guessed that the tissue samples, or the lab reports, got entangled and trapped in the hundreds of thousands of Christmas cards and packages flooding the U.S. Postal Service.

She told me to call back later.

I spent my time waiting by browsing porno sites looking for photos of ladies in (or mostly out) of red negligees or Santa outfits; I plan to blend these into a festive Christmas screensaver.

I called the doctor back about 3 p.m.

Still no word.

The lady said the office might call me back if they heard anything before 4:30 when they close for the weekend.

I continued my quest for Santa ladies.

4:30 passed.

I can call again sometime Monday.

I'm going to have a very interesting screensaver.

Sunday, December 17, 2006

A Moving Experience

Of all the strange, beautiful and even miraculous events associated with that first Christmas, to me one stands out as more miraculous than any of the others.

I refer, of course, to the Flight Into Egypt.

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Modern manger scenes compress the events surrounding the birth of Christ. The star, the shepherds, the inn, the wise men, the slaughter of the innocents, the annunciation, the circumcision, John The Baptist, angels, Simeon, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, Anna, gold, frankincense and myrrh — it all gets jumbled together in our minds and consolidated as though it all happened in one silent night.

Bible scholars tell us that these events actually took place over a span of two to four years.

This morning I've been thinking about the Flight Into Egypt because on Friday my daughter and her boyfriend moved in together from their separate apartments into a new home. And on Saturday Donald and Helen moved from their separate apartments into their new home.

Eve hired professional movers.

Six or seven of Donald and Helen's friends volunteered to help them move.

These young men — strong, handsome and pure-hearted to a man — spent their entire Saturday lugging boxes, beds, and books up and down stairs. They loaded a U-Haul, two pickup trucks, an SUV and a van with stuff to move across town.

Ah yes, as the Scripture says, "Greater love hath no man than that he helps some dumb friend move just a week before Christmas"!

Or something like that.

To complicate matters, the previous owners of Donald's home were moving their stuff out of the house at the same time as Donald, Helen and friends were moving their stuff into the house.

Ginny and I delivered pizza to the moving crew.

That was our only contribution to the migration. I just don't have the stamina to do more.

But these kicked-ant-hill events got me to thinking about that most unusual of biblical miracles, the Flight Into Egypt.

You see, Moses only parted the Red Sea. Joshua only made the sun stand still. Elijah only called fire down from Heaven — but Joseph moved.

He moved his household in a single night.

Here's what the Bible says:

“Behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream saying, ‘Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him’.

“When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night and departed into Egypt: and was there until the death of Herod...”

Wow!

Talk about a miracle!

Ever move anywhere with a baby?

I remember how it was just going across town to visit Grandma.

I'd load the car with a contraption called a Porta-Crib. Then strapped the baby in a car seat. Then there was the diaper bag, the teddy bear, a case of Similac, bottles, squeaky toy, change of clothes, lawn mower, pop-up books, fishing gear, bottle warmer, blankie, and a partridge in a pear tree — all the stuff it takes to go **anywhere** with a baby.

So, here's Joseph, sound asleep, and this angel appears telling him to pack and move that same night.

No indication that this angel told Mary anything.

Joseph got the job of informing her.

“Honey, wake up. We're moving to Egypt”.

So the couple begin loading their donkey with car seat, Porta-Crib, diaper bag, etc. etc.

Of course the insane jealousy of the child-killing king spurred them with a bit of incentive, but this young couple moved whatever they owned.

Yes, they moved.

By themselves.

In a single night.

Right at Christmas time.

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It's a shame they didn't have good friends like Donald's and Helen's to help.

Monday, December 18, 2006

Curbside Beauties

After breakfast with Donald and Helen Sunday, Beauty and I visited their new home (which they moved into Saturday) and while there, we browsed in the boutique for goodies both for ourselves and to carry to the mission.

What we call "the boutique" other people might call curbside trash.

People throw out amazing things, especially when they move from one home to another. Ginny collected a slew of toys kids in that household had outgrown; she'll sanitize them and take them to the mission for poor children.

We also gleaned (gleaners is a biblical word which sounds so much better than dumpster divers) pots and pans and dishes and kitchen utensils and all sorts of household items. It's not too unusual for people who lost their homes to a fire to show up at the mission needing absolutely everything from scratch. For years we have collected such things from curbside, washed and cleaned them, then distributed them to the poor.

Please, instead of throwing your castoffs in the garbage, take it to some mission in your city. There are people desperate for just normal household items.

At various missions I've met women who escaped abusive relationships with nothing but the clothes on their backs and the baby in their arms. To get reestablished in life they've needed something as simple as a can opener. So why throw your used items in a landfill when you can help the poor at no cost to yourself?

Beauty and I have enjoyed some thrilling adventures while boutique shopping and once I aided a young artist in getting his own show at an art museum because he was kind to me when he found me going through his trash. He had no idea in the world that the bum rummaging in his garbage can knew a museum official.

You may enjoy reading about one of my adventures in one of my old journal entries at John's Great Brassier Hunt.

When our kids were little we taught them to ~~dumpster~~ ~~dive~~ glean curbside treasures for one mission or the other. Once when Patricia was about six, she found a mannequin hand for displaying rings in the trash; her find thrilled her so that she announced to the family, "When I grow up, I want to be a bag lady".

Yesterday as Beauty and I were just leaving for lunch, Patricia and Jennifer called all excited about finding an early Christmas present for me in a curbside trash pile.

They brought it over immediately.

The girls know that pictures and models of old clipper ships interest me because when my sight was better I constructed models of these. So when they saw a huge sand casting of a clipper ship, they knew I'd love it.

The casting weights close to a hundred pounds.

It is a signed work by renowned artist Charles Faust whose sand cast murals graces museums, zoos, airports and other buildings all over the country. — Darn, I wish my camera worked. When it gets repaired I'll post a photo.

This is real art treasure and I'm so thankful the girls found it for me.

After the girls left, Ginny and I went to Georgie's BBQ, one of Jacksonville's best, for lunch. Because we arrived at an off hour, few customers were in the place. After we ate, the waitress gave us our bill (we qualify for the decrepit discount) but as we sat sipping tea and talking about books, the girl came back to our table.

"You two are the nicest people I've ever met," she said. "I just had to tell you that".

This surprised us to no end. We had done nothing at all out of the ordinary with this young woman. We have no idea what impressed her so; maybe other customers had given her a hard time that morning. We mentioned that we are just common, ordinary, run of the mill Christians, but that wouldn't account for the girl's reaction to us.

Odd.

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As we drove away, we talked about the courtesy of God in dealing with us and wondered if the young lady had glimpsed some dim reflection of that in our demeanor.

It was just a strange thing to happen.

Sunday night Beauty and I walked the streets of Riverside and Avondale enjoying Luminary Night — that's always the thing we enjoy most about the Christmas season. (I busted my camera so the photo is a web shot).



Years ago the Riverside Avondale Preservation Society began encouraging people in the area to put out Luminaries on a specific night.

Now thousands and thousands of white paper bags holding a candle anchored in a bed of

sand line area streets on Luminary Night.

And thousands and thousands of people roam the streets enjoying wholesome fun.

The event grew grassroots and everybody celebrates exactly as the fancy strikes them. Some people throw open their homes to all passers-by. Others serve cider and cookies to anyone passing. You are welcome to sit on porches to watch the impromptu parade.

Everyone dresses as they see fit. Some girls fill tight sweaters (I noticed). Some folks wear tuxedos and evening gowns. Some dress as Santa or giant chickens. Some hold hayrides pulling open trailers filled with kids who toss wrapped candy to the crowds.

A number of people greeted Ginny and me by name although we had no idea of who they were or how they knew us.

There is no order to the parades because everybody decorates as they please and drive where they will. Dozens of bicycle clubs, each with hundreds of riders

cruise the streets. All the bikes decorated with Christmas lights travel in packs.

We saw one kid on rollerblades cruising with a bike club; he held bicycle handlebars with a headlight out in front of him. That looked so funny!

We saw golf carts loaded with revelers. Some guys driving riding mowers pulled garden carts filled singers. Several churches sported enormous living manger scenes and you could feed the donkeys straw or give the sheep drinks of water out of hand-held paper bowls.

Garden parties abound and folks are likely to invite strangers in.

The Family Bible Church of Ponte Vedra brings in a terrific choir to perform on the lawn of a member; huge crowds sing along with the choir.

A formally dressed string quartet played hymns in one yard; a guy with a trumpet played Rudolph from the back of a passing pickup truck. Square dancers dotesy doed in the back of another.

We saw no sign of rowdiness or drunkenness anywhere in the throngs. When traffic tangled, someone or another would step off the curb and direct traffic till the snarl cleared, then he'd move on about his own touring.

There seems to be no organization. It's just a matter of people being there just because they enjoy what they are doing in an outpouring of simple courtesy and good will as everybody does their own thing.

Here goes an ATV with moose antlers mounted on the front. There goes a horse-drawn carriage. When floats pass on the avenue, the kids engage in a candy war flinging peppermint at eachother (yes, the impromptu parade goes in both directions simultaneously).

Open top convertibles, antique cars, motor scooters, bikes, baby carriages, dads pulling kids in wagons, old folks on walkers...

Back in the '60s we'd call this a Happening.

All this stuff goes on along the main thoroughfares but



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when we strolled off the beaten track onto quite residential streets, cars crept along with headlights off so passengers could better see the luminaries. The paper bags glow with candles as they line the curbs and up the walks to most homes I think the tradition of luminary candles found its roots in the idea of lighting the way for the Christ Child to find His way to your home.



Beauty and I wandered
these quite streets of
happy Christmas for hours
then came home for a
bowl of hot chicken soup.

Can Heaven be much
better?

Tuesday, December 19, 2006

Wise Men (and women) Bearing Gifts

Beauty and I lacked the energy to decorate outside this year as we usually do. Here's a photo of last year's outside display:



But, while we felt decoration-impaired at home, Ginny's office encourages workers to decorate their cubicles for the holidays. So Ginny pulled six or eight beautiful Christmas card fronts which featured the Wise Men off the web, draped them with garland, and posted the caption:

Wise Men And Women Still Seek Him!

I offered her a picture featuring the Wise Men. A picture I find touching. A picture capturing the true spirit of the season.

But, would my beautiful wife use it?

No.

Here is my favorite Wise Men Bearing Gifts picture:

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(See Matthew 2:1-12)

12-24-2002

Why wouldn't Ginny use my picture for her office display?

The woman has no taste.

Monday I took my friend Barbara to lunch and we talked about church stuff.

She said that Liz, a mutual friend, collapsed in her kitchen this morning as she was putting coffee on the stove. Her son found her on the floor and called rescue. They took her to the hospital — Condition unknown.

When Ginny got home from work she told me that one of the ladies there woke up this morning expecting her husband would be up getting ready for work and making coffee.

She found him still in bed beside her.

He'd died in his sleep without making a sound.

He was considerably younger than I am. His wife knew of no previous medical problems at all.

Strange.

Ginny's father called last night to tell her he'd already opened the Christmas gift she sent him. It is so hard for any kid to give a gift to any dad. I used to agonize over what to give my father when he was alive. But Ginny hit right on target this year; in an antique store here in Jacksonville she found a bronze plaque from some turn-of-the-century machine.

And this plaque had Jack's name on it!

I think the thing dated to about 1909 and it came from some kind of huge boiler or pump, maybe it was once on a train engine, but it had her dad's namesake in large letters corroded green with age.

That just pleased him to no end.

He seemed really thrilled and that pleased Ginny to no end.

Relax kids, we dads are easier to please than you will ever imagine.

Yes, we have it all.

We've done it all.

We've seen it all

We know it all.

But don't despair — You are what pleases us.

Oh, by the way, no word about my biopsy results yet.

Sufficient to the day...

Wednesday, December 20, 2006

The Ramp From Hell

(First An Update: My doctor's office called asking for Ginny and me to come in together tomorrow to discuss the results of my biopsy; we'll know soon).

Tuesday I enjoyed breakfast with my friend Wes and lunch with my daughter Jennifer. What with one or the other of them driving, I rode hither and yon all over Jacksonville most of the day.

Wes and I get together a couple of times a month to talk about theology.

Jennifer reminded me about one time a few years ago when Wes & I ended up literally rolling in dirt on the ground laughing so hard that neither one of us could catch our breath:

I don't remember just how I met the lady, but as I roamed to and fro over the surface of the earth I'd met this old cripple lady who could only get around by using one of those motorized wheelchairs — but she could not get out of her house without being carried.

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Since being a Christian involves a little more than just talking theology, Wes and I decided to build a wheelchair ramp for her.

Do I need to tell you that neither one of us had ever built a wheelchair ramp before... Although, as an experienced carpenter, I did actually hang a picture once.

No problem.

I once saw a preacher's car with the bumper sticker that said, "My Boss Is A Jewish Carpenter".

Since Jesus was a carpenter and Wes and I are both Christians, it naturally follows that we'd be able to construct a wooden wheelchair ramp in no time at all...

That's logical. Isn't it?

Not necessarily.

We bummed plywood, 2x4s, Krispy Kreem Donuts, and other essential building materials.

We measured and estimated we could nail together a simple ramp by noon.

Our first try at the ramp proved so steep mountain climbers would not be able to get up it; I understand that people slide down ski jump ramps like that at Aspen.

Our second try was not long enough to reach the ground — which made for a four foot drop at the end.

Then to anchor the thing at the lady's front door, we had to drill holes in concrete which had been poured around 1930; it was real concrete, the kind with flint pebbles embedded in the mixture.

Off to Home Depot to buy a new drill — burned out the motor in the old one.

Our third ramp ran both steep and long. If the old lady had started down that thing, she would have careened across traffic into the bushes on the other side of the road.

Three days later into our construction project, the ramp worked but wobbled. The Disney people wanted to buy it to add to their Pirates Of The Caribbean ride in Orlando.

We tacked cross braces underneath to stabilize the structure. We glued rubberized mats to the deck to slow down run-away wheelchairs. We nailed a banister in place.

Then we stood back smoking our pipes and admiring our handiwork.

“Wes,” I said, “I have just had a vision of Jesus.”

“What!?”

“I just had a vision of Jesus. He was wearing a leather carpenter’s apron and He spoke directly to me.”

“O Yeah? And just what did He say?”

“He said that if anybody ever asks, say that it was atheists who built the ramp. He doesn’t want His name associated with it”.

Thursday, December 21, 2006

WWAD — What Would Abraham Do?

Some people drive cars with What Would Jesus Do bumper stickers.

As a kid I used to read Captain Marvel comics, so I think I know what He’d do in my situation.

He’d shout, “Shazam!” and the problem would be fixed.

I’ve tried that. Shazam! Shazam! Shazam! — Doesn’t work for me.

But now Abraham, he’d understand the problem I face.

According to Genesis, chapter 18 verses 11 and 12, when Abraham was over 90 years old, three angels appeared unto him with hard words.

They told him he was going to be hard enough to father a child!

When his wife heard that, “She laughed within herself saying, ‘After I am waxed old, shall I have pleasure?’”

And then maybe Abraham (or maybe it was Sarah) said Shazam or something, and she ended up pregnant.

What brings that section of Scripture to my mind?

Now, at our age neither Ginny nor I desire another baby, but we do relish joyous recreational sex.

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When we went yesterday to the doctor's office, my biopsy report said:

*"Prostatic Adenocarcinoma. ... **The Gleason score of your cancer is 6**, Prostate cancer with a Gleason score of 6 is considered **low risk**. It tends to grow faster than cancers with Gleason scores of 2,3,4, and 5 but is not as aggressive as cancers with higher Gleason scores. About 50% of low-risk cancers will spread beyond the prostate within 10 years".*

The doctor presented Ginny and me with five options about how to handle this.

Each option comes with certain advantages and disadvantages...

Mostly disadvantages.

Ever lace up an old shoe?

A shoe with the end of the shoestring frayed and missing that little stiff tip?

It's just about impossible to get it through the grommet in the shoe.

If you are too young to know what I'm talking about, get down on your knees and thank God!

I pray you will never understand!

Abraham would have understood.

Genesis 18:14 asks, "Is anything too hard for the Lord"?

I know that quote is taken out of context, but I find it appropriate because Ginny and I will face some interesting decisions over the coming months.

What Would Abraham Do?

Oh, here's a bit of bizarre biblical news:

In the doctor's waiting room, I read an article from the December issue of *The Florida Frontier*, a monthly student newspaper.

It seems this music recording company (which I will not dignify by naming) has recorded a tape on which 250 famous actors, actresses, and singers speak roles as characters in various stories from the Bible.

For instance, on this tape Samuel L. Jackson speaks as the voice of God.

And, the article says, “Due to last-minute casting, Michael Jackson was the only choice for the voice of Eve”.

Really?

Friday, December 22, 2006

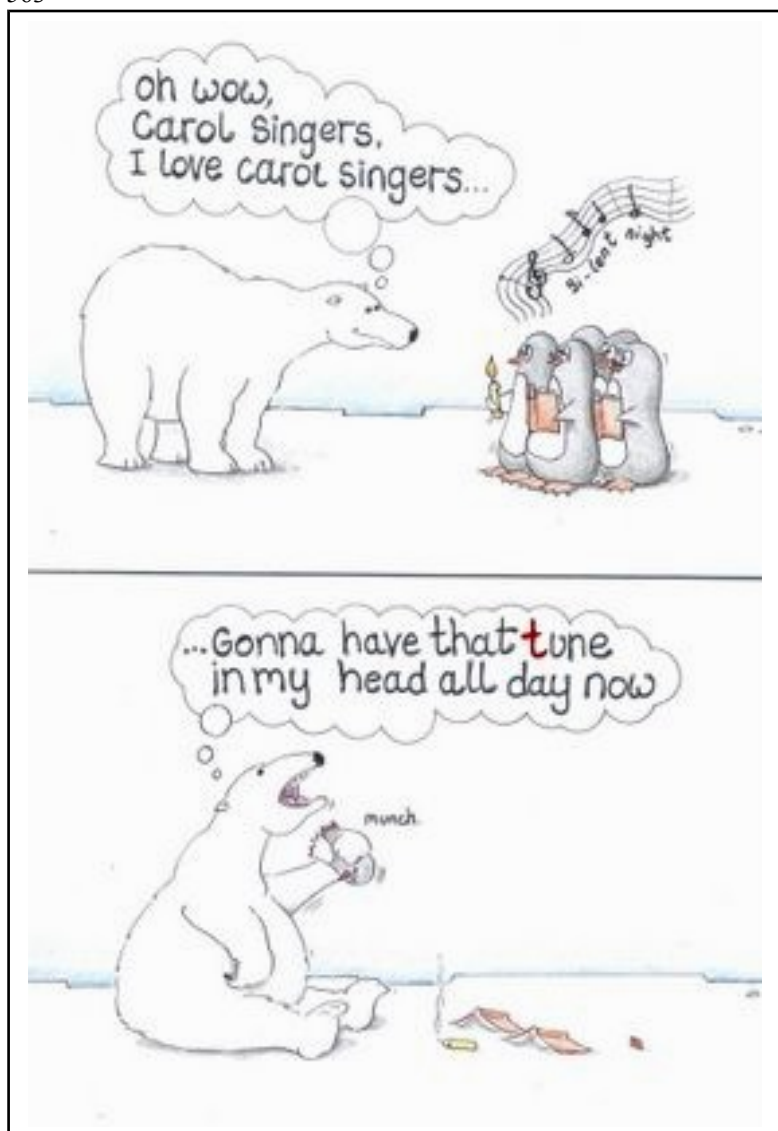
Need A Lift?

Practically every morning I visit the website of Plutos The Bubbleman at <http://www.simunation.blogspot.com/>

He is a yachtsman from London who owns neither a tv set nor a telephone. Sometimes he posts intriguing seascape photos (I've saved several as desktop backgrounds).

But almost every day, he draws cartoons which are Well, let's say interesting.

Here are two of my favorites:





Saturday, December 23, 2006

Christmas On My Computer

Friday I met some of our kids for breakfast up at Dave's Diner to celebrate birthdays (two this week) and to plan if or where the whole family would attend a midnight service on Christmas Eve.

We all want to go together.

We all want to go different places.

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We all agree that we want to attend a church with stained glass windows. Negotiations are ongoing.

After breakfast they went shopping; I returned home to my computer. I began to realize what a huge role it plays in my life now. Even in how I celebrate Christmas.



My books sell online; I order gifts online; I check football schedules, weather reports, and tv listings online; I send e-mail cards; I enjoy blog friends online. I even decorate online.

I live a virtual life.

In a recent past blog I mentioned how I collected a set of online photos of ladies in (or mostly out of) Santa suits to make a screensaver for my computer.

Well, while waiting for Ginny to get off work and start our long Christmas weekend vacation, I put that screensaver together.

I did another one featuring winter scenes in Currier & Ives prints.

Ginny stayed at her office catching up chores before taking off, so I made still another screensaver featuring stained glass windows.

Got to keep myself amused somehow.



First I did a Google search for *stained glass windows* — that turned up guys wanting to sell me one. Then I did a search for *Our Church Windows* — that turned up better pictures.

I'd select a photo, right click to Save As into a folder, then drag and drop all the windows in the folder into my Make Your Own Screensaver program

My Christmas screensavers turned out great!



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The window above is a Biblia *Pauorum* or Poor Man's Bible window at Canterbury. I think it dates back to the 1300s.

The idea was that while poor people might not be able to read, they could learn the Gospel from the bright panels of the window which depict different Bible stories.

In the 1600s Roundheads under Olive Cromwell smashed stained glass windows in many English churches; they felt the windows constituted a subtle form of idolatry. Being an iconoclast myself, I think they had a point. God is Spirit and too great to be captured in mere images; nevertheless, I appreciate the windows as an art form.

If you prefer non-religious stained glass windows, check out the giants of learning and literature windows at Harvard University at: <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~memhall/staingls.html>

Anyhow, I dabbled at constructing holiday screensavers all day Friday.

The decorations tell a lot about my character.

The dirty old man side of my nature expresses itself in the screensaver of Santa ladies frolicking around a Christmas tree in various states of undress. My interest in quaint antique things shows up in the Currier & Ives saver. And my joy in great art appears in the stained glass windows saver.

Were I a more serious Christian, I doubt if I'd have wasted a day fiddling with any of these ghee haws. I did have serious work to do which I neglected to play with my computer.

I know that I contain a mixture of diverse elements, some ok and some not so nice, but somewhere in this mix the Spirit of God has a toehold making me rejoice and celebrate — appropriately or inappropriately — that the Savior Christ the Lord is come.

That's why this particular window struck my fancy:



Sunday, December 24, 2006

The Thief In The Grocery Store

I didn't steal anything at all Saturday.

In times past I have stolen money and things. Stealing is a constant temptation to me. Something I struggle with all the time.

But I didn't steal anything at the grocery store yesterday and I've been mentally kicking myself ever since for not taking advantage of my chances to steal a good haul.

Yes, I regret not stealing the money.

I blew my chance.

Twice!

Here's what happened:

Thinking to beat the crowds, Ginny and I rushed to the grocery store right after breakfast.

That must have been a great idea — throngs of other Christmas shoppers thought the exact same thing.

After we loaded our cart with essentials, Ginny approached the deli section to buy sandwich makings for easy meals over the holiday. She drew number 25 from the machine and waited to be served.

A young woman ahead of her held number 22.

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The deli ladies were serving Number 18 or so. Not wanting to clog the area more, I pushed our cart out of the congestion and parked beside the cart belonging to young Miss Number 22.

Her purse lay open in the cart, cash, credit cards, cell phone car keys all clearly visible. She perused the deli case choosing whatever. Engrossed in her shopping.

Temptation lured me.

We paid our homeowners insurance and property taxes this week. We had to draw money out of the credit union in order to buy groceries and here, inches from my hand, lay a bag full of cash.

I looked this way and that.

No one paid me the slightest bit of attention.

I glanced at the ceiling. No sign of a security camera.

We could really use that money.

I wanted that money.

I wanted it bad.

Miss. 22's number came up. She began a lengthy discussion with the counter clerk. She brought back a party platter and dropped it in her basket.

I said, "Excuse me Miss. But it's really dangerous to leave your purse unguarded in your cart.. Anyone could take it while you're shopping".

She thanked me in a huff — if that makes sense.

Really snotty about it, she said, "This is a nice neighborhood".

I said, "Yes it is, but bad people can be in good neighborhoods".

Obviously I offended her.

She went back to the counter and resumed her conversation with the clerk leaving her purse right where it had been.

She paid no attention to my warning.

Last week a friend described a woman he works with; He said, "John, she's not mentally retarded. She's not mentally unbalanced. She's not emotionally retarded, and

she's not emotionally unstable. She's just plain dumb-ass stupid"!

That's the way I felt about Miss. 22.

I mentally kicked myself for not stealing her money.

She deserved to be robbed.

Besides, she acted snotty.

I felt I should have ripped her off big time.

Once I read about another thief who cut through two padlocks to steal a garden tractor. When the cops caught him, he justified his action by saying that the owner did not really want to keep the tractor. "If he'd really wanted it, he'd have locked it up better," the thief said.

Anyhow, I did not steal Miss. 22's cash although I wanted to badly — but I mentally kicked myself for not taking advantage of my temptation.

I regret not stealing the twit's money.

Most of the time I just drift into doing wicked things hardly aware that I'm being tempted to sin. But not taking snooty Miss. 22's money presented me with a conscious decision to make.

Another such decision followed right on the heels of that one:

In the checkout line the cashier made a mistake.

She overcharged us on one item by two dollars.

Of course, Ginny caught the overcharge and called the cashier on it. With her accountant background, Ginny keeps track of what rings up on the register as fast as the clerk rings things up.

Although a line of people waiting to check out stretched behind us, the cashier halted everything to dispute Ginny's correction. She called for a price check only to discover that Ginny was right.

The store was cheating us out of two dollars.

Cashier called for manager.

The line stretched back.

Ginny, cashier and manager consulted disputing the two dollar overcharge.

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I told the bagboy that we also needed a carton of cigarettes.

He strolled over to the customer service counter to get them — while visions of sugarplums danced in his head.

He returned with the \$37 carton of cigarettes, stuffed it in a plastic bag, and dropped it in our cart with the other bagged groceries which had already been rung up.

The cashier had not scanned in the \$37!

In the questioning about the \$2 the store was overcharging us, they were cheating themselves out of \$37 — and nobody noticed this transaction but me.

I looked at the carton of cigarettes in our cart.

I listened to the creeps huff, puff and argue with Ginny over two dollars. I looked at the carton of cigarettes again.

Unless I said something, we would walk out of that store with a free carton of cigarettes.

Finally the two buck dispute was resolved. Ginny, of course, was right. They gave her her two dollars overcharge back.

The manager stalked away muttering about us delaying the long line of customers.

I was so tempted.

So very tempted.

But, I halted the cashier and called her attention to the carton of cigarettes which had made it through checkout without being scanned.

We paid the full price.

But again I mentally kicked myself for being such a sap.

The grocery chain has more money than I do. They can afford the loss. They were snotty in the way they handled us. They tried to cheat us out of our two dollars; why shouldn't I cheat them out of their \$37?

My mind supplied a million reasons why I should have kept my mouth shut and walked out of that store \$37 richer.

I've been mentally kicking my own ass all day for not taking Miss 22's cash, for not staying silent and walking out with the cigarettes.

I think I've mentioned before in this journal that petty theft is one of my many temptations. It is a particularly strong one. I'm constantly lured to steal things.

Oh, I'd never rob a bank — that takes guts.

I'm not that kind of thief.

No, my forte is being a petty, sneak thief — the sly, conniving, nasty kind who wants to steal, but to justify my stealing.

I used to think that as a Christian and a writer, my temptations would be towards noble, mental sins — you know, pride, vanity and all that lot.

But actually, I find that my real temptations are not to such wimpy sins but to squalid, dirty, nasty, shameful sins of the flesh.

So, why am I writing about sordid temptations on Christmas Eve?

The Scripture says, "The Father sent the Son to be the Savior of the world".

Peace of earth, goodwill, shepherds, wise men, and all that jazz are all well and good — but the main business of Christmas is sin.

The angel said, "Thou shalt call His name Jesus because he shall save his people from their sin".

Within myself, I am all the time so inclined toward squalid sin that it took an act of God to redeem me.

That's the message of Christmas — that God did act. That He lowered Himself to become human in order to die for our sin on the cross. Yet as the living God personified in flesh, He rose from death.

All that because John Cowart is a dirty, low-down sneak thief.

All that because you are whatever you are and you do whatever you do .Everybody has different temptations

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just as we all have different tastes in music, but we all sin and fall short of the glory God has for us.

Yet, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

How about that?

Merry Christmas from John Cowart, an ineffective thief.

Monday, December 25, 2006

Teacher Says, “Every Time A Bell Rings, An Angel Tinkles”.

Yesterday, I poured a cup of coffee on my parents’ grave.

I don’t understand why I do a lot of the things I do.

As is my custom on Christmas Eve, I drove out alone to the cemetery where my father and mother and grandmother are buried to visit their graves. I worked with a string trimmer, rake and broom to tidy up the gravesites. I edged the stones and raked fallen leaves.

I remembered.

And I cried.

I cried because my parents were always so disappointed in me.

Remembering how much my folks loved their morning coffee, I carried a cup with me and poured some on each grave as though I were some pagan making an offering to the dead.

Why did I do that? I certainly don’t believe they are thirsty or in need of any earthly thing. I have attended pagan funerals where mourners threw offerings into the grave, money, cigarettes, liquor. But such a practice plays no part in my own belief system, yet here I was pouring coffee on my parents’ grave.

The Scripture says that it is appointed unto man once to die and after that the judgment.

Although I tried hard to dwell on good things they had done for me, the memories that welled up, were all those about their disappointment in me even when I had done no particularly wrong.

When I was a Boy Scout, I won scads of awards; never once would my parents attend an awards function. They were so afraid I might do or say something that would embarrass them.

When I became an adult, my mother refused to read the articles I wrote because she found me such an embarrassment.

Poor thing.

My mother embarrassed easily.

She even lied about her age — by one day.

Going through her papers after her death I found that, while she always claimed her birthday fell on November first, she was actually born on October 31st. I'll bet she lied about that one day difference so nobody would know she was born on Halloween.

Oh well, I did what I could for them while they lived and now I visit their graves on Christmas Eve each year although I don't believe in flowers or such for the dead, yet I do it.

And, I poured out a cup of coffee on the graves as some sort of sign of respect. I don't understand why I did that.

To get to the cemetery involves a drive through the toughest section of town. Bums and derelicts and winos and nut cases huddled in many doorways, in bus stop shelters and on park benches.

Although I must say the neighborhood improvement tactics must be working because only one prostitute accosted me as I drove past. Used to be there'd be dozens on a Sunday morning. Once a telephone repairman was up a pole at Eighth & Main when he felt something tug on his boot. He looked down to find a girl had climbed the pole to solicit him!

When I was younger and more involved in hands-on mission work, This was my area to serve among incredibly poor people. Families living in cars. Men dying in the streets. Women ravaged. I served in a soup kitchen a couple of times a week, distributed clothes, and other such goodie goodie stuff.

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Don't know that it did anybody much good but it was what I could do.

Made me feel superior if nothing else.

Driving from the cemetery, I felt a longing to be serving in that world again.

The greatest honor I have ever been paid was back when I taught Bible studies on Saturday nights at a dirt-floor mission. My car broke down and I called the director to say I could not make it to teach. He put it to a vote among the 20 or 30 men at the mission offering them the choice of having a free Saturday night or sending someone to pick me up and bring me in to teach a Bible lesson.

They voted for the Bible study!

Humbling.

The greatest honor I've ever had.

Speaking of Bible study:

A slew of our children attended the Christmas Eve service with Beauty and me and that pleased me so. But afterwards, as Ginny and I watched the late local news, the anchorman said, "Tonight for Christmas, thousands of people are gathered in Jerusalem where Jesus was born".

Really?

In Jerusalem?

Later, we watched the tail end of *It's A Wonderful Life*:

"Teacher says every time a bell rings, an angel tinkles".

Tuesday, December 26, 2006

No Wimpy Partridges For The Cowarts' Tree

Because Donald and Helen removed most of the work side of Christmas off our shoulders, Ginny and I enjoyed the easiest, smoothest Christmas Day I ever remember.

Although they have not even finished unpacking yet, the kids hosted a buffet breakfast in their newly-purchased home. And we all enjoyed a great time gathered in a circle and exchanging jokes, jabs and gifts.



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I made out like a bandit!

Maggie made me a pipe-cleaner crab (in the tree branches photo). Jennifer gave me peppermint candy (an earlier blog mentions the sand casting she and Patricia gave me). Eve & Mark gave me an art book featuring optical illusions. Donald & Helen presented me with some fine quality pipe tobacco — and two life-sized black vultures.

With those bright ribbons round their necks, my vultures look just so damn Christmassy! (I think these gift birds relate to my interest in bird watching rather than to my recent medical tests. Although with that crowd, who knows?)

As usual Ginny & I did not exchange gifts. And my three closest friends Barbara, Wes & John don't exchange Christmas gifts either, although during the year if one sees something the other will like, we give it but we have just outgrown formal gift-giving just because of some holiday.

Patricia did not show up for Christmas with us or call. We expected her and I don't know what happened so anything I say about that would be pure speculation. But, being a dad, I speculate plenty.

Ginny and I have tried to establish our own home as a Crap Free Zone where people can come and go and do as they wish without having to justify anything to anybody but know they will be accepted — although maybe teased unmercifully by the others.

We seek to live in reality without game-playing.

So I was very pleased to see that Donald, Helen and Maggie are starting that same sort of thing in their new marriage.

Because they had other family things they wanted to do, at 11 o'clock, Donald said, "There's no place like home for the holidays, so go home. You've got your loot. Now pack it up and get out. We've got other things to do".

I taught him that.

We all packed our goodies and left in good will and joy having enjoyed a wonderful Christmas morning together.

Beauty and I retired to our home to nap, listen to Christmas music, gloat over our treasures, and watch football.

I understand that later in the day, a van load of the others drove down to Gainesville to see about Patricia, but I haven't heard back any details yet.

Right now, the most pressing issue in my life is where to display my two vultures to the best advantage.

Should I keep the festive ribbons or remove them?

Decisions. Decisions.



Wednesday, December 27, 2006

A Good Day -- With Bad News

Tuesday Ginny and I spent an idyllic day at home fiddling with things that are too long.

She cut off and hemmed two pairs of cargo pants I'd bought for a dollar at a garage sale. Her sewing machine hummed as she shortened the legs. I worked at my desk formatting a book manuscript that I need to shorten by 200 pages (ever notice that I write long?).

We'd break to smoke and sip coffee and talk over our projects.

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She stored away Christmas presents and wrapping paper for next year (The kids tease us about recycling Christmas wrappings; we have one set of gift bags still in use that are dated 1995).

We discussed where to put the three new cat statues people gave her, and the best location for my two vultures.

After lunch, we strolled through the park and fed squawking ducks. On an island in the pond we spotted a pair of Great Egret.

We rested on a bench with the sun warming our backs as we talked about medical options and character. Beauty revealed facets of herself that I'd never noticed before; after being married for 38 years, I thought I knew the woman but I still discover new and wondrous things about her that surprise and delight me.

As we talked a massive flight of White Ibis circled the pond and landed. Their distinctive curved yellow bills, the long legs trailing in flight, the black wingtips and white wings in the sunlight — a magical sight.

Beautiful.

Delightful.

Then we came home.

To the telephone.

Yes, our youngest daughter missed Christmas with the family because she's been sick. Yes, she felt uncomfortable about coming home because she could not afford both college and presents (as though the lack of presents would have mattered).

But complicating the situation, it seems as though she is on drugs again.

When she was a teen, she went through a bad patch with drugs. She conquered her addiction and thrived for a while excelling in studies and maturing in outlook.

I'm so proud of her and so concerned for her.

I understand that it is not unusual for addicted people on the road to recovery fall off the wagon a few times before finally winning their battle. But each setback is enormously painful.

Ginny and I ponder how we can help her without enabling the drug habit.

Of course, she has not asked for our help yet.

So on one level it is none of our business.

She's a grown woman and free to make her own decisions and live her own life apart from us. But at the same time, she's our little girl, our little sis, and the whole family grieves that she's in danger.

Yes, the shit she's into may well kill her.

We can set an example of a happy life for her, we can pray for her, we can practice tough love, we can encourage, praise and support — but the ultimate choices and the ultimate consequences are hers.

Concerning the pair of vultures:

Beauty and I decided to separate the pair. The inside vulture, still with ribbons, broods atop Fancy's cage (birds of a feather, you know). Our outside, vulture, minus ribbons, will perch on the back rain gutter.

I really wanted the outside vulture to sit on the chimney, but there it could be seen from the street and in our neighborhood some citizen might try to shoot it off the roof, so we nixed that idea.

I wonder where Martha Stewart would place hers?

I'll have to write and ask her advice.

Thursday, December 28, 2006

We Are Party People!

"You're doing what!" my eldest daughter asked when she called catching us just as we were walking out of the house.

I explained that Ginny and I were off to visit not one, but two libraries.

"You people sure know how to party," she said.

"Think about it," I said. "Can you name anyone you know anywhere who is happier than we are?"

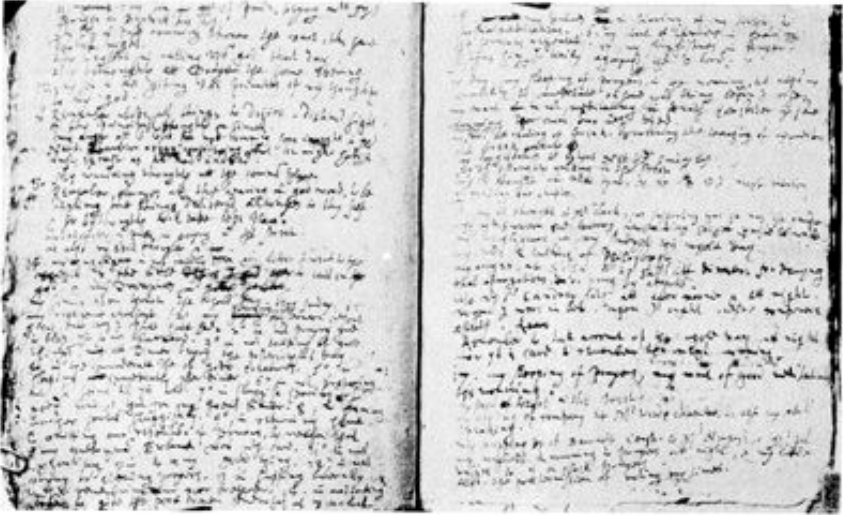
"You have a point there," she admitted.

We visited the first library to pick up some reserve materials being held for me. The copy of Samuel Ward's Diary I'd ordered on interlibrary loan had arrived!

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Whoot!



Samuel Ward

Ward, a Greek scholar, kept a diary between May 11, 1595, and July 1, 1632. I've wanted to read his book for ages.

Ginny and the librarian laughed, they actually laughed, at my excitement over finally getting this important book.

Poor things.

Some people lead such dull, drab lives that they just don't understand excitement.

At Jacksonville's new Main Library, various organizations display dozens of glittering Christmas trees decorated with that organization's theme.

For a treat, I took Ginny to see this colorful holiday library display.

Do I know how to show a girl a good time or what!

This was our first visit to the newly opened library and we discovered that the place actually has several books I

wrote in their collections. One of the books is rare enough to be kept under lock and key to be consulted only in the Florida Room. Isn't that impressive! (Not very. I'm working on a revision of that history to make it available on-line).

I got a kick out of seeing my own works on the shelves.

Doesn't take much to please me.

Here's a photo of Ginny in front of the new Library:



We also checked out several science fiction videos to enjoy over the holiday.

From the library, we drove out to Moon River Pizza where we ran into Dave, Beth & Ray, who formerly lived in our neighborhood. We hadn't met for about six years and enjoyed updating each other on our children's activities and things going on in the neighborhood.

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The trio has taken up kayak fishing. They paddle the shallow-draft boats deep up into the salt marshes where huge redfish spawn out of reach for larger boats. Beth caught a 42-inch-long fish recently!

They said their daughter is off on her first ski trip and they asked about Patricia, the only one of our children they knew. So I bragged about her accomplishments over the past six years.

I briefly touched on Patricia's missing Christmas with us this week and Beth said they'd pray for her. She holds my daughter in fond memory.

I've wondered what triggered this recent problem for Patricia?

I know that for myself, the dirty spirit can use anything to lead me into doing wrong. I'll think, "I feel good, so I'll celebrate by ...". Or, I'll think, "I feel bad, so I'll comfort myself by ...". My end action is the same whatever the trigger, good or bad, that sets me off.

We all fall off the wagon, usually more than once, and the only thing to do is say, "Damn that hurt" and get back on track.

I think that sometimes the Lord deliberately lets me fall just to keep me from being too uppity.

He withdraws His restraining influence and lets me fall flat.

But that's part of life.

It's not fatal.

The Scripture says, "The steps of a good person **are** ordered by the Lord... Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down, for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand".

Anyhow, Ginny and I enjoyed our pizza with our friends then came home to watch a classic video, *The Giant Gila Monster*, a 1950s film in which this big lizard eats these kids running desert roads in their hotrods.

Who says we don't know how to party?

Friday, December 29, 2006

Fret Not

My Scripture reading this morning included the first phrase of Psalm 37 which says, “Fret not thyself because of evildoers...”

I wish the Bible told me exactly HOW I’m supposed to fret not!

Not a clue!

Thursday both Jennifer and Patricia called assuring me that Patricia’s drug addiction is being managed.

We’ll see.

Patty sounded bright and cheerful and optimistic.

But, I worked in a half-way house with drug addicts even before she was born, and I fret. With an addict you can never be sure if you are talking to the person or to the drug. So everything must be heard with cautious optimism or outright skepticism. Especially when dealing with someone you deeply care about, your hopeful heart only wants to hear the best. It tunes out signs of deceit. Besides, over the years, she’s mastered twinning Daddy around her little finger. She knows how to push every one of my buttons.

But, The Lord tells me to Fret Not.

I sure wish He’d have included specific instructions about how to do that. I’m confident that the Lord Jesus will help us get through this but, naturally, I’m leery about the whole process.

Living with faith can be scary.

Oh, in case you haven’t noticed, I stand among the world’s foremost fretters, especially in areas where my children are concerned.

I not only fret for Patricia herself but for all the rest of us as well. Drug use by one member hits the rest of the family like an airplane in the side of the World Trade tower. Collateral damage, I think they call it.

Last night Ginny and I enjoyed an outing with Donald and Helen. They presented me with a packet of tobacco for my pipe — but I won’t be able to smoke it for months. It’s tobacco seeds which I can plant and grow my own.

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I'm about to become a farmer.

Whoot!

We roasted hotdogs over an open fire in their backyard, toasted marshmallows, and talked for a couple of hours while watching the moon rise as the fire died down.

Of course Beauty and I regaled Helen with stories of Donald's childhood designed to embarrass him. Great fun.

We also discussed the impact of Patricia's drug use and we talked about how to protect ourselves from the possible legal, emotional, financial, health and moral implications. Donald seems to be hit harder by this than the rest of us.

We are one injured bunch of bunnies.

We will continue to strive to help Patricia, without enabling her drug habit — but it is really hard to juggle those two bombs in the air. I mean why help pay for an education for someone who's sickening her own brain?

But, that's getting into fretting again.

We also talked about their plans to establish an internet business and about how to market my books more effectively. Looks as though my work-in-progress needs to see print as a hardback. Helen says she will help me design a wrap-around cover — something neither of us have tried before.

My December sales showed a marked increase from the previous quarter but are still nothing to brag about. Many thanks to those of you who bought one of my books; I hope you enjoy my work and find it helpful in your own Christian life..

After we left Helen & Donald's, we drove around to see some spectacular Christmas lights on streets Eve had told us about. One guy had hooked a computer to his light and sound system which caused portions of the lighting to flash and throb in time to the music. Delightful.

Back home, we watched something or another on tv for a while — trying not to fret.

Saturday, December 30, 2006

**Look. Look. See Spot. See Spot Ruin! Ruin,
Spot, Ruin.**

My lawn grows shaggy.

Leaves litter our front yard.

I have not mowed grass since before Thanksgiving.

But I have an excuse.

Our great neighbor, Rex, lets me use his lawnmower because I broke mine when I attempted to mulch a horseshoe that must have been buried in the sand in my yard for decades.

Horseshoes don't mulch.

Anyhow, I borrow Rex's lawnmower whenever my grass gets too high.

Rex's dog, Spot, protects their home from suspicious characters like meter readers, postmen, trash collectors — and neighbors wanting to use the lawnmower.

Spot, a miniature collie no higher than my daughter's Chihuahua, guards his domain like an ankle-high King Kong.

He barks mightily to chase me away when I go over to get the mower — until I scratch his ears, then he turns into a wiggling, fuzzy ball of jelly.

Spot likes to chew things. He will chew anything. He will reduce an aluminum drink can into tiny shreds of metal. And woe be to any plastic toy kids may leave in the yard. Spot chews everything in reach.

Just before Thanksgiving, Rex went out to mow his grass and found that Spot had chewed the lawnmower's starter cord handle to bits.

Without the handle, the spring-loaded mechanism swallowed the length of cord into the guts of the mower.

Rivets held the housing in place so to rewind the cord, Rex would have to drill out the rivets, replace the starter cord, buy a rivet gun, and replace the whole mechanism.

He decided it was less trouble just to buy a new lawnmower.

He used it one time.

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He cut his grass and mine (I told you he is a great neighbor) about a month ago.

Yesterday, I went over to borrow Rex's new lawnmower to cut my own grass again.

Guess what.

Yes, Spot has chewed the handle off the starter cord of the brand new lawnmower!

I think Spot may be in trouble when Rex comes home from work.

The kind of trouble that cuteness won't get you out of.

So, my yard looks shabby because I have not cut my grass — but I have a good excuse.

Funny thing about excuses: Whenever we excuse ourselves about not doing something, by definition, we have admitted that there exists a standard which we have failed to meet, a moral law that we have broken.

Apart from that, there is no reason to ever offer an excuse for anything.

By the same token, whenever we accuse someone else of doing us dirt, then we also admit the existence of a standard, a moral law, which the other person should have met — but didn't.

If they had done nothing wrong, then we'd have no reason to accuse them.

The Scripture speaks of certain people, "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; in the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ..."

So whether I excuse myself, or accuse someone else, I have admitted the existence of God's law, a law I have broken. And I admit that Judgment Day lies ahead. I admit that I stand in need of God's mercy.

Heavy stuff.

So my yard looks shabby. My grass grows high. My lawn disgraces the whole neighborhood...

But I have an excuse!

The dog ate my lawnmower.

Sunday, December 31, 2006

Thanks To You, Dear Reader

I find it hard to believe how many people have visited my on-line journal,(www.cowart.info/blog/), my online book catalog at (www.bluefishbooks/info), and my website (www.cowart.info) over this past year.

I love you, but you really do need to get a life.

According to the Webalizer Counter Software for my diary, over 62 thousand readers have visited during the year. They hail from 82 different countries and over the course of the year, they wrote 846 comments about my postings.

Amazing!

Thank you very much for the interest you've shown and for the encouragement you have given me through thick and thin.

I appreciate you.

Webalizer Stats For My Rabid Fun Blog:

Summary by Month										
Month	Daily Avg				Monthly Totals					
	Hits	Files	Pages	Visits	Sites	Referrals	Visits	Pages	Files	Hits
Dec 2006	4153	3310	480	253	37125	3940009	7611	14426	99309	124603
Nov 2006	3587	3004	529	262	25342	3504738	7888	15898	90123	107639
Oct 2006	2165	1776	411	205	8872	2366661	6369	12755	55062	67140
Sep 2006	1263	988	305	149	3721	1519117	4498	9170	29646	37911
Aug 2006	1095	847	302	138	3940	1342826	4292	9387	26261	33945
Jul 2006	1327	986	289	165	6413	1579525	5133	8982	30580	41160
Jun 2006	1432	1182	354	199	6591	1724629	5986	10631	35485	42988
May 2006	1433	1197	321	203	5755	1758078	6319	9953	37135	44436
Apr 2006	837	712	326	166	3360	1095749	4981	9786	21388	25127
Mar 2006	501	370	241	131	1816	496597	4087	7471	11485	15543
Feb 2006	521	400	159	91	1573	576200	2551	4465	11224	14604
Jan 2006	828	535	172	98	2016	3037175	3041	5338	16602	25698
Totals					22941304	62756	118262	464300	580794	

Overall statistics from my website, The Rabid Fundamentalist, show an even wider variety of readers from as many as 106 countries: Here are the Webalizer Stats For My Rabid Fundamentalist Website:

Summary by Month										
Month	Daily Avg				Monthly Totals					
	Hits	Files	Pages	Visits	Sites	KB down	Visits	Pages	Files	Hits
Dec 2006	6293	5214	1052	503	41355	7949618	15095	31564	156427	188809
Nov 2006	6527	5708	1462	509	30796	7620400	15297	43866	171265	195832
Oct 2006	4726	4123	981	448	15072	4932477	13893	30419	127815	146534
Sep 2006	4587	4006	934	401	10270	4778807	12039	28043	120196	137639
Aug 2006	3542	3083	732	315	9428	4260307	9790	22707	95596	109807
Jul 2006	4904	4225	768	415	14480	4876847	12881	23828	131002	152039
Jun 2006	5305	4643	856	463	14918	5457924	13918	25702	139308	159167
May 2006	5129	4527	773	454	13639	4941343	14089	23977	140342	159009
Apr 2006	4779	4236	907	452	11972	4481551	13568	27239	127089	143390
Mar 2006	4173	3692	792	406	8952	3144141	12603	24558	114456	129368
Feb 2006	3479	3111	607	288	9098	2701684	8083	17022	87135	97415
Jan 2006	5338	4552	818	406	12589	7060744	12601	25375	141128	165489
Totals						62205843	153877	324300	1551759	1784508

I do wonder if some readers may have been scared off by my title — Rabid Fundamentalist?

I chose that title because the editors at the newspaper where I worked as a mail clerk years ago teased me with that nickname.

“Here comes Cowart with more of that rabid fundamentalist crap of his,” they’d say.

I chose to wear their loving taunt as a badge of honor — not because of some high moral principle but just to bug the hell out of ‘em.

I began signing my submissions to the editors with that nickname, Rabid Fundamentalist. We used word processing software called Logicon which only allowed for a three digit extension, so my files came through the computer tagged, Rabid Fun.

That seemed appropriate because much of the stuff I wrote takes a light, superficial approach to life and fun and faith.

On a deeper lever, I like my title because the word *rabid* conveys the idea of enthusiasm, and I am indeed enthusiastic about life and the love of God. The word *fundamentalist* conveys the idea of someone who sticks to the fundamentals, and mine is at best a rudimentary faith for a simple man.

Jesus rose or rotted.

That's the one fundamental.

If He died and rotted in the dirt, then what He said or did has no more weight than the words and actions of Jessie James.

Jesus is just another dead guy.

The world's full of 'em .

You can't walk anywhere without kicking up their dust.

If He rotted then that stuff he taught — nice as it is — just doesn't matter.

But, if Jesus Christ walked out of that tomb after we tortured him to death, if He walked out under his own steam, then He is declared to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead — and what He taught really does matter.

Why?

Because we are also headed toward a tomb.

Our own.

If He is indeed the Son of God, the Alpha and Omega, the Prince of Life, the Bright and Morning Star, The Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Almighty God, then nothing else in my life counts other than my relationship with Him.

And that means commitment.

Life commitment.

If He's dead, He's dead,

If He's living, He's Lord.

I believe that Jesus Christ is Lord, that He rose from death, and that He'd kinda like for us to behave till He comes back; everything else is peripheral intellectual froth.

One of my favorite Scripture verses says, "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. They are plans for good and not for evil, to give you a hope and a future".

Anyhow, thank you for reading about my days.

A Dirty Old Man Gets Worse

— 591

I hope that your watching this particular dirty old man as I flounder daily in problems, confusion, and temptations helps make your own life easier.

We're all in this together.

Love,

John Cowart, a dirty old man.



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