

A Dirty Old Man VS The Coons



John Cowart's 2010 Diary



**A DIRTY OLD MAN
VS THE COONS**

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Bluefish Books



**Cowart Communications
Jacksonville, Florida**

www.bluefishbooks.info

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To Ginny



The Brains Behind This Dirty Old Man

**JANUARY
2010**

**Friday, January 1, 2010
Patricia's Wedding**



Today our youngest daughter got married at Jacksonville's Treaty Oak.

The father of the bride survived—but is too tired to write about it.

Maybe tomorrow...

ZZZZZ....

Saturday, January 2, 2010
Blurred Father's View Of The Wedding

First internal stuff mostly about me...

I may get to the wedding in a bit

It's now 5 a.m. and I've spent the past two hours trying to figure out what happened at the wedding yesterday; it's all a blur.

To start with Ginny and I did not know Clint and Patricia's wedding was actually on for January 1st. We found out on the day after Christmas. There'd been some hitches and we did not know how those things were working out. Then Patricia wrote us an e-mail from downstate where she lives but instead of sending it to us, she'd punched the save draft key on her computer, so we remained in the dark.

Thus, many events caught us by surprise.

Besides, both Ginny and I are a bit hard of hearing so I kept missing names of people, directions, and pieces of vital information. So I've been off balance for days now.

However, thanks be to God, there was little we needed to know. Clint and his parents, David and Melonie, handled everything.

Meeting Clint's parents scared me to death. They are very successful and wealthy people and I felt inferior and ashamed to meet them. David is an executive in the maritime industry and travels internationally managing ships; Melonie owns a shop of some sort. (I didn't quite catch it).

I did not know we were to meet them till just hours before we did. So I felt nervous. But they acted gracious and happy and made us feel welcome.

My son Johnny paid for our dinner at that meeting at a restaurant usually too expensive for Ginny and me to frequent. Johnny and David got to be thick as thieves talking about shipboard computer systems.

That was on New Year's Eve—cold, wet, rainy.

Clint and Patricia had chosen to marry in an outdoor ceremony beneath the branches of Jacksonville's Treaty Oak.

Wide-spread canopy of branches, lovely flourishes of Resurrection Fern, 25-foot diameter trunk, grassy field, wooden deck—and 800,000,000 acorns!

Patricia asked me to go early with a broom and sweep the acorns and leaves off the deck. Dad on the go. Up at dawn. Loaded leaf blower in the car. Put on rain gear because it was pouring. Drove to the oak. Located a fuse box and threw the switch. Plugged in my leaf blower and cleared the deck of leaves, sticks, acorns and a used rubber.



Returned the electric switches back exactly as I'd found them. Drove back home soaked to dry off, warm up, and dress.

Hummm—the pants to my suit fit the last time I wore them three years ago.

Must have shrunk.

Try these tan pants instead.

Ginny drove us back to the oak an hour ahead of time. For some reason it was important to the wedding couple

to be married at 1 p.m. on 1/1/10. Mystical numerology, I suppose.

Although the rain continued to drizzle, the wind blow, and the temperature drop, I managed to work up a sweat carrying chairs from the parking area to the deck.

Tragedy!

My pipe tobacco got damp—could hardly get it lit.

Johnny and the preacher (J.P.? Notary?) were there already. But the first person I met was a lovely young woman who hugged me. Who was this girl?



It was Rachael, whom I've known since childhood, but she's matured so much I did not recognize her. She brought her cello to play for the wedding. She and Johnny rigged a canopy so her cello would stay dry. Among other pieces, Rachael played a hauntingly beautiful rendering of *Jesu, Joy Of Man's Desiring*.

More and more people arrived—about 40—but when I tried to seat three more young people with camera's, it turned out they were tourists in town for the football game and had nothing to do with the wedding.

Finally, the bride, my youngest daughter Patricia, arrived for me to escort down the aisle. As we strolled across the field, I told the nervous child bits of history about the oak.



There were some girls loitering on the steps.

I tried to shoo them away, till Patricia informed me they were bridesmaids—I did not know there were to be any bridesmaids.

The preacher asked, “Who presents this woman for marriage”?

I replied, “Her mother, her sisters, her brothers, and I do”.

I retreated to the rear to try to fire up a smoke from my damp tobacco pouch.

Didn't smoke. Smoldered.

I cried.

Not because of damp tobacco.

Such a terrific young couple:



Scads of people, both families and friends, photographed the ceremony. Ginny took this one from the

middle of the group, there were more camera people behind her.



Unfortunately, because our camera batteries died, or because of condensation, or whatever, only about a third of the pictures Ginny took came out; Dozens of people say they will e-mail their copies to us.

Another high-tech thing that amazed me came to light when everyone began talking about going to the restaurant Clint's parents had booked for the reception. The Hilltop Club is about 15 miles away in Orange Park—only two people in the crowd had ever been there before—so all these high-tech folks whip out GPS locating devices, synchronized coordinates, climbed in their cars and sped away. I had directions written down on a post-it note. The Hilltop hardly compares with Dave's Diner, but it is nice:



A 20- foot Christmas tree adorned the lobby. Thousands of lights and scads of poinsettias decorated the porches. Golden koi surfaced near the fountain in the pool...But I asked Ginny to photograph one festive decoration especially for me—This festive buffalo head:



Clint and Patricia's reception was held in one of the front formal dining rooms:



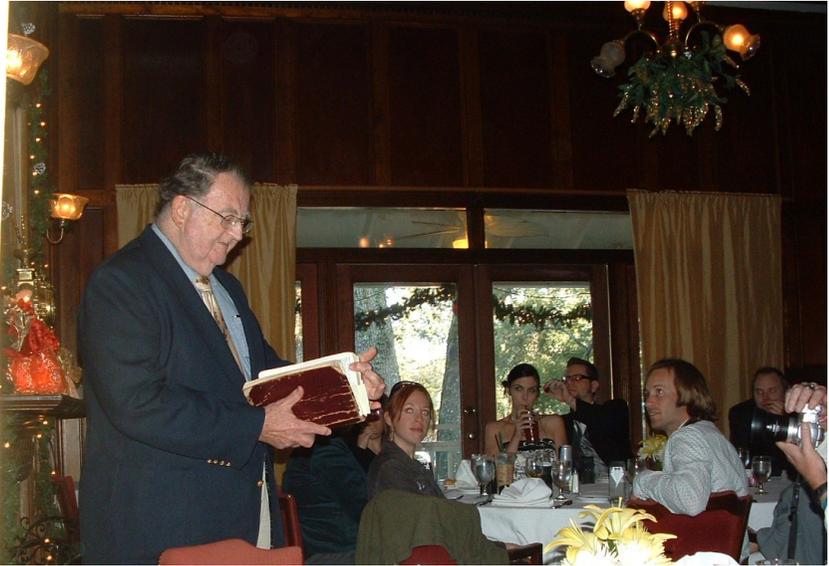
At Patricia's request, her sister Eve baked a cat-cake for the occasion:



Mark and Eve, bless them, also paid for succulent prime-rib dinners for Ginny and me.

Clint and Patricia had asked that I give a toast or blessing for the dinner—"Because that sort of things comes so easy for you"—Ha! I worried over this task for

days rejecting a dozen ideas till I came up with three short readings from my tattered old Bible:



Here's what I said:

The kids asked me to open this with a toast or something. I looked up wedding toasts on the internet and they are too obscene for your innocent ears. So I'm going to read three short passages from the Bible: a commandment for Clint, a bit of love poetry for Patricia, and a blessing for us all.

Cline, this is the commandment of the Lord God Almighty!

Rejoice with the wife of thy youth.

Let her be unto thee as a gazelle upon the mountain,

Or a deer in the meadow.

Let her breasts satisfy thee at all times.

Yea, Be thou ravished with her love!

(At first the audience seem stunned, then they began to hoot and laugh and clap Clint on the back).

What? I said. Did you think there were only ten commandments in the Scripture?

Patricia, this love poem by Agar the Seer is for you:

There are three things too wonderful for me to tell about.

Yea, there are four too beautiful for me to describe:

The way an eagle soars in the air,
The way a serpent moves on the rock,
The way of a ship in the midst of the sea,

And the way a man makes love to a maid.

And, now a blessing for us all, the words Aaron, High-Priest of Israel, brother of Moses, pronounced over God's people:

The Lord bless thee,

And keep thee.

The Lord make His face to shine upon thee,

And be gracious unto thee.

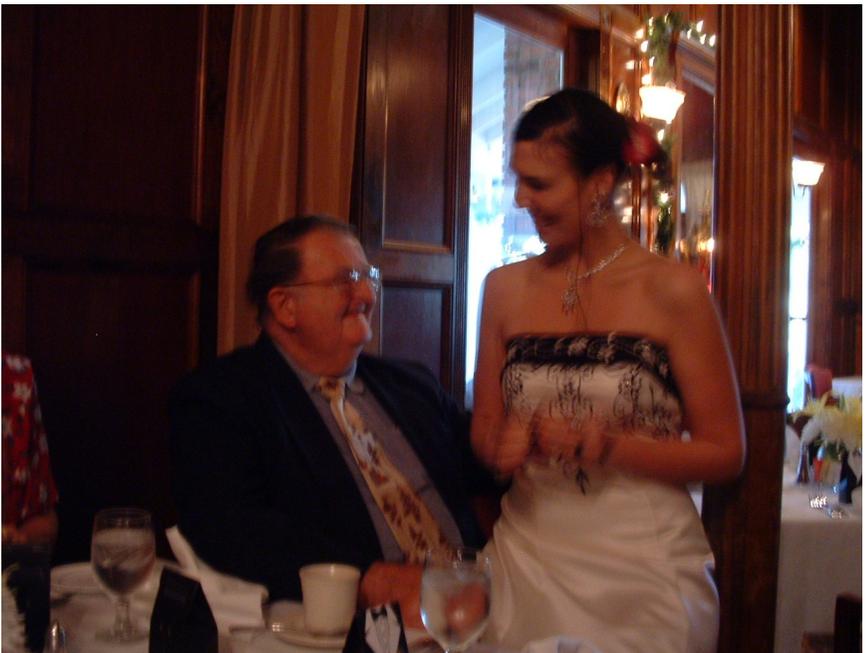
The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee,

And give thee... Peace.

Here's a photo of Ginny and me enjoying a touching speech Clint made about how he met out daughter:



Later, Patricia came over to our table and I took her on my lap and did that little nursery rhyme motion game, “This is the way a lady rides”—she laughed and giggled just like she used to do when she was two years old.



During one smoke break, I enjoyed a conversation with one of Clint's aunts who told me about some 1849 diaries in her family kept by pioneer ancestors who migrated west during the Gold Rush. Fascinating.

I am leaving out so much.

I met so many nice people. I heard so many nice things. I learned of so many plans—many of Clint's relatives are driving downstate for another reception with a hundred or so young people in attendance on Saturday. Ginny and I just could not face that extra trip.

When we got home, she sat reading a murder mystery to unwind. I watched a vcr movie about a prehistoric monster that ate a boatload of people who richly deserved eating—very relaxing.

All day long I've been damp and wet and cold. All day long people have hugged or touched me not knowing that almost anytime I'm touched I have panic attacks so bad my breathing stops. All day long I've had the neurological shakes that make me tremble so bad I have to hold the cup with both hands to drink coffee. All day long people have swarmed around me. All day long the tooth that needs pulling next week has pained me. My feet hurt. I have a cold that racks me with coughing. All day long I've felt inferior and out of place. All day long it has drizzled cold rain. All day long, I've had trouble lighting my pipe.

One moment at Hilltop Clint caught up with me on a veranda overlooking the pool. "Mr. Cowart," he said, "Today has been just perfect. Absolutely perfect".

I agree with him.

Tuesday, January 5, 2010 Johnny Went Back

Sunday, my son Johnny drove back to the bleak, frozen north.

Of course, he drove away from the bleak, frozen South—record-breaking cold hit Jacksonville Sunday night as temperatures dropped into the 20s and all the flowers in our yard wilted and died.

Johnny is my middle son, youngest of two sons from my first marriage.

Here's a photo of him at the wedding in his Crocodile Dundee mode:



Johnny came down South to spend Christmas with the southern branch of the family and to celebrate Patricia's wedding.

He added so much to the holiday as he spent time with Mark & Eve, Donald & Helen, and with me and Ginny.

He did all sorts of helpful chores for me from moving heavy boxes to changing light bulbs high in the ceiling where I could not reach on the ladder (We'd been cooking in a dark kitchen for several days before he arrived).

Johnny has proved to be such a wise young man. He advised me about several areas of concern and his common sense and insights help me greatly.

He's read about my friends Barbara and Wes but now he got to meet and spend time with them in person.

Here's a photo of Johnny with Jennifer, me, Wes and Ted at breakfast one morning:



One of the happiest things about Johnny is the fact that he works at a job doing computer stuff that he absolutely loves.

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

So, I am really happy that my son finds so much enjoyment in his work.

When he got back up in snow country, he sent me this e-mail:

"This was one of the very best Christmases I can recall in many years.

As is normal I suppose, we seldom realize how profoundly we touch the lives of others. I've not smiled nor laughed so much in far too long just being with people I love and who love me.

I'm back to work but will be trying to send things out as I get to them.

Thank you all again for just being who you are.

I love you”.

Johnny

Wednesday, January 6, 2010
After-Christmas Let-Down

Joy To The World has come and gone.

I won't hear that song again for months.

I am in my annual post-Christmas slump. I'm miserable and I deserve it. I've earned it. Back on November 3rd, I put away the book manuscript I was working on and I haven't touched it since. Now, I don't want to.

November marked the beginning of my holiday season as Ginny and I celebrated our 41st anniversary with a vacation trip. We returned to celebrate Thanksgiving. Then we celebrated three or four family birthdays in a row. Then we celebrated Christmas. Then we celebrated New Years. Then we celebrated our daughter's wedding...

I never want to celebrate anything ever again!

I hereby declare myself celibate!

No. That's not the right word—but it might as well be. All those celebrations leave no time for anything else.

Today is January 6th—the day my grandparents called Old Christmas, the day liturgical churches observe as the time of the Magi's arrival, the day some churches say is the actual birthday of Christ, the day when many churches hold Christmas pageants.

A day when I'm worn out and never want to celebrate anything ever again.

A day when I've been thinking a lot about decay.

Yes, decay.

The process whereby everything dwindles down, loses energy, falls apart, rots. Entrophies—is that a word? Let me look it up. Be right back...

No. That's not the right word and I'm not sure what the right word is. The idea I want is that things degenerate from fresh and new to old and wrinkled as

they move toward death. Like the sun losing energy, light and heat fading, going black, dying.

Or, more a case in point—like me.

Once young and strong and virile, now, I'm me. Weakening, souring, feeling old, useless, unwanted, decayed, degenerating, worn out, failing—and sorry for myself.

Poor John.

He's human.

What brought on this happy train of thought? I mean more than just the post Christmas blues?

Well, two things:

The stairs on our vacation cabin back in November. And news that a neighborhood couple who've been married as long as we have are considering a divorce.

When we got to the cabin, I grabbed two suitcases and started up the stairs. Couldn't make it. Had to rest on the landing. What happened? I've run up and down stairs all my life. Then it hit me—all my life is one hell of a long time!

I'm wearing out.

Then when we went swimming. I used to be a good swimmer. Won medals. Used to explore for underwater artifacts. Now, I can hardly dip my head under without losing my breath. Come up sputtering, gasping for air.

What happened to me?

I ain't the me I know.

This surprised me.

And I care less about things. (but that's another thought train).

The fact is that things decay. People, buildings, relationships, love, interests, cars, me—we all wind down.

We are dying.

This is really a morbid thought except for one thing.

Resurrection.

The Christian doctrine of resurrection confronts us with the fact that it's Jesus or nothing. The physical

universe appears to be headed toward a state of equilibrium—all temperature a uniform cold. All energy evenly dissipated. All life bland. Non-existence. A great gray nothing without form or feature.

St. Paul said, “If Christ be not raised , your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.... If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable”.

No fact of the Gospel is more important than resurrection.

Yes the Incarnation at Christmas looks more picturesque than an empty tomb.

Christ has come. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

The fact that Christ died for our sin and that He conquered death is the only hope anyone has—unless you regard oblivion as a hope.

But the Scripture teaches there is no oblivion—we will spend all eternity somewhere.

We were not made to die.

But to live.

As Paul said, “If Christ be not risen , then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain”.

He continues, “But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept .

“For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.

“For as in Adam all die , even so in Christ shall all be made alive .

“But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at His coming. Then cometh the end...”.

So, I feel a trifle down in my post-Christmas slump.

The radio doesn't play *Joy To The World* and *Grandma Got Run Over By A Reindeer* anymore. The decorations we haven't put away yet are getting dusty. The big red candles have melted to look like lumpish slugs. I had to ask my son to change a light bulb for me because I was scared to wobble on the ladder. So I fell asleep in my

chair before the ball dropped. So my arthritis annoys me. My sight fades. I feel old. Tired out. World-weary.

I think about decay.

Yet another thought creeps into my malaise—resurrection.

Yes, the night cometh—but joy cometh in the morning.

Friday, January 08, 2010 Faith Cures?

I had a pronounced limp this morning, and my post-Christmas depression continues as I work indexing last year's diary.

How did I spend so much time accomplishing so little?

I suppose my three big things were publishing William Short's 1854 Diary, registering my books in the Google Book Search Program, and formatting my books to make them available as e-books.

That's all essentially clerical stuff.

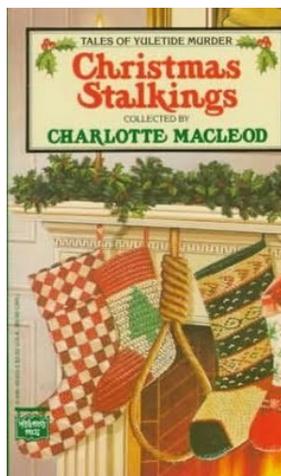
Last year is gone and wasted.

However, help for both my case of the blues and for my limp is available.

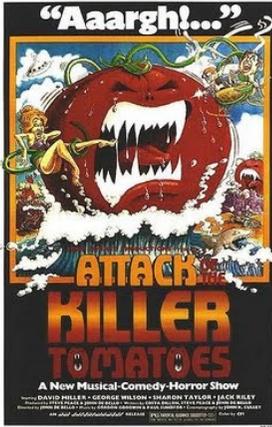
As a Christian I believe in the power of prayer and the efficacy of the Holy Bible—but recently I haven't felt much like praying or Bible reading.

What has given me a lift recently is reading a copy of Charlotte MacLeod's book, *Christmas Stalkings: Tales Of Yuletide Murder*.

Yes, I get a lift from my after-Christmas malaise by reading about the lady who passed counterfeit bills at the holiday arts and crafts fair, or about the department store Santa who planted a bomb in the store, or about the guy who shot the angel in the school Christmas play, or about any of the other happy holiday tales of murder and mayhem in Ms MacLeod's collection of short stories.



See, even as bleak, unbroken winter stretches before me, yet I retain some vestige of Christmas joy through reading this book (MacLeod, Charlotte. *Christmas Stalkings*. ©1991. Mysterious Press. N.Y. 264 pages).



Ginny provided me with another spirit-lifter in this bleak season when she checked out a video from the public library.

Last night we watched the 1978 film classic, *Attack Of The Killer Tomatoes*.

No need to review this cinematic masterpiece: the title says it all.

As a Christian, I've discovered it wise to take whatever spiritual help I can get wherever I find it.

My limp proved to be of a different nature.

Earlier this morning when I woke up, I padded to the bathroom, out to the living room to turn on the computer, then into the kitchen to make coffee. I noticed that I had a pronounced limp.

No big surprise there because I have arthritis in my right hip joint that makes me limp on a bad day's flare up... but my hip was not hurting???

I looked down and saw that I've been walking around the house wearing only one bedroom slipper.

I've walked all over the place this morning without realizing why I've been limping.

I went back in and put on the other slipper.

Now, thank God, my limp is cured.

Is there some deep spiritual lesson I should learn here?

Sometimes, nothing makes me feel more stupid than to discover the cure for what's ailing me.

Monday, January 11, 2010

A Good Day, A Bad Day, & A Day For Psalms

This morning, the prayers of King David in Psalm 3:7 and Psalm 58:6 stand as the uppermost Bible verses in my mind.

On the other hand, Saturday was one of my best days ever. Ginny and I slept late then spent over an hour leisurely discussing the merits of various places we might go for breakfast—the kind of lingering comfortable unhurried conversations that make the best moments of a long marriage.

We eventually picked a place where we found a corner table and sipped coffee and munched cinnamon toast till noon.

Then we began packing away Christmas decorations, pausing to reminisce about where we got this one or that one because we have accumulated such decorations for 40 years and they all have pleasant associations.

After a late lunch we watched a video—*The Englishman Who Went Up A Hill And Came Down A Mountain*. A fine film.

We separated to toy with various unhurried projects in deep but silent companionship.

I just can't describe what a nice, nice day Saturday was.

Then Sunday it all went to Hell.

She woke grumpy in a deep mood swing.. I woke angry about a stupid dream that did not make the grade as a nightmare but was nonetheless upsetting as I tried to find a booth in a crowded restaurant for myself, an old man who looked like Ed Asner, and two or three kids. But every time I'd spot an empty table and push through the crowd, someone else would get to the table ahead of me. Frustrating!

All day long Gin and I snapped at each other, got in each other's way, misunderstood what each other said, put things in the worse possible light, and bumped heads.

Nothing had changed since Saturday, but everything was different.

Odd that.

In the afternoon we agreed to avoid making any of the decisions we'd planned to make. "This is just not a good day to decide anything," she said.

We still love each other but it was just a bad bad day for us.

After she left for work this morning, I pulled a tooth that has annoyed me since before Christmas. I did not want to fool with it before Patricia's wedding for fear of messing myself up, so I put up with the pain and delayed pulling it till now.

But, this morning I had no reason to put the job off any more.

I pulled it myself for two reasons:

Ginny and I are concerned about medical expenses for the coming year and I did not want to waste our limited resources for such a thing this early in the year.

My other reason for doing it myself is my great aversion to being touched. I panic when a nurse wants to handle me for a complicated medical procedure such as checking my blood pressure. And I've cut my own hair for years to avoid having a barber touch me, so why subject myself to a dentist's touch when it's possible to pull the tooth myself?

This makes sense to me.

But I don't recommend pulling your own teeth to other people.

It does hurt a bit.

That reminds me of those two Psalms:

Psalm 3:7 -- Arise, O LORD; save me, O my God: for Thou hast smitten all mine enemies upon the cheek bone; Thou hast broken the teeth of the ungodly.

Psalm 58:3-6-- The wicked ...go astray as soon as they be born... Break their teeth, O God, in their mouth: break out the great teeth of the young lions, O LORD.

Scripture is so comforting in times of pain, isn't it?

Tuesday, January 12, 2010
Transcribing Barbara White's Diaries

Two years ago, I published four of my friend Barbara White's books, collections of her award-winning *Along The Way* newspaper columns. I feel her writings have the potential to become Christian spiritual classics.

My August 20, 2007 diary entry *Shuffling Paper*, tells the incredible saga, with photos, of how I managed the heroic feat of transforming her shopping bag full of columns into books.

Last year, Barbara entrusted me with her personal diaries to transcribe and publish. Again, she presented me with another bag full of material—this time it was dozens of hand-written, spiral-bound notebooks.

I try to transcribe these things now and then—a horrendous job for a guy who has trouble seeing and even more trouble typing. I think she hates me.

Anyhow, beginning with her entries in 1976, finally I have now transcribed up to her first entry of 1987. Here's a copy that entry:

Random Thoughts For 1987

This is a different year, this time I want to do things my way.

Whom God loves, He beats the Hell out of!

We get into trouble in the area of our greatest strength, our gift.

I need to give myself to service of the few rather than to try to be important to the many.

I need to go down and out with people, not sit up in my devotional tower.

I need to return to the basics—Who God is, what the Bible is, who Jesus is—foundational stuff.

I need to hold on before I can move on.

It's better to be kind than to be right.

God deliberately left many things vague and mysterious. I can live with that.

When speaking at retreats, I need to impart a Spirit, not a set of rules. Nobody remembers what I may teach

or say, they remember what I do, they remember the Spirit in which I speak, condemnatory or forgiving, up or down. It's not a matter of talk but of power.

Whether or not I can see where I'm going, the important thing is to keep going.

Those who strive to be great, will be last. God's woman is not the person you'd expect. She is one of the little ones who kept the faith.

Nobody falls into sin. We jump!

Maturity admits that I am to blame. No one will take care of me. The world is not fair. I am to take responsibility. Admit I have done it to myself.

Restoration means, "Thy kingdom come".

Barbara White's *Along The Way* series of books is available at www.bluefishbooks.info .

Wednesday, January 13, 2010 It Must Be Contagious.

New To The Blog World.

This morning I got word that my son Johnny, after his visit to Florida over the holidays, was bitten by a blog bug.

Yes, he has started his own blog called *Things That John Thinks Of*.

It is at <http://godsawaiting.blogspot.com/>

He's only made three post so far and it will be interesting to see where he goes from here.

Apparently he uses Facebook instead of Blogger as a host spot and when I tried to leave him an encouraging comment, it disappeared even though I told it I was using a Google account. However, Johnny is a computer geek so he can figure out how to read comments.

Please stop by his site and welcome him to the wonderful world of blogging.

Thursday, January 14, 2010 Remembering The Boat To Haiti

Honestly, I'd forgotten all about the boat to Haiti till yesterday when I heard the news about the terrible

earthquake, magnitude 7, that devastated that country on Tuesday afternoon.



Carel Pedre, a TV and radio presenter in Port-au-Prince, told the BBC (at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8455735.stm>)..."I saw a lot of people crying for help, a lot of buildings collapsed, a lot of car damage, a lot of people without help, people bleeding."

He said he had seen a cinema, a supermarket, a cyber cafe, and an apartment building, all of which had crumbled in the quake.

Mr Pedre said he could feel aftershocks every 15 to 20 minutes, lasting from three to five seconds each. The darkness, he said, was compounded the fear and worry people were feeling.

"There is no electricity, all the phone networks are down, so there's no way that people can get in touch with their family and friends," he said.

He said he had not seen any emergency services, adding that while people in the neighborhood were trying to help each other, they did not know "where to go or where to start".

Reuters reporter Joseph Guyler Delva said when the quake hit the city "everything started shaking, people were screaming, houses started collapsing".

Mr Delva said he had seen dozens of casualties. "I saw people under the rubble, and people killed. People were screaming 'Jesus, Jesus' and running in all directions." He described the scene as one of total chaos.



"Amid the crying and wailing, people are spending the night outside," the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) chief in Haiti, Ricardo Conti, said in a statement at <http://www.nationalpost.com/news/story.html?id=2436152>

"People are trying to comfort each other. What you are hearing in the streets are the prayers of thanks of those who survived," he added.

"It is extremely difficult to move around the city to assess needs. What is certain is that the quake has had a massive impact on a population already reeling from other recent disasters".

The Wall Street Journal: (at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704362004575000460345415900.html>) reported the disaster:

"I saw dead bodies, people are screaming, they are on the street panicking, people are hurt," Raphaelle Chenet, the administrator of Mercy and Sharing, a charity that takes care of 109 orphans, said in a telephone interview from the capital. "There are a lot of wounded, broken heads, broken arms."

A hospital in Port-au-Prince collapsed, along with dozens of other buildings, including one building in the presidential compound and one other government ministry building, according to Alice Blanchet, a special adviser to the Haitian government. Other landmark buildings in the capital, including the U.N. headquarters and the Hotel Montana, sustained heavy damage, witnesses said.

These news reports triggered my memory.

My memory of the boat to Haiti is hazy and I may have details garbled because as best I can remember this happened back in the late 1970s or early 1980s when our children were small.

It started with our regular family devotions after dinner one night.

Ginny and I always looked for way to instill a sense of Christian charity in our kids. Often during our family devotions we'd read newsletters from missionaries in exciting places. Once the kids folded paper airplanes as a project letting them know about the work of Mission Aviation Fellowship. And once we sponsored an orphan in Indonesia and read her letters at our dinner table. (I can't remember her name or what happened to her). Now and then, we took them down to a rescue mission and let them serve the homeless in a soup kitchen. Once in a great while we'd have a missionary or evangelist visit for dinner... stuff like that to capture the kids' interest and imagination and give them some concept of outreach and charity.

Of course Bible readings and prayer formed the mainstay of our after dinner devotions. Yet, in keeping with our strict religious ideals Saturday night devotions meant watching the Muppet Show on tv. And we had Joke Nights and Ask Dad Anything nights which were always good for a laugh.

Then I'd also sometimes give object lessons illustrating Bible verses... Like the night when it was my turn to cook and I filled the cast-iron Dutch oven with rocks, water, and a rubber snake; I sprinkled cinnamon over the mixture and set it on the stove to boil. Delicious aroma. Imagine their surprise when the lid came off releasing a cloud of steam!

I then expounded on Matthew 7: 7-11 where Jesus said:

“Ask , and it shall be given you; seek , and ye shall find ; knock , and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth ; and he that seeketh findeth ; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened . Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him”?

Then, we all walked around the corner to Famous Amos for our meal... Our kids had an interesting childhood.

I'd forgotten all that stuff.

I'm now 70 years old and I forget a lot of things nowadays.

Writing it down makes it sound like more than it was. Really, we are just mediocre comfort-loving Christians trying to survive and make our way in the world. My religious living motto is:

Avoid pain.

Enjoy pleasure.

Maybe God won't notice.

But as Ginny and I muddle through, Jesus Christ—His incarnation, death, resurrection, and continuing presence—does mean something to us and we tried to impart that to our kids as they grew up.

All that was so long ago I'd forgotten about it till I heard about the earthquake and I suddenly remembered that mission boat.

I forget how we heard about it—evening news maybe?—but we learned that a ship collecting foodstuffs and clothing for Haiti was docked in the St. Johns River behind Jacksonville's (then) City Hall.

Seems to me that Haiti, the poorest country in the hemisphere, had just suffered a hurricane or something of the sort.

This looked like a good opportunity for a learning experience for our little kids.

During family devotions, Ginny told the kids about the situation and they gathered up black plastic leaf bags of clothes from their closets and she packed some canned goods and dried foods from our hurricane supplies, and we all drove downtown to the boat.

A shabby little thing, the ship hardly looked seaworthy. The captain, who appeared to be a godly and compassionate man, was from one of the Caribbean Islands himself. Nevertheless, he also appeared to me to be crazy as a loon. He felt the Holy Spirit had told him to take his little ship, load it with supplies, sail to Haiti, and help the poor.

Ok.

He let our kids roam his ship freely. They each carried a box or bag from our house and stowed it in the ship's hole in person. They explored lockers and swung from ropes and ran the bell and spun the wheel and spit over the side—a great adventure.

They all wanted to sail to Haiti with the old man.

Deadbeat Dad and Mom refused them passage.

Killjoys.

That may have been a good move on our part because a few days after the boat sailed from Jacksonville, it sank in the Atlantic. Coast Guard rescued the old man and his crew of two, but the boat and the donations for Haiti were lost at sea.

At the time, I remember feeling we'd been suckers. I begrudged the food and stuff we'd donated. I felt we'd wasted resources for a will 'o wisp, half-baked religious fanatic. Besides, we could have used those clothes and food ourselves. We barely kept our own heads above water, and had no business wasting stuff we needed.

That old guy could afford a boat, a ratty old boat it's true, but more than I could afford. I have an aversion to giving money to people who earn more than I do. Still feel that way.

However, maybe our giving was not for the benefit of the people of Haiti but for the Cowart family. Giving may or may not help the poor, but it will surely help the giver. It may not change anything for them, but it does change us.

Funny thing, years later one of our daughters (was it Eve or Jennifer? Can't remember) spent one summer on a mission trip helping an impoverished Indian tribe. And to this day both girls pack food baskets for the poor almost every holiday.

And years after that, our son Donald, organized a mission trip for his church and traveled to Haiti (or was it Cuba???) to build something or another for some poor church down there.

And there was the time Johnny brought Norman from under a bush to live with us for a week—the same Norman who said, “It feels good to be inside a building” and who would not walk in front of the tv because Dan Rather was watching him..

And my eldest son Fred, who is a gourmet cook, often prepares Sunday dinner for a group of guys who are not exactly homeless but appear to me to be disenfranchised loners. Fred was not in on the boat adventure,

And, of course, there was the time Patricia fed that poor homeless family with duck food and we all tease her about it unmercifully to this day. Or the time she fixed two of my pipes and my tobacco pouch to give to the craving homeless smoker she met outside her workplace.

Our children have all grown and established their own homes now. They have matured into different levels of understanding and faith from mine. Yet, again and again I have seen our grown kids put themselves out to spread God's love by hands-on action in helping poor people.

I am so pleased with them.

So, the boat to Haiti sank.

Our meager attempt to send some cast-off clothes and a few cans of beans to Haiti never reached the island.

It never made any difference to them there.

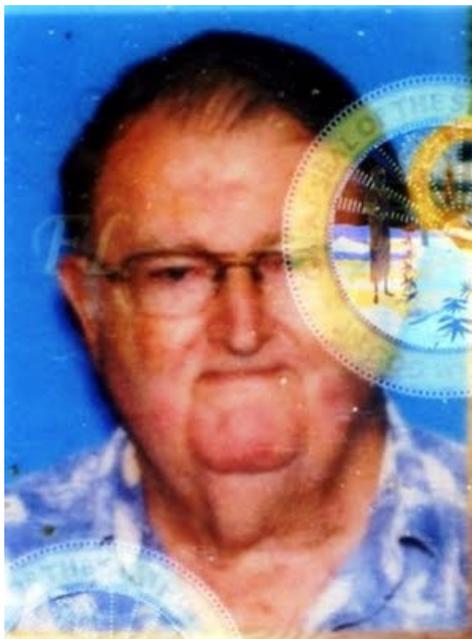
But, it may have made some difference to us here.

You know, the problem with remembering this stuff from long long ago is that it reminds me of how little Christian service I do now.

Bummer.

Oh, by the way, today is Johnny's birthday; please stop by his new blog at <http://godsawaiting.blogspot.com/> and leave him a cheerful comment.

One last thing: Yesterday, just for fun, my e-friend Sherri, whose Matter Of Fact blog is at



<http://matteroffactsite.blogspot.com/>, asked readers to expose themselves by... Er, let me reword that... Sherri asked her readers to “unmask” themselves by posting an un-retouched, unflattering—but fully clothed—photograph of themselves.

I'll play along. I just scanned in my most recent driver's license photo. That shows the real me! Anybody got an air brush?

Friday, January 15, 2010 Matteo Ricci's World Map

Along with about 3,500 other people I used to work at the Library Of Congress, so whenever I hear news about the Library, my ears prick up.

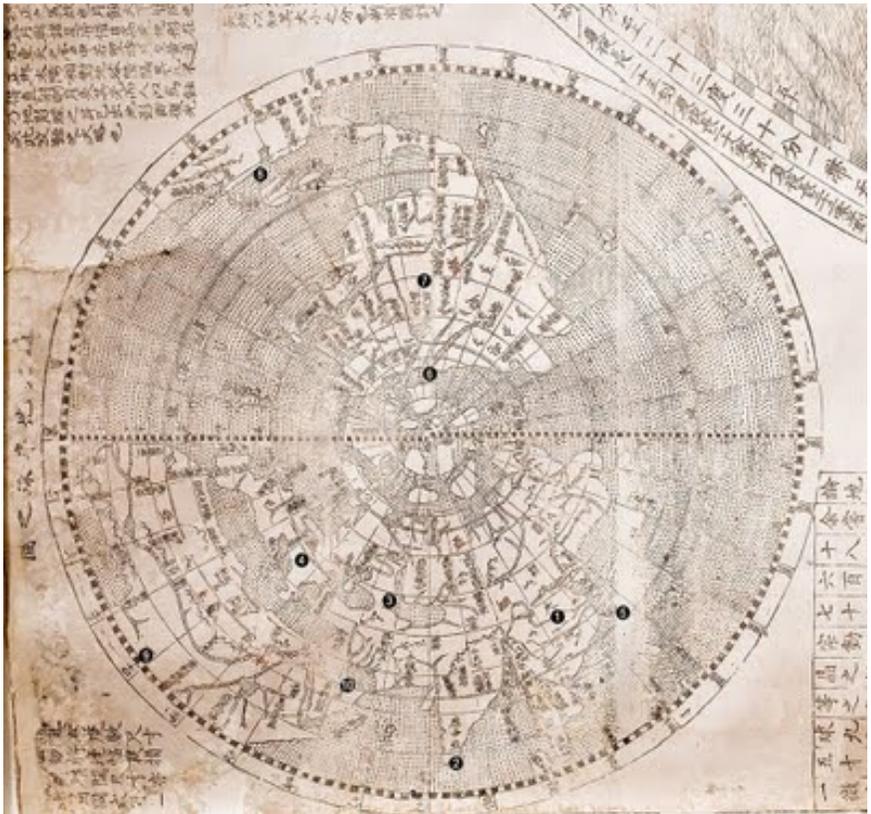
Earlier this week the Library's website (at <http://www.loc.gov/index.html>) announced their exhibit of a world map drawn in 1602 by Matteo Ricci a missionary to China. The James Ford Bell Trust paid one million

dollars for the map. It is second most expensive map ever sold.

The Library also displays the most expensive, the ten-million dollar Waldseemüller Map of 1507, the first document to name America.

The Ricci Map is destined to become part of the James Ford Bell Library at the University of Minnesota.

Ricci, a Jesuit priest, drew the huge map— it measures 5.5 feet tall by 12.5 feet wide—at the command of Emperor Wanli. Understandably, it places China at the center of the world.



Printed on rice paper, the map was designed to be mounted in six sections on a folding screen.

The map includes drawings of the western hemisphere and Ricci's notes about North America describe 'humped oxen' (bison), wild horses and a region named 'Ka-na-ta' (Canada).

Ricci also included a brief description of the discovery of the Americas:

“In olden days,” he wrote in his Chinese script , “Nobody had ever known that there were such places as North and South America or Magellanica (An old name for Australia and Antarctica) But a hundred years ago, Europeans came sailing in their ships to parts of the sea coast, and so discovered them”.



I found it particularly interesting that this 400-year-old map shows details of my home state; Ricci labeled Florida as “the Land of Flowers”. This ancient map shows recognizable details of the Florida landscape, including Apalachicola Bay, and the St. John’s River (although Ricci thought the headwaters lay to the north instead of to the south). He also identified the barrier islands along Florida’s east coast.

His map fascinates me.

There are about four other copies in existence.

Next time one comes up for sale and I have an extra million dollars in my pocket, I think I’ll buy one.

Saturday, January 16, 2010
I Forgot

I've admitted before that petty thieving is one of my besetting sins.

It's a temptation that's been with me for as long as I can remember. Nothing major. I don't have the guts to be a bank robber, a stock trader, or a CEO, but I've been known to steal little things, things I can palm, or sneak away with.

There's a reason I bring this up.

I'll get to it later.

Friday I planned to have lunch with an old friend. We'd set this up before Christmas but postponed it till now because of the pressure of other holiday activities. I'd bought her a Christmas present which I intended to hand her after lunch, a lunch where we talked mostly about writing (She's preparing an autobiography and wanted some tips about getting it published).

She is one of the three or four people who read my blog and she told me how she'd laughed about my story of my mysterious limp a couple of days ago.

That lead to our talking about memory and how I'm becoming more and more forgetful. I wonder if I'm developing what my grandmother used to call Galloping Senility, after all I am over 70 now, and the specter of Alzheimer's takes on a haunting solidity at my age.

We ate lunch at a restaurant I'd never been to before, one way across town on the south side of the River, about 18 miles from my home. Our table overlooked a marina where millionaires tie up their yachts. It had been cool when I drove Ginny to work so I could have the car for the day and I wore my favorite jacket.

Let me tell you about my favorite jacket: when I was a little kid World War II was still going on and of course every movie featured heroic American airmen wearing leather flight jackets. We called them Bombardier Jackets. Brown leather. Pockets all over. Cool leather collar that you could snap a fur lining on. Zippers and snaps and epaulets on each shoulder where you could stick your flight gloves through when you weren't wearing them.

The jacket that won the war.

John Wayne wore this kind of jacket.

I wanted one.

All the guys wanted one.

My parents could not afford to buy me one.

I spent my entire deprived childhood without a Bombardier's Jacket. Even went off to college without ever owning one. Got married (twice) wearing something else.

Then, about five years ago at a garage sale, I spotted a Bombardier's Jacket—slightly worn. Well, more than slightly. Torn in places. Shine rubbed off the leather. Holes in the pockets. Ripped lining and the fleece stuff inside comes out in puffs. Looked like the jacket had been worn by some guy on the ground during a bombing.

New, a World War II style airman's jacket costs upwards of \$400; My wonderful garage sale jacket cost me a quarter. Not a quarter of \$400, but a quarter of a dollar. 25 cents.

My wife, who is not known for her fashion sense, says I was overcharged.

In the five or six years I have proudly worn My Jacket, it has not grown any less shabby. But if a Bombardier Jacket is good enough for John Wayne, it's good enough for John Cowart.



So, my friend and I sit on this sunny deck, eating shrimp, sipping tea, watching yachts bob in the river, talking about writing, diaries, and life.

The glare off the water flashes in my eyes.

The sunlight in the open air warms me up. I take off My Jacket and place it in a nearby chair on the deck. It lays there in a wad looking like a rag without my robust manly body to fill it out.

As we discuss the autobiography, my friend observes that the people in our lives are like a tree: Some are leaves, they hang around for a while then blow away. Some are branches, more substantial than leaves, they seem solid for a season, then they break off leaving stumps. Then there are tree-trunk people rooted deep in the earth, permanent fixtures in your life, they are going to be there for you not to be shaken till the hurricane of death itself uproots them.

She said it's important to recognize what kind of tree part the people around us represent. She said recently she valued someone as a trunk, but he turned out to be a leaf.

Now, when we went up on the deck, I'd left my pipe and tobacco pouch on the dash of the car. I was ready for

a smoke. We went down to the parking lot and a truck had me blocked in so I had to maneuver around him, then I drove to drop her back at her house. Then I drove back to my house and about halfway home I realized that I had forgot to give her that Christmas present.

Tough.

Before I got across the river, I had to turn on the car's air conditioner. That's Florida weather for you—19 degrees last Sunday, over 80 today.

Got home. Put the Christmas present on the table. Got undressed to shower and shave to meet Ginny. Reached for my matches. They are in My Jacket pocket...

My Jacket!

My Jacket is still 18 miles away across the river on the chair at that restaurant which is called ???

What was the name of that place?

I forgot.

About that time I realized that Ginny's cell phone was in My Jacket's pocket. I'd forgotten that. Now, I had panicked visions of somebody finding My Jacket, taking out the cell phone and placing call after call to Dakar. And we'd get the bill!

I just can't remember the name of that restaurant!

Called my friend to ask her the name of where we'd just had lunch. She didn't know either, just that nice new place on the river. She called somebody she knew and found out the name. She called the restaurant. The waitress said she'd found this rag—My Jacket. Since the place was closer to her house, my friend drove to pick it up and said she'd meet me on this side of the river in Orange Park where she had an afternoon appointment anyhow.

I quickly got dressed again and headed out to drive the ten miles to Orange Park. About half way there, I thought, "I'll give her the Christmas present I forgot when we... O Crap. I'd forgot and left the present on the table at my house".

She turned into the abandoned filling station off I-295 just ahead of me. So I met her car and retrieved My Jacket...

Ginny's cell phone was still in the pocket.

Thanks be to God!

Drove back from Orange Park, past my house, and across the north side of town to pick Ginny up from work.

When we got home, the forgotten Christmas present still sat on the table... I'll give it to my friend next year... Unless I forget again.

What does all this rambling about things I forgot to remember have to do with the life-long problem of stealing that I started out writing about?

Well, in my mind it relates to the single most important prayer in the Bible.

When Jesus was crucified, He was nailed up between two thieves?

The Gospels do not tell us the age of these thieves.

I think one of them could have been an old thief, a 70-year-old thief—a guy like me.

He's the one who prayed, "Lord, remember me..."

Tuesday, January 19, 2010 **Book Value**

Over the weekend I overheard two conversations, entirely different on one level, about the same thing on another.

These struck me as important because I'm in the process of proofreading the manuscript of my book *A Dirty Old Man Goes To The Dogs*. In a few weeks that book should be ready of publication in both print and e-book formats. Therefore, Ginny and I recently engaged in long conversations ourselves about the value of my work. This is a long-standing topic for us.

I overheard the guy in the restaurant not because I was eavesdropping, but because he was talking to a man in a different booth. Why they didn't sit together I don't know. Because they were neglecting their wives during the meal to talk across space with one another, I suppose.

One couple already sat in a booth when Ginny and I got to the restaurant. A bit later this other couple arrived. I saw them pull in the parking lot in a tricked-out super-

sized, duel-cab pickup, and I noticed the fine quality of the black and white plaid shirt the guy wore when he walked in the door.

This guy explained to his friend at an adjacent table that he bought houses which had been repossessed, patched them up, then rented them out. "The folks that had bought that place were paying over \$200,000 for it; in the repo auction, I picked it up for only Forty-Three Five cash," he boasted.

He laughed at the dilemma of the poor dumb saps losing their home.

He felt gleeful about it.

Their disaster equaled his opportunity.

Nothing immoral or illegal about buying low and selling high. But, somehow I felt the guy was greasy.

When the man at the other table questioned about problems with renters, the entrepreneur boasted about how easy it is to evict people who can't meet their rent payments. You give them 30 day's notice, then call in an eviction company. Yes there are companies whose only business is evicting renters. You pay the fee, they put the residents out on the street, change the locks, and hand you the new key. You don't even have to be on the site at all.

The guy boasted that he's bought at least one repossessed house a year since 1980 but that recently property values have dropped so much that he makes a killing every month or so now.

Why do I worry about the danger of Hell's fire for such a man?

If he's being at all unethical, he did not seem to have a clue about it. Just doing business. Making wise investments. Getting the most value for his money.

Why does my skin crawl hearing him talk?

I feel so sorry for him.

I wonder about his values.

Ginny said I should not be so judgmental; I said, "I'm not judgmental, I'm discerning".

The other conversation, the one I overheard in the book store, also concerned value.

As I waited my turn in a long line at to get up to the cashier to pay for a history of Amelia Island, a second line of people waited in another line to exchange books for store credit. The two lines crossed.

Busy place that book store. (But with no one buying my books).

I noticed a lady in the exchange line. Well-dressed. Heels. Expensive sweater. Look of old Ortega money. Frowning as though worried. Impatient about waiting in line with all these peasants who carried shopping bags or cardboard boxes overflowing with books to exchange.

She herself carried five small books wrapped in white tissue paper.

When she got to the counter I overheard her tell the evaluator about how valuable her books were. "All these are from the 1800s," she said. "They've been in our family for years. I want to sell them now. They just take up space. How much are they worth?"

The evaluator carefully unwrapped the leather-bound volumes. I could see they were in excellent condition but I could not make out the titles.

He checked for bookplates and autographs.

He consulted his computer.

He carefully re-wrapped the books in tissue and handed them back.

"I'm not going to buy these," he said. "They have no resale value".

Boy, did she get hot!

She demanded to know why her books were not worth the hundreds or even thousands of dollars as she expected. "These are really old books," she said. Her voice reeked of suspicion that he was pulling some scam.

Everyone knows old books are worth a lot of money.

"Not these," he explained. Patiently he told her about what makes a book valuable. Just being old hardly counts. Condition matters (and these were in fine condition). Provenance matters (but these were not autographed).

But the thing that matters most is someone else wanting to buy them.. “I can’t sell these, because no one is likely to want to buy them,” he said.

Again, I could not see the titles but I know the sort of book these were: maybe *1892 Real Estate Values In Collier County, Wisconsin*. Or an 1832 edition of *Elsie’s Prize Pig* by Mrs. Judge Monroe Wombarton—old, but not valuable. They stayed in fine condition for 200 years because no body was interested enough to open the covers for two centuries.

The lady left the store fuming—but there was something else... I felt she was desperate. I felt she only ventured into the unfamiliar venue of a book store because she was short of cash and had heard somewhere that old books might be valuable.

I felt sorry for her.

The two conversations remind me of my own quest for values. I often question the value of my own work. What good is writing a book that hardly anybody reads?

But value resides in what someone is willing to give for a thing...

Or, does it?

Some things have enormous intrinsic value whether the anybody around recognizes it or not.

For instance, I once saw an antique show on tv when a man brought in an American Indian soapstone tobacco pipe which the evaluator said was worth something like \$30,000! The guy said that at home he’d been using it as a tack hammer!

And as I recall, one morning in 1844 German scholar Constantine Tischendorf found a novice monk at St. Catherine’s Monastery, Sinai, starting a fire to cook breakfast with torn-out pages from an old book written in uncial Greek. Turned out that Tischendorf discovered the book to be *Codex Sinaiticus*, widely regarded as world’s most valuable book .

But, until Tischendorf recognized the value, it had no value.

Fire starter.

Where does that thought take us?

Thinking about this stuff reminds me of what St. Peter said about the value of Jesus Christ. He said that Christ is valuable—precious—to those who believe, but that those who do not believe count Christ as worthless, as of no more value than a broken brick laying squished in the mud at some construction site.

All the time I overhear or read words by people who do not seem to value Christ at all. He just does not enter into their value system.

That says nothing about Him; It speaks reams about them.

Treasure is treasure—even if you hammer tacks or boil your morning coffee with it.

If we do not recognize the value, who loses?

St. Peter says it better: “He that believeth on Him shall not be confounded . Unto you therefore which believe He is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence...”

Monday, January 25, 2010

First Photos With My New Toy

Yesterday, Ginny bought me a new toy.

No special occasion, a just for the hell of it gift.

Now, I own a brand new Aries Mini Digital Camera, Model ATC-0103—a tiny camera you wear on a key chain.

Hoot!

Of course, I snapped a photo of her across the table from me in a fast food restaurant as the first picture with my new camera:



Over our coffee we talked about how in the Bible God broke into peoples lives while the people engaged in ordinary, everyday activities—fishing, herding sheep, thrashing grain, filling out tax forms. The Lord of all creation is Lord of ordinary days.

My own ordinary activities recently involve correcting proof copy for my book *A Dirty Old Man Goes To The Dogs*. Two things impress me about this manuscript:

First, some sections are really good. That surprises me. Once I write a piece, I'm inclined to forget it and dismiss it as over and done with, so when I re-read it months later, it amazes me that I could have written so well. I mean this book is not terrible awful.

The other impressive thing is how many mistakes I make. I mean, I have gone over manuscript drafts before submitting it to the printer. Even so, I'm finding typos (our for out; and form for from are two I make all the time). I'm finding I misuse words that sound similar but have different meanings (such as fine and find). I'm finding inconsistencies in numbers. And I find that I should have stayed awake in seventh grade English grammar when they taught the use of commas...or should that word be comas?

Anyhow, such stuff occupies my ordinary activities over recent days.

Once we got home, I played with my new camera some. Here's a photo of my pipes and ashtray:



The little camera works fine, but my shaking hands blur the picture. (An age-related nerve thing sometimes causes me to wobble a bit).

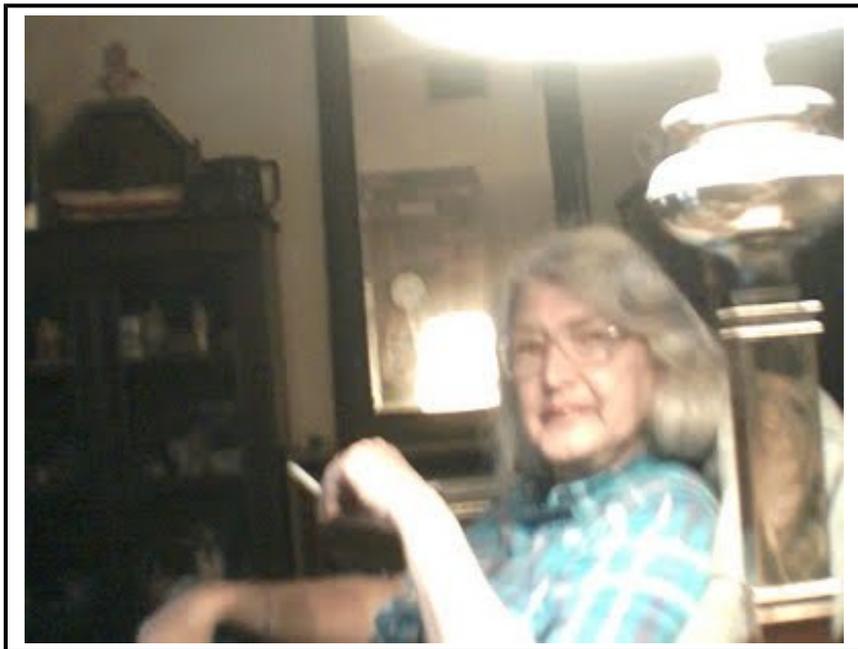
The camera's best feature is that it has only two buttons: *on/off* and *snap photo*. That's just my speed.

I mean we own this other digital camera that offers 837 features and settings. I think it has settings for taking pictures of flowers, one for pictures of mountains, one for portraits. I think there's one setting for photographing male turtles and another for female turtles—it won't work if you can't tell the difference (fortunately, I can). This camera has a day/month and year timer and a setting for getting close-ups of coins. It will pop corn. It will calculate logarithms. I think there's even a taser setting in case you want to take photos of unconscious people.

I can't work that camera! I must have 600 photos of my own feet from when I lowered that camera before it finished focusing on the scene I was trying to photograph.

However, my new mini digital camera has advanced to the high point in technology that it only has two buttons and I can actually take pictures with it.

There is no flash attachment so the lens gathers available light—like so:



This morning, my friend Wes treated me to breakfast at one of the worst restaurants either of us has ever been in and I snapped this photo of him beside a waterfall/fountain in the dining room:



Again, it's my shaking hands that cause the blurring.

One of the best things I like about my new toy is that this camera dangles from my keychain; yes, it is that small. I can always have it handy in case I see something beautiful I want to capture. For instance, when we finally got out of that restaurant, across a parking lot, I saw this distinct weather front moving into Jacksonville:



It spanned from horizon to horizon—miles and miles of straight-line storm clouds, every inch with a bright silver lining in the morning sun.

Yes, I am ready to photograph anything I come across now.

That reminds me, Saturday while browsing over old diaries in a book store, I came across this anecdote about photography:

A reporter asked Marilyn Monroe, “Is it true that you posed for those pictures with nothing on at all”?

Marilyn replied, “Certainly that’s not true. The whole time I was posing, I kept my radio on”.

Tuesday, January 26, 2010 A Bottle In The Smoke

The image of a smoking caterpillar sprang into my mind.

Yes, John Tenniel’s 1865 illustration of the caterpillar puffing on a hookah in *Alice In Wonderland* imprinted itself on my brain.

But alas, it was the wrong image.



This came up last night during our devotions. For years Ginny and I nurture the custom of reading a short Bible passage and praying briefly after dinner practically every night.

Last night as Ginny read a few verses from the longest chapter in the Bible, we encountered these words:

I know, O LORD, that Thy judgments are right, and that Thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me.

Let, I pray Thee, Thy merciful kindness be for my comfort, according to Thy word unto thy servant.

Let Thy tender mercies come unto me, that I may live: for Thy law is my delight....

My soul fainteth for thy salvation: but I hope in Thy word.

Mine eyes fail for Thy word, saying, When wilt Thou comfort me?

For I am become like a bottle in the smoke; yet do I not forget Thy statutes.

How many are the days of thy servant? when wilt Thou

Whoa!

Back up for a minute there.

“Don’t you mean smoke in a bottle?” I asked.

That’s when I thought of Alice’s caterpillar smoking fine tobacco in a Turkish water pipe—the smoker draws smoke through water in the bottle to cool it

I didn’t think they were blessed with pipe tobacco back in Old Testament days.

“No,” Ginny said, “It’s not ‘smoke in a bottle’; it says, ‘A bottle in the smoke’. What do you suppose that means? Did they even have glass bottles back then?”

Seeking answers to our questions, just for fun, we looked up the passage in a couple of different Bible translations:

One renders the Hebrew text as, “There’s smoke in my eyes—they burn and water, but I keep a steady gaze on the instructions You post”.

Another says, “I am shriveled like a wineskin in the smoke, exhausted with waiting. But I cling to Your principles and obey them”.

Another says, “I have become like a wine-skin black with smoke; but I still keep the memory of Your rules”.

Another, “Although I have become like a shriveled and dried out wineskin, I have not forgotten Your laws”.

And another, “I am as useless as a discarded wineskin; yet I have not forgotten Your commands”.

Oh, that’s right. In the old days they kept wine in a cured leather sack. To drink, you hoisted the pliable bag up, rested it on your upraised elbow, squeezed the bag, and squirted the wine into your mouth without touching your lips to the spout—very macho.

As a curio, you can still buy wineskins. Try a college book store or one of those Pier One or World Import places.

Years ago, when I was teaching the Gospel of Luke to an adult Bible class, we had a *Breakfast With Jesus* lesson because so many of the things Jesus said and did

happened at a meal. I asked everyone in the class to bring in some food mentioned in the Bible. They brought pieta bread, figs, apples, smoked fish, cheese, roast lamb—and one person brought in a wine skin and we took turns trying to drink from it without getting soaked.

Great fun.

This photo of an Italian statue of Polyphemus drinking from a wineskin looks just like me trying it. I mean the sculptor Antonio Novelli might well have used me for his model of the Cyclops.



Well, not exactly.

But you get the idea.

But, He-Man statue aside, why did the Psalmist say he feels like a wineskin in the smoke?

Jesus may have had this Old Testament Scripture in mind when He said, “No one puts new wine into old wineskins. The old skins would burst from the pressure, spilling the wine and ruining the skins. New wine must be stored in new wineskins. That way both the wine and the wineskins are preserved”.

When a wineskin bottle is fresh and pliable, it expands as the wine inside does. But if the skin is left hanging around, say on a tent pole, smoke from the hearth dries out the leather. It gets stiff. It cracks. It shrivels. It gets old. It can't hold the new.

Oh, now I'm getting the picture. The Psalmist is saying he feels like a bottle in the smoke, dried up, past his sell-by date.

I can identify with that.

For instance, for the last few months I've encountered the problems associated with transforming my print books into e-books. I resist. I'm old fashioned enough to only think of books as real books and those others as air books... yet publishers everywhere confront the popularity of e-books with a new generation of readers. I've been working on new formats and considering the implications of free-range books and digital rights management.

New wine for my stiff old hide.

New technology. New ideas. New formats. New wine.

I face similar factors in my spiritual life. I'm comfortable with the way I am. I don't want change. I want the familiar. I like the old hymns, the old methods, the old sermon modes—all this new stuff I see expanding in religious circles makes me feel as though I have gas.

Swollen up.

Ready to pop.

Seems to me like organized Christianity needs a good fart.

But that's a different subject.

Saint Paul once said, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away ; behold , all things are become new. And all things are of God..."

Yes, the Lord is always bringing new things into my life, new people, new ideas, new problems, new victories, new defeats, a new Heaven and a new earth. He stretches me beyond my present capacity.

But I resist.

Like the Psalmist I too feel like a bottle in the smoke. Dried up, set in my ways. Like the Cyclops I'm content to dwell in my safe little cave. Like Alice's caterpillar, I all I want is to sit on my mushroom, smoke my pipe, and watch the world pass by.

I say, "Thanks very much, Lord, but that's enough. You can stop now. I'm happy the way things are. I like me the way I am. Quit already!"

And He says, "Open your mouth wide and I will fill it".

I suspect He knows what He's doing.

The Psalm says, "My soul fainteth ... Mine eyes fail ... I am become like a bottle in the smoke".

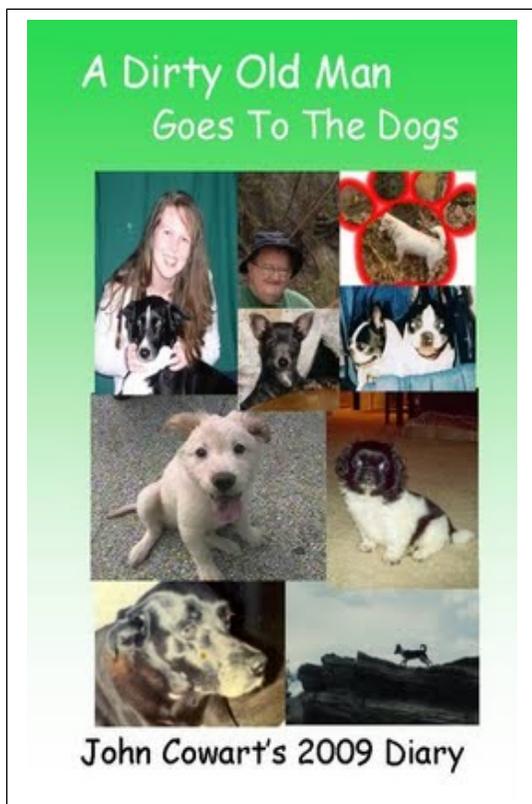
That's my condition.

It also says, "Yet, I do not forget Thy Statutes".

That's my hope.

Thursday, January 28, 2010
Take Up Thy Mug And Walk!

Yesterday I finished correcting the 470 proof pages of *A Dirty Old Man Goes To The Dogs*. That book is now available in both print and e-book formats at www.bluefishbooks.info .



I also entered the book in the Google Books Program, but it will take about two weeks to show up there.

Working with the e-book formatting drives me nuts.

It involves an altogether new discipline and I feel I've been disciplined enough already in this life.

It's that bottle in the smoke thing all over again. I don't want to learn new computer stuff. I know more than I want to know already, but I'm forced to press on learning more and more to make my books manageable and marketable.

There's a lot to be said for illiteracy.

In fact, last Saturday a man and his son, a boy of about ten, came into the restaurant where Ginny and I were enjoying smoked turkey BBQ. The little boy read the menu to his father because the man could not read.

I thought that both sad and touching.

Good for the kid.

Anyhow, I hope my books begin to sell better, because we face a financial reverse. About 15 years ago the finance department where Ginny works made a mistake. An audit last November finally notice the mistake.

They came up with a plan to correct their mistake.

All they have to do is reduce Ginny's salary by 11.6 percent (8.6 percent beginning next month and an additional 3 percent later).

Problem solved.

Their callous letter outraged me.

It was their mistake. Nothing to do with us. But we have to pay for it.

I told Ginny to get in the car. I'd drive her to her office so she could pick up her house plants and coffee mug. I wanted her to walk out. To quit on the spot.

Her reasoning is that 88 percent of her income is better for us than zero percent.

Besides, she's doing something vital toward feeding hungry children and does not want to abandon them.

She's both Christian and fiscally responsible.

I'm the pissed out of shape hothead.

Adding to my boil is that this week a guy, a foreign national, came by four times to talk with me about how a local church is exploiting him and his family—if the situation is as he portrays it, it borders on slave labor.

I inquired about the legality of what they are doing and it appears legal—but it is as sleazy as Hell. God save us from churches skirting that line between legal and right.

Of course whenever I feel moral indignation, the Holy Spirit reminds me in a flash of the times when I have done the same thing—on a smaller scale, but the same thing—that I'm indignant about. In the present case, I'm remembering times when I exploited guys who worked for me.

When I think of bad guys, it's easy to see that they is me—only younger.

Jesus said, judge not that ye be not judged.

But I'm not judging, I'm being discerning.

See, there I am again skirting between what is legal and what is righteous.

Good thing Jesus keeps His eye on me because I haven't given Him much thought recently.

Anyhow, I hope my latest book/e-book sells well. I'm consulting Donald and Helen later this week about e-book contracts, additional formats, and such.

Oh, by the way, about the kid in the BBQ place. At the next table sat a man in a group of people, apparently hunters, judging from their camouflage gear and boots.

This one guy sported an interesting tee shirt.

On first glance I thought he was an environmentalist or something like that because the top line read: **God Made A Place On This Earth For All His Creatures...**

Below that were vivid wildlife photos of a jumping trout, a leaping deer, and a flying pheasant.

And the bottom line read: **Right Beside The Potatoes And Gravy!**

Friday, January 29, 2010
Seven Years Ago...

Although I've converted my files so [my books](#) are available in both print and e-book editions, I'm concerned about the dangers of e-books.

You see, yesterday I picked up four garbage cans full of fallen branches from our yard and afterwards I took a bath; and while laying in the bathtub reading a murder mystery, I fell asleep.

That got me thinking...

What I wonder is—if you fall asleep in the tub while reading an e-book, will you get electrocuted?

Steve Jobs did not address that possibility when he unveiled his new Ipad reader the other day; and the folks selling Kindles don't talk about it either. Are they hiding something?

I prefer real books with ink and paper myself, but then, I'm old fashioned.

Besides picking up sticks yesterday, I also worked preparing more of my friend Barbara White's old diaries for transcription. *Her Along The Way* series of books is also available at www.bluefishbooks.info. Last year she entrusted me with the 14 spiral-bound notebooks containing her prayer diaries and I'm transcribing and editing them for future publication.

I see one of my rolls as a writer is to preserve old diaries which might otherwise get lost and I've devoted a lot of energy to that end.

Here is a scanned page from Barbara's entry for December 19, 2002:

Thursday, Dec 14, 2002

I just finished talking to Henry about my concern for John. Yesterday at lunch I felt strongly that he needs to guard his heart and his spirit from the much "stuff" of the world - including his family - right now. Dear Lord, I pray that fishing was from you and that therapy of first with John and then with Henry goes according to your will. I prayed before I called this morning and now I let it go into your hands - trusting - entrusting it there where it belongs.

The party at the small group meeting on Thursday was terrific. I really enjoyed the sharing of Christmas memories - which turned to be more on funny things than on traditions. But I talked only to Bruce Satmore and Woody War and longed for the quiet peace of my home. (and saw the last 20 minutes of West Wing.

That page caught my attention because it mentions Ginny and me. It got me wondering what my own diary for the same date might say.

So I dug back in the closet to pull down my own diary from seven years ago and here is what I found:

Wednesday, December 18, 2002

A few minutes ago, about 8:30 a.m., my brother David called on his cell phone saying he's driving up to Shand's Gainesville for his lung transplant as soon as he arrives. Months ago I agreed that if he survives the operation I will go to Gainesville, take the training and be his caregiver for a week or ten days.

So much for the Christmas plans Gin & I made last night.

We'll see what happens.

Anytime the phone rings, Ginny " and I both say, "Oh goody, there's somebody with plans for our life"....

However, in spite of all my bitching, on some level I want to be 100% at the disposal of Jesus. And if He has holiday plans for me different from my own, I don't like it but I intend to follow Him to the best of my ability. I won't win any points for being a cheerful giver, but I will try to fit into His plans. Damn it.

It would be nice if I could pray like Tomas A'Kempis in *Of The Imitation Of Christ* for real:

"O Lord Thou knowest what is best for us, let this or that be done as Thou pleaseth. Give what Thou wilt, and how much Thou wilt, and when Thou wilt. Deal with me as Thou thinkest good, and as best pleaseth Thee, and is most for Thy honor. Set me where Thou wilt, and deal with me in all things just as Thou wilt. I am in Thy hand: turn me round, and turn me back again, as Thou shalt please. Behold, I am Thy servant, prepared for all things; for I desire not to live unto myself, but unto Thee; and O that I could do it worthily and perfectly!

Amen to that, Brother Tom.

Barbara White took me to lunch at Silver Star. She says she feels she has a discerning spirit which indicates that I am in danger of burn out or some kind of health problem. While we were there, Barbara felt that Peggy, the young waitress who has served us for years, was in pain; when she and Peggy talked, it turns out that Peggy

has a large tumor which requires an operation scheduled for next month.

While I was out, a library in New England called Eve (*our daughter who was home from college camped in our tv room during the holidays*) for an hour-long job interview by phone. She feel good about it. She sounded so professional on the phone; I'm very proud of her.

Eve, Ginny and I went grocery shopping at Publix; while they were in the store, I sat out on a bench smoking my pipe. It was the most peaceful experience I've had in weeks..

When we got back, there was still no word from or about David . Not knowing whether or not I'll be here for Christmas, I took a present over to Chris for the new child she and Rex are taking in.

Being mean and cruel I chased Eve out of her room so Ginny and I could watch *West Wing* tonight. I also asked her to make arrangements to stay with Jennifer this weekend if possible so Ginny and I could have some time together; recently I've wondered if our sex life is over altogether.

Thursday, December 19, 2002, Jennifer's Birthday

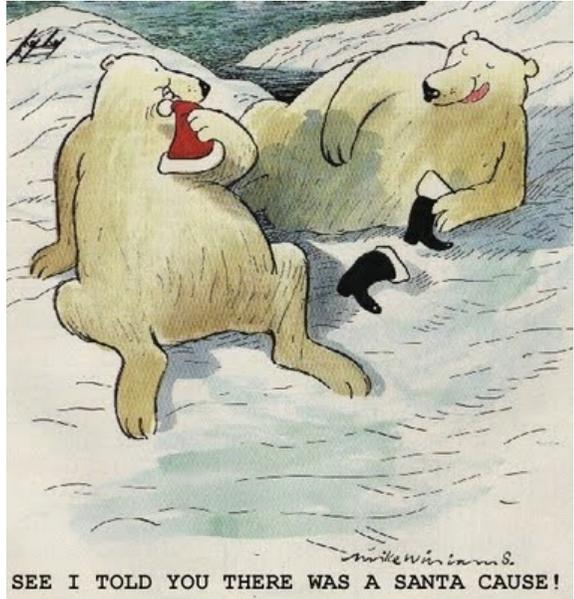
Again today I went over my Will of God ms. (*Yes, this is the same manuscript I'm still working on here in 2010, I'm a slow writer*) It feels good to be nosing around serious work again.

Eve rode downtown with Ginny to go to the credit union so I had a few hours alone in the house.

At 6 a.m. this morning Barbara called Ginny. Yesterday, she, Barbara, felt a premonition of some sort that I am in some kind of undefined danger, physically, mentally, spiritually, or all three and she wanted to talk with Gin about it. I don't know what to make of this. Gin doesn't either.

Still no word about what happened or is happening with David . (He survived the transplant and in 2010 is still doing fine).

At her office Christmas party today Ginny won the prize for decorating the best office door. She used the text of the editorial *Yes, Virginia, There Is A Santa Clause* as a center piece then surrounded it with various pictures of Santa from all sorts of countries and cultures all over the world.



Here's the selection I offered for her door:

Saturday, January 30, 2010
Who Needs e-books?

This morning's *London Daily Mail* newspaper announced that the Portsmouth City Council now makes applications to get a taxi driver's license available in a new mode—in Braille.

Sunday, January 31, 2010
Quiet Joy

Normally I rise and start work between 3 and 4a.m., courtesy of God's blessing of prostate cancer, but Saturday morning He granted me the grace to sleep till five. I pad out to the living room and boot the computer to begin my day's work.

Our miniature grandfather clock ticks away minutes and chimes the hour. My fish swims back and forth in the aquarium beside my desk. Ginny's useless bird, Fancy, preens in his cage.

Outside darkness melts into a gray dawn. Ground fog drifts outside my window obscuring view of other houses down the street. That mist dissolves into a low drizzle of rain. Were I filming a Dracula movie, this would be a perfect day to shoot.

I intended to mow the lawn today but the rain cancels that project. I feel the comfortable pleasant relief you feel when something you planned to do but really didn't want to gets thwarted by outside circumstance.

As I thought and prayed through my morning devotions, God Almighty did not fuss at me for a change.

The news tells me that a city council in England, in a movement to be all inclusive, has made applications to drive a taxi available in Braille for blind people. Once, the church I sometimes attend initiated a campaign to be "All Inclusive" in our community. Everybody in the pool! I see a parallel between the church's movement and the one by that city council.

But as I started to get critical in my thinking, I also pondered that invitation in the last chapter of the Bible: "The Spirit and the bride say, Come . And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely".

Whosoever will may come.

And I pondered Mark 8:34 where Jesus said, "Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me".

An exclusive all inclusiveness.

A no nonsense all inclusiveness with barbs.

But, not being a blind taxi driver, I need not concern myself over much about such things. The Lord knoweth His own.

I hear the clock radio in the bedroom beep 6 a.m., Ginny's usual wake-up time. She ignores the sound. After ten minutes, I go in and punch the button to stop the thing. She mutters a sleepy, "Thank you" and snuggles down under the covers for another couple of hours.

I answer a handful of e-mails, read blogs and news, think about work on the will of God manuscript and about the transcribing of Barbara White's Prayer Diary.

I hear the rain on the roof falling heavier now.

Ginny wakes and comes out in her robe for coffee; her sleep-tousled white hair forms a silver halo around her face in the lamp light. She zombies awhile, sipping coffee as we discuss going out for breakfast. Decide not to.

As she started cooking, I shave, shower, and dress in tan slacks with a favorite tan wool sweater, loose enough to be comfortable, warm enough to be cozy.

In the kitchen I find her at the stove wearing her sweats. I slip my hands under her sweatshirt. She slaps my fingers away with a smile of pleasure and promise. At the sink I wash yesterday's dishes as she fries bacon, cracks eggs, and stirs grits.

She serves my bowl of grits so hot they could smelt iron ingots. Just right! Touch a pat of butter to those grits and it disappears into a pool of gold. Ginny fills the pepper shaker and I sprinkle a constellation of black stars on the white surface.

The Lord Jesus has granted me a morning without my hands shaking so I can spoon my food without slopping it all over me. Thank You, Lord.

I lather jalapeno jelly on my toast. Ginny's mother bottles this green jelly and sends me a few jars every Christmas. This morning feels more like Christmas than Christmas did.

We retired to our chairs in the living room. Ginny reads her Martha Grimes novel; I hold a musty volume of theology unopened in my lap, a book which interests me but would not keep me from drowsing off.

I run bristled cleaners through my pipes. A fresh pouch of Toasted Cavendish rests beside the steaming coffee mug at my elbow—my Saturday coffee mug, the one with the Vargas girl in the red swimsuit.

An atmospheric inversion, or whatever, causes my pipe smoke to float in visibly layers a few feet below the ceiling. Wind blows outside. I hear oak branches scrape against the wall of the house. Our electric fire logs flicker.

For God only knows what reason, Ginny starts to clean out the hall closet by the bathroom. I hear her muttering to herself in the background, saying, "Why in the world are we keeping this"?

No answer needed.

A few minutes later I look over to see an alchemist at work. She's intent on combining partially empty bottles of shampoo. I snap a photo with my new keychain camera:



I don't disturb her.

I open Kierkegaard's diary on my lap, but stare into space instead of reading..

This is the day which the Lord hath made...

Why can't they all be like this?

Tuesday, February 02, 2010 Lunch With A Happy Hooker

My friend Barbara White has become a Happy Hooker.

Barbara is the author of the *Along The Way* series of books at www.bluefishbooks.info .

Yes, she's joined a group of women who crochet or knit baby clothes which are given to mothers of newborns when they leave a charity hospital. The 18 or 20 ladies who crochet these caps, booties, and baby blankets call themselves The Happy Hookers.

The hooking part of the group name refers to crochet hooks.

“John, I do this because this is something I can do,” Barbara said as she treated me to lunch yesterday at Silver Star Chinese Restaurant. Because of an injury to her wrist, Barbara knits instead of crochets. “When I found out that I may live a while longer, I wanted to do something I’m able to do as service to the Lord, and I can do this,” she said.

It appears that the chemotherapy has worked for Barbara’s cancer; yet she felt it prudent yesterday to see an attorney to adjust her will. And since that brought her over to my side of town, she came by and picked me up for lunch.

Since I firmly believe in the old adage that the chief duty of a writer is to avoid writing, I was happy for the excuse to leave off work on the will of God book to go with her. No wonder it has taken me so many years to get this far with that book!

I have this deep ingrained feeling that no one reads what I write and that it does not matter if I write or not because my work is useless.

Barbara said I listen to the wrong voice. “The enemy’s voice is persistent and persuading. But it is not pervasive,” she said. “He is a smooth-talking liar. The Lord may convict but He does not belittle you”.

But I am so attuned to the put-down voice and have listened to it for so long that it is difficult for me to discern the Voice of God when it relates to the value of my own work, life or influence.

The main thing I cling to is that phrase of Scripture that declares I am “accepted in the Beloved”. And the Lord Christ said, “This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent”.

Barbara quoted that the important thing is not whether we make right decisions but that we make faithful decisions.

Over the weekend she attended the Bar Mitzvah of the grandson of a friend. The young man represents the third or fourth generation in his family in that same temple. The continuity of faith there impressed Barbara greatly as

the Torah scroll was passed down among family members before reaching the young man. He read the passage from Judges about Deborah and Barrack.

Barbara said tears of worship streamed down her face during the service.

Of course, I also contributed to the high tone of our conversation as we also talked about e-books, writing and editing.

I told Barbara about a murder mystery I've been reading: a 15-year-old girl accuses a candidate running for governor of molesting her. She can prove it. She tells the two detectives that the politician has a birthmark on his testicles; it's shaped exactly like a semicolon.

Outside the interview room, one cop says, "She's lying. Somebody coached her."

"You don't believe he could have done it"?

"Oh, he may have done it. What I don't believe is that a 15-year-old in our educational system knows what a semicolon looks like".

Wednesday, February 03, 2010
Likes, Don't Likes, And Divine Guidance

Each morning the barkeep came outside the bar, attached a garden hose to an outside spigot, and hosed blood, spilled the night before in drunken fights, off the sidewalk.

The notorious bar sat at the corner of Eight and Main in Jacksonville's Springfield section, an area since subjected to urban renewal, still a tough area but back then a squalid slum.

I drove by that corner every night going home from work.

A few years ago as I drove by one evening, I heard music, not honky-tonk music but a gospel tune. Glancing over, I saw a small group of clean-cut young people conducting an evangelistic meeting before a gathered crowd of bums. Interested, I pulled over, parked, and walked back to stand at the fringe of the watchers. Hot, sweaty and filthy from my day's work, I blended right in with the other bums.

The guys in the church group looked like wimps to me —brave wimps to be out there at all, but wimps nonetheless. The group included a few girls, one especially noticeable because the way she enthusiastically kept time to the music with her tambourine.

A crusty street guy nudged me with his elbow. “Just look at that gal shake that thing”.

He was not referring to her tambourine.

“What do you suppose would happen,” he said, “If I was to run up there and grab her tits”?

I thought it over for a moment then answered in a slow drawl, “Well, I don’t know it for a fact, but I imagine somebody would throw you down on the pavement, kick off your kneecaps, then stomp you till blood squirts out your ass”.

Now he looked me full in the face. “You really think so”.

“I reckon”.

“Ain’t Christians supposed to love people”?

“Yeap”.

“Are you with those kids”?

“Nope. Just watching the show, same as you,” I said.

“Oh,” he said and edged away into the crowd.

After those pathetically young Christians finished their service uninterrupted, I got back in my car without having spoken to anyone else and drove on home.

I wouldn’t swear to it, but I suspect I did the will of God that day.

I had not thought of this non-incident for years till a conversation with my friend Wes yesterday reminded me of it.

Wes took me out to breakfast and when we returned to my house we enjoyed a long conversation about Christian mysticism, pietism, subjective religion, objective reality, and logic. Our talk centered around the question: Just Who’s In Charge Here Anyhow?

My talk with Wes Tuesday and my talk with Barbara Monday boosted my spirits to resume work on that will of God manuscript again.

By pondering the question of control, divine guidance, and God's will for individuals, and by reading a biography this afternoon, I see four elements related to how the Lord guides us.

- Sometimes God guides us by using things we like.
- Sometimes God guides us through things we don't like.
- Sometimes He guides through things other people don't like.
- And sometimes He guides through things others do like.

I spotted these four elements at work in the lives of William and Catherine Booth, founders of the Salvation Army.

For instance, on April 10, 1852, William and Catherine met for the first time at the home of a mutual friend.

He liked what he saw.

She liked what she saw.



He walked her home afterwards and She later said, "It seemed as if God flashed simultaneously into our hearts that affection which none of the changing vicissitudes

with which our lives have been so crowded has been able to efface... Before we reached my home we both felt as though we had been made for each other”.

They married within three years. They remained together till her cancer death 38 years later. I think they had received God’s guidance through something they liked.

On the other hand, William hated his job. When he was 13, his father had died and William became sole support of his mother and family. He had to take work as a pawnbroker’s assistant. Seeing destitute wretches pawn the very clothes off their backs just to buy bread, a night’s lodging, or another cup of gin, turned his stomach.

Yet it was that distasteful daily contact with the poor that developed Booth’s sense of compassion and influenced the future course of his life—and of England.

Walking home from a Methodist meeting one night, Booth said he was filled with a sudden spiritual exaltation, a sense of being forgiven by the blood of Christ, and a sense of gratitude to God. He knew this ought to be expressed by preaching the Gospel to the poor. He and Catherine decided to “reach for the worst”.

God was leading him by way of a job he did not like and found galling.

So, William Booth gathered a bunch of street people together and took them into his church. The church folk did not like these nasty sinners cluttering up the sanctuary. Booth and company were kicked out.

God guided Booth by way of something other people did not like.

Trusting God to provide and having no steady income, William and Catherine began to preach on the streets, in front of bars and dance halls, at public hangings, anywhere lost, lonely, hurt people might be found. Their motto became “to work where the need is greatest, guided by faith in God and love for all people”.

The Booths had found their niche.

By 1879, they had established 81 preaching stations throughout London, recruited helpers, and held 140 services every week. They established soup kitchens, employment services, reading rooms, street schools,

immigration helps, health care services, and a host of other needed helps for the poor... A book they and their son wrote, *In Darkest England*, changed the face of the British government's social attitude to this day.

All rooted in the fact that some other people kicked them out of a church because the refined congregation did not like what they were doing. That's the way it appears on the surface, but underneath are the Everlasting Arms.

What about something other people did like?



Once at one of Booth's open air evangelistic meetings in Salisbury, a local builder named Charles Fry and his three sons became interested. The four happened to enjoy playing in a local brass band. Just because they liked to play, they brought their instruments to the meeting and began to play peppy tunes.

When someone objected that the tunes fit a barroom venue better than a religious meeting, Booth countered, "Why should the devil have all the good tunes?"

Thus came into being the world-famous Salvation Army bands, rooted in God's guidance through a bunch of guys who liked to toot their horns.

Taking inspiration from an organized military model, Booth fought the works of the devil .



Near the end of his life as a guest of royalty, General Booth was invited to deliver an address in London's prestigious Albert Hall. He said,

“While women weep as they do now, I'll fight; while little children go hungry as they do now, I'll fight; while men go to prison as they do now, in and out, in and out, I'll fight; while there remains one dark soul without the light of God, I'll fight—I'll fight to the very end”.

**Thursday, February 04, 2010
In Costume**

Now I know why hardly any of my books sell.
I don't have an apple costume.

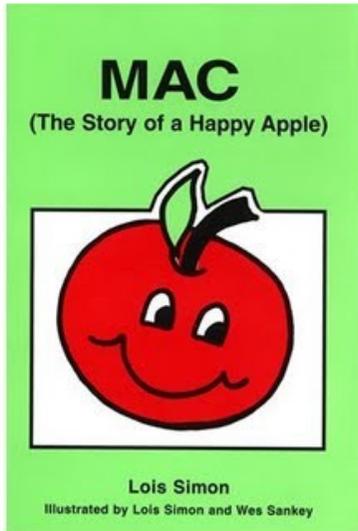
Last night as Ginny and I made our weekly book run, some event was going on around the library. Hoards of people surrounded the place and the overflow encamped in Hemming Park. I never found out what the event was, but I noticed a number of people in costumes. A bunch of Star Wars troopers lounged by the bike rack. I saw an Indian chief, a chef, and a Victoria's Secret Angel (or maybe that's what she wears to the office).

Once we forged through the crowd and got into the library, I noticed a number of tables set up in the lobby where local authors were signing their books. Outstanding among them was a gentleman in an apple costume (a real apple, not a computer system).

I asked permission to snap his photo with my little keychain camera; sorry about the blur but my hands shake too much to hold the thing steady. (You don't want to watch me eat soup. Honest, you don't).



This intrepid bookseller was promoting Lois Simon's book *Mac: Story of A Happy Apple* (Vantage Press, © 2008). I asked his name but he said, "I'm only a prop. She wrote the book". And he introduced me to Ms Simon who wrote and illustrated this story which she said is for kids from 3 to 103.



While I enjoyed talking with Ms Simon and the Apple Man, Ginny sat in the park across the street drinking a soda she bought from a street vendors.

Ms Simon is an accomplished artist whose paintings can be viewed at

<http://www.stellersgallery.com/Artists/ArtistPortfolioO.asp?artistID=38&O=1&R=0> When I checked out the website, I noticed that one of her paintings is called *Leading The Way...*



Ok, now I'm moving to a completely unrelated subject... or am I?

For years now I've been working on a book about divine guidance. Spent ten hours on it today. So far I have

over 500 pages expounding about three words in the *Shepherd Psalm*, Psalm 23.

The three words—He leadeth me.

Naturally my title is *If God Leads Me, Why Do I Run In Circles?*

The book examines examples of how God leads people in the pages of the Holy Bible—those are solid examples of divine guidance.

It also examines examples of how God has lead notable people of the past such as Salvation Army founder William Booth whom I mentioned in yesterday's posting. I am less positive about attributing divine guidance to such people. Yes, by their fruits shall ye know them, but does achieving success in some particular field necessarily mean a person was guided by God? After all, Attila was an eminently successful Hun.

Then the book also examines examples pulled from my own diaries for the past 30+ years. These examples shake and wobble worse than my hands! I really hesitate to ever pontificate saying, "God Led Me To...". I feel more comfortable saying, "It seemed like a good idea at the time".

For instance...

Back in the early 1970s I took a class in public speaking with a bunch of preachers. For one exercise, the teacher split us into small groups to teach a practice lesson to each other. Now I was fresh from a job as a long distance truck driver; I'd go for days on end alone without saying a word more than "Fill 'er up" or "Eggs over easy". And here these preachers orated all week long.

I worried that I'd make an ass of myself when I...

Ding!

A mental bell rang. The little light bulb flashed above my brain.

"Make an ass of myself... Make an ass...Isn't there a Bible story about an ass that talked? Yes, Balaam's donkey in Numbers 22 where, as St. Peter said, "Balaam the son of Bosor, loved the wages of unrighteousness; But was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man's voice forbad the madness of the prophet".

So, I constructed a big donkey head mask with long ears. When it came my turn to speak to the preachers, I put it on and told the whole story of Balaam from the viewpoint of the donkey!

Those preachers got the lowdown straight from the ass's mouth.

It was a hoot!

Afterwards, Dr. Keith Johnson, director of Teens For Christ, came up to me saying, "My kids could use something like what you just did". He invited me to teach some Bible lessons to his "Kids".

TFC was a residential refuge at the beach for runaways, addicts, drunks, destitute people, the abused, the homeless, and disenfranchised. These "kids" ranged in age from youths to guys in their 70s. Their common denominator was that none of them had any interest in religion whatsoever.

To tell about the forgiveness of sin and Christ's death on the cross, His return from the grave, and His love for them, I manufactured a lot of gimmicks to gain their interest, to make Bible lessons palatable for them.

From the one idea about wearing the donkey mask, I ended up teaching every week for about four years till the place went belly up.

One worm in my apple:

I think my long tenure as an unpaid Bible teacher had little to do with God's leading and a great deal to do with my love of being center stage in the spot light. I wanted everybody to see how clever I am. I made the gimmicks more to display my talent than to glorify God.

Jesus warned about the perfidy of guys like me—"All their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi".

In the light of that Scripture, can I claim that God lead me to make that donkey mask in the first place?

No.

It just seemed like a good idea at the time.

Friday, February 05, 2010
In For The Long Haul—With Cookies

A passing tourist snapped this photo of Ginny and me in St. Augustine last summer: We were sitting on a shady bench in a park smoking and talking about marriage.



Wednesday night at the library we again fell into a discussion about marriage. A young man noticed us and asked, “How do you two manage to stay together for so long?”

I replied, “The grace of Jesus Christ”.

I regretted that quip, a damn pious platitude to his serious question. Yes, what I said is true but evasive, a knee-jerk reaction to an out-of-the-blue question, not a real answer.

This stranger really had no interest in our marriage. He hungered for somebody to talk to about his own. He needed a listener, not a bumper sticker response to his pain.

He explained that he and his wife had been married for three years and now faced splitting up. “I don’t know if we should quit now or hold on a little longer,” he said.

“Hold on whatever it takes,” I said. “When all is said and done in this world the only thing you’ve got is each other”.

Understand that these words of wisdom come from a guy who failed at his first marriage. Ginny and I have

been married for only 42 years now and I don't want to fail again. And yes, recently a couple down the block who've been married as long as we have broken up. Just because you've been together a long time doesn't mean you can take it for granted.

When the young man asked if there were some secret to staying in love, we felt at a loss to answer. We think we're doing something right, but we can't pinpoint what it is. Love is just there, sort of a white-noise background to each of us moving through life.

"Be totally honest with each other," I ventured. "Nobody loves anybody all the time. Realize that, and don't have unrealistic expectations".

Ginny said, "One thing that's helps us is to be able to say, 'I love you forever, but I can't stand you right this minute. Check back with me in the morning'". The lines at the video reserve counter moved on separating us from the stranger. "Hold on. It's worth it in the long haul," I encouraged him in parting.

Yes, it is the grace of Jesus Christ that keeps us going. I'm crazy in love with Ginny and she appears to find me tolerable too, but it is God's grace that makes us able to live with each other. When our youngest daughter got married on January first (see that entry for photos), I think I gave her and Clint that same counsel, to cling to the Lord God and to each other. That's all that counts in the long run.

If we ever run into that stranger again, I might have more to say.

To show how a long-term, relationship works, here is the body of an e-mail about chocolate chip cookies; my son Johnny sent it to me last week:



A very old man lay dying in his bed. In death's doorway, he suddenly smelled the aroma of his favorite chocolate chip cookie wafting up the stairs.

He gathered his remaining strength,

lifted himself from the bed, and leaning against the wall, he slowly made his way out of the bedroom. With even greater effort forced himself down the stairs, gripping the railing with both hands.

With labored breath, he leaned against the door frame, gazing into the kitchen. Were it not for death's agony, he would have thought himself already in Heaven.

There, spread out on newspapers on the kitchen table were literally hundreds of his favorite chocolate chip cookies.

Was it Heaven? Or was it one final act of heroic love from his devoted wife, seeing to it that he left this world a happy man?

Mustering one great final effort, he threw himself toward the table. The aged and withered hand, shaking, made its way to a cookie at the edge of the table, when he was suddenly smacked with a spatula by his wife.

“Stay out of those,” she said, “They're for the funeral”.

Saturday, February 06, 2010 Note To The Kid In The Attic

Since this is Superbowl weekend, I doubt if many of my contemporaries are likely to read this entry—not that many ever do—so I'm using this to address the Kid In The Attic. He's the reader I envision when I write, a kid who will stumble across my diaries in a dusty box in an attic 50 or a hundred years from now.

I want the Kid In The Attic to see how a Christian life worked out in real time for one lone guy at the beginning of the 21st Century. This is pretty individualistic stuff, Kid, but to give you a peg to hang things on I think it's a good idea to mention current news events now and then.

So, here's your update on two things I've mentioned before:

Haiti's earthquake.

It will be a cold day in Haiti before I send them another penny.

Last week the Haitian government arrested ten American aid workers and charged them with kidnapping 32 children.

According to articles in the *Wall Street Journal* and in the *New York Times*, the ten Baptist missionaries were sponsored by a large church in Iowa which has sent aid workers into Haiti for years. They had bought property and had drawn up plans for an orphanage for Haitian children long before this earthquake. Looks like such experienced aid workers would have known who to bribe.

Investigative reporters find no record of criminal connections or wrong doing among any of the Baptists except that one lady owes money from when her business went bankrupt in the present recession.

The ten under arrest for “kidnapping” the children face up to 15 years in a Haitian prison—which seems to have escaped earthquake damage while news photos show rioting mobs of native people being served by American troops who appear to be carrying all the boxes.

Talk about bite the hand that feeds you!

So, my first reaction is not to give one penny aid and to stop payment on all checks that have already been written for Haiti earthquake relief, and to fly back from U.S. hospitals all those injured people American rescue workers have “kidnapped”.

An A-bomb would not be amiss either.

The earthquake was not the disaster; those people are.

They do more damage to each other than the earthquake ever did.

That’s my first thought... Then here comes a Bible passage (Matthew 23) to mind (I’ve got to stop reading that stuff!).

Jesus said, “Behold , I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify ; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city...”

But the love of God does not write us off even then. Despite how we all have treated the wise and good people, God keeps on sending them. Those rescue

workers arrested in Haiti are just the last in a long line. In spite of their treatment, God's Love keeps on coming.

He is relentless.

Swine Flu (H1N1)

Although a third wave may be in the offing, the Porky Flu epidemic does not seem as bad as predicted.

Around the world, governments are trying to unload stockpiles of vaccines going stale. Loud voices accuse health organizations of crying wolf, being doom-sayers when there was no cause for alarm—and of even deliberately falsifying the severity of the flu danger just to get money for pharmaceutical companies.

Politicians bemoan money spent on unneeded vaccines.

On the other hand, Keiji Fukuda, World Health Organization Pandemic Influenza Adviser, said that claims that H1N1 is a mild pandemic are wrongheaded.

"There have been over 14,000 deaths that have been laboratory-confirmed, many in young, previously healthy people. Who is going to tell their families that the virus is mild?" Fukuda wrote to TIME in an e-mail.

He said that the WHO's definition of influenza pandemics has always been based on transmissibility and has never had anything to do with the lethality of a virus; it was no different with H1N1.

In response to accusations of overreaction to what has amounted to a mild disease, Fukuda says that once the 2009 H1N1 pandemic had been declared, "WHO consistently made it clear that it could not predict the future course of the pandemic but consistently provided sober, balanced and scientifically supported information and guidance."

The quotes are from *Time*.

A couple of months ago, through our Civilian Emergency Response Team, Ginny and I trained to work at vaccination sites. But we were never mobilized. The anticipated huge crowds seeking inoculation never materialized.

Being in a high-risk group, Ginny did get her vaccination. Being in the Too-Old-To-Bother-About group, I

did not. We took the CERT training courses but were not needed.

I feel disappointed that I missed the show, but grateful that the epidemic did not send death carts rolling down the streets collecting bodies for a mass burial pit (That has happened in Jacksonville in two previous epidemics, Yellow Jack and Spanish Lady).

Soon there will be another CERT disaster drill. I'll have a chance to be a victim. Age, arthritis and adrenaline preclude my training as a rescue worker pulling fair maidens from the rubble, but I am able to play the role of pathetic victim...

Sometimes I think I've been training for that role all my life.

Monday, February 08, 2010

Mary? Eleanor? Where Are You?

The book I'm writing requires many footnotes.

I've worked on this manuscript, *If God Leads Me Why Do I Run In Circles*, off and on for years and I tend to forget where I got what?

If I steal material from one writer, that's plagiarism; but if I steal from many writers, that's research. I research biographies, histories and reference books a lot because other writers say what I want to say better than I can say it.. Thus, piles of books surround me as I work.

As I read in my easy chair, a dozen sharp pencils at hand; books balance on the aquarium; books clutter the coffee table; books pile up in my lap; books, some open, some closed, fill the end table. The books bristle with bookmarks and Post-it notes like flattened sea urchins.

Camouflage for an uneducated man trying to write authoritatively.

So, yesterday I wondered whether it was Mary Chesnut or Eleanor Chesnut I wanted to quote? Mary Chesnut wrote an extensive diary during the Civil War; whereas Dr. Eleanor Chesnut died a martyr during China's Boxer Rebellion.

Which one wrote that poem?

And where did I put her book?

Fear for your lives goldfish as I try to browse the titles
poised above you without getting out of my chair.

I narrowly avoided setting a Post-it note on fire as I
fiddled with the stack of books by the ashtray. I shifted
my feet, propped on the coffee table, to seek the volume I
wanted there.

Nothing for it.

I'd have to get up out of my chair.

I found my glasses and put them on.

I stacked this book and that one on the floor beside
me to go check the bookcase in the foyer...Oh. Here's the
book I wanted—it was open in my lap the whole time I
was searching.

Must be some deep spiritual lesson here somewhere.

But I can't figure out what it is.

By the way, here's a photo of the lady:



P.S.: To family members in Maryland and Virginia complaining about Friday's snow blizzard... It was so bad here in Jacksonville that yesterday when I was cleaning the swimming pool, the water felt so cold I could hardly stay in for more than 30 minutes.

P.P.S.: As I write this I hear Ginny behind me running the vacuum cleaner.

It sounds odd.

I look around to see her chasing some flying bug around the living room trying to slurp it from the air with the vacuum hose.

We both start laughing like crazy.

A typical Sunday afternoon at the Cowarts.

PPPPSSSS: It's now 4:18 Monday morning. I knocked off work for a few minutes to go outside and watch the space shuttle launch. Standing on our pool deck, I saw the rocket arc as though it were flying above the rising moon. Beautiful!

Glad to have seen this. If I understand correctly, this is to be NASA's last launch (last night launch?) for a decade.... But I don't want to start a tirade about that.

Tuesday, February 09, 2010
Help! I'm Being Improved!

New and Improved—

I cringe when I hear those words.

Especially when they apply to my computer. It means that somebody somewhere is changing things so that stuff I used to be able to do, I can no longer do without learning how to do it all over again from scratch.

Yes, everything is improving but me.

Now, I'm all for self-improvement because it works like this billboard I saw on the Oddly Specific site—



New and improved means change.

The only thing in the universe that does not change is God. He is immutable. To change He would either have to get badder than He is, or gooder than He is. Neither is possible. His love does not change.

But computer systems change.

Boy do they change!

And I resist change.

Case in point: I got an e-mail saying that an improvement may knock my blog off the internet come March 26th. Of course I can improve my postings by going from an FTP to something else.

That's fine, except that I don't know what an FTP is.

I thought it had to do with sending flowers, until last night when my son and his wife explained that that last letter is a P not a D. For years I had not paid that much attention because I don't want to send flowers so I ignored those initials. Donald explained that they mean File Transfer Protocol.

I used to watch *West Wing* when it was on tv so I knew the word protocol has to do with seating arrangements at a White House dinner.

Well, I was right about the arrangement part of my hazy definition. But I have not been invited to the White House yet.

So Sunday while the Superbowl players provided background noise, Donald and Helen answered a laundry list of questions I'd written down about computer improvements. Every answer means more work for me.

I almost snapped this photo of Helen and Donald with my keychain camera; they watched Superbowl while their cat Perl nudged my elbow (I love my little camera!).



One improvement I face involves plugging two new cables into my computer. Another may involve reformatting book files. Another apparently means learning a new software system. Another involves giving a third party access to withdraw cash from our bank account.

Whoa!

Not a chance of a snowball in Haiti.

Let me read that contract again.

These changes are supposed to keep me on-line and generate more income for me by generating greater book sales.... Humm, back in October and November I sent weeks reformatting books to do that very thing. Let's check the accounting records....

Yes, my earnings have increased. I made 3 cents more than I made before I put all that work in.

Patience, John.

It takes time for improvements to show results. Right? After all this is the computer age when data moves around the world in seconds. In fact, when some company wants to remove money from our bank, they do it in the twinkling of an eye.

One improvement ahead will transfer my blog to Word Press; that challenges me. My postings may have a new improved look, maybe even a different color scheme.



Also, watch for this guy to appear in my sidebar; he is the harbinger of a new FreeEbook to be offered each month after we get the program set up.

Yet another computer site improvement will be an 86-page sale catalogue for the Florida history materials I've collected over the past 35 years.

Yes, under duress, and with a suspicious mind, I am tiptoeing (dragged kicking and screaming) into the required improvements.

But I don't want to be new and improved.

I'm old and entrenched.

Remember that old church song: *Just As I am*? It says we surrender to God just as we are, naked, ashamed, confused, reluctant, "O Lamb Of God, I come".

Barbara White, author of the *Along The Way* series of books (at www.bluefishbooks.info) says, "The Lord loves me just as I am and too much to let me stay that way".

St. Paul said, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away ; behold , all things are become new. And all things are of God...".

God does not just patch me up; He makes me a new and improved creature.

Trouble is, this new nature gets packaged in the same box as my old nature. That creates problems.

I don't want God to love me too much.

I don't want to be improved.

I don't want to learn new tricks.

I'd rather that God tolerated me instead of loving me.

Cause Love just don't quit.

He won't leave well enough alone.

So what if I have a few rough edges, I don't like to be held to His grind stone. It hurts to be polished.

Lots of folks seem to hanker after joining churches—but they want to be members without any change in lifestyle or behavior or attitude. They want the same thing I want.

I like me as I is too.

Old and entrenched.

My e-friend Amrita, in her biographical sketch of Sundar Singh yesterday provides this illustration: A man in the river swims around unaware of the weight of water; but when he comes out and tries to lift even one bucket full of water, he realizes how heavy it is.

Sin is like that. We swim immersed in it as our natural element with hardly a thought. It is not until we begin to get out that we realize that sin has weight. A heavy, back-breaking burden pressing us down.

And, being old and entrenched, we thought it nothing to soak in sin.

No wonder we need the Lifeguard.

But I'm getting away from griping about improvements to my computer...

Be that as it may, floundering, I've screamed for help with my computer upgrades, with improvements and with the downright arbitrary changes which swamp me.

So my daughter-in-law Helen, who is a ... What's the right word for a female geek? Geekess? Geekette?—anyhow, Helen is coming to my rescue this afternoon to begin some of these many changes.

Look for exciting new changes and improvements to this site.... Maybe by March first. Can't guarantee that, but it's my target date.

Of course, that may change.

Wednesday, February 10, 2010
Three Things About
An Old Shipwreck On Ponte Vedra Beach

- First off, the following post reprints page 305 from my book *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad*. For 30+ years I've kept a diary trying to make sense of my own life; but this section about the Ponte Vedra Shipwreck explains why I publish some of these recent diaries.
- Next, I'm reprinting an exciting e-mail from Chuck Meide, chief archaeologist for LAMP (Lighthouse Archaeological Maritime Program) at the St. Augustine Lighthouse. His website can be found at <http://www.staugustinelighthouse.com/lamp.php>.
- And finally, there is a long link is to LAMP's 2001 Report which details the findings of marine archeologists exploring the wreck. (I think you have to be signed on to Google or to G-mail to read this PDF document).

I find all this elating!

Exploring A Shipwreck (from page 305 DOM Goes Bad)



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.



The 15 photos Wes took are posted in the Jacksonville history section of my website at http://www.cowart.info/MyWeb_001.htm

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.

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.

**E-Mail From Chuck Meide, chief archaeologist
for LAMP:**

Hello John,

I came across your webpage, and in particular the photos of the old wooden wreck at Ponte Vedra Beach which you have posted (http://www.cowart.info/MyWeb_001.htm). You requested that anyone contact you if they had info on this wreck.

My name is Chuck Meide, I am the chief archaeologist for LAMP (Lighthouse Archaeological Maritime Program) at the St. Augustine Lighthouse. Back in September 2001, archaeologists from my program (this was before I took the job) visited the wreck which had been uncovered by Tropical Storm Gabrielle. They recorded the hull timbers before it was naturally re-buried. While it remains unidentified, it is believed to represent the remains of a late 19th century coastal trading schooner, probably at least 150 to 200 feet in length.

I have attached a section from our 2001-2002 report which details the investigation and description of the wreck.

I hope you don't mind, I've downloaded copies of the photographs you have posted for our records. I'm sure this wreck is periodically exposed, as it was in the mid 1980s when your friends took these pictures.

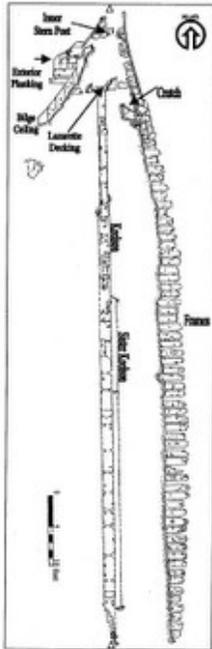
If you have any further questions, please don't hesitate to contact me. If you have any further information about this wreck that you think we might be interested in, please let us know. I saw a brick in your photos, there was no mention of this in our report so any exposed bricks may have all been taken by

beachcombers by the time archaeologists visited the wreck, so that is of interest to us.

Link To The 2001 LAMP Report on the Ponte Vedra Wreck:

Report can
be read at

Figure 54:
Ponte Vedra Beach Wreck
(85A4872).



[https://docs.google.com/viewer?
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Anyhow, recently my life revolves around purely clerical work on that Florida History Materials Sale Catalog and puzzling over incomprehensible software programs I'm told I can't do without. So to think that some photos I posted five years ago actually are of interest to a professional archaeologist... That's made my day.

Thursday, February 11, 2010
On Avoiding Work

This morning a website I use all the time announced that it is “migrating to a new platform”—whatever that means. And yesterday my g-mail account began to buzz.

Work piles up on my desk like snow falling in Washington. I can cope with that—I can deal with it one shovel full at a time, or I can wait for it to melt of its own accord.

Overwhelmed by work, I chose to ignore it and read a book of ghost stories about near death experiences.

But wait, work is not piling up like snow, it’s piling up like the volcanic ash that buried Pompeii. It will turn to stone if I leave it there....

What to do? What to do?

Where’s my place marker in that book?

Speaking of near death experiences...

Know what Papa Mosquito said to the family gathered around his death bed?

“Don’t go to the light! Don’t go to the light! It’s a bug zapper”.

Friday, February 12, 2010
Life & Limb:
The Story of Dr. Eleanor Chesnut

Last Monday I mentioned my adventure researching a footnote I’d lost.

Found it.

This fits into a book I started writing off and on (mostly off) about 15 years ago. It’s a book about divine guidance called *If God Leads Me, Why Do I Run In Circles*.

The book looks at ways God guides people. It draws on incidents from Scripture, incidents from the lives of notable Christians, and incidents from my own 30+ years worth of diaries.

And, as I said Monday, “I really hesitate to ever pontificate saying, “God Led Me To...”. I feel more

comfortable saying, “It seemed like a good idea at the time”.

But I’m delighted to have found the references I searched for to quote from Dr. Eleanor Chesnut. Here is an excerpt from my manuscript:



**Life And Limb:
Dr. Eleanor Chesnut**

The Lord God promised the Prophet Isaiah, “I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known; I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them”.

Jesus once said, “When He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth”.

Throughout the ages men and women of God have actually staked life and limb on such Scriptural promises of divine guidance.

Life and limb?

Yes.

Life and limb.

Take Dr. Eleanor Chesnut for example:

Her father deserted and her mother died when she was little so the Iowa girl was raised in extreme poverty by charitable neighbors. She begged her way into Park College by appealing directly to the president of the school. She was allowed in as a charity student and dressed herself from the school's mission barrel for needy students. She became a Christian at college.

In 1888, she entered the Woman's Medical College in Chicago where she excelled in her studies. She did volunteer work in a women's prison and she also enrolled in the Moody Bible Institute.

In 1893, she applied to the Presbyterian Foreign Mission Board in New York.

"I am willing to be sent to whatever location may be deemed fittest," she said. "But being asked if I had a preference, my thoughts turned to Siam... I do not, however, set my heart on any one place, but rather pray that wherever it may be will be the appointed one, that what powers I possess may be used to the best advantage".

The board assigned her to South China.

In 1898 as she served as the only physician at a hospital in Lien-Chou, a man was brought in with a severe infection. She found a volunteer to help hold the patient down (I think this was in the days before chloroform) and with no other help, Dr. Chesnut amputated the leg.

Unfortunately, the flaps of flesh covering the amputation did not mesh as the surgery healed.

A skin graft proved necessary.

When none of the man's relatives nor anyone else would volunteer, Dr. Chesnut cut a large patch of skin from her own thigh and used it for her patient.

Did God lead her to do that?

Dr. Chesnut heard no voice from Heaven commanding her to do it; she relied on the promises of Scripture concerning God's will, guidance and leading.

She wrote a friend at home, "Every morning I have a choice little time all to my lonesome. First I read the new quotation on the calendar, then the thought for the day in 'Daily Strength For Daily Needs' and finally play and sing a hymn."

Was it only on the basis of a quote from a Scripture calendar and a little Scripture passage in a page-a-day devotional book, that this woman decided that it was the will of God for her to risk her own leg to gangrene?

How did she know what God was leading her to do?

In a letter before she left for China she told a friend about her reasons for wanting to be a missionary in the first place:

"I have had developed in me a liking for medical study, although I did not seriously think of the matter until of late. It seemed to me such an utter impossibility to carry out the design, as I am without means and without friends to assist. But I do trust that I am by divine appointment fitted for this work. My age—twenty-one next January. Oh! I just long to do this work."

She liked medical studies; she wanted to do useful work. Were her personal likings and wantings the voice of God leading her?

On October 29, 1905, at the height of anti-foreign sentiment in China, three new missionaries arrived at the Lien-Chou hospital; a single woman and a married couple with their 11-year-old daughter.

Less than 48 hours later a Chinese mob attacked the hospital. The little girl was stabbed to death and thrown in the river. Her parents and the single woman were clubbed to death. Four men from the mob threw Dr. Chesnut into the river then one of them speared her with a pitchfork—"once in the neck, once in the breast, and once in the

lower part of the abdomen". The other men jumped in the water and held Dr. Chesnut under till she drowned.

What can we make of this?

Would God led three new dedicated missionaries and an innocent child to be on station for less than two days then allow them to be murdered?

Was it God's will for an experienced physician who loved Him and desired to serve Him to be forked to death?

Did God guide His people to this point?

Should the missionaries have gotten out to safety when they saw the anti-foreign riots begin in the Boxer Rebellion years before?

How did Dr. Chesnut and her friends decide what was the will of God for them? Why did she think God was guiding her to stay on duty at the hospital? Was she positive that God was leading her?

The same day she died, the Presbyterian Foreign Mission Board received a letter from Dr. Chesnut who wrote weeks earlier; in it she wrote a poem concerning her own questions concerning divine guidance:

Being in doubt, I say
Lord, make it plain!
Which is the true, safe way?
Which would be in vain?

I am not wise to know,
Not sure of foot to go,
My blind eyes cannot see
What is so clear to Thee;
Lord, make it clear to me.

Being perplexed, I say,
Lord, make it right!
Night is as day to Thee,
Darkness as light.

I am afraid to touch
Things that involve so much;
My trembling hand may shake,
My skillless hand may break—
Thine can make no mistake.

Notice the words Dr. Chesnut uses: *doubt, blind, perplexed, afraid, trembling*. I like this lady! I can identify with her questions about recognizing God's guidance for sure.

She is confident of God's trustworthiness, positive that God won't make a mistake; but she is not at all sure of her own ability to see His will and follow His way.

I think I know how she feels in this poem.

I feel exactly the same way.

Tuesday, February 16, 2010 Three Secrets

Over this past weekend I almost did something good for somebody.

Didn't do it.

But I intended to.

Big deal. Back on July 10, 1736, John Wesley, founder of Methodism, wrote in his diary, "It is a true saying, Hell is paved with good intentions".

Actually, I intended to do good deeds for two different needs but I did not do either of them. One project I was physically unable to; the other self aborted. That being the case, I suppose it's ok for me to tell about it. Had I actually done a good deed, Jesus actually forbids my letting anyone know about it. Doing good is one of three things He commands we do in secret.

He said, "Take care not to do your good works before men, to be seen by them; or you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. When then you give money to the poor, do not make a noise about it, as the false-hearted men do in the Synagogues and in the streets, so that they may have glory from men. Truly, I say to you, They have their reward".

He said to do good in secret, "So that your giving may be in secret; and your Father, who sees in secret, will give you your reward".

When it comes to doing secret good, Jesus said, "Let not your left hand see what your right hand does".

I can do the Lord one better—most of the time my right hand does not even know what my right hand is doing”!

So, even though I did not do or give or accomplish anything good, maybe I learned something valuable from this weekend’s experience.

First, I learned that I shouldn’t give what belongs to somebody else.

I’d encountered this poor family and I intended to do something good for them, but since I lacked enough cash to do it, I planned to use somebody else’s money to do it.

That’s a no-no.

As Kind David said, “Shall I offer unto the Lord that which cost me nothing”?

When I sought the counsel (and the cash) of somebody I knew could afford to do what I intended, he pointed out the difference between helping the poor family and meddling in their life. He noted that they had not asked for my help, and he pointed out that they did actually need what I wanted to give but that I had a bug in my ass to give them something that I thought they ought to have. It was all my idea.

As St. Peter said, “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,”

Instead of acting out of a heart full of Christian charity, I was being a busybody.

I think the reason Jesus said to give in secret was to save us embarrassment. If the world really knew how little I give in proportion to what I keep and spend on myself, I’d be ashamed.

I recall an old cartoon from some magazine: this guy in a business suit sits on a park bench feeding pigeons. Beside him he’s placed this large sign proclaiming:

These Crumbs Are Brought To You By A Grant From The John W. Cowart Foundation.

Jesus said to give in secret.

He also said we are to pray in secret.

“And when you make your prayers, be not like the false-hearted men, who take pleasure in getting up and saying their prayers in the Synagogues and at the street turnings so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, They have their reward.

“But when you make your prayer, go into your private room, and, shutting the door, say a prayer to your Father in secret, and your Father, who sees in secret, will give you your reward....”

Again, obeying Him saves us from embarrassment; if folks realized how little I pray...

Personally I feel reluctant to tell somebody, “I’m praying for you”.

That statement presupposes that my prayers are bigger and more effective than your prayers. I’m a better, more pious Christian than you are. Your puny prayers don’t work; my powerful prayers do because I have an inside track with the Almighty. I’m a superior Prayer Warrior!

That’s ridiculous.

I think it better if I were going to pray for somebody, that I just do it. There’s no Heavenly reason for them to know about it, is there?

The third thing Jesus said we should do in secret is fast:

“And when you go without food, be not sad-faced as the false-hearted are. For they go about with changed looks, so that men may see that they are going without food. Truly I say to you, They have their reward. But when you go without food, put oil on your head and make your face clean; so that no one may see that you are going without food, but your Father in secret; and your Father, who sees in secret, will give you your reward”.

That’s one commandment I keep with bells on.

Just look at my photo—All 270 pounds of me.

You’ll never in this world guess how much I fast!

If we think our religion is real, there is no reason for anyone else to be told about it.

You can be a Christian on a desert island 500 miles from any other living soul.

Our relationship is with God. It need not be on public display.

And, if I truly believe Jesus, I do not need affirmation from any outsider. But...but...but, how will anybody know that I'm a born-again, fire-baptized, card-carrying Man Of God if I don't let them know it?

Well, there's one thing Jesus said I can do which need not be secret:

He said, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another".

Oh. That.

Wednesday, February 17, 2010 On Being A One-Ply Christian

Please Note: *Over the next few days I am changing my blog. The address will stay the same, but I have to transfer to a new software, new server, new format, new look, new features, etc. But it's the same old me.*

While making these changes, I plan to re-post some of my favorite entries from former days. Please bear with me as I learn how to work this new system. This post comes from page 119 in my book A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad:

— Thanks, John

On Being A One-Ply Christian

Again today I re-discovered that my religion is as thin and flimsy as one-ply toilet paper.

I'm fine as long as I'm safely on a roll, but let the slightest bit of friction come, let something rub me the wrong way, and — well, there's a nasty break through.

As often happens, today's break through came because of my own expectations; I'd envisioned spending the weekend in a certain way accomplishing certain things important to me. Instead, I find other people have other plans. As usual, this rubs me the wrong way. I grow frustrated. My Christianity rips.

And there you have it!

This afternoon I vented a lot of this frustration in the presence of my daughter Eve— who had nothing whatsoever to do with the situation. Eve is a gentle fawn of a girl who just happened to be in the room when Dad began his rant.

Did I complain about the situation at hand?

No. I raged about everything that bugged me from an unexpected \$400 bill, to the government's handling of the war in Iraq, to the carpetbagger jaguar football team moving from Jacksonville (leave losers!), to the letter "i" sticking on my keyboard.

Poor Eve got to see the real me - the bitter, sour, grump who lurks brooding beneath my thin layer of Christian faith.

Incidentally, one reason Eve was over at my house - after treating me to a nice lunch out - was to set up her own blog. She made her first posting today. Please visit her new site to leave a comment welcoming her to blogging. Her site is called Of Cabbages And Kings and it's found at <http://www.eveyq.blogspot.com/>

Anyhow, does the breaking through of my frustrations, my ranting and raving and exposing the ugliness that underlies my thin, flimsy faith, prove that that faith is not real?

When a Christian falls, does that mean his faith is only a misty vapor?

On one hand, it would be easy to say that a person who acts like me, is not a real Christian. Real Christians don't say the sort of things I said.

But I am a real Christian. I'm a born-again, fire-baptized, spirit-filled, card-carrying Christian and I've got a tee-shirt and bumper sticker to prove it! (My tee-shirt says: JESUS LOVES YOU - BUT I'M HIS FAVORITE)!

On another hand, does such behavior as mine mean I'm just a hypocrite, pretending to be a Christian, but just using Jesus to enhance my own reputation?

That could be.

I do believe better than I act. But I'm working on that one.

On still another hand (yes, three hands), does the behavior of any frustrated Christian under stress, when the faith hits the fan, mean that Christianity is false. That there's really nothing to it?

Not necessarily.

The truth of Jesus in no way depends on being propped up by His followers.

He is Himself whatever we are.

Besides if I, being a Christian, can be such a mean, bitter, sour, nasty old grouch underneath my one-ply faith — just imagine what I'd be like without that thin redeeming film of God's grace!

Sad, isn't it?

And here I thought so highly of my own shining, sterling example as a model Christian. I thought so much better of myself than that.

I expected more of me ...

Maybe that's the whole trouble right there.

Thursday, February 18, 2010
Tits & Tobacco: an odd occurrence

*This post comes from page 126 in my book **A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad:***

All day I unscrewed pool fixtures and carried out my usual Friday duties.

Gin & I both celebrated birthdays in the same week earlier this month and her mother sent us a nice birthday check (*Thanks, Alva*). So, for our usual Friday night date, we splurged by cashing the welcomed check and going to Donna Maria's, an open-air Mexican restaurant on the waterfront.

Scrumptious.

While there I saw a bird (actually it landed on the table next to us). I'd never seen one like it before. But Ginny calmly announced that it was a *boatswain grackle*. The scope of the woman's knowledge amazes me.

Anyhow, this Mexican place sits right next to a Hooters Restaurant which also has an open air section. The two places blend together, so while we dined, I watched a

fascinating jiggle show as sweet young things bent over vigorously polishing tables .

An aside: We went to a different Hooters once years ago when Ginny's new boss treated the office staff and spouses to dinner there. About 18 or 20 people attended. Four or five waitresses brought out huge mounded platters of chicken wings and everyone prepared to dig in. But the new boss tapped her glass for attention, stood up, and said, "Mr. Cowart, I understand you are religious. Would you say grace for us."

At this, the four or five waitresses paused in their serving, lined up posing and jutting, and stood in an impressive, but respectful, line. Other noisy customers packed the place but the stance of the girls caused a hush to fall.

Normally I believe in praying in secret, i.e. in private, not public, prayer. But what do you do when asked to pray in public in a Hooters?

Stunned, I stood up at the table and prayed aloud saying something or another in thanks for food, jobs and beauty. Then the feasting began .I've heard it said that a Christian needs to be ready to preach, pray or die at a moment's notice — but this really caught me off guard. I have no idea what I said, but afterwards several people commented about how appropriate the prayer was.

Anyhow back to tonight, I enjoyed my fried peppers stuffed with something and coated with the Mexican version of Velveeta. And I enjoyed the scenery of boats, birds, and boobs galore.

Afterwards, Gin & I strolled holding hands along the Riverwalk. A guy came up with a cell phone pressed to his ear. He stopped us and launched into a long story about wife and kids in a broke down car, dead battery, expensive hotel room— and could I give him \$57 to make ends meet. Ha! Fat chance.

*(The asking price of panhandlers has gone up. My Daddy told me that back during the Great Depression a running joke was: **Q:** "Say, Buddy, you got a nickel for a cup of coffee?" **A:** "No. But I'll get along somehow.")*

I gave the man a bit of change and he pressed for more till I said that was all I'm willing to give. I suspect the cell

phone was only a prop for his scam; panhandling is illegal on the Riverwalk and there is a strong police presence.

So much for that.

Now here's where things get weird:

As Ginny & I drove home we stopped at a Walgreen's drug store because they were having a sale, a dollar off, on my brand of pipe tobacco. I bought my tobacco and Gin picked up a couple of things she needed.

Now remember: the sum total of my thinking all evening - tits, tobacco.

As we walked to the car, I saw a homeless man. No shirt. A ragged bundle of clothes. Thin as a rail. Not a hair on his head. Looked like an AIDS victim with a really bad T-Cell count. He foraged in a trashcan, found a plastic soda bottle with a little liquid left in the bottom, and he drank it. (There is a heat index of 105 today).

Now without thinking I gave this man a tiny courtesy, nothing big, just the sort of normal kindness you'd extend to anybody you know.

He started crying.

He stepped close and threw his arms around me and lay his head on my shoulder and cried his heart out. I have a great aversion to being touched; it's so strong in me that I cut my own hair rather than let a barber touch me. And here this stranger is embracing me and crying. I deliberately shelved my aversion, steeled myself to being touched, and put my arms around him. I cradled him in my arms. I patted his back and rocked him back and forth like a child.

All I said to him was, "It's ok. It's going to be alright. Don't be afraid. It's all going to be ok."

I said this over and over.

I think we stood like that in the Walgreen's parking lot for a good ten or 15 minutes. Ginny quietly got in our car and waited.

Now, here's what's odd.

This man sobbing in my arms said, "Forgive me. I'm just a sinner. Please forgive me. Forgive me."

I had not said one word about religion. I quoted no Scripture. I gave no testimony. I didn't read *Four Things God Wants You To Know*. I did not lead him in *The Sinner's Prayer*. None of that standard Christian witnessing stuff - Tits & tobacco had been the only things on my mind. - And here I felt God was using me??? Why? Maybe He's scraping the bottom of the barrel for witnesses here in Jacksonville.

Yet, nevertheless, this poor bastard was crying for forgiveness with tears streaming down his face and snot dripping from his nose.

Finally, he pulled himself together. Wiped his face with his forearm, picked up his bundle and walked down the street sniffing and saying, "Lord, forgive me. Lord, forgive me.."

I really don't know what to make of this.

Don't you have to be pious and prayerful and "on fire for the Lord" to be used by God?

Or, maybe I was not "used by God"

Maybe I just ran into an emotional AIDS patient.

Maybe the man is a kook who does this with everybody?

Or, was this some kind of scam? Cynical Christian that I am, after embracing, cradling, and rocking this guy, I immediately checked to see my wallet was still in place - it was.

I really don't know what to make of this odd incident.

Was I on *Candid Camera* or something?

Puzzling.

One commenter remarked:....I can see you at Hooters saying, "I don't pray publicly too often, but I'll try my breast."

Friday, February 19, 2010

Dressing For Heaven & I Do Not Turn Green

This post starts on page 248 in my book A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad:

Dressing For Heaven

Traditional imagery pictures people in Heaven as wearing gold-foil hats and flowing gauze robes. Friday, I imagined a different picture; I imagined that I would stand before the throne of God wearing the very same clothes that I have given to the poor.

Yes, all afternoon Ginny and I padded around the house in our underwear trying on all our clothes to see if they fit as we cleaned out our closets and packed up clothes to send to the poor at the mission.

Ginny is infuriatingly systematic, methodical, and self-disciplined. In her closet she has 20 green clothes hangers, 20 blue ones, 20 white ones, and 10 clear plastic hangers. She keeps 20 dresses for work on the green ones, 20 casual outfits on the blue ones, etc. I'm not sure about the exact numbers or color codes but you get the idea.

She refuses to add to the number of hangers.

That means that whenever she gets a new office dress, an old one must go. A new casual blouse means that one now on the hanger must come off.

That way she only has her very favorite clothes in her closet at any given time. No muss, no fuss, no clutter.

She's the same way about her books. She has one bookcase. When she gets a new book, an old one must be replaced so her shelf space remains constant.... On the other hand, I have ELEVEN bookcases in our house and piles of books on the floor, in chairs, under the bed, in the closet... Well, you get the idea.

Yet, somehow this strange woman and I remain married.

Another factor adds to the clutter in our house. For some reason our friends, neighbors, and children bring us stuff to go to the mission. I mean, even back when we did not own a car, folks who did would bring mission donations to our house and I'd have to borrow a van or something to get the donations out there to the poor. That still goes on, so the foyer of our home is always piled with bags and boxes of stuff to go the mission.

We cleared the foyer yesterday morning and took out a load, but already another three black plastic garbage

bags full of clothes are in our foyer. I'm looking at them right this minute!

Anyhow, yesterday Ginny and I also cleaned out our own closets. This meant we were constantly having to make decisions as to what clothes to keep and which items should go to the poor.

This presents me with a dilemma.

What do I send to the poor, what do I keep for me?

Pants are easy. If they still button and zip and I can sit down in them, they stay. Those that have shrunk too much for me to zip up, some poor guy can wear them.

Shirts present a different problem. Some are easy to send to the suffering poor. For instance that tee-shirt with cute fuzzy kittens in a basket on the chest that Aunt Hazel gave me - hey, the poor like kittens, don't they?

But here's that neat tee-shirt I bought myself, the one with the pack of wolves eating into a harp seal with blood and seal guts strewn about in the snow — That's a keeper. Definitely a keeper. I'll be such a hit when I wear that one to Jennifer's Christmas party.

So I made choices about which shirts to send to the poor — that's when I got the idea that the clothes we'll have to wear in Heaven will be the ones we give to the poor here on earth.

As I recall, Russian writer Leo Tolstoy said that what we have there, is what we give here; and I think C.S. Lewis said the same thing about the books we'll still have in Heaven. Apparently, we lay up treasure in Heaven by giving to the poor on earth.

I doubt that's right. Sounds too much like salvation-by-works to me but, nevertheless, I suspect that Christ approves of us giving our best.

We can't brown-nose God. Giving to the poor should simply be an expression of our love for the Lord Christ, Prince of the Poor, who though He were rich yet made Himself poor for our sakes.

Be all that as it may, as I packed stuff to go to the mission, I got this ridiculous idea about what clothes I might have available to wear in Heaven.

Do I really want to appear before the throne of Almighty God in castoffs, with my bare belly hanging over pants that won't zip and wearing fuzzy damn kittens on my chest?

Speaking of clothing... The following entry is from page 66 of *A Dirty Old Man Gets Worse*:

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 were. 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.

Saturday, February 20, 2010
When Faith Hits The Fan

This post comes from page 252 in my book A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad:

When The Faith Hits The Fan

Sometimes I hate being a Christian.

Case in point - last week an elderly lady of my acquaintance phoned asking for help with a minor chore, a chore which should take me about three or four hours to do. Instead of telling her to go to Hell, I agreed to help the dear old soul.

It turned out that the simple chore consumed three whole days of my life and mind because she kept changing the perimeters of the chore so that it became more and more difficult for me to help her. She just made the thing harder and harder for me to do. *Could it be that she treated me like I treat Jesus???*

Instead of a one-shot deal, this lady's chore expanded like the Chicken-Heart-That-Ate-Cleveland. It involved three personal visits from me, two from Ginny, and between eight and 12 phone calls.

And each step of the way, I grew more and more resentful and frustrated and bitter until what started out as a simple act of Christian charity transmogrified into an occasion of black seething sin inside me. At one point I vowed never to help anybody with anything ever again in my whole life! Ever!

You know, it's relatively easy for me to think I'm a Christian when I'm alone with my books and my computer, when I'm thinking deep thoughts about my imaginary god and imaginary people — but let me get out in the world dealing with the Living God and real people, let my faith hit the fan, let my idealized version of Christianity inconvenience me, then I feel put upon and I grow bitter, resentful, depressed, angry... Mad at God and man.

What the hell kind of Christian am I anyhow?

Probably a typical one.

But we won't go into that.

So dawns the season of light and joy, of Peace on earth and Good Will toward men - and here I'm peeved and ready to kick ass.

In spite of my vow to never help anyone anywhere ever again, will I eventually calm down and act like a Christian again?

Possibly.

Probably.

But today might not be the best day to ask me for a favor.

Sunday, February 21, 2010 A Tragic Loss Of Life?

Yesterday dawned bright and beautiful, top-down, windows open, shirt sleeve weather with the temperature here in Jacksonville pushing 70. So Ginny and I ventured out on a day trip driving all over the rural towns of northeast Florida and southeast Georgia, stopping here and there as the spirit moved us, and eating way more than the Spirit might think prudent.

Our aimless quest led us to browse in five or six roadside antique shops, consignment boutiques, and book stores.

At each store Ginny asked about a pattern of dishes she treasures.

At each store I asked about tobacco pipes and old diaries.

She bought a couple of three dollar dresses which she said would cost over \$80 each in a mall. And she bought a birdhouse that struck her fancy.

She said that these antique stores offer more and more things that we already own or once owned but gave away. We are turning into antiques ourselves.

At one store a sign above the cash register announced:

**We Buy Junk.
We Sell Antiques.**

While we browsed, a distraught lady rushed in asking about her glasses. She been in that shop earlier and lay

her glasses down somewhere to squint at a price tag, then left. "I can't see to drive without them," she said.

I winked at the guy at the counter and told the lady, "You just missed them. We sold that pair of glasses about ten minutes ago".

The guy cracked up laughing.

That's me, a Christian spreading light and joy wherever I go.

Not to worry, we found her glasses and she left rejoicing.

At another antique warehouse, I asked the mature couple minding the store about pipes.

No joy.

I asked about old diaries.

The man at the cash register said, "We've got one. Just came in. Mind you, it is a bit risqué. Mother, where did we put that girl's diary"?

"That thing was filthy," the lady said. "Dirty language about sex. It was trash and I put it in the trash. Won't sell such a thing in my store".

"She was just a young woman telling about her life experiences," he said.

"Well, she shouldn't oughta been having experiences like that! And she certainly shouldn't have been writing about it. Garbage is garbage and that's where it belongs".

As the conversation developed, I gathered that the girl had been a flapper during the 1920s, or maybe a hippy chick from the 1960s.

In a way, her diary doesn't matter because it is lost for ever, discarded among headless dolls, mildewed teddy bears, castoff chicken bones, soggy cardboard boxes, cracked DVD discs, hamburger wrappers...

How do I know?

Because as we left the store, I checked in the back ally dumpster hoping to salvage the lost diary.

No joy.

I know how much effort it takes to write a diary; I've kept mine for over 30 years. On one level I'm heartsick

that the record of this unknown girl's life was trashed as of no value.

On another level, I know that the record of this girl's life—of all lives—is inscribed in the mind of God and that one day all the books will be opened, all secrets revealed. The Lord knows the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Did Jesus come to save only the prim and proper?

Or, is the love of God commended toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us?

Our omniscient and merciful God looks upon what we do—and why we did it.

Think of a nurse monitoring me in an intensive care unit. Can't burp without her knowing. She sees me sleep. She sees me suffer. She knows what is crucial to my well-being and what I must simply endure. She watches overall, and occasionally intervenes in my distress.

She watches me die.

I think that nurse demonstrates how God always watches us.

Not standing by like Big Brother with a cattle prod looking to zap the sinner with glee.

In Him we live and move and have our very being. We exist in His intensive care unit. The hairs on our heads are monitored. Nothing is lost to Him with whom we have to do.

Yet, St. Paul mentions that there are some things that "perish with the using".

Maybe this girl's diary was one of those things.

Maybe my own precious writings are another.

Things do serve their purpose and are then rightly cast aside.

Antique stores are full of them.

So the girl's diary was judged trash and consigned to the dumpster.

I harbor a prayer that when the Lamb's Book Of Life is opened, she herself will see her name recorded in Glory.

Be kinda nice to see me listed there too—maybe in the appendix?

You should read some of my early journals... but then again, maybe not.

Tuesday, February 23, 2010
**Two Things On My Mind Before
Christmas**

*This post comes from page 259 in my book *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad*; I wrote it a few days before Christmas in 2005.*

Two Things Occupying My Mind Recently

Well, it's Friday already and I still haven't finished Monday's 2do2da list. I've stayed busy all week but have accomplished little.

Story of my life.

Two things have occupied my thoughts recently:

A few months ago I decided to stop clicking on internet pornography sites to look at girly pictures. So far, so good. But I'm being tempted to return to that practice.

What is it about the Christmas season that makes me want to lower my standards and look for license? Observing the incarnation of God into the world should make me grateful to Him, but instead I'm tempted to celebrate the season by cutting loose to look at girls in (or out of) red flimsies.

I've been told that mature Christian men outgrow such adolescent fantasies, but you couldn't prove that by me. Apparently I'm a 67-year-old man with the mental outlook of an 11-year-old boy.

I have not given in to the temptation yet, but knowing my own history with temptation - I have rarely been tempted to do anything that I eventually didn't do it - I'm not guaranteeing anything.

But at the moment, this bugs me.

At the other end of the spectrum, I have also been thinking about the essential nature of God. (Hey, my mind works that way).

At breakfast Monday, my friend Barbara mentioned something about God being "Wholly Other" and I've been thinking about that.

God is unique. That is, there is nothing else like Him. He is one, complete in Himself. He is not exactly like any other being in, or beyond, the universe.

He is Creator, all the rest of us are creatures of His making.

Men, roaches and archangels have more in common with each other than we have with Him. He is Creator; we are all created entities.

Yet, in creating us, He apparently stamped nature with some hints as to His own nature and character. The majesty of thunderclouds, the power of the tornado, the potential of an egg, the wings of a butterfly, the protective coloration of a caterpillar, the love shared by man and woman, the splendor of an angel, the thoughts of the human mind - all these dimly reflect some element of the One who created all.

He is above all and in Him we live and move and have our very being.

That's scary.

For one thing it means He's big.

Huge.

Immense.

I don't picture the Incredible Hulk when I think of God, but that's close.

In a way I think of when I go downtown and stand at the base of a skyscraper and tilt my head way back and look up; even though I'm standing on solid pavement, I feel as though I'm falling and I get dizzy.

God scares me because He is so big. He holds all the universe in His hand as though it were no bigger than a peanut.

He makes me feel fragile.

I don't think my view is uncommon.

Remember for yourself one of those times when you felt close to God in your own experience. Regardless of the circumstances, I suspect that you felt some of the same things that I felt.

In my own 67 years, I can only remember a few times when I've felt particularly aware of God's presence. These

experiences were almost overwhelming and I feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, even remembering them much less speaking about them.

Oddly enough, only one of these occasions occurred in a church service. Once it happened when I was a kid in my bedroom, once when I was out camping in the woods, once when I saw a girl in a yellow dress, and once when I was dissecting a pig in a biology class.

Odd places to encounter God.

Whatever works for you.

My experiences probably have a few things in common with your own:

While I felt a fear of God, I also felt a strange attraction to Him. I was afraid but at the same time, there was an incredible sweetness. I wanted this awareness of Him to never end.

Was it that way for you too?

I became keenly aware of my own unworthiness, insignificance, uncleanness - not for particular things I've done, but just in the light of His holiness. I felt as though I were someplace I didn't belong - but I was being welcomed anyhow.

Know what I mean?

Now I'm a guy with all sorts of questions, complaints and problems, but during those time I felt aware of being in God's presence, all that stuff faded into insignificance. No questions were worth asking. No complaint worth voicing. No problem worth discussing. The only thing that mattered was God Himself; nothing else counts.

So here I was, a worm and no man, in the presence of the Almighty, yet I felt loved, accepted in the Beloved, welcomed. And this felt overwhelming, that the Mighty God cared about me. The King of the Universe really cares.

That's a hard thing to get over, isn't it?

Now, I'm thinking about the incarnation, that the Creator of the universe, King of Kings and Lord of Lords cares about us.

He sees that we've scrambled the eggs He gave us to hatch, and He reduced Himself to become a human baby to come into this world and unscramble the mess we've made and are helpless to unscramble ourselves.

Somehow I envision the Incredible Hulk in a straw manger.

Yes, in the incarnation, the Lord God emptied Himself of some of His prerogatives, focused His scary immensity into a tiny baby – nothing to be scared of – and came to seek and to save the lost.

So the angels told the shepherds, “Don't be scared... it's only a baby.”

Then ... well, you know the rest of the story as well as I do.

But there is one other thing I recall about my own experiences of being aware of the wholly other God. I was aware that the scary, sweet bliss I felt would not last. I knew that I was only seeing a temporary glimpse for that moment, that the real, permanent awareness of God still lies far ahead.

Meanwhile there remain bills to pay, phone calls to make, oil to change, leaves to rake, people to love (or at least tolerate), Christmas presents to buy --Yes, in Him we live and move and have our very being – but we do that here and now.

So I need to spend this day catching up on Mondays list – and not clicking on porno sites.

Lord, please be merciful to John Cowart, a sinner.

**Wednesday, February 24, 2010
Three Days In June, 2005**

This post comes from pages 72-74 in my book A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad.

Everything I know about prayer, I learned from my dog.

For some reason today I've been thinking a lot about what my dog taught me about prayer and understanding God's will.

Sheba, our black lab, lived with us for 17 years; she's been dead for four years now. After her initial shots, we never took her to the vet again, and, in spite of common knowledge to the contrary, we usually fed her table scraps, and on rare occasions a can of dog food..

One day as I was driving in heavy rain the rubber blade on my windshield wiper gave out. A nuisance. The next Saturday I bought some replacement blades and took them home to mount on the car.

Here I am parked in our drive on a bright sunny day trying to squeeze those rubber refills into the metal fixture. And Sheba sat alertly watching that interesting thing I was doing.

She whined and pawed the ground but she never took her eyes off me. She could not have watched more intently if I'd have been opening a can of Alpo. She cocked her head from one side to the other and gave every indication of yearning to help me accomplish whatever it was that I was doing. She seemed distressed that I was having trouble getting the task done.

I laughed.

And I just loved that stupid old dog for wanting to help.

That night at my prayers I puzzled over some situation I just could not understand; why had God let such-and-such happen?

Why didn't He listen to my fervent prayer and advice about how to remedy the situation?

How can I follow the will of God when I don't even understand what it is He's trying to do?

Why does God want us to pray when most of the time we don't even have an inkling of what to pray for?

As I struggled with such questions, the image of Sheba sitting in the drive staring intensely at me as I worked burst back into my mind.

I realized that I can no more understand the actions of God than Sheba could understand why I was changing the windshield wiper blades!

And I thought that maybe our Father may just enjoy our company, attention and good will—even when He has no need of our advice.

Saturday, June 04, 2005

A Writer's Life: Adventure, Passion, Thrills & Romance

I sat in front of the computer all day editing the manuscript of *Letters From Stacy*; up to page 100 now.

When Ginny got home, for our Friday Night Date we drove to the library to check out pleasure reading. Then we drove to Bar-B-Q Junction on San Juan Avenue where we read our books, ate great BBQ, and watched the rain, hardly speaking to each other.

Back home we put on some music, sat in our rockers and read our books all evening.

Can you stand the excitement?

Sunday, June 05, 2005

No good deed...

Ginny claims that when I go out of the house a huge neon sign floats in the air above my head flashing the word "SUCKER."

Bums, winos and street people see this flashing sign and home in on me knowing instinctively that they've spotted the world's softest touch who will swallow any sob story.

Well, I was out mowing a neighbor's huge back yard (long story) in heat pushing 90 degrees. As I worked in the thick grass I was thinking that I'm too old and feeble to do such heavy work. I looked up from my work and there in front of me stood a stranger, an elderly gentleman older and more feeble than I am. He asked me if he could mow the yard to earn a couple of dollars because he is hungry.

Now, obviously I could not turn a total stranger loose in my neighbor's back yard, so I told him that I had to finish this work myself, but that maybe I could find a bit of help for him. Since I was working in my swimsuit and tee-shirt, I had no cash on me, so I left him sitting in the shade while I walked back to our house and to get a bit of change to give him.

Had to scrounge around in pants, billfold and dresser drawer to scrape together some cash. Then I walked back to the neighbor's and handed the old guy enough to buy a burger.

I was feeling pretty virtuous about how kind I am to God's poor and how righteous I am to go to all this trouble to get the old man a few dollars, and how that I am a shining example of Christian charity in action.

The Good Lord in Heaven looked down on the scene and said, "*John Cowart, you smug, self-righteous prick! I'm going to have to take the wind out of your sails.*"

So I handed the stranger his money, graciously received his thanks, waved bye as he left, and I immediately stepped back into a nest of fireants.

God's tiny little creatures responded.

They climbed upward and began stinging at my knees and proceeded to work their way north.

It's difficult to feel smug and self-righteous with fireants conducting war games in your pubic hair. I think I could swear that I heard tiny helicopters and music playing "Flight of the Valkyries" from *Apocalypse Now*.

Unregenerate cynics sneer saying that no good deed goes unpunished.

Even though I'm a Christian, today I'm inclined to agree with them.

Thursday, February 25, 2010
Two More From The Past:

This post comes from page 182-187 in my book A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad:

A Little Tin Box



One morning last week I made myself a couple of new matchboxes.

As a pipe smoker I prefer wooden strike-anywhere matches. Pipe smoking carries an entire ritual of behavior patterns that add to the satisfaction, and for me decorating match boxes is part of that ritual.

In recent years I have used the tin boxes that package Altoids peppermints. Friends and family save the tin boxes for me and every month or so, I fix a set of them up for my matches.

Usually I fix a batch of five matchboxes at a time: for the car, for my pocket, for my desk, for beside my reading lamp, and for the tv room.

Here's how I do it:

First clean the box with a damp napkin then glue a striking surface to the bottom. For strikers I use either a scrap of sandpaper or the rough strip from the sides of a cardboard match package.

I trace the curved shape of the Altoids lid on a sheet of clear stiff plastic and use that as a template for my design. I place that clear template over a picture that

suggests my mood at the moment and trace around it. Then I cut the picture out with scissors and glue it to the cover of the tin box

I keep a file folder of magazine clippings (National Geographic is a great source) of photos which appeal to me for box covers. I choose matchbox cover pictures to fit my mood, or relate to some writing project I'm working on, or touch on some holiday or event important to me. Usually I glue a photo of a bikini girl who strikes my fancy inside the box.

This photo shows some of the matchboxes I've used while working on the *Glog* manuscript.



I suppose there are better ways to spend my time than pasting pictures on little tin boxes, but it keeps me off the street.

One Downer Of A Posting:

Depression is such an Everest of a feeling that it overwhelms.

I've avoided writing in my journal or my blog the past couple of days. I've felt that nobody wants to hear me whine. I think readers have enough downers in their own lives that normally I want my writing to give a lift. So I try

to enter bright sunny postings reflecting the joys of Christian life.

That's dishonest.

Yes, I am a Christian.

Yes, I am a happy man.

But there is a flip side to my life also.

And recently I've been pissing against a spiritual wind.

But that's shameful and I don't want readers to know about that side of me. I have a reputation to maintain. I don't want to give folks another reason to reject Christ; I don't want to bring reproach on His name. I want readers to think I'm a nice guy.

So, I lie.

I pretend to be happier, cooler, more spiritually in touch than I really am.

Well, this past week my faith has hit the fan.

Over the years I have written scads of biographical profiles of successful businessmen for Chamber of Commerce type magazines. I've also written a number of biographical sketches of outstanding Christians. And one thing always bothers me in collecting materials for such articles: biographers tend to tell only the good stuff about their subjects.

That bugs me and leaves me hopeless.

I mean if I'm reading a life of some spiritual giant hoping to find some inspiration and meaning in my own life, but all I read about are his successes, then what is there that I can relate to as I stumble through life without a clue?

Don't these Real Christians ever have an off day? Aren't they ever tempted to say, "To Hell with it." Don't they ever just give up and lay in the dust for a while before climbing to their feet and trudging on?

Maybe I'm just a hypocrite. Maybe I'm not "Filled With The Spirit." Maybe I'm not a true, dedicated believer. But I'm here.

I put a certain premium on honesty. I've resolved to be honest in my journal entries and record what's there, not just what ought to be there. And I try to do that in this

blog. The subtitle of this blog is “a befuddled Christian looks for spiritual realities in day to day living.”

Sometimes that spiritual reality is ‘Being A Christian Sucks.’”

Am I still a Christian? Yes. As Peter said, “To whom should we go, Lord? You alone have the words of eternal life.”

Am I a hypocrite? Yes. I do want to put my best foot forward. Once I even wrote a newspaper article on hypocrisy (Right-hand column, www.cowart.info).

Anyhow even though today’s posting is a downer, it’s what I have to say. That’s what you get here: one miserable bastard — and Jesus.

I hope someday some guy who’s down will read the stuff I write and say to himself, “You know, if a stupid looser like John Cowart can try to walk with God, maybe there’s hope for me too.”

Friday, February 26, 2010

A 90-Year-Old Dying Man

. This post comes from page 185 in my book A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad:

My friend Ginger, a nurse in a major area hospital, often tends to dying patients. After her shift Tuesday morning, she called inviting me to breakfast. She’s run into a situation which upsets her.

The patient, a man in his mid 90s, was a preacher. He’s suffered a stroke with many medical complications. Heart problems. Kidney failure. Diabetes. And a host of other age-related ailments. When he is lucid, he appears to be at peace and ready for death. As the Bible puts it, he is full of days and ready to be gathered to his fathers.

But his daughter insists on every possible medical intervention to keep him going.

This daughter, a deeply religious person, wants the hospital to get the old man well enough to travel. Then she plans can carry him to a faith-healing meeting conducted by one of the television preachers she watches. There, she feels, the old man will be cured.

The lady sits by her dying father's bedside continually with a huge black Bible open in her lap. The room's television blares out religious programming. And the lady loudly proclaims to any and all passers-by that she expects God to perform a miracle and heal her father.

Several things about this situation upset Ginger.

"John, she's going to be devastated when the old man dies," she said. "I think she's going to just lose it and come apart."

She thinks this lady feels so desperate for hope that she's relying on religious fantasy instead of realistic faith.

Jesus never cured anybody of old age.

Ginger, a dedicated Christian who wants to live as a testimony to Christ among her coworkers, is also concerned about the effect this woman's stance has on the hospital staff.

When skeptics see this Christian lady's frantic clinging, how can they take what we Christians say about our belief in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come?

Does our own behavior belie our own words?

This dear lady proclaims that she expects a miracle, for God to make a sick 90-year-old man healthy and young again.

Can God perform such a miracle?

Certainly.

Is that likely?

There's a reason they're called miracles.

Once I had a toothache. An abscessed tooth. I did not have money enough to see a dentist. I could not get into a charity clinic. I suffered and suffered and suffered.

I prayed for God to heal me, to ease my agony, to make my pain go away.

Nobody home in Heaven that week.

Finally I boiled a pair of pliers, rinsed my mouth out with alcohol and pulled my own tooth.

I do not recommend this.

Did my faith in a loving God fail?

Damn right it did!

Nothing like a good toothache to turn this particular Christian into a practicing atheist.

Why did God let me suffer in agony like that?

I have no idea.

I do know that He himself suffered anxiety:

“Father, if it is at all possible, let this cup pass from me...”

I do know that He himself felt abandoned in pain:

“My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?”

I do know that He himself cared about the family of the dying.

“Woman, behold thy son...”

I do know that the life Christ offers us is based on physical reality:

“I thirst.”

No fantasy about it.

Buried under dirt in a tomb for three days, Christ — like a visitor to a hospital burn unit walking out with a validated parking ticket in hand — headed back Home.

He once said, “In my Father’s house are many mansions... I go to prepare a place for you so that where I am, there you may be also.”

I grieve for Ginger. This is the third big hit she’s taken this week.

I grieve for the lady clinging to her Dad because I think this is more about her than about him.

I wonder how much of my own faith is fantasy and how much is reality.

My experience teaches me to view the world as a pretty screwed up place, and it seems that Jesus holds that same view; He said he came to save the utterly lost in the worst possible situations (the incarnation did not take place in Disneyland).

But this world ain’t the whole show.

We live in a staging area. Temporary quarters. Transitional housing. Dorm rooms for the semester.

Resurrection and Home lie ahead.

February 28, 2010
Something My Daddy Did

This post comes from page 91 in my book A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad:

I am already older than my father was when he died.

Before his death in 1979, my father, Zade Maxwell Cowart Jr., a Jacksonville native and a master molder, worked at NAS-JAX. There he crafted parts for some of NASA's 1971 Lunar Rover equipment, the golf-cart like vehicle astronauts used to drive around on the moon's surface and abandoned when they left.

Yes, astronauts took my Daddy's work from Jacksonville to the moon. -It's still up there.



Lunar Rover (far right) was abandoned on the surface of the moon.

March 1, 2010
New Blog Look Achieved—With Help

Yes, yesterday I and my fine advisers began the transition to this new site.

For five years I had done everything computer in exactly the same way.

But File Transfer Protocol changes at Blogger forced me to move kicking and screaming to this new Press Gang software.

You can teach an old dog new tricks, but it's painful for the dog.

Without the advice, support and encouragement of my family, geeks all, I would have given up. I tried to think of a way to thank them so I used a computerized concordance of the New International Readers Version (NIRV) to see what the Holy Scripture says about advisers. The first verse I came up with is from Proverbs 24:6 (NIRV) — "If you go to war, you need guidance. If you want to win, you need many good advisers".

Since I stay at war with my computer which rebels every time I try to write anything, and since I want to win, I'm so pleased that my family helps so much.



Chief instigator of all things computer is Donald, pictured above, who got me started. He keeps the whole system for my website, my books, and my blog going.

My daughter-in-law, Helen, pictured below, coaches me in html (whatever that means), graphics and sidebar stuff. She designs jewelry and book covers as well.



Yes, the Holy Scripture often speaks of the value of great advisors. For instance, Proverbs 15:22 (NIRV) says, “Plans fail without good advice. But they succeed when there are many advisers”.

I want my plans to succeed!

My son-in-law, Mark, pictured below on the right in the photo, gives me his input about meta tags and marketing.

He's the sanest of the bunch—watch out for his Nerf Saber though.



Then there's my daughter Eve, pictured below in her office at work, who helps me with research and transcribing. She's sane and stable, although she does think she's a cat.



Then, of course, is my beautiful Ginny, who keeps the whole thing together. She does not write books, nor keep an on-line diary, nor ride a motorcycle, nor make jewelry, nor think she a cat. And she hardly ever swings a Light Saber. She actually works for a living and supports me in the style to which I have become accustomed. Here's a photo of her... What does that say on her shirt?



I ONLY LOOK SWEET AND INNOCENT!

Yes, without these fine advisers I could not write my blog or publish my books.

I really want to thank them.

And in looking for an appropriate verse of Holy Scripture, I find these words in II Chronicles 22:4 (NIRV) —

“After Ahaziah’s father died, the members of Ahab’s family became his advisers. That’s what destroyed him”.

Oh!

Thanks anyhow, Kids.

Tuesday, March 2, 2010
**I’m Learning New Stuff—Under
Duress**



Today Tracy asked me to give a guest post on her *Abundant Living* site at <http://abundantliving-tracy.blogspot.com/> . I chose one called “Scruffy” from page 21 of my book *A Dirty Old Man Gets Worse*.

Meanwhile, my son and his wife continue to tweak under-the-water-iceberg features of this new blog format. Helen says she will come over tomorrow to coach me in how to post on it. This Press Gang site is now only three days old.

After I explained my ingenious Three Dot system of writing a post on Blogger, the kids said I’ve been approaching the computer like a caveman with a chisel and hammer approaches a rock to write on it. Hey, I’ve been doing it that way for five years; just because it’s a bit awkward, why should I change?

Did you know that you can cut and paste things with a computer?

Oh, the photo above is the one I want Helen to install as my avatar. Putting that ship into the beer bottle represents my major accomplishment in life so far.

Wednesday, March 3, 2010
Bad Times Remembered:

About 7:30 yesterday morning something happened. Because it involves things told me in confidence by someone else and because of possible legal ramifications, I do not feel free to spell out exactly what happened at dawn. But, the incident reminded me of things that happened to me, Ginny, and our kids many years ago back when we were poor

I've written about those times before, so here I'll repeat a section from page 152 of my book, *A Dirty Old Man Stumbles On*:

**God Likes Me Better Than He Likes You,
Doesn't He?**

I hesitate to write about this.

It's not my intention to upset, belittle, or aggravate anyone—as one of my recent diary entries did.

I do not want to cause anyone else to sin, to be filled with lust, coveting and envy, or to harbor resentment in their hearts.

I do not want to trouble the mind of anyone reading my blog, but the fact of the matter is that God likes me better than He likes you.

I can prove it.

Today Ginny and I plan to shop for a new car.

We think God has enabled us to do this.

Back when we were poor, we lived in actual, physical want, lacking many basic necessities of life. We lived with hunger. Back then when I'd go to church and hear some brother testify about how God was prospering him and providing means for him to do this or that, I'd hate the bastard.

And I'd worry that if owning physical goodies were a sign of God's favor and blessing, and there I stood without bus fare to make it home, then that meant God liked that guy — but did not like me.

I hear tv preachers say that sort of thing all the time, "The King's Children Always Travel First Class," they say. "Give and it SHALL be given unto you", they say. "Send me a donation of cash as seed money and god will prosper you with wealth," they say, as they flash diamond rings and Rolex watches (which they did not purchase via a special on-line e-mail offer).

God gives goodies, is the insidious message of heresy and liars.

God does not give goodies — He gives crosses.

Jesus, the Son of God, did not own the boat He preached from. He walked everywhere or borrowed a donkey. He ate meals cooked in someone else's kitchen. He slept as a guest in someone else's home. The cross He died on was not His own, it was the property of the Roman government. And He was buried in a borrowed tomb — which He returned to the owner in good condition, hardly used, after three days.

Yet the Scripture teaches that He was owner of all creation, King of kings, Lord of lords, the bright and morning star, all the cattle on a thousand hills.

Christ is no pauper.

He set aside His wealth for a reason.

So, what of His followers?

Is it true that the godly get more goodies? BULL!

The night Ginny and I had to walk miles and miles after midnight to get home with her as swollen-up pregnant as Mary on a Christmas card, God loved us just as much then as He does today when we are going car shopping.

When we had to gather up beer cans under the stadium in the pre-dawn hours so we could cash them in to buy milk and cereal for the kid's breakfast that same morning...

When I dropped my last quarter in the world into the payphone to call about that job only to get an answering machine...

When I used a pair of pliers to pull my own tooth because I could not afford a dentist...

When I gave my son the guitar he longed for, but I did not have money to buy the strings for it and I saw the disappointment cloud his face...

When all the kids dashed home excited and waving packets of their school photos, but I could not afford to buy any of them... Yes, I remember five of the kids all coming home from school happy and bouncing and excited about their school photos, each in a packet costing about \$40 and I remember not having money to buy anything but a single wallet-sized photo of each kid and they thought I would not buy their photos because I didn't like them.

Damn!

Although I could hardly realize it at the time, but the Lord Christ was with me in those days as much as He is today as I shop for a new car.

I hope, I really hope that Ginny and I never face such hard times again, but if we do, I look for Christ to stay just as present with us as He is today. As He was back in our former days of poverty, HUD housing and food stamps.

Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever.

Anyone who thinks good stuff equals the presence of God has not understood the Book of Job. Things are peripheral. God gives us what we need — or withholds the things we think we need — for one reason only: to draw us into fellowship with Himself.

If the godly get more goodies, then by that reasoning, Bill Gates must be the most godly man on earth! Whether he is or not, I have no idea; maybe he is; but, if so, it is not because of his wealth. He is wealthy and prospers because those factors give his particular soul the best chance to know Christ better.

The poor, barefoot tribesman who owns nothing more than a loincloth and a sharp stick to grub roots with, lives in his state of poverty for that same reason: because

those factors give his particular soul the best chance to know Christ better.

I am where I am, here between Bill and the tribesman, so that I can come to know Christ better. Although I must confess that I like being able to car shop better than I did walking without bus fare.

Fear not! God does not like me better than you because He's letting me shop for a new car today.

Maybe He's just sick of hearing me complain about our old car.

March 4, 2010
Practice With Graphics

For hours yesterday, Helen, my daughter-in-law, demonstrated much patience in walking me through a tutorial on using this new software. Thus, while learning this new blog software, I'm practicing inserting pictures; so this older post comes from page 373 of my book A Dirty Old Man Gets Worse:

Thoughts On A Ladder About The Evolution Of The Mouse



Tuesday I intended to work on the fire history book, but 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:



Opossum, p. 1509.

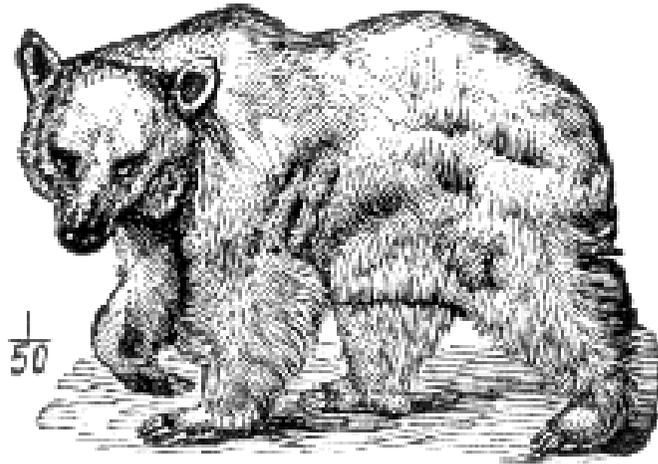
Anyone can see the resemblance the possum bares to its evolutionary ancestors.

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 even 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.

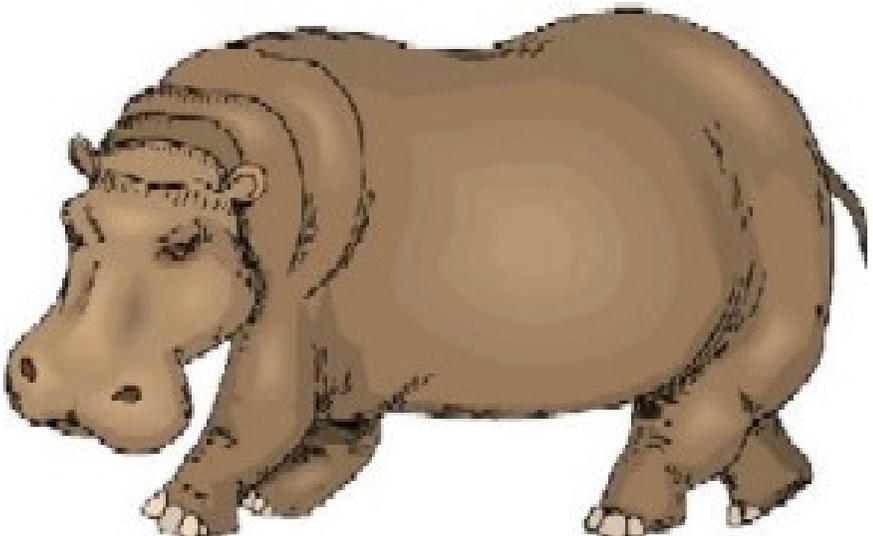
But in the cycle of life, Winter again comes. Mr. Raccoon goes to sleep in a cave and evolves as it sleeps for a long, long time. The animal becomes more complex, it increases in size, and its tail just about disappears. The animal emerges from its den in Spring as a bear:



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.

Consider the lizard:



Lizard, p. 1264.

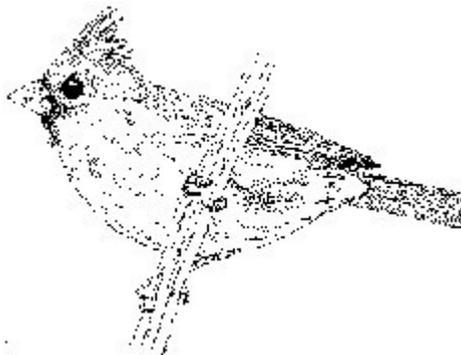
Were this creature to hibernate properly it would evolve into a noble Gator and go to the University of Florida where it would eat bulldogs every season.:



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:



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.

March 6, 2010
I See Every Head Bowed

Ginny ought to know better than to take me to places like that!

She know my weakness.

She know I can’t afford the expense.

But Saturday morning she drove me to the annual Friends Of The Library Book Sale in the exhibition halls at the Jacksonville Fair Grounds where over 200,000 books were offered at discount prices.

I stood in the middle of one aisle and snapped these photos with my key chain camera:

This first one looks down a single table with readers hunched over scanning titles. A twin to that table stretched behind me.



I centered my attention on the history and biography sections vying with other book people for Florida history books.

Why would I look for more Florida history materials? Just last week Helen helped me post an 86-page catalogue of my Florida history collection to sale (Take a look at <http://www.cowart.info/WritersFloridaCollection/index.htm>).

If I'm trying to sell my amassed Florida History collection, why in the world would I want to buy more of the same sort of materials?

Because I'm a nut!

When I see a book or artifact that fits my collection, I feel compelled to add that item.

Ginny says that in my heart of hearts, I do not want to sell my books.

I guess I am a little bit of a materialist.

My beautiful wife was lost somewhere amid books and bibliophiles.

Anybody see her?



Thus, while Ginny bought two books at the sale, I bought two bagsful!

It pains me to see so many books by so many writers being held in such low esteem.

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



I envision every book's author, dead or alive, looking on in spirit. These writers worked just as hard as I do, and I know the months or even years that go into producing each book. And here thousands of books languish on tables picked over by indifferent crowds who think a dollar is too much to spend on a writer's life work.

"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 own 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.

Well, I guess the only thing for me to do is pull down my old bookshelves and erect bigger new bookshelves, then I can relax and "I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much books laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry" .

Now, where have I heard something like that before?

Sunday, March 7, 2010
Ten More Days



Today is March 7th; St. Patrick's Day falls on March 17th. So, about this time each year I try to steer teachers and other interested people away from green beer and green bikini contests popular here in Jacksonville

and toward accurate information about a Christocentric man I greatly admire.

One such source is an biographical profile I wrote about St. Patrick many years ago. Here is the author's note at the end of that piece:

While I wrote this sketch of St. Patrick, my father was in the hospital dying of cancer. My mother wanted one of us to stay with him at all times and I drew the all night shift for—what wasn't, but seemed like—months. Because I was writing this on a strict deadline and there was no writing surface in Daddy's room, I wrote 90% of this piece in longhand on a yellow pad while laying on my belly on the floor under his bed. My youngest daughter was born just weeks after Daddy died; naturally we named her Patricia, the feminine form of Patrick. The name means NOBLE.

You can find my biography of Patrick at <http://www.cowart.info/> (Left column) .

Another source (which has nothing to do with me) can be found at <http://www.joyfulheart.com/stpatrick/> This site contains a wealth of information including a translation of St. Patrick's book, *Confession*, which begins saying, "I, Patrick, a sinner, a most simple countryman, the least of all the faithful and most contemptible to many..." His short book is a joy to read.

The *Joyful Heart* site also contains a translation of a prayer hymn ascribed to Patrick, *The Breastplate*. It is a comprehensive prayer for God's presence and protection in his life. I like these last five verses:

I invoke today all these virtues
Against every hostile merciless power
Which may assail my body and my soul,
Against the incantations of false prophets,
Against the black laws of heathenism,
Against the false laws of heresy,
Against the deceits of idolatry,
Against the spells of women, and smiths, and
druids,
Against every knowledge that binds the soul of
man.

Christ, protect me today
Against every poison, against burning,
Against drowning, against death-wound,
That I may receive abundant reward.

Christ be with me, Christ before me,
Christ behind me, Christ within me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ at my right, Christ at my left,
Christ in the fort, [i.e., at home]
Christ in the chariot seat, [i.e., traveling by land]
Christ in the poop deck. [i.e., traveling by water]
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks to me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.

I bind to myself today
The strong virtue of an invocation of the Trinity,
I believe the Trinity in the Unity
The Creator of the Universe.

Monday, March 8, 2010 **A Long Standing Interest**

Monday saw great progress made in my writing in that will of God manuscript. By great progress I mean I actually got a few more first-draft pages written.

My current chapter involves Kooks And The Will Of God. It questions how I am to differentiate between God's voice and my own mental whims. I need to address this issue because... well, there are folks who say God told them to do some bizarre things.

For instance the lady here in Florida who said God told her to direct traffic in the middle of a busy intersection—having removed her blouse and brassier first.

Or the guy in Chicago who lost his job and his wife while he spent five years obeying what he said was the voice of God telling him to construct a giant statue of Jesus out of Superglue and toothpicks—65,000 toothpicks.

Or John Wilkes Booth who wrote in his diary that God told him to assassinate President Lincoln.

Or Adolph Hitler who said, “The Jews have made no contribution to human culture and in crushing them I am doing the will of the Lord”.

How do I know that I’m not as crazy as those fine folk when I try to obey God?

Well, first off, I don’t own 65,000 toothpicks...

Anyhow, that’s the chapter I’m working on at the moment.

The rest of the day I read for pleasure.

Saturday when Ginny and I attended that gigantic book sale, I bought a book on the great plagues of history, a copy of Dave Barry’s *In Cyberspace*, a copy of Aubrey Burl’s *The Stone Circles Of The British Isles*, and volume of sermons by the Puritan preacher William Temple (1555-1627).

Being a serious Christian with a long standing-interest in spiritual matters and a deep commitment to knowing Christ, I naturally put that sermon book on the bottom of the pile and read Dave Barry first, cover to cover, in one sitting.

Laughed till I turned blue as America’s Funniest Man describes his frustrations with computers—which are often the same as my own.

Then I turned to Burl’s *Stone Circles*. Haven’t finished it yet, but it enralls me. Oddly enough, I found the introduction hilarious and laughed as the author describes his frustrations over research when the names of some sites have been updated, the British map office changed their grid system so things previously described in one location no longer match the older grid citations,

construction damaged some sites, and some stone circles were moved to new locations for housing developments.

The way Dr. Burl describes these frustrations is a hoot!

I read some paragraphs aloud to Ginny, who did not laugh at all.

I'm married to a humor impaired woman.

I mean if you don't find moving megalithic monuments funny, what joy is there in your life?

I have a long-standing interest in megalithic monuments. Take a look at this photo:



I constructed this dolmen in a high school art class back in 1955.

Do you mean to say that I've kept my high school art project for all these (2010-1955=?} many many years?

Well, yes.

And I'm one to worry about the toothpick guy?

Somehow Ginny finds that funny.

Be that as it may, I find Dr. Burl's book, published by Yale University Press, fascinating—except that I often don't know what he's talking about.

I have to read this thing with a dictionary at my elbow and look up word after word.

Even then...

Dr. Burl writes for readers more educated than I am; he assumes I'll know the meaning of *skeuomorph* (a derivative object retaining design clues to a structure), and *penannular* (forming an almost complete ring but with a break). He talks about the difference between a henge, a stone circle, a ring cairn, a howe, a tor, and a kerbstone.

The difference between those structures eludes me.

I've heard of Stonehenge and Avebury Circle, but I did not know there are over a thousand such Neolithic structures in the British Isles. And they have such cool names: Long Meg And Her Daughters, Blackwaterfoot Round Cairn, Brats Hill, Devil's Quoit, Merry Maidens, Giant's Ring Henge, Goat Stones, King Arthur's Round Table Henge, and Robin Hood's Ball.

Then there are a whole bunch of names I can't even begin to spell.

Yet, all those erect stones both fascinate and mystify me.

But all those professional archaeological terms lose me in jargon. After all, Dr. Burl earned the reputation of being the foremost authority on British Neolithic antiquities. Who else could use the term *skeuomorph* in everyday conversation?

That reminds me, back in the late '50s I took a couple of anthropology courses at Florida State and a story made the rounds:

An anthropologist just returned from field work in Borneo gave a lecture at the university, and displayed some artifacts he'd collected among the tribesmen.

When he asked for questions, a co-ed on the front row timidly raise her hand, pointed to an object on the table and asked, "What's that thing?"

"That's a tribal phallic emblem," the professor said.

"Oh," said the co-ed breathing a sigh of relief, "I'd hate to say what I thought it was".

Tuesday, March 9, 2010

You'd Have To Have Been There

My friend Wes laughed so hard he rocked back and forth in his chair. He laughed so hard he gasped for air. He laughed so hard his face turned red like a round party balloon with a smiley face drawn in black marker.

I don't know what my face looked like because I was laughing so hard I could not catch my breath. My nose ran. Tears streamed down my face.

What brought on this burst of hilarity?

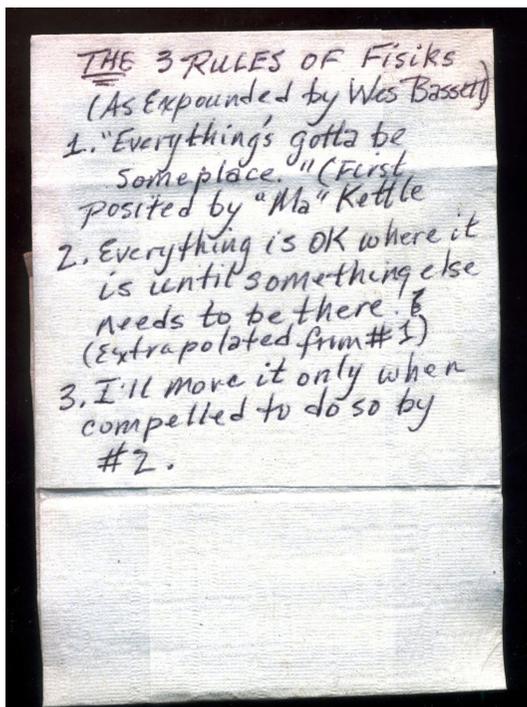
We were discussing the presuppositional apologetics of theologian Cornelis Van Til... and...

Well, I can't describe it.

I suppose you'd have had to have been there to see what was so funny.

Wes came over Tuesday to take me to breakfast; we get together every couple of weeks to shoot the bull and talk about life and theology.

Wes drives this big double-cab pickup truck and as I got in I noticed that he had not unloaded some fire wood that had been in the truck bed three weeks ago. When we got to the default breakfast place, Wes explained that he is not too lazy to unload the firewood, but he subscribes to a three-point philosophy about moving things; he wrote it out for me on a paper napkin:



We ordered breakfast. The waitress said she didn't have what we ordered. We ordered something else. She checked with the cook and found he did have what we'd originally ordered—so she brought us each two full breakfasts!

Good thing that truck is double-sized because we ate everything she brought to the table.

Back at my house, we sat in the living room puffing our pipes, talking about past anguish, present concerns, and future hopes.

That's when we got into discussing presuppositional apologetics. I'd never heard of it before Wes explained, but apparently, through life experiences, I have arrived at conclusions similar to Van Til's.

Overall, Wes and I talked for seven hours.

You know something? I pity unbelievers because they miss out on so much fun.

Mid-afternoon I got a bug to eat some shrimp gumbo. Wes and I jumped in his truck and drove 15 miles west out to the town of Baldwin to Toot's Restaurant in where they make the best gumbo I've ever tasted.

Alas, Toot's had sold out of gumbo!

Local customers had eaten every drop the cook had brewed! He will not stew another batch till Thursday. Life is cruel. And, since Wes and I'd also talked about my divine guidance book in the morning, I questioned why, if God leads us, would He let us drive 15 miles out into the boondocks only to find they'd sold out of shrimp gumbo?

Wes said the Lord is teaching me to call ahead.

As we drove back to Jacksonville by a different way, Wes pointed out a building on U.S. Highway 90, one of north Florida's oldest routes. Wes has talked with a former owner and toured the building in the past; he stopped so I



could snap a photo through the fence with my key-chain camera:

I've seen this building before but knew nothing about it.

Wes said the building was the first stage-coach stop out of Jacksonville on the old plank road between Jacksonville and the town of Alligator. It was built in 1834. It may have swerved as a refuge for settlers during the Second Seminole War of 1842.

Through the years various owners have expanded the place and added brick facing, or stucco, or other material over the original siding. The tavern served Confederate soldiers from near-by Camp Milton during the Civil War, and the place was a speakeasy/roadhouse during Prohibition. The building has also housed a general store, a roadhouse, a restaurant, and a whore house. Some big brass beds from those days may still be stored in the attic.

Construction of Interstate 10, drew traffic away from the old road years ago. The glory days now past, for a long time the old stage-coach stop has been up for sale.



Anyhow, that's the way I spent my Tuesday.
Didn't get a lick of work done. Good.

Wednesday, March 10, 2010
For The Birds—An Odd Occurrence

Wednesday's issue of the *London Daily Mail* reported an odd incident involving a hundred birds.

If this report can be believed—and it must be true. It was in the newspaper—last Sunday night over 100 birds dropped out of the sky and fell dead into the front yard of Julie Knight, a nurse in Somerset.

“Covering an area 12 feet across, more than 100 birds carpeted the garden, each with blood oozing from its beak and curled up claws”. The paper said.

Lloyd Scott, from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, said: 'This is one of the oddest things I've ever heard about. We've certainly never come across anything similar”.

An animal control officer collected some of the bird bodies and took this photo:



Authorities could only guess why this happened at all or why all these birds fell only in one lady's front yard. One speculated that a hawk or other predator panicked a flight of starlings in the air and the birds collided with each other trying to escape. Another questioned if the birds may have eaten weed poison and all died at the same time; or could they have hit a power line and been electrocuted?

Helen Cohen, an RSPCA officer said 'This is still a mystery. ... This is obviously an extremely unusual occurrence...Tests were carried out on some of the birds and they were found to have physical injuries but we could find no evidence of any health issues which could explain what had happened'.

Ms knight, the homeowner, said, "It was like something out of an horror film - like Hitchcock's *The Birds* - it was absolutely terrifying....The sky was raining starlings. One of my neighbors saw them. They seemed to just fall out of the sky. About 70 were dead straight away".

What could have cause this strange occurrence?

Did it really happen?

Must have. It wouldn't be on the Internet if it wasn't true. Would it?

I know what happened. Get this:

Ms Knight said, "I'm worried about what could have killed them because I have a young grandson and two cats that are often in my garden".

Ah Ha! The truth comes out.

Cats!

Need I say more?

Of course there may be another explanation. Doesn't the Scripture say that our Father in Heaven knows every sparrow that falls?

But these birds in Somerset were not sparrows.

Maybe God has it in for starlings.



The reason I write about this incident is that I'm bogged down in my work and not getting anywhere. Just can't get a handle on it. So I walked away from my desk and did a bit of yard work outside.

A robin came to drink from our garden fountain just a few feet from me and I snapped his picture with my little key chain camera (I love to play with that gadget).

Last Sunday, while birds rained down over Somerset, Ginny and I worked outside in our own yard . We identified eight or ten species of birds in the yard and we saw three hawks soaring overhead. Sorry, I'm not ornithologist enough to

identify hawk species in flight.

Birds in our yard are ok.

If a cat came into our yard, the hawks would get him.

Friday, March 12, 2010
Two Prayers

Long ago at our church, the prayer group used to put out wooden boxes where folks could place written prayer requests either anonymously or signed with just a first name. 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!"

Sunday, March 13, 2010
It's Time

MCHUMOR

by T. McCracken



"I hate changing to Daylight Saving Time."

Tuesday, March 16, 2010 As I Lay Sleeping

The time change threw me off.

Monday, I woke at my usual 3 a.m., which is now 4 a.m., but since I'd stayed up late reading Sunday night, weariness overwhelmed me.

After getting Ginny off to work, I sat down to read and fell asleep in my chair. Slept till almost 4 in the afternoon!

Ever hear the fairy tale about the shoemaker and the elves? How elves crept into the shop while he and his wife slept and sewed together these wonderful leather boots? Well, while I slept, my son Donald and his wife Helen crept into my blog site and did wonderful things.

Notice the librarian hit by lightning in my sidebar—he introduces old books in e-book pdf format. Free.

Each month I plan to offer as a free e-book, a book which I have either written or edited for readers to download without charge. A different book will appear in that link about the middle of each month for a limited time.

And the kids fixed this feature while I lay asleep...

Reminds me of something Jesus once said:

“And he said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground; And should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how.

“For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come.

“And he said, Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God? or with what comparison shall we compare it?”

And what was it St. Paul said about salvation? Oh, yes, here it is, ““For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast”.

Anyhow, check out this month’s free e-book, the diary of Richard Rogers, a man who hungered after God.

Wednesday, March 17, 2010

Opening Words

Yesterday, I finished the first draft of a book manuscript I’ve worked on for years. Began it in about 1990. My working title is: If God Leads Me, Why Do I Run In Circles. It’s a 400-page book about knowing and doing the will of God. First draft done, now the real work of re-write begins. Thought I’d place my book’s opening words here:



I've Missed God's Will

First off, let me tell about one of the times I'm sure I've missed God's will.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You carry her bags, the conviction said.

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

Carry her bags.

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

I did not carry her bags.

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

The words of Scripture became dull ink on gray paper.

My prayers raddled around in my mouth.

No hymn graced my lips.

No joy touched my heart.

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

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

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

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

No one ever does.

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

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

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

I had missed doing the will of God.

Now it may seem odd to begin a book about the will of God with a personal example of not doing His

will, but my purpose in telling you this is to let you know that the will of God is not necessarily what you'd expect. I also want you to know that if you have said *No* to God in the past that does not necessarily mean He has written you off for ever and ever. I want you to know that God is easier to please than you might think.

But I also want you to realize that it is indeed possible for you and me, frail, fragile, temporal creatures to actually say NO to Almighty God.

... With consequences.

Thursday, March 18, 2010

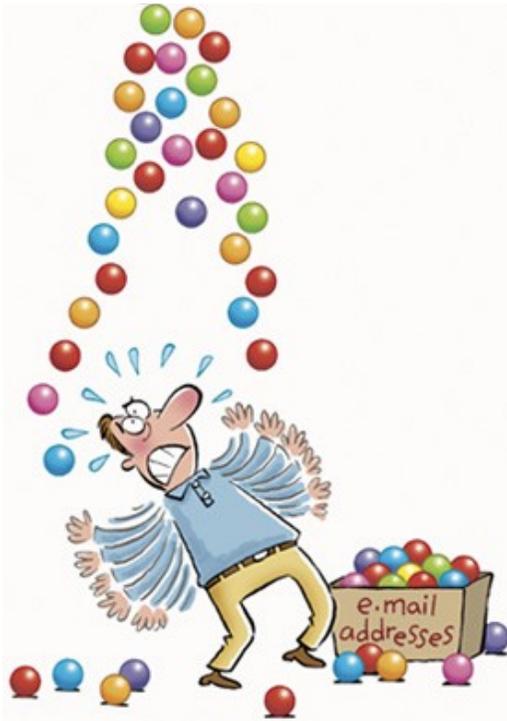
Juggling Eggs

OK, so recently I have been juggling eggs.

Trying to finish that book ms I've been working on for 20 years, transcribing the White diaries, reformatting my books on Bluefish as e-book files, preparing my 82-page Florida History Materials Catalog, learning the new software system for my blog, gathering materials for an historical novel about the first public hanging of a woman in Jacksonville, culling my library, and trying to maintain some semblance of a life.

Juggling eggs.

I ain't too good at this.



You know, as I've worked on that book about the will of God, *If God Leads Me, Why Do I Run In Circles*, I've begun to suspect something. All my life I've tended to think of following the will of God as a straight-line march from here to there singing *Marching To Zion* or *Onward Christian Soldiers*. That's frustrating because I don't move from here to there; I zig-zag all over the map chasing one will 'o wisp or another—juggling eggs.

I'm beginning to suspect that life is not a march, maybe it's a dance.

Maybe we circle this way and that as we move through life, now on this side of the floor, now on that, circling right or left and returning to where we started—maybe it's a dance. A grand pattern which we move in but are too close to to see.

Just a thought.

Can't quote any Scripture to support that idea right off hand. Do I need to?

Recently my daughter-in-law, Helen, has exercised great patience with me over the redesign of my *Rabid Fun* website. Every time she gets my sites just like I say I want

She's fine now. But about 1:30 Thursday morning, pain woke Ginny. Her legs cramped terribly—not a good sign for a diabetic. Her cries and trashing about woke me. She walked the hall on tiptoe for a bit trying to relieve the cramps.

I stood by offering groggy and completely useless suggestions. "Eat a banana" was the most positive thing I could come up with. Yes, we have no bananas; but there's some pineapple in the frig.

She wouldn't try pineapple—a blood sugar thing, I suppose.

Finally her pain subsided enough for her to sit in her living room chair and prop her legs up on the coffee table. She zonked out asleep again.

Not me.

Wide awake me.

Usually I get up and begin work between 3 and 4 a.m. but since here I am up at 1:30 anyhow, I began answering e-mails, reading news and blogs, looking up book references—my usual early-morning chores.

Break time.

Left my desk, went over to my chair. Puffed my pipe. Watched Beauty sleep. Thought about the book manuscript. Gloated over my new blog look. Thought about passages in the book manuscript. Prayed a bit. Thought about the bikini sections in the *London Daily Mail* newspaper. Reviewed my chore list for today. Thought about the book manussss....

Oh Crap!

Back in 2005, someone sent me 27—That's right—TWENTY-SEVEN—e-mail files of material related to this will of God book. I was not ready to use the information at that time, so I stuck them in a folder and had not thought of them again—until the wee small hours of this morning.

Suddenly, I remembered.

After five years without giving them a thought, I knew exactly where I'd put those files and how I had intended to use them.

I need to insert that file material here and there throughout my *finished* manuscript. That throws pagination, tenses, thought-flow, and everything else off.

Like the rope rigging of an ancient clipper ship, if you change the tension on one line, you have to adjust the tension on every line on the sails. Same way with a book manuscript.



Temptation. With my manuscript so close to completion, it would be such a pain to insert major changes now, so why not leave that stuff out?

Because the ideas in these files is better thought out and better written than anything I originated myself. I have a responsibility to present the best thing I can to the

folks who buy my books. When I'm dealing with a subject as serious as following God's will, it behooves me not to shirk. This book could have the potential of influencing someone's walk with Christ—or it may gather dust on some ratty shelf unread by anybody but me and the Lord God. Either way, it ought to be the best I can do.

Lord, it would have helped if I'd have remembered those lost files sooner.

Maybe these files are not for the benefit of potential readers; maybe they are for my benefit. I suspect the Lord brought them to my mind at just the right time. The frustrating right time.

Jesus once told his Apostles something about the descent of the Spirit, "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".

Bring to your remembrance.

Does that just apply to memorizing Bible verses? Or does it extend to remembering phone numbers, putting gas in the car, or locating forgotten files?

By the time Ginny woke up at 6 a.m., feeling fine and ready to go to work, I'd located those files that five years ago I'd "put in a safe place so I wouldn't forget them".

Ha!

I suppose this would be a good place to insert a quote, an excerpt from one of those long-forgotten files:

"Take up the cross, and follow Me."

—Mark 10:21

You have not the making of your own cross, although unbelief is a master carpenter at cross-making; neither are you permitted to choose your own cross, although self-will would fain be lord and master; but your cross is prepared and appointed for you by divine love, and you are cheerfully to accept it; you are to take up the cross as your chosen badge and burden, and not to stand cavilling at it....

Beloved, the cross is not made of feathers, or lined with velvet, it is heavy and galling to disobedient shoulders; but it is not an iron cross, though your fears have painted it with iron colours, it is a wooden cross, and a man can carry it, for the Man of sorrows tried the load.

—Charles H. Spurgeon, 1892
Baptist Preacher in London

Monday, March 22, 2010
They're Playing My Song

Last week my e-friend Felisol in Norway conducted a survey about favorite hymns.

This morning, it surprised me to find that she'd posted the song I recommended on her blog , Far Side Of The Sea, at <http://felisol.blogspot.com/>

This is a nice way to start a Monday.

Once long ago my son Johnny and I sang this as a duet in a little storefront church on Market Street. About the only time I can ever remember singing in church.

I especially love the last two verses. Here is a copy of the lyrics:

*Once to every man and nation, comes the moment
to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or
evil side;
Some great cause, some great decision, offering
each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by forever, 'twixt that
darkness and that light.*

*Then to side with truth is noble, when we share her
wretched crust,
Ere her cause bring fame and profit, and 'tis
prosperous to be just;
Then it is the brave man chooses while the coward
stands aside,
Till the multitude make virtue of the faith they had
denied.*

*By the light of burning martyrs, Christ, Thy
bleeding feet we track,
Toiling up new Calv'ries ever with the cross that
turns not back;
New occasions teach new duties, time makes
ancient good uncouth,
They must upward still and onward, who would
keep abreast of truth.*

*Though the cause of evil prosper, yet the truth
alone is strong;
Though her portion be the scaffold, and upon the
throne be wrong;
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the
dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch
above His own.*

Wednesday, March 24, 2010
Red And Yellow And Green

Red—What’s red and comes in a pear-shaped plastic bottle?

I write from a home office, Ginny works out in the real world. Therefore, since I’m already home, most evenings I cook our dinner. That works well for us... most times.

Tuesday night I prepared a pork loin.

Sweet Baby Ray’s Sweet Vidalia Onion Barbecue Sauce (yes the label says “sweet” twice if you read it) is red and comes in a pear-shaped plastic bottle.

Barbecue sauce goes well on pork loin. I prepared to lather some on, when Ginny stopped me. “What are you doing? Don’t you want to put barbecue sauce on that?”

“That’s what I’m doing,” I said.

“No. You’re not,” she said. “Read the label”.

I did.

Publix Lite Raspberry Walnut Vinaigrette Salad Dressing, it said.

Hey, it’s red and comes in a pear-shaped plastic bottle... Must be the same stuff. Right?

Well, I could admit to my wife that by mistake I just grabbed a pear-shaped plastic bottle of red stuff off the shelf without paying attention, or I could justify myself without admitting any wrong doing...

I chose the He-Man way.

“This is a special receipt I’m trying,” I told Ginny. “I got it from Martha Stewart. It wasn’t on her tv cooking show; she fixed this dish for the guards when she was in prison”.

For some reason my wife doesn’t believe me.

Yellow—Yesterday a friend questioned why I now use a yellow legal pad as the background image for my blog postings.

It symbolizes to me that my writing has come full circle over the past 35 years.

I wrote my first book, *The Lazarus Projects*, while working nights at a city dump (excuse me, now they call that facility a Sanitary Landfill but back then it was called a dump).

Best job I ever had.

Someone had vandalized equipment at the dump and the administration set me and some other guys as 24-hour a day guards there. I was the only person on the site for about 90% of the time. The schedule worked out so each guard pulled a straight 40-hour shift. I kept the pumps running, prowled the dump for goodies, directed trucks when they came in, napped in a bulldozer seat with the shotgun across my lap, and wrote my 291-page novel with pencil on a yellow legal pad.

The Lazarus Projects tells the story of a team of scientists and businessmen from Miami who travel back through time two thousand years to view first-hand the crucifixion of Jesus Christ; they want to see whether or not He actually rose from the tomb or rotted in the dirt.

Rose or rotted.

Has to be one way or the other.

Anyhow, it was odd that I'd write a novel before I ever wrote any of my magazine articles, but that's the way I started.

After I wrote on the yellow legal pads, Ginny would type my manuscripts because I did not know how to type.

Back then we were poor. Could not afford to buy stamps to mail my magazine article manuscripts to a publisher. Ginny had collected stamps when she was a little girl. So, she dug into her old stamp albums for mint stamps and used those 20-year-old stamps to mail my first magazine articles.

Earlier this month, back on March 7th, I told about how I wrote an article about St. Patrick of Ireland on a yellow legal pad while lying on the floor on my belly under my

Father's hospital bed as he died of cancer. Had to meet a publisher's urgent deadline while we were desperate for grocery money.

Anyhow, that's why I wanted to use a yellow legal pad as my blog background today.

Oh, by the way, my novel, *The Lazarus Projects* is available in both print or e-book formats at www.bluefishbooks.info.

Green—I heard this great Russian joke about green frogs:

Ivan and Igor were walking down a country road when they spotted a large green frog in the grass verge.

Ivan said, "I'll bet you five rubles that you won't eat that frog raw".

Igor caught the green frog, bit its head off, and ate it raw.

Ivan paid him the five rubles.

A little way on they spotted another green frog. "I'll bet *you* five rubles that you won't eat that frog like I did," said Igor.

Ivan caught the green frog, bit its head off, and ate it raw.

Igor paid him the five rubles.

They walked a ways on and Igor suddenly stopped. He turned to Ivan and said, "Why did we eat those frogs"?

Friday, March 26, 2010
The Lord God Almighty And His Duck Matilda

Here in Jacksonville, Florida, today, all around us azaleas bloom, redbud trees bud, dogwoods flower, amaryllis open—
Spring hatches out:



Ginny and I intend, God willing, to spend the next ten or twelve days on our



I should be back to posting about the fifth of April;

Meanwhile, my blog archives contain entries which may be of interest.

For instance, the following (May 31, 2006) comes from page 185 of my book *A Dirty Old Man Gets Worse*.

The Lord God Almighty And His Duck Matilda



My hat is old.
My teeth are gold.
I have 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, and 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
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 called according to His purpose”.

That’s a tenant of my faith. But why does it so often seem otherwise in my day to day experience? Why do so many of our efforts seem so futile?

Why would God allow us the nurse this duck back to health only to have her raped or killed by her own kind?

That makes no sense to me in my limited human experience. Maybe it does make sense in some vast eternal plan, but it doesn’t seem right to me in the here and now where I live.

My faith says “Good”.

My experience says “Crap”.

I can not deny my personal observation of life; neither can I deny the love of God.

It’s hard for me, but I try to move beyond my own observations and experiences to a place where I can say with Paul, the quintessential realist, “I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

I believe that.

On a shallow level I really do believe that..

But sometimes, even when you do what is reasonable, even when you act with the best intentions, even when you plan ahead, even when you do what is right, even when you do what is logical, even when you pray — even then, your duck gets screwed.

Or worse.

April

April 1, 2010

**Ginny & John Visit Jacksonville’s Karpeles
Museum**



In my mind, two reasons make this building a significant Jacksonville landmark:

First, it was in the park right in front of these steps where I kissed a girl for the first time. I was 16—and no, it was not Ginny. This was back in 1956 long before I met her.

The other reason is that the 1921 Greek revival neoclassical building (once used as a church, then as a synagogue) now houses the Karpeles Manuscript Library Museum, the world's largest private collection of original manuscripts and documents.

The Jacksonville facility is one of several such museums scattered about the country to house and display the collection of historic manuscripts amassed by David and Marsha Karpeles.

Yesterday Ginny and I took a break from our massive Spring Cleaning of the garden, to visit this museum. Here's a photo she took of me, glasses off, examining the rigging of an exquisite model of the *Constitution*:



Yes, as well as manuscripts the Karpeles collection includes ship models, fossils, maps, ancient Egyptian artifacts, coins, curios—anything to tickle the fancy. The permanent collection rotates among the various Karpeles museums. I think there are nine main museums in various cities as well as over 200 mini-museums housed in schools all over the country.

The museum's assistant director met us at the door and ushered us around items of interest. Oddly enough, I found this nice and knowledgeable lady bears the same name as my grandmother's maiden name, but we chatted enough to realize there is no family connection (She's from up north).

She explained that mathematician David Karpeles developed the character optical recognition system used by computers—like the bar codes on products in the grocery store, or on the check I write to pay the mortgage, or the ISBN codes on the backs of my books. He also worked in real estate and earned the fortune needed to acquire his manuscript collections.

In a Los Angeles Times interview (at <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/feb/15/travel/tr-spano15>) David Karpeles said:

“In 1977, we took two of our kids to the Huntington Library in San Marino. The kids had no interest whatever. We had two cases left to see when they started asking if we were ready to go. But then my daughter Leslie said, 'Daddy, Daddy, here's a letter written by Thomas Jefferson.' My son Mark found one by George Washington and said excitedly, 'Look at the cross-outs. He made mistakes just like me!' They knew they were looking at originals famous people had touched, a completely different thing from just reading the documents. All of the sudden, everything changed for them”.

That incident sparked the idea for the museums.

But why place one in a backwater like Jacksonville?

“We wanted places where the collection would be appreciated”.

He certainly hit the target here!

Ginny found some original papers related to Mark Twain, one of her favorite authors. In this photo, I'm pointing out Florida on a world map from the year 1520 (and no, I did not touch it!):



The museum contains documents from Robert E. Lee, Abraham Lincoln, and even Albert Einstein. In fact, the museum's Einstein brochure offers the clearest presentation of his ideas that I have ever seen anywhere.

Ginny enjoyed viewing this elaborate doll house:



While she looked at the doll house, I noticed another display more to my taste:



Currently, the museum displays "Off The Wall" art by the Northeast Florida Sculptors Association. We enjoyed seeing an angel figure composed of a harp with dog

mandibles representing wings. Ginny took this photo of ceramics which also use animal bones in the design:



It's delightful to know that such an important collection of manuscripts finds a home in Jacksonville. Marsha Karpeles, executive director of the nine museums said, "One important thing you learn is that manuscripts are written by people, and one individual person can have an effect on the course of history."

In an interview for *The Librarian* (at <http://librarian3.blogspot.com/2006/03/karpeles-manuscript-museums.html>), she said that operating the free museums is an outgrowth of the idealism she and her husband absorbed growing up in Minnesota. "It's our chance to do public service, our chance to give it back. Some people travel the world; some people collect jewelry. This is what we do."

Of course there are personal benefits too. She said, "I just got an MFA in creative writing, so mine is the first

draft of the thesaurus created by Roget in 1805. He used it for many years without telling anyone about it. It wasn't published until 1852". Hoot!

I'd have liked to browse the collection more, but, alas, my arthritis dictated otherwise. I could barely make it down those historic steps. I'm not 16 any more.

After lunch, we visited an antique store where Gin made a delightful find—a dinner plate matching her china. It features a design she'd never seen before. I love to see her happy! Look at her smile over her treasure:



Notice that my computer screen still shows the Spring Break logo on my desktop. That means today I'm back to raking and mowing and raking and pruning and raking and laying a brick border the full length of the yard, and, of course, more raking.

Since I spend most days sedentary, sitting at my computer, writing my books, this gardening work makes me stiff and sore. My arms tingle, my back hurt, my legs ache. I should know better than to try so much physical work in such a short space.

I'd rather tour the museum again.

During our prayer time after dinner, Ginny read a passage from Psalm 139 that stuck me as appropriate for a day browsing among manuscripts:

O Lord, in Thy book all my members were written...
How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O
God!

How great is the sum of them!
If I should count them, they are more in number
than the sand:

When I awake, I am still with thee.

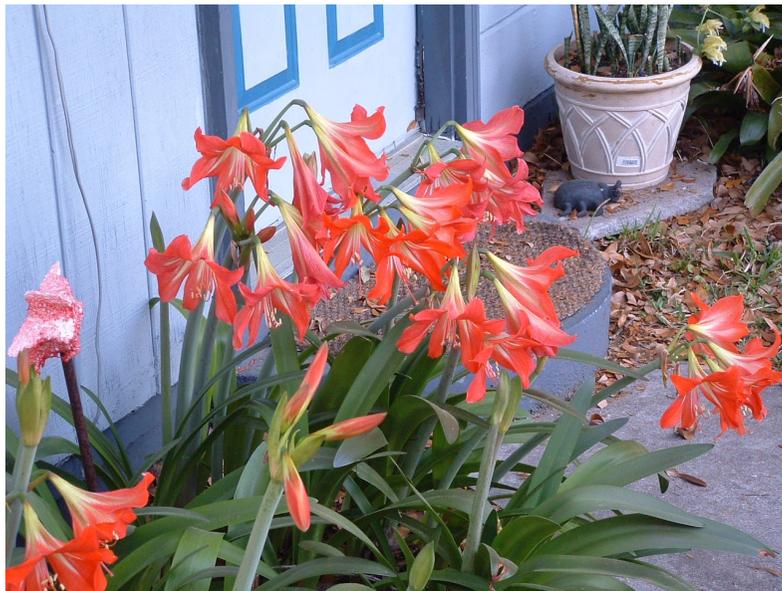
April 5, 2010

He Restorteh My Soul

During our vacation, Ginny and I have worked restoring winter ravages to our garden. The outdoors work together also restored us. Here's a brief photo tour:. To start off, a spray of bridal veil stands at the corner of our drive.



Stalks of amaryllis flank our front door.



The yellow flowers of a shrimp plant drape over beneath out living room window.



Rain gutter troughs wired to the fence rails contain decorations of impatiens.



A dried snake on the garden gate discourages intruders.



Lines of marigolds border the bromeliad beds. The logs edging the bed once supported trolley car rails (Jacksonville's trolley cars stopped running in the 1930s).



Tubs of hibiscus decorate the pool deck while bathing beauties sun.





A Knight and his frog guard the back steps.



Our refurbished fountain gurgles beneath the fig tree in front of out deck chairs.



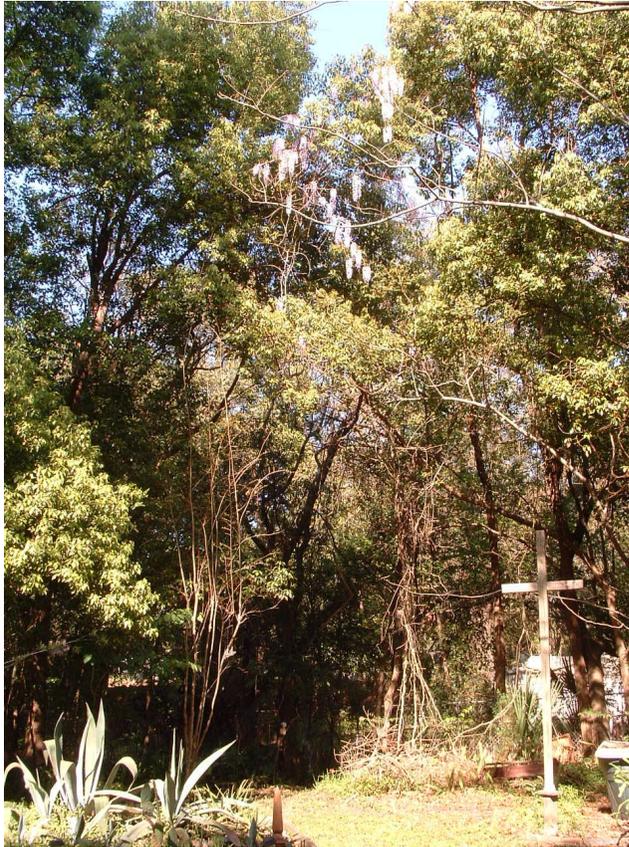
Stuffed monkeys cavort on our jungle trail.



A panther snarls from his lair beneath a fallen log. Don't worry, he's chained.



Clouds of wisteria blossoms hover above the garden cross.



Ginny and I raked millions of leaves, in places over three inches deep, to clear our yard and flowerbeds. Over our past ten days of vacation time, we raked and pruned and planted, restoring our yard in preparation for summer.

While the garden shapes up lovely, the work left me looking like this:



Here is Ginny planting marigolds under the bottle brush tree we just transplanted:



One reason Ginny and I love working in our garden is that here we can see we've made a difference. During our regular workweek, we see no change because of what we do. In our yard work, the result becomes apparent. Most of the time we work by faith, believing that somehow, our deskwork matters; in the garden, we work by sight. Transformation is evident. A weed is gone, a flower grows. Not being people of great faith, we need to see results now and then.

When we bought this home 15 years ago, car parts, rusty barrels, construction debris, rotted lumber—all this trash littered the yard.

Maybe when we are dead and gone, the next owners may let the garden revert back to a junk yard; but, for here, for now, we make a difference.

And all we have done is care-take. We can not grow a single flower. God gives life to all. In Him we live and move and have our very being. In life as in the garden, we just watch Him at work, marvel, and do a bit of weeding, raking, and care-taking.

As this old grave stone declares:



“For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive”.

More work in our garden remains. For instance, weeding the cactus bed. We confine all thorny, sharp, bitey, bristled, stingy plants to one area. When the weeds there get higher than the cactus, I’ll pull them up, but I’m not sticking my hand in that bed beforehand.



Tuesday, April 6, 2010
Preserving Treasure

Our yard resembles a wedge of pie with the house sitting at the point, the side fences spreading out in a triangle, and the back fence curving where the pie crust would be. We keep the small front yard and the center of the back yard clear, but allow the back crust to remain natural woods except where I hacked out a jungle trail for our amusement.

Here's a view across the middle of the backyard, pool on the right, jungle behind the shed on the left:



Amid the flower beds, along the fence lines, and along the jungle trail we have accumulated our idea of yard art.

Yes, our yard is filled with beautiful things, interesting things, and just plain things.

An urge to preserve old things motivates me, witness the books I write or edit, yet often that urge gets frustrated.

Family and friends know of my taste (or lack thereof) in yard art and often give us unusual items. Other stuff Ginny and I buy at yard sales, or pick out of curbside trash.

For instance, driving by, we sighted this radiator and loaded the heavy thing in the car to place in our garden. The cats are Ginny's:



Our neighbor Beth gave me this Lladro figurine beneath the discus thrower on the stump of a tree downed by a tornado:



Our son Donald brought us this flute player (by an asparagus fern) back from Los Alamos when he was out there studying at the Nuclear Physics Lab:



Our beautiful daughter-in-law Helen gave me this lovely bird (as a token of her esteem?) knowing it would not clash with our decor:



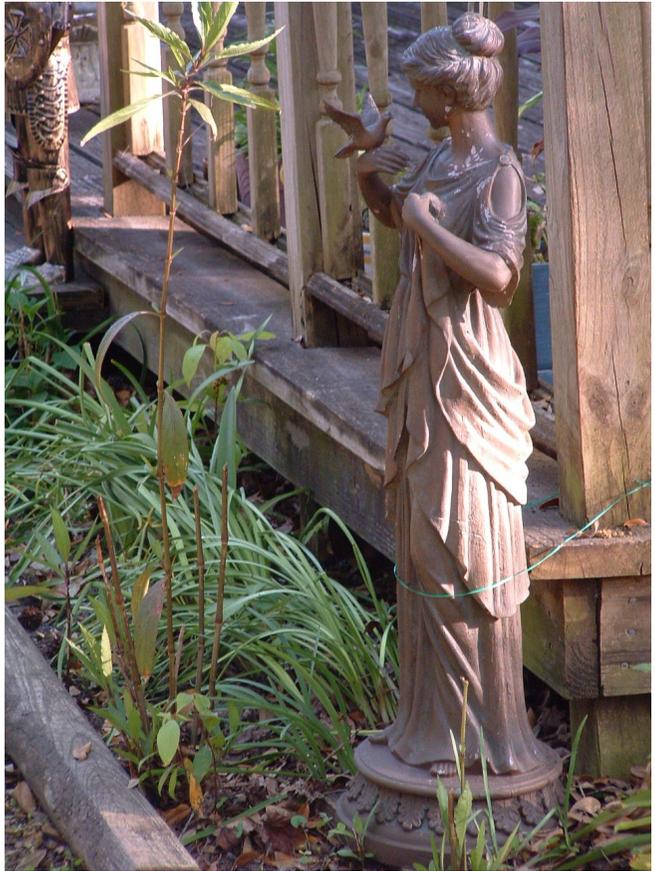
Our daughter Patricia provided Venus in a cage which hangs from our fig tree :



Our daughter Eve brought this cross wind chime from London when she returned from her graduate studies there:



Our daughter Jennifer gave us this bird girl statue:



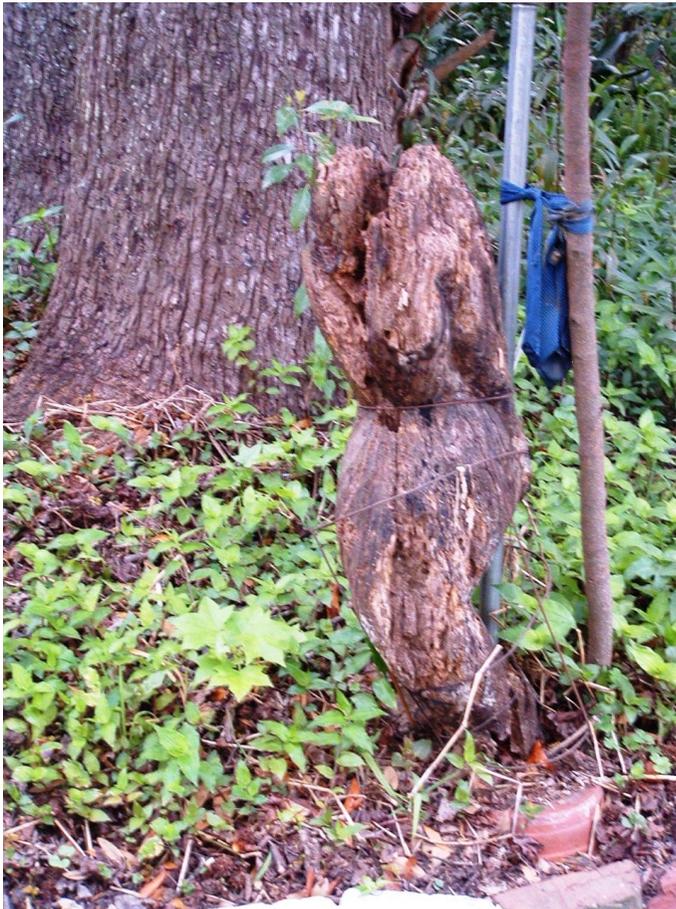
I gave Ginny this blue jay planter full of flowers on the day she gave birth to Jennifer:



Once, when I explored the foundation of our previous home with a metal detector, I uncovered this rusty sword. And I also dug up this cement flamingo buried underground at an old house:



I like to preserve old things, but I can't always. For instance, termites attacked some vital organs of this wooden lady on the Jungle Path: They also got this wooden statue that was once a mermaid:



Jesus said, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal".

But, even this Last Super casting is not immune to time's ravages:



St. Paul also speaks of some things that "perish with the using".

Some things may age for a long time, but can not be preserved.

The only thing in this world that lasts forever is people.

Working in my garden this morning I saw a people, a young man, jump a neighbor's fence into her back yard. She was not home. He has no business there. I picked up the phone to call the cops.

He saw me at the fence with phone in hand.

He claimed he was hunting for his cat. Then he said he was cutting through her yard to visit an Alzheimer's patient. Then he said he was a neighborhood watch

member just checking the place out. Then he said he was looking for a short cut to another street. Then he said he's just got out of prison and was in drug rehab but clean.

He climbed back over the fence and left.

I expect to see him again; I recognize him from seeing him around the neighborhood.

Our neighborhood watch captain said "I know that guy. He is scum. Worst kind. Nothing but trouble. Dangerous. Always up to no good. Just pure trash." and advised calling the homeowner.

I don't want this guy around whatever his real story is...

Up to no good. Scum. Worst kind. Trouble...

The kind of guy Jesus died for.

A sinner.

A sinner like me.

Just as we each have individual tastes in music or art—even yard art—so we each have our individual favorite sin. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory God intended us for. We are sinners needing a Savior.

I just want the guy I saw to go away. Not bother me. Not climb fences. Leave me in the peace of my garden... I want to pay him no attention. I resent his intrusion.

Don't they have places for people like him?

Sure I like to preserve things—but people?

Yes I know I am to bear witness of Christ to people, but I'm sure God must mean witness to nice people, not vile fence jumpers.

Lord, am I to engage this man in conversation about Your love for him? Am I to witness? Am I to represent You, instead of calling the cops?

Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?

I'll continue my garden tour tomorrow.



Wednesday, April 7, 2010
One Peeved Editor!

Last night during our prayer time after dinner, Ginny and I read the account of

the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. It reminded me of one time I really pissed off an editor.

Years ago I sent an article to one of those magazines which claim to investigate psychic phenomena seeking truth. 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 he was considering the manuscript for publication... Until he arrived at my concluding paragraph...

Then he stabbed his blue pencil completely through all six pages of the manuscript!

I've had articles rejected but I've never had one stabbed repeatedly before.

I wonder if Stephen King or Dave Barry ever had an editor stab a blue pencil completely through one of their manuscripts?

That was one ticked off editor.

Something must have touched a nerve.

Glad I didn't deliver that manuscript in person.

Oddly enough, the article was an Easter-related piece. Here's a copy:

Was Jesus A Ghost?

After He rose from the dead, Jesus Christ did several things which have embarrassed His followers ever since.

Historically Christians have maintained that the resurrected Jesus was not a ghost but that the same physical body which was crucified, dead and buried actually returned to life. Christians eagerly point to that passage of Scripture where Jesus reassures his disciples that he is not a spirit by showing them his wounded hands and side (Luke 24:36-40). Those believing in a physical resurrection also appeal to the fact that he ate food to show that he was indeed physical and not a spiritual apparition. But for those who maintain a physical resurrection, the embarrassing fact is that the resurrected Jesus did some very ghost-like things.

- He appeared and vanished at will (Luke 24: 30-36).

- He entered rooms through locked doors (John 20:19 & 26).
- He evidenced control over nature (John 21: 1-6).
- He accurately foretold the future (John 21:17-25).
- He could be with familiar friends and not be recognized until he chose to be (Luke 24: 13-31).
- He displayed telepathic ability in knowing the content of conversations which took place when he was not present (John 20: 24-29).

Even his disciples doubted that it was really Him they saw, and at one point “They were terrified and affrighted, and *supposed that they had seen a spirit*” (Luke 24:37). Can this resurrected Jesus indeed be the same physical person they buried? Or is he something different? Do his actions and abilities change from those of a physical being to those of a ghost?

Every year Easter sermons dwell on the empty tomb, the message of the angels, the triumph over death and the transition of dead winter into springtime. But they usually remain silent about the ghostly actions of the resurrected Jesus. His paranormal abilities do not seem to fit into the commonly accepted idea of a physical return to life of a once-dead individual. His post-resurrection behavior seems to embarrass his followers.

In modern times, there have been a number of documented cases where people have been revived from death-bed experiences. Some have been resuscitated after being declared clinically dead by doctors. In a seminar given in Jacksonville, Florida, on February 16, 1976, Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, prominent psychiatrist recognized as a specialist in the area of death and dying and author of several books on the subject, recounted several factors which these revived people seem to have experienced in common. According to Dr. Kubler-Ross these common experiences include:

- Full awareness of the moment of death
 - Consciousness of what the doctors were saying and doing in the operating room
 - A sense of floating above their bodies
-

- A feeling of great peace
- A Complete lack of fear of dying after they have been revived.

Some of these people tell of seeing pure light and meeting some religious figure who helps them with the transition between life and death.

But none of the people who have had these revival experiences can do any of the things that are attributed to the resurrected Jesus!

They do not display any ghostly qualities or paranormal abilities. They are essentially the same people with the same normal abilities both before and after their encounter with death. Apparently we can reasonably expect the same behavior patterns from an individual before and after death.

How is Jesus different? What are some of the factors which make him special? Were the abilities and activities of Jesus any different after he had been dead? Did his behavior pattern radically change?

Supernatural Control Over Nature

Eating is a distinct physical action. We are told that on at least two occasions after the resurrection Jesus ate in the presence of witnesses. Once he dined on fish and honeycomb (Luke 24:41-43); and once on bread and fish (John 21:12-15). On this second occasion, which took place on a lakeside after the disciples had spent the night fishing without catching anything, he provided not only the immediate meal but also a spectacular catch of 153 large fish. This post-resurrection control over nature in providing this meal is paralleled before his death when he fed the multitudes (John 6:1-14); and when he called Peter, James and John from their work as fishermen to become his disciples (Luke 5: 1-11). In fact when he chose these disciples, the size of the catch ripped the net and the ship was in danger of sinking. The influence of Jesus over nature in both these incidents is identical; it almost reads like two accounts of the same event. But one occurs before his crucifixion, the other after.

His ability and behavior in this particular area both before and after the resurrection appears to be the same.

Mind Reading or Telepathy

Doubting Thomas ought to be the patron saint of modern times; we can identify with him because he needed to see concrete evidence before he committed himself to belief. John tells us that Thomas was not present when Jesus first talked with the disciples after His resurrection (John 20:24-29). When told that Jesus was alive again, Thomas flatly declares, "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails... I will not believe". All four Gospels unanimously record that at first none of the disciples believed he had risen, but this unbelief was nothing new because they had a long history of not believing in Jesus even before his death (John 6:64-66). Remember the familiar story of Peter's denial at the trial? (Luke 21:54-62)?

The unusual thing in the encounter between Jesus and Thomas following the resurrection is that Jesus knew Thomas' private doubt and statement without having been present at the time Thomas expressed these things. When they did meet, Jesus took the initiative by calling attention to the nail prints in his hands and the spear wound in his side. He knew the content of Thomas' private conversation! When Thomas realized that Jesus knew his thoughts and saw the very evidence he had asked to see, he responded by falling at Jesus' feet exclaiming, "My Lord and My God"!

Now, it's interesting to note that Jesus had displayed this same ability to know what was in men's minds several times before his crucifixion. He demonstrated this seeming telepathic ability when he called Nathaniel from under the fig tree (John 1:45-51). In Jericho when he called Zacchaeus, the little man who climbed the tree to be able to see him, Jesus showed this kind of perception (Luke 19:1-10). Gospel writer Mark describes the ability of Jesus to know what people were thinking in these words, "Jesus perceived in his spirit that they so reasoned within themselves... (Mark 2:8).

Luke's Gospel offers another illustration of this paranormal ability (Luke 7:36-50). On that occasion Jesus attended a banquet at the home of Simon, the Pharisee. During the course of the meal, a prostitute entered the hall and threw herself at the foot of Jesus' couch. She wept profusely and began to wash his feet with her tears,

drying them with her own long hair. And, breaking open a flask of her perfume, she anointed him.

Although Simon felt outraged at this public display, he said nothing – but, he thought to himself that if Jesus were really a holy man, he would realize what kind of woman she was and repel her. At that point Jesus addressed a parable on the nature of love and forgiveness to the unspoken thoughts of his host. Then he publicly declared that the prostitute’s sins were forgiven.

From these incidents it is evident that both before and after his resurrection, Jesus demonstrated this paranormal ability to know the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Vanishing Act

The most ghost-like, and the most embarrassing for Christians, among his special activities after the resurrection is his ability to vanish (Luke 24:31) and to suddenly appear in locked rooms (John 20:19 & 26).

This is not the sort of thing normal, physical people can do.

Because of the unusual nature of these accomplishments, some feel that the resurrection may have been a totally spiritual event, that there was no physical return from death, but that the spirit of Jesus lives on in the hearts of good men everywhere. However, regardless of how strange these abilities seem to us, an examination of the Scripture reveals that even these ghost-like actions were attributed to Jesus even before he died!

For instance, once when he was in Nazareth, where he had been brought up, Jesus delivered a controversial speech. His message infuriated the hearers. The mob shouted him down, grabbed him, and hustled him to the edge of a local cliff where they intended to “cast him down headlong”. Frenzied people surrounded him, people who knew him from childhood, people who intended to murder him – yet, Luke cryptically states, “He, passing through the midst of them, went his way”! (Luke 4:16-31)

How odd.

A similar thing happened in Jerusalem (John 8:52-59). In his speech there Jesus openly stated that God is his Father. The hostile mob snatched up rocks intending to

batter him to death, but again Jesus “passed through the midst of them” thus paralleling his freedom of movement after the resurrection.

Two Other Phenomena

There remain two additional factors to examine before drawing any conclusions: the first is Jesus’ ability to accurately foretell a person’s future; and the second is the fact that when he first appeared to his assembled followers they supposed they were seeing a spirit - not a physical person.

Following the resurrection Peter determined to go fishing and took the other disciples out on a boat all night. At dawn Jesus appeared and called to them from the shore and Peter jumped overboard, swimming to meet him.

In the conversation that followed, Jesus revealed how Peter would eventually meet his own death (John 21:1-19). Catholic tradition teaches that Peter’s martyrdom occurred just as foretold.

But, this was not the first time Jesus had accurately predicted a future death. On at least three occasions before his own execution, Jesus predicted it in detail saying, “Behold we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests, and unto the scribes; and they shall condemn him unto death and shall deliver him unto the gentiles: and they shall mock him and shall scourge him, and shall spit upon him and shall kill him: and the third day he shall rise again” (Mark 10:33-34). Even knowing these things Jesus went to Jerusalem anyway and it’s common knowledge how true his prediction proved to be.

Since every supernatural aspect of Jesus’ behavior after his resurrection is paralleled by similar behavior before his death, then why did his friends sometimes fail to recognize him?

When he visited them, why did his followers “suppose they had seen a spirit”? (Luke 24:37). Were they correct or mistaken? Had they ever previously thought this?

One of the most dramatic things Jesus ever did happened on the coast of Gennesaret (Mark 6:46-54). While he prayed alone at some unnamed mountain, the

disciples rowed a small boat across the Sea of Galilee. As they labored, making little progress against a contrary wind, they saw Jesus coming out to meet them. He walked on the water. When they saw him, Mark records, "They supposed it had been a spirit". Jesus reassured the screaming men saying, "Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid"; then he climbed into the boat with them for the rest of the trip. As for their reaction: "They were sore amazed in themselves beyond measure and wondered". This is the identical reaction they had upon seeing him risen from the grave. In both these unusual circumstances, when he walked on water before crucifixion and when he visited them afterwards, the disciples supposed they had seen a "phantasma", a ghost.

Can the person who appeared to the disciples be the same person whom they had seen crucified and had personally buried? Or was this a ghost? A spiritual apparition or a physically resurrected individual? Is the person who rose the same one who was buried?

Is Jesus Christ a ghost - or is he something else?

Every ghostly feature of his post-resurrection activities has a precedent before his death. Jesus exhibits no new characteristics after he returned from the grave. He continues doing exactly the same type of thing he did before he died. He even continues to command that men "Follow me" just as he had done before.

He is essentially the same following his death experience.

It appears that the source of embarrassment for Christians about his post-resurrection behavior may lie in two areas; the first is that no gospel devotes more than two chapters to post-resurrection events; therefore the enormity of these events is compressed in mind-boggling brevity. They confuse and embarrass because they are so condensed that we find them incredible. The second factor contributing to this embarrassment is that a temptation exists to think of Jesus as a local boy who made good as far as death is concerned.

If the resurrected Jesus was not a ghost, if the same physical body which was tortured to death and buried arose still consistently performing the same characteristic

actions as before, and if these actions are vastly different from the things others can do, then we are forced to suspect that, although he physically rose from the dead, he was not the same kind of being as the rest of us who will also die. Apparently he is at the very least Someone Special. And, if he is not a ghost, then what is He?

Thursday, April 8, 2010
Three Updates

On Tuesday (April 6th) I told about seeing a neighborhood drug addict jump my neighbor's back fence, and I told about my mixed feelings toward either banishing him from our block or witnessing to win him for Christ.

Here's an update:

The more I thought about the situation, the more I felt I should do something I do not want to do, that is talk with this young man about the claim of Christ on his soul.

Makes me leery just thinking about it.

When it comes to contact with other people, especially in the area of evangelism, I think everybody in the whole world has taken assertiveness training classes but me.

So I began preparations toward witnessing to this guy.

I see him up and down our street often, but I do not want to let him inside our house. Nor do I want him to come inside our back garden gate. This is a prudent matter of safety; he has a reputation for violence.

So my first step was to rake the leaves and trim the plants in our front yard, then to set comfortable lawn chairs in the shade of the oak with a side table for coffee cups and an ashtray to make relaxed, non-threatening (for both him and me) place I could invite him to talk the next time I see him.

Having done that, I recruited two volunteers to help me refurbish low places in our back fence to hinder any intruder approaching our house.

In preparing a welcome and in strengthening defenses, I prayed for the young man—(mostly that I would not have to actually talk to him).

God gloriously answered my prayer—the young man got arrested Wednesday night and is now in jail.

I did not see what happened so my account here is garbled, based on diligent reports from other neighbors (read, gossip); but his arrest seems to have involved a vacant house, several appliances being taken, and a dog.

Apparently neighbors noticed when the young man moved a refrigerator down the street by rolling it end over end without having removed the glass shelves from inside.

Made a bit of a racket during the middle of the night, and four or five or six neighbors converged on the scene (Although this happened just yards from our front door, Ginny and I did not hear a thing). Words were exchanged. Somehow a dog or several dogs were involved.

The fence-jumper claimed he had permission to move the refrigerator, a washing machine and a dryer to the driveway of another vacant house around the corner to strip them for copper wiring to sell for scrap....

How all this worked, I don't know for sure, but they tell me he is now in jail facing a 30 to 90 day sentence. So neither my welcoming, nor my defensive, preparations are needed—yet.

I pray that while back in jail this time (he's been in and out continuously for years) the young man will encounter one of Jacksonville's many prison ministries and find Christ—without me being involved at all.

How's that for compassionate Christianity?

Won't Jesus just be tickled pink with me?

Now, for another update on a different front:

My beautiful daughter-in-law Helen treated me and my friend Barbara White to a Chinese lunch today. In our conversation Barbara told me her Easter observations about the kiss of alabaster and the kiss of betrayal.

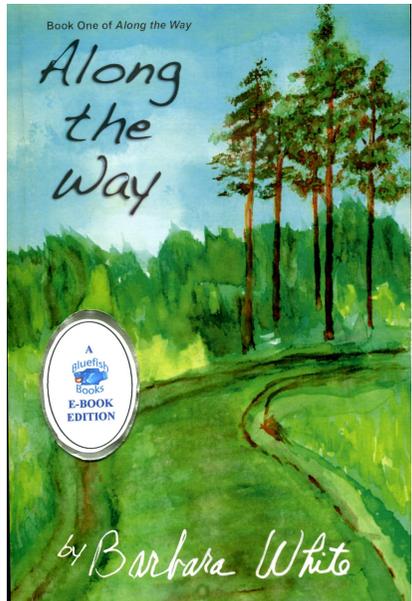
Mary Magdalene kissed the feet of Jesus and anointed Him in worship with perfume from an alabaster box. A known and noted sinner, she acknowledged her condition and found forgiveness. Mary Magdalene was the first person to see Jesus after He rose from the grave.

Judas kissed Him too. Judas pretended devotion. He hung with the disciples. He ate at the same table as Jesus. He asked Jesus pertinent questions. He maintained the appearance of belonging. But, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas kissed Jesus to mark Him for crucifixion.

Same action—Different hearts.

After Barbara went home, Helen helped me post one of the books Barbara wrote, *Along The Way*, as this month's free E-Book at the top of my blog sidebar—

The link is under the picture of the librarian on the ladder getting hit by lightning; that's my graphic for electronic books. The Free E-Books I offer are ones I've either written, transcribed, or edited myself. I try to post a different Free E-Book in pdf format each month.



Two years ago, I published four of Barbara's books, collections of her award-winning *Along The Way* newspaper columns. I feel her writings have the potential to become Christian spiritual classics.

My August 20, 2007 diary entry *Shuffling Paper*, tells the incredible saga, with photos, of how I managed the heroic feat of transforming her shopping bag full of newspaper columns into books.

After Helen showed me how to work the book edit page software, she updated me on the progress of her own exciting project.

She and some friends approach the opening day of their new venture, White Bee Gallery, a working artists' studio, display gallery, and shop at Jacksonville Landing, the city's premier waterfront center.

Not only has Helen designed book covers for me, she also creates jewelry and glassworks and other fine art creations—although the tee-shirts she makes with cats on the chest can hardly be considered fine art. She, with a handful of other artists I have not met yet—plans to open on the 15th of the month. Looks to be a unique shop. The website she's designing for the endeavor is at Helen Cowart's White Bee Gallery at <http://whitebeegallery.com/>

So, I have now updated information about the fence-jumper, the Free E-Book by Barbara White, and Helen's White Bee Gallery.

Everything is up to date—but me.

Wednesday, April 14, 2010
Our Garden Remembers



The kid who played with this is now grown up with a family of his own. Originally this dinosaur held He-Man Action Figures, then for years it stood on the mantle as I used it as a pipe rack. Now, his toy decorates our garden reminding us of our kids when they were little.

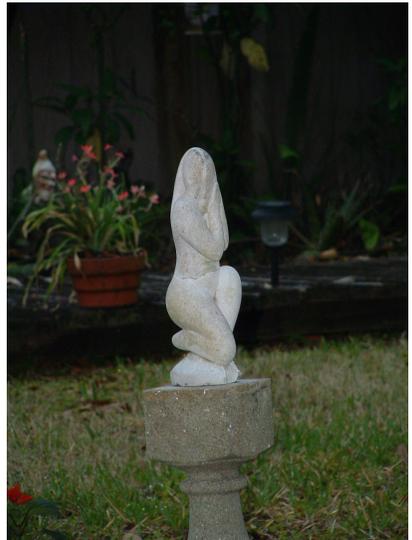
Last week I posted photos of yard art decorating our garden; but not every feature



merely decorates. Some items in our yard remind us of people who are no longer in our lives for various reasons.

Our youngest daughter got married in January. She's moved to a different city and started a new life. But our garden still sports this pink plastic flamingo she gave us:

My friend Sam gave me this concrete pillar shortly before he died of a stroke 15 years ago; the statue portrays grief:



Not so somber but nevertheless poignant stands her favorite chew toy marking the grave of Sheba, our beloved black lab who lived with us for 17 years:



Not all the memorials in our yard relate to sad occasions. My friend Rex built a new home out in the boondocks and moved his family there. He gave me these replica ruins:



I've already mentioned the Lladro figurine our neighbor Beth gave me before she and her family also moved to a new, larger home. And Felisol noticed the bronze grill my father crafted back in the 1940s. As a boy, I saw him shake this casting out of the sand mold while it still glowed white-hot. Here's a better view of it:



Two of our neighbors gave me this glass ball long ago. They recently lost their home to foreclosure:



Before he died suddenly a few years ago, Ginny's father gave her this iron incense burner:



Mary, my friend Barbara White's daughter, made this lion guarding our pool steps. Mary died of cancer about 18 months ago:



My mother died of cancer in 1985. She gave us a cutting to grow this Queen Of The Night plant:



Gardens are a great place to see fresh life and growth, as well as to remember people who have passed through our lives.

In the great love story of Jacob and Rachel, the Bible says that at her death, he set up a memorial pillar as a remembrance; I imagine it as a garden spot:

Genesis 35: 19—And Rachel died , and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem. And Jacob set a pillar upon her grave: that is the pillar of Rachel's grave unto this day.

Everywhere I look in our garden I see reminders of people important to me...

Everywhere I look in our garden I also see work that still needs doing!

Last week Ginny clipped this newspaper cartoon for my amusement:



Thursday, April 15, 2010
Good Things Come To Those Who....

One reason I hardly ever get any actual work done is that I find so many more exciting and interesting things to do.

For instance, yesterday morning instead of working, I spent five hours waiting for a bird.

Let me explain:

This waiting thing involves stuff that happened Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, and six weeks ago.

Sunday afternoon Ginny and I sat out by our garden fountain talking about our Income Tax forms (which are due today)... Suddenly a whirl of wings surrounded us; an enormous flight of cedar waxwings descended on our yard out of the blue.

Well over a hundred, perhaps many more, bright silver, black and yellow birds filled our yard; so many lighted on our mimosa tree that the branches bent to the ground from their weight.

We did not have a camera with us for a photo. (I've picked up this one of cedar waxwings in flight through a Bing image search, it comes from the East Tennessee Wild Flowers website).



Imagine scores of these beautiful birds, translucent silver wings, in our garden back-lighted in bright sunshine! I thought of a swirl of angels in flight. Here is a close up of one:



I remembered the vision of the Prophet Daniel, “I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire. A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him: thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him: the judgment was set, and the books were opened” .

Wow! That’s what I thought of...

Of course, I doubt if a swirl of real silver-winged angels would have crapped all over our deck like these cedar waxwings did.

The birds thirsted.

They’d come down to our garden for water. They flocked around the birdbaths, around the pool skimmer, around the dog’s bowl—they actually piled on top of each other so anxious were they to drink from any source.

For perhaps ten or 15 minutes this enormous flight of birds overran our garden; then, on some invisible signal from their leader, all took off at once. Not a one remained behind.

You’d never know they’d been here except for an occasional stray feather and, of course, the evidence on the deck.

This sight amazed us, Ginny and I have never seen anything like it before. And to think, if we’d have been out in our yard ten minutes sooner or ten minutes later, we would never have known it ever happened. We would have missed a wonder.

That was Sunday.

Monday, my friend Wes treated me to breakfast. We returned to my garden to smoke our pipes and talk of faith, frustration, family, and friends.

Wes, an accomplished organist among other things, told me about a recital he'd gone to in Tallahassee over the weekend. He waxed eloquent about the tunes.

I can hardly differentiate between an organ and a kazoo.

Wes wasted his time telling me about music. I have no ear for it. The musical world is sealed to me. I can't imagine what other people see in it.

As Wes talked, I saw a flash of color at one of our bird feeders.

Could it be... Yes, I'm sure of it—A painted bunting!

Here in north Florida bird watchers drive for miles and spend big bucks on the off chance of spotting a painted bunting, our state's most colorful bird— And here were two of them right here in my backyard!

I hushed Wes and urged him not to move. Painted buntings are notoriously skittish. I wanted nothing to frighten it. I scarcely dared to breathe lest I spook this unusual bird.

I pointed the feathered glory out to Wes... who responded, "Yep. That's a bird alright".

Wes is not a bird watcher. He has no eye for it. The birder's world is sealed to him. He can't imagine what other people see in it.

This realization opened an odd train of thought for me:

As music is to me, as birds are to Wes, so is the Gospel to many people—it's a sealed book, viewed with apathy.

Even though we all realize that we will die and spend all eternity somewhere or another, some folks just have no interest.

"Yep. That's the Ancient of Days alright," they say and grub on about their business.

Saint Paul said, "If our gospel be hid , it is hid to them that are lost : 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 unto them".

They miss beauty.

Miss wonder.

How sad.

The way the Prophet Jeremiah words it—"O foolish people, and without understanding; which have eyes and see not, which have ears and hear not! 'Fear ye not Me?', saith the Lord. 'Will ye not tremble at My presence?'"

Music. Birds. Religion—some of us are just too dense to get any of it.

Anyhow be that as it may, I got excited about seeing the painted bunting and after Wes went home, I carried my camera outside to stalk the bird for a photo—No bird. Perverse varmint hid from me.

I lurked under an awning waiting for a sign, the flutter of a wing in the bushes, the movement of a leaf, a sound in the shrubbery ... and I waited. And I waited. And I waited. No bunting in sight. No bunting on Monday. No bunting on Tuesday.

Work piled up on my desk as I continued to camera stalk the elusive painted bunting for five hours Wednesday morning.

Ah Ha! There he is—that red dot on the gate:

He would not come closer.

I waited.

Ah, Back at the feeder.

I raised my camera—Away he flitted.

Even with the zoom setting, I could not get a clear picture.



There he is. On the left side of the feeder—that little blue head.



The cautious varmint kept the feeder between himself and my zoom lens. I waited till the breeze turned the feeder on its cord:



I can hardly see him on the right.

Ever patient (Stop laughing, Ginny) Ever patient as I'm known to be, I waited, still as stone, for the bunting to come within camera range.

Finally: greed overcame his caution and he ventured to a closer feeder:



Got the rascal! Here, let me enlarge that:



Yes, it paid for me to wait. Waiting sometimes does pay.

When I walked back into our house to transfer my photos from digital camera to my computer, someone was knocking on our front door.

About six weeks ago I'd asked a neighbor who had to move because of a separation and the foreclosure on his home, if I could dig up a cigar plant from his flower bed. Hummingbirds love this red tubular flower.

At the time he said no because he was not sure about the foreclosure situation. Then he moved away and the house sat vacant.

Those cigar plants tempted me. They sat there sprouting weeds in the bed. Every time I went to my car in our drive, across the way I'd see those cigar plants going to waste. Abandoned.

Who'd know if I were to slip over and dig them up?

I wanted those plants.

Alas, John Cowart, Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Neighbor's Cigar Plant.

My conscience would not let me walk over one night and dig them up for my garden. “John, if it’s not yours, leave it alone,” it said.

That galled me but I obeyed.

Then yesterday my former neighbor had been over there moving some of his stuff out of the garage and while working, he remembered my request and brought over two cigar plants for me.

I’m touched that in the midst of his own problems, he remembered my request from six weeks ago. How thoughtful of him.

I’m glad I waited instead of digging them up myself.

The plants may grow better for not having been stolen.... That makes no sense.

But anyhow, I’m glad I waited and obtained them legitimately as a gift from their rightful owner. Waiting is worth it.

Years ago I wrote *Why Don’t I Get What I Pray For?*, a book on prayer (it’s now long out-of-print) but one chapter involved waiting. It’s called, “But Lord, I Hate To Wait!”.

If anybody is interested, that book has been reprinted under the new title *I’m Confused About Prayer* available at www.bluefishbooks.info.

So, birds and plants and prayer—that’s my day.

As I said at the start, one reason I hardly ever get any actual work done is that I find so many more exciting and interesting things to do.

Friday, April 16, 2010 Christian Hero Rescues Foxfire

Up at 3 a.m. Friday morning to get some work done before an appointment with my doctor (nothing worth writing about). Spent the early hours transcribing Barbara’s Prayer Diary—an unending task it seems.

Started with her entries in 1976 and I’m only up to 1988 after months of on and off transcribing. Exhausting, but I think it’s worth it.

In the midst of my work, I ran across a reference to Foxfire, Barbara's cat. She loved that vile beast. The cat reciprocated with vicious tyranny. Foxfire exercised more control over Barbara's household than Joseph Stalin did over Soviet Russia.

In case you haven't guessed, I'm not noted as a cat lover.

Naturally, cats ignore a roomful of people pleading *Here, Kitty Kitty* to climb on my lap. Cats are discerning creatures. They know where they are not wanted—and go there.

Anyhow, as I transcribed some lesson notes in Barbara's diary, I recalled an incident involving Foxfire.

I'll come back to that in a moment.

But first I've noticed that back in 1988 Barbara included some pithy observations here and there in her diary; here are a few isolated samples:

When you stop burning the oil, you start burning the wick.

The Father's leading may hurt you, but will never injure you.

We usually come to God from bad motives. Remember God sought you, not you Him.

Don't talk to yourself in God's name.

I don't want to walk in the Spirit, I want to be carried.

Two flat tires on the way to church—Is it Satan keeping me from church, or did God not want me to go that particular morning?

The written Word of God is inspired, but the written Word of God does not always prove what we think it ought to. We're tempted to impress people by taking it too far. Don't walk around expecting the exceptional!

Signs point to something; if not, you're in trouble. "Signs following" and "following signs" are not the same thing.

Examining is not being critical or cynical. We have all been gullible at one time or another. But God wants to increase my confidence in my own discernment.

God draws us; every other force pushes us.

The demonic appeals to something already inside us.

Much guidance happens when God guides me without my being aware of it.

God has the ability to make all things serve His purposes—even my mistakes.

In prayer I send a lot of time arguing with the Umpire.

Most of us fear that somebody else will lead us astray, but my own dumb decisions cause most of my trouble.

Don't lean on a rubber crutch.

Remember, the scaffolding will be taken away when the building is complete. Don't devote your life to maintaining the scaffolding. For instance, God took my prayer list away to show me that a prayer life has to be a life of prayer—there is a difference.

Now back to my heroic actions in rescuing Foxfire...

One August Ginny and I were over at Barbara's house visiting her and Mary, her daughter. Barbara had just run an errand and returned home—locking both Foxfire and her keys in her car.

Ginny, Barbara and Mary fretted.

Ah, damsels in distress. My specialty.

Mighty John Cowart to the rescue!

Here's my chance to perform an act of Christian charity—in front of an audience.

Fortunately, Barbara had left the driver's side window down about half an inch.

Remember this was back in the days when car locks worked (unlike today's) with flared buttons. With a straightened coat hanger twisted into a loop at the end, you could snag the door lock button and pull it up.

Nothing to it...

Unless...

Unless there is a perverse cat in the car.

Foxfire saw me ease that coat hanger through the window and fish for the door button.

He batted the wire away.

I tried again.

He batted the wire away again.

The ladies tried to distract his attention over to the passenger's window by tapping on the glass. No fooling Foxfire with that stupid human ploy.

What does it matter that the car is locked? In Florida—In August—To touch the car's surface raises blisters. Nevertheless, Foxfire stood ready to repel all boarders.

The ladies prayed for foxfire's rescue.

I prayed for strength to resist the temptation to loop the wire around the damn cat's neck and drag its hairy ass out through that half-inch gap in the window.

Bat. Bat. Bat.
Fun with the cat.

Eventually the heat took its toll. Can cats pant? Foxfire grew lethargic. Listless. Batting my coat hanger away no longer seemed such fun.

Foxfire lay down on the driver's seat. Glaring at me.

I hooked the door button.

Foxfire sprang free.

He showed his appreciation by stalking out of the car and sitting down to lick his paws ignoring the adoring cooing of the ladies surrounding him.

Did you know that a man can cuss while doing an act of Christian charity?

Thursday, April 22, 2010
More Stuff For The Kid In The Attic

Every writer envisions the reader he expects to read his work. For me, that's the kid in the attic.

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

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

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

Tuesday morning at breakfast the worried waitress asked, "Do you have earthquakes in Florida"?

She'd just moved here from California.

At the loud noise the building shook and dishes in the restaurant rattled.

Yes, earthquakes are possible here in Florida; one chapter in my book *Crackers & Carpetbaggers* (available at www.bluefishbooks.info) deals with the Great Seaboard Earthquake of 1886.

But it was no earthquake Tuesday morning.

The sonic boom of the returning space shuttle caused the commotion. The cook, the waitresses, and all the customers rushed outside to see. Being the last one through the door, I barely caught a glimpse of *Discovery* returning with its seven-member crew after a 15-day mission to the International Space Station. NASA only has three more shuttle missions scheduled before retiring the program.

Ginny and I have often watched space launches from our own backyard, but this was the first time I've ever seen a shuttle return to earth.

Cool!

I also made an out-of-town trip Tuesday, but I do not feel free to write about that.

While the space shuttle flew without a problem, aircraft in Europe have been stuck on the ground for the past six or eight days. A volcano in Iceland spewed a massive cloud of ash, dust and grit that covered Europe from Great Britain to the Ukraine.

The grit clogs air intakes on jet engines. One plane crash in England is blamed on the ash. Mid-way through the eruption, over 63,000 commercial flights had to be canceled. This cost the airlines more than five or six dollars.

I heard one guy say the ash cloud was God's judgment on airlines for their recent increase in fares, now charging \$35 for carry-on bags!

Maybe so.

Here's a photo from the *Boston Globe* newspaper of the Eyjafjallajokul Volcano taken on April 17th.



Positively Old Testament!

News reports say particles of sharp grit and volcanic ash rub together in the air generating both cloud-to-ground and earth-to-sky lightening.

I did not know that.

Before seeing that photo, I thought Moses exaggerated when he wrote about the Ten Commandments and Mount Sinai:

“Mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly...And God spake all these words... And all the people saw the thunders and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they removed and stood afar off”—I’ll just bet they did.

But such phenomena can't be blamed on the airlines. There weren't any back then.

Why do some folks feel the need to blame?

For instance, recently there have been earthquakes in Haiti, Chile, China, Mexico and in the South Sea Islands. News reports say one Iranian cleric made a speech last week saying earthquakes are caused by immodest women—by which he apparently meant women who dress showing more than their eyes in a black gown (sorry, I've forgotten the name of that traditional female garb).

At the same time, there is a Christian group here in the U.S. who protest at the funerals of servicemen killed in action. This group blames the war in Iraq and Afghanistan on America's tolerance of homosexuals.

I don't know about acts of God in judgment, I'm sure there is such a thing, but I find that for most of the calamities I've experienced in life, I have no one to blame but myself.

But, that's enough about what's going on in world events, let's talk about something more important—what's going on in my life.

I feel like a fraud.

Last week I talked with my doctor about getting a handicapped sticker for parking our car. He thinks I qualify; I'd like to think I'm not in that bad a shape.

What brought this up?

Well, Ginny and I drove downtown to the main library and parked. A traffic cop came over and asked, "Say, Buddy, do you have a handicapped sticker"?

That puzzled me.

We'd just parked at a regular meter.

The officer explained that he'd watched me struggle to get out of the car with my cane and he saw that I have trouble standing or walking.

For me, I've lived with it so long that pain is normal.

Handicapped stickers are for people in much worse shape than I am. What's a touch of arthritis when there are folks without legs needing those spaces? Besides, I manage. Look at all the photos of our garden taken earlier in April, Ginny and I did all that work ourselves. True, I can

only work 15 or 20 minutes at a time before having to rest a long time. But I manage.

I'm more clumsy than crippled.

Here's another thing. After sitting in my desk chair at my computer working for an hour, the pain drives me to a recliner to build up stamina to work again—but, if I'm at the same computer in the same chair browsing internet photos of naked women, I can stay all evening without a break.

Don't need any parking sticker to stay parked on a porno site.

Ginny says I'm a 70-year-old adolescent boy.

Let's move on to something happy. Take a look at this photo:



Yesterday, a friend (who does not wish to be named) saw an ad for a pipe collection for sale. Now, they are mine. A gift.

On one level, I'm thrilled. On another level, I'm saddened.

My friend asked the lady selling the pipes about the person they'd belonged to. Turns out that the lady's 83-

year-old husband committed suicide six weeks ago. Poor bastard. I grieve for him. And for his widow.

I think that death by suicide is an outcome of the disease of depression, just like death by cancer is an outcome of that disease, or death by malaria is an outcome of that one. It need not be necessary, but it does happen. Tragic when the overwhelming pressure of external circumstance or internal despair shoves a victim into the maw. But I doubt that suicide is necessarily always the product of sin. Just because Judas committed suicide does not mean all who do are sons of perdition.

I hate it when surviving family members feel the extra burden besides their grief when they feel that the victims of suicide might have offended God by their action.

It was Jesus Himself who said, “He that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out”.

My friend said that it was the Lord who brought the pipe ad to her attention—not to buy pipes for me but to bring her into contact with this widow who carries such a heavy burden. My friend established a rapport with her which may lead to mutual visits, comfort and Christian witness.

Me, I got nine new pipes: four are drug-store-pipes; three are fine quality; one, a composite (meaning a different stem and bowl have been meshed); and one pipe I suspect was designed for smoking dope.

One pipe’s engraved inscription strikes me as funny:

Dr. Mile’s Anti-Nicotine Tobacco Pipe!

Never heard that one before.

I spent a great afternoon enjoying cleaning my new pipes.

Occasionally non-smoking friends rebuke me for my addiction to my pipes. They stand in good company. The Sweetest Man In History did not smoke. Neither did Vad The Impaler, (title character for Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula*). And Adolph Hitler did not smoke either. Non-smoking friends stand in good comp...

What?

You don’t know about The Sweetest Man In History?—His name was Attila—everybody calls him Hun.

Monday, April 26, 2010
**Understanding About Canes, Shovels, And
Scripture**

Friday, Ginny's boss gave her this flower arrangement:



Saturday, a former neighbor gave us a wheelbarrow full of Siberian iris to transplant into our garden. I dug out a bed for them between the boardwalk and the pool wall, clearing dried leaves, spiny cactus, tree roots and old plants already in that spot.

This meant a lot of standing and bending and stooping and crawling about on my hands and knees in the narrow space.

All this healthy physical activity made me feel ashamed to have even thought about getting a handicap parking sticker last week...Then I sat down for 15 minutes and the arthritis kicked in. I could hardly get up out of my chair. This on again, off again pain confuses me. Am I good to go, or ready for the scrap heap?

Now, here's an odd thing: Saturday in the grocery store parking lot, as I struggled to get out of the car with my cane, this strange woman came up .

"What's wrong with your leg," she asked?

"Old age," I replied.

"Is it your knee," she asked.

"My hip".

"Are you in pain right now"?

"Yes. It hurts all the time".

"Do you mind if I pray for you?", she asked explaining that she is part of a healing ministry and they go around looking for sick people to pray for.

Now, I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and I believe in prayer but I felt a check in my spirit and my first thought was, *There's something wrong here. This doesn't smell right. If this group wants to pray for sick people, why in the Publix parking lot? Why not in the hospital four blocks away?*

Out loud, all I said was, "No. I'd prefer you didn't".

She did not need anybody's permission to pray for anything; but since she'd asked, I refused.

She walked away looking for somebody else to pray for.

Ginny had been getting stuff from the trunk during my exchange with the lady, "What was that all about?" She asked.

"Just some woman who wanted to lay her hands on my hips," I said. "Happens all the time".

Ginny didn't believe me.

In our Bible reading Sunday night, Ginny and I read the passage in John where the disciples did not understand Jesus—Yet a little while, you see me; then yet a little while and you don't see me, then you'll see me again—and when they asked, He elaborated leaving them more confused than before.

I'm with the disciples on that one.

All the time Jesus is saying things that to me sound like gobbledygook—kind of like Stephen Hawking explaining the universe to me. I just don't get it.

I trust Him anyhow—the Lord, not necessarily Stephen Hawking—even though I don't understand.

One thing I've noticed, things are not always about, what I think they're about.

For instance, as I worked in the garden, a guy came over to borrow some tools. He sat down to talk. Heartbreaking problem involving a grandchild.

I listened.

This visit was not about borrowing tools.

I suspect God may have brought the guy by our house for some other reason than a shovel.

I agree with my e-friend Felisol from Norway as she observes in her posting this morning, "All these days of coming and going; little did I know, that they were life itself".

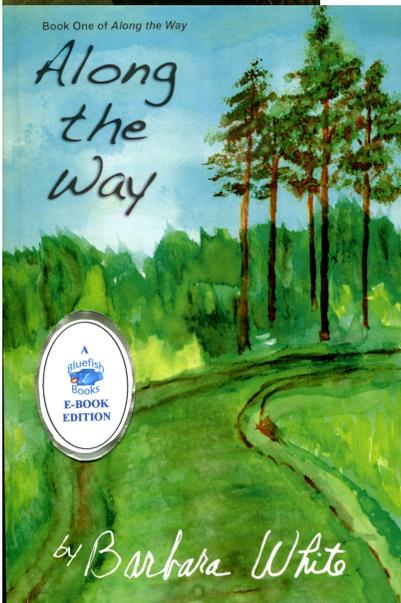
Tuesday, April 27, 2010 Seeds, Weeds & Dry Spells

My August 20, 2007 diary entry, *Shuffling Paper*, tells the incredible saga, with photos, of how I managed the heroic feat of transforming my friend Barbara White's shopping bag full of newspaper columns into four books.

Barbara, now retired, is an award-winning newspaper editor and columnist.

For the month of April, the free E-book I've offered in my blog sidebar is the first of these books which I edited at great pain. It's Barbara's *Along The Way*, a book I believe is destined to become a Christian spiritual classic. The link is under the picture of the librarian getting hit by lightning while reading on the ladder.

That's my graphic for electronic books.



Recently, besides working, planting, weeding and watering my garden, I have also been transcribing some of Barbara's hand written prayer diaries. I plan to publish these diaries eventually.

In my transcribing yesterday I found these two diary entries. They relate to a dry spell in Barbara's life, to a situation with one of her children, and to hope. Here are the two entries from Barbara White's Prayer Diary:

July 9, 1989 (Mark 4:1-25)

The vision of my life as a lawn of dry, brown grass, with bare patches and clumps of weeds fits right in the story (parable) of the seed and the sower.

I have received seed and it has grown. Over the years it has even produced some fruit. And there is still life in the grass. It is brown and dry, but not totally lifeless. But I have allowed the cares and worries of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desire for other things to lure me away from tending the lawn seed as I should.

I do not need to start over; my ground does not need to be completely dug up again. But work is needed.

First, water. Water, water, and more water is needed. And plant food. Weeds must be dug up where possible and a good Weed-And Feed fertilizer put down.

But I must approach this with care. I could root out good plants rather than weeds if I am not careful. So I must get expert advice. I could burn the grass by applying too much fertilizer—or the wrong kind—or at the wrong time. Again, I need the advice and direction of an Expert.

So, I will apply to the Holy Spirit for meeting my needs. And I will do—will exert myself to do—what He tells me

Man plants, weeds, and waters, but the Holy Spirit of God brings the growth and the harvest. The Holy Spirit of God causes growth and produces the grain and fruit, but man is to do the work allotted to him as his portion—it waters the dry plants....

September 16, 1989, Saturday

It still feels like desert, Lord.

Does the desert end slowly with just the appearance of bits of vegetation here and there? I think that's the way it must be.

An oasis may be a suddenly appearing green lush spot we come on abruptly, but the true end of the desert must slip past almost unnoticed.

You told me, Lord, that first Sunday back at All Souls, that You had not forgotten me and that the long desert

You told me about back when Mary was in Tallahassee in work release was finally coming to an end.

You didn't say when. You often don't get that specific. And I understand that it may depend on me somewhat. I may have to be moving to get there. I'm going to come out of the desert one footstep after another on the road that follows You. The verdant land is not going to reach me where I sit moping.

Have I forgotten how to walk?. I cry, "Lead me, Lord", but You are already leading and yet I seem to me to be standing still.

I give You permission, God, to change me, to work in my mind, to think new thoughts that I might arise and follow You. Do with me according to Your good pleasure—oh, my heart faints—I feel the drawing back, the desire for comfort and ease.

But I give You permission, Lord Jesus. For my heart's true desire is not ease, but joy, peace and love.

MAY

Sunday, May 2, 2010

The Nicest Guy In Hell

Last week several of my e-friends wrestled with a knotty problem in theodicy.

Tracy wrote "Doubts of Faith—Hell"; Matt wrote "Yes, Virginia, There Is A Hell"; and Ethinethin wrote "My Dad Told Me All About Hell When I Was 12 Years Old".

Over 50 commenters responded to these essays. Readers wonder how a loving God can send anyone to Hell, especially when there are so many nice people in the world who do not believe in Jesus Christ as Savior?

Ethinethin questions, "The system is so unfair, but it's supposed to be God's system ... a *loving* God's system! God couldn't come up with something better"?

For the past couple of days I've been moving trees around in my yard; uprooting them from one spot, transplanting them in another. That's what I do to avoid working on the manuscript of a book I hate. While I gardened, I thought about Hell and Heaven.

Tracy, Matt and Ethinethin cover the subject well. I have little to add so I have not commented on the three essays or their many responses. That's because I'm out of step with everybody else. I have no problem believing in Hell, it's Heaven that I question.

But, on reflection, and having no more trees to move, now I feel I should maybe dip my own oar in the water on this subject.

First let's agree that you and I and everybody we know will spend all eternity somewhere?

Where?

Some say, Heaven; Some say, Hell; Some say we get recycled; And some say when you die, you die forever, only oblivion lies ahead, and that we spend eternity rotting in a grave.

The Bible says, "It is appointed unto men once to die , but after this the judgment".

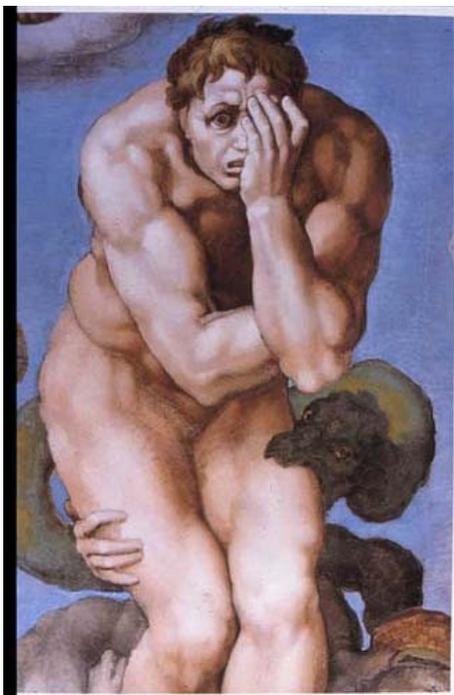
That doesn't leave us much wiggle room.

Not only that, but the Scripture narrows it down even more, "Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in His sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to do".

And this Last Judgment hinges on belief in Jesus Christ.

Here's a detail, *Remorse*, from Michelangelo's painting of *The Last Judgment*.

Jesus once told some listeners, "Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world. I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not that I am He, ye shall die in your sins".



Why would a God of love allow people to die in sin and go to Hell? Isn't that unjust? Isn't He responsible?

Not necessarily.

Say you give \$50 to a poor family down the street so they can buy food. But mom and dad load the kids in the backseat, drive to the liquor store, get tanked up, wreck the car, and the kids in the backseat get mutilated and mangled—What did you do wrong?

Not a thing!

That's the picture I get thinking of God, Daddy Adam and Mamma Eve. God gave 'em Paradise, they wrecked the whole thing. And heck, you and I weren't even born yet, but we got mangled in their wreck and suffer for what they did. I think that's what theologians call "original sin". What did God do wrong there?

The way things are is the way things are.

But the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. We are our father's kids. We take after Mama Eve and Daddy Adam. Individually, we do the same sort of thing they did—with bells on.

Cause and effect.

We have all borne consequences of something we did ourselves; and we have all suffered the consequences of something somebody else did.

That's the way the world works.

One problem about Hell revolves around who is bad enough to end up there.

Say a bully beats a girl, tortures her with a burning cigar, rapes her, and cuts her throat. Say neither the bully nor the girl are believers in Jesus Christ. Is God in any way just in consigning the slayer and the slain to the same Hell?

"If ye believe not that I am He, ye shall die in your sins".

Does belief play a bigger role in eternity than actions?

Shouldn't nice people get a break?

By nice people, I mean people I like.

That's what we all mean when we say the word nice—it means people or things that we find agreeable or pleasant. It's a subjective term, a personal evaluation. It just means how someone strikes me. Hitler's buddies thought he was a nice man. I think of myself as a nice man. In his own eyes no man is an asshole. And you may think I'm nice because of what you don't know about me.

Saint Paul wrote to Timothy saying, "Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after. Likewise also the good works of some are manifest beforehand; and they that are otherwise cannot be hid".

We don't know who is naughty or who is nice—yet, like Santa Clause we evaluate. We assign people value then compare ourselves with those evaluations.

Picture five guys in a rowboat in the middle of the Atlantic when the boat sinks and all are drowning.

Let's say the five guys are me and Billy Graham and the Pope and Hitler and Dracula. We all five sink beneath the waves. Hitler and Dracula sink 50 feet under, The Pope and Billy Graham sink ten feet under, and I sink 30 feet under the water.

I look beneath my feet and see Hitler and Dracula, and I say, "Look at those miserable sinners; they are drowning 50 feet lower than I am".

I look up and see Billy Graham and the Pope drowning in only ten feet of water and I say, "Those lucky bastards! They are so much better off than I am. They're only ten feet under".

A ridiculous picture?

Yes, but by and large that's what we get when we evaluate people as nice or not nice.

And the Scripture says that there is none righteous; no, not one.

We are all under sin.

We all are drowning in our own septic tank.

There is no one who does not deserve Hell. The amazing this is that God redeems anybody; He's not

obligated to. When it comes to Hell, we've earned our place there. We qualify.

That's why we all need a Savior.

Desperately.

I don't like that.

I don't know about you, but I'm quick to claim ownership of "nice" portions of Scripture. "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want". That's nice.

Yet the Scripture also says, "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone into his own way..."

I want to have a Shepherd, but I don't want to be thought of as a sheep.

I'm not a sheep.

I'm a nice guy.

That's how I think of myself: not a super Christian like Billy Graham or the Pope, and certainly not as a wicked, nasty sinner like Hitler or Vald—just a nice, fair-to-middling Christian with a fault or two, but nothing serious.

And we all know that Christ died for nice guys... Isn't that what the Bible says?

It doesn't?

Jesus said that He came to seek and to save the lost. He observed that the sick call for a physician, not the healthy.

The Scripture says, "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly".

The ungodly, not the nice.

The Bible also says that the love of God is shown towards us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

So, was Jesus a nice guy?

He once called His listeners snakes. A lady came to Him asking for help for her daughter and He called her a dog. When some guys complimented Him, He told them they were like a grave vault, white outside but filled with putrefying green meat inside. He platted a whip and

chased legitimate businessmen out of the Temple. He claimed to be the one and only God Almighty come in the flesh and the only way to escape Hell.

That's what He said—I am the way and the truth and the life, no man commeth unto the Father except by Me.

He said He came from above everybody and everything else.

“Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world. I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not that I am He, ye shall die in your sins”.

Well, we put a stop to that kind of talk.

Nailed Him down.

Hand and foot.

Killed Him dead.

Wrapped Him up.

Sprinkled spice on the package so He won't smell bad when He rots.

Let Him see what a whitewashed tomb is like from the inside.

Buried Him underground. Put a rock on it. Out of sight, out of mind

Now we're ready to go back about our business, nice guys one and all.

Problem—The Lord of Life would not stay dead.

Here we thought we'd seen the end of Him and then He rose again from the grave.

Would a nice guy do that?

Yet the Bible says Jesus is “declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead”.

From Above (wherever that is) to here, then back to Above.

Curious.

Several guys wrote books about Him. They had so much material they couldn't get everything down on

paper but John said, “But these are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name”

Believing in Jesus Christ—not believing John Cowart to be nice—is the ticket to life.

That leaves me with two prospects.

I can reject Christ. Or, I can believe in my heart that God raised Christ from the dead as my Savior and Lord and I can confess that fact in the way I live and speak.

I stand destined to become the nicest guy in Hell.

Or, on the other hand, I can chose to ride into Heaven on the coattails of Jesus as the most miserable, filthy, dirty old man ever to clear the gates.

Wednesday, May 5, 2010
Happenings In My World:
Notes For The Kid In The Attic

Though few of my contemporaries buy my books, but I foresee that 50, 70 or a hundred years from now, on some rainy afternoon, a teenage boy prowling through boxes in the attic of his house will chance upon a dusty box of old books. Some title will capture his fancy and he will begin to read my diaries. This is the reader I write for; I want to show him the reality of Christ in one ordinary guy’s life, to reveal the good and bad of how the Christian life works out for me.

In order to put that spiritual dimension in context, every now and then I feel it appropriate to mention contemporary historical events as pegs to hang the personal elements on. So, this past week—

Banana Pudding:

An elderly gentleman came by the house to sit in our garden and talk about tools, but soon his conversation segued into telling me his vivid dream about courting his wife back in 1942. They were in her mother’s kitchen making banana pudding. His vivid dream detailed the process—kerosene stove, icebox, vanilla wafers, wanting to lick the spoon. He remembers being invited to go to church with her family.

He said this was the happiest dream he's ever had.
She died nine months ago.
They'd been married 66 years.

On The Beach—Not A Novel

Several times Ginny and I have enjoyed our November anniversary vacations over in the Florida Panhandle on the Gulf Coast, site of the world's finest beaches.

Here are three beach photos we took:



Perhaps politicians, engineers and businessmen never heard that oil and water don't mix. But they decided to drill offshore in the Gulf to bring up oil.

They succeeded.

The *Boston Globe* reports:

Late on the night of April 20th, 50 miles from the shore of Louisiana, a fire broke out aboard the *Transocean Deepwater Horizon* oil rig under lease by British Petroleum, with 126 individuals on board.

After a massive explosion, all but 11 of the crew managed to escape as the rig was consumed by fire, later collapsing and sinking into the Gulf.

Safeguards set in place to automatically cap the oil well in case of catastrophe did not work as expected, and now an estimated 5,000 barrels (over 200,000 gallons) of crude oil is pouring into the Gulf of Mexico every day - and could possibly continue to do so for months as complicated efforts are made to stop the leak.

This morning the *Bloomberg BusinessWeek* reports:

The spill began April 20 when a drilling rig exploded off the coast of Louisiana, killing 11 workers. It has been spewing up to 200,000 gallons of oil per day into the Gulf with little to no relief expected for at least another week. The spill now covers thousands of square miles and is getting close to the Loop Current, which speeds south through the Gulf and into the Florida Keys. It then hits the Gulf Stream, which could then drive the oil north along Florida's Atlantic Coast.

“The safeguards... did not work as expected”.

So a mile-thick oil slick threatens to encircle Florida. Warnings have been issued from the mouth of the Mississippi River south to Tampa Bay.

Bye bye beach.

And these same folks, or ones just like them, want to build electric plants that run on radioactive materials—with safeguards of course.

Failed Visit

At noon Saturday, I stopped to visit a cancer patient who is expected to die this week. Her caregiver met me too exhausted to open the door all the way. She just could not handle having a visitor. God bless all caregivers!

I went home without having seen the patient.

I felt relieved.

All Too Common:

In Mogadishu, Somalia, two bombs exploded inside a mosque in the main market section, killing at least 30 people and wounding over 70. .

Prayer rugs that line the mosque floor caught fire, and streaks of blood and black smoke covered the charred walls.

“It was very horrific. The blood was everywhere, human flesh cut into pieces scattered everywhere in the mosque. I could hardly stay there,” said Abdulahi Nuur, who attended to the dead and wounded.

News reports carry such stories practically every day.

My—Ha—Work

I continue to avoid working on that book manuscript, *If God Leads Me, Why Do I Run In Circles*. Will I ever get the second draft of that thing finished? I feel such an aversion to touching the damn thing. Humm... if the environmental people want something to wipe up and absorb spilled oil, I've got about 350 pages for them.

Car Bomb In Times Square

Saturday, the fear of terrorism returned to the streets of New York yesterday after police evacuated Times Square and detonated a car bomb. Two street vendors had raised the alarm after seeing smoke rising from the SUV and hearing a “pop pop pop” sound.

The authorities said later that the device was made of three propane bottles, consumer-grade fireworks and two five-gallon tanks of petrol and could have killed many people. “This was the real deal — to hurt people,” Sal Cassano, the Fire Commissioner, said, adding that the force of the bomb could have destroyed the front of a building.

In the first attempted terrorist attack against a big US civilian target since an alleged attempt to blow up an airliner on Christmas Day, Islamic extremists were once again the prime suspects.

Police said they believed that the intention was to create a fireball in one the city's top tourist areas, which was teeming with thousands of tourists and theatre goers on Saturday night.

The device, which contained a clock and electrical wiring, had apparently begun to detonate but did not explode. The car was parked on West 45th Street during the busy time between matinee and evening performances in the theatre district. Bomb disposal Experts worked to make it safe while a robotic arm was used to break into the vehicle, which had its engine running and hazard lights flashing.

A Pakistani man believed to be behind a failed car bomb attack on New York's Times Square was arrested today (May 4, 2010) while trying to leave the US, officials said. Video surveillance cameras in Times Square apparently caught his image leaving the car bomb.

Faisal Shahzad is being held in New York after he was identified by customs agents at John F Kennedy International Airport. He was stopped before boarding an Emirates airlines flight to Dubai, according to officials.

Shahzad had recently returned from a five-month trip to Pakistan, where he had a wife. He is an American citizen with an address in Shelton, Connecticut.

Lunch With My Best Friends

Monday I went to lunch at a Chinese restaurant with my friends Barbara and Wes. Barbara's hair is growing back nicely following her chemotherapy. Wes just bought a Greek/Hebrew Lexicon printed during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I in the 1550s.

Over egg foo young, Wes and Barbara discussed creeds and the *filioque* phrase.

I listened.

Back at my house, embedded in the garden, they talked about movie stars and film's I've never heard of.

I listened.

My friends get along fine without any contribution from me.

Up In The Air:

Yesterday, that volcano in Iceland again spouts ash shutting down air traffic over Scotland and Ireland. It may spread wider... Maybe it will link up with our oil spill in the Gulf?



A Happy Home:

Friday, our daughter Eve and her husband, Mark, made the down payment, buying their first house. I haven't seen it yet, but from the kid's description it sounds beautiful. I hope they will have a happy home in their new house.

The Bee At The Landing

My daughter-in-law, Helen, has stayed busy preparing for the opening of her new art gallery/artists' workshop, The Bee Gallery, at Jacksonville Landing. She is scheduled to open as part of Jacksonville's Art Walk night tomorrow. Helen designed several covers for my books at www.bluefishbooks.info so you know her work is outstanding and that she is a charitable person who take pity on computer-confused old guys.

Jacksonville Sets A New Record

This morning's *Times-Union* reports: Jacksonville area bankruptcy filings in March hit the highest level in more than four years. Local bankruptcy attorneys say it could get worse this year before it gets better.

According to U.S. Bankruptcy Court records, March bankruptcy filings in Jacksonville hit 1,180—almost double those in January.

“April was the largest single month for bankruptcy filings in our firm since the eve of the bankruptcy law changes in October 2005,” said attorney Chip Parker of Parker & DuFresne , a law firm that handles foreclosures and bankruptcies.

Now For The Big News!!!

I have a toothache!

That overshadows all that lesser stuff going on in my world today.

Ok, Kid In The Attic, have a good life.

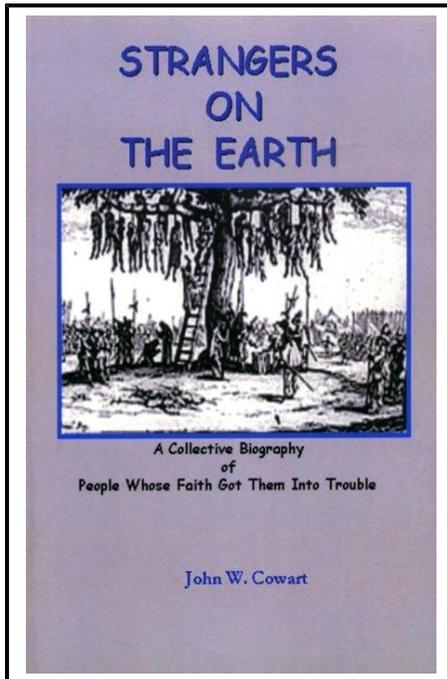
Love, John

Thursday, May 6, 2010 This Month's Free E-Book

Each month I post one free e-book on this site. You can get to it by clicking on the link below the picture of the reader standing on a library ladder at the top of my sidebar.

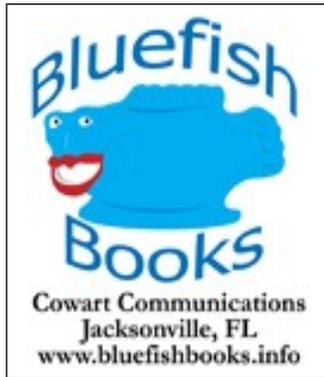
The Free E-Books I offer are ones I've either written, transcribed, or edited myself. I try to post a different Free E-Book in pdf format each month.

This month's book is *Strangers On The Earth*.



I wrote this back in the '80s; it went out of print. So I revised, enlarged and republished it four years ago. It tells the stories of people who got into trouble because of their faith. These people fascinate me. They range from America's first best-selling author, to Christian saints, to the astronomer who formulated laws of planetary motion used in NASA space launches, to an impoverished colonial farmer, to the man behind the legend of Santa Clause.

Print copies of Strangers are available for sale at [Blue Fish Books](#) .Bluefish Books specializes in old diaries & letters, history, biographies, memoirs, novels, inspirational books, and other works edited or written by John Cowart (that's me 😊).



All of my books—well, about 20 of them—are published in both print and PDF e-book editions. Many are listed in the Google Books program... and I'm going crazy trying to learn how to convert these books into e-pub format (whatever that is) before the TechnoTyrants who rule the E-World come out with an even newer, more complicated, way to do things—A pox on all their houses!

Anyhow, for now, enjoy reading *Strangers On The Earth* before some geek tries to improve it. And while you enjoy reading *Strangers*, I'm going to sit here and listen to Perry Como on my 78s.

Love, John

Friday, May 7, 2010
Temptation?.... Or Opportunity?



I can't tell the difference between an opportunity and a temptation.

For over 20 years I have worked on and off on a book about discerning the will of God; it's titled *If God Leads Me, Why Do I Run In Circles*. The manuscript nears completion. Another couple of months' work should see it ready for publication.

It looks as though after thinking and writing about divine guidance for 20+ years, I'd have some idea of what God wants me to do—HA!

I have no idea.

I'm more confused than ever.

Case in point—Last week a young lady approached me asking for help editing a book she has written.

My heart dropped on hearing her request.

I'm swamped with work I'm already committed to doing. I just can't take on anything else. To do this work with her means backburnering one of the writing projects I'm already involved with. My own work is important and were I to set it aside, the world would lose an incredibly valuable contribution to classic literature...

Or, maybe not.

The world does not seem to be pining away waiting for the next John Cowart book.

If I don't finish my manuscript, who gives a damn?



Besides, and this is enormously important, I've looked over the young lady's first draft. She has written an immensely valuable and unique book of Christian testimony.

In a nutshell, her story follows the typical, almost stereotypical, format—Sinner meets Jesus and gets changed into a Christian. Her book is not unique in that regard; however, she tells her story in a well-written format which reaches out to other women who may now be where she once was—She was a stripper in “gentlemen's clubs” where she felt miserable. But as Christ worked in her life—I'm strongly reminded of the story of Mary Magdalene—the former exotic dancer's life

changed. She is now the wife of the pastor of a dynamic Christian church.

Mary Magdalene was the girl who washed the feet of Jesus at a feast, anointed Him with oil, and dried His feet with her hair—later she became the first person to see Him after He rose from the dead. Her story inspired generations of great artists to portray her. Here's a copy of Alexander Ivanov's 1834 painting "Noli me tangere":



One Bible translation (sorry, I forget which one) of Luke's Gospel, at the Anointing when the disciples get pushed out of shape by Jesus' associating with this known prostitute, Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She has done what she could. And, in every age, and in every place throughout the world—anywhere My story is told, her story shall be told also, as a memorial to her".

You know, over the years I have been a writer, many and many a time people have told me about how they can write a book as soon as they get the time, and they ask me what I think... I never want to squelch their ambition, but I have yet to see any one of them actually write a book. I suspect they find out it involves work.

But I feel so sorry for them as I remember how much pain I suffered trying to get started as a writer. I hate to

see anyone go through that horror! And I'll do what I can to alleviate that kind of suffering in aspiring writers..

There are so many good writers out there, and there are so many sharks in the water to eat their ambition, take their money, kill their dreams.

So, on one hand I'm inclined to edit this woman's copy; on the other hand, I'm reluctant to abandon my own work even for a few months (at my age there aren't all that many months left).

Another factor: While she danced in bars and knows something of the ways of the world, and while she's grown in her dozen years as a pastor's wife and knows the ways of Christ, she's an innocent when it comes to knowing what goes into changing a first draft into a published book.

It's like she's given birth to this perfectly beautiful baby and I come in saying, "I'm going to cut your baby in pieces and glue it back together to make it even better. I'm going to edit it. First, let's get rid of those toes".

The physical production process frustrates idealism.

(Once a lady I was helping with a book got so mad she actually threw a bowl of hot chicken soup on me—nevertheless, I did eventually get her book published; it's *Rebel Yell: The Civil War Diary Of John Thomas Whatley, C.S.A.* at www.bluefishbooks.info).

The fact is that the only thing harder than starting a book is finishing one.

And this young lady has no clue of what will be involved in the process of editing her copy. Yet it may well be worthwhile.

Be that as it may, I still face this temptation/opportunity dilemma.

Is her request an opportunity for me to help spread the Gospel? Or is it a temptation luring me away from finishing my magnum opus on divine guidance?

While I wallow in indecision, I might as well mention two other factors:

Pride—I'm tickled for a young woman to seek my advice and wisdom. And not just a young woman but a former stripper. What a feather in my cap! What an ego-

builder. I must be quite a guy. In years past, the only thing any stripper ever said to me was “Get lost, Creep!” thus I feel flattered and inflated at the chance to work with this lady.

Frustration—I’m bogged down in the will of God manuscript. It’s an 8,000-piece jigsaw puzzle of a plate of spaghetti and the cat got on the table batting around the pieces.

I’ve grown to hate this book. It just doesn’t work.

When I mentioned the manuscript’s structural problems to my son-in-law, he suggested that I stop work on it and retire.

The prospect appalls me! It scares me. It breaks my heart.

In my mind to quit means admitting that I’ve spent my whole life in worthless vanity, that I’ve ultimately and finally failed, that I’ve pissed away my life chasing an illusion, that I go to the grave having accomplished nothing worthwhile, that I’ve put Ginny and our kids through squalid hardship and privation just to boast that I’m a writer.

As Saint Paul said, “He that provides not for his own, especially those of his own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an infidel”—I fall into that category.

But so long as I’m trying to write, I pursue hope for my books, and I can fool myself into thinking that I’ve suffered and allowed my family to suffer for a noble purpose.

If I quit, then I must admit to chasing a pipedream, being too useless and lazy to work at a real job.

I’ll have to own up to living a life of utter vanity. I’ve spent 70 years pissing against the wind. The wind won.

Perhaps the Lord is bringing me to a place to give myself up, to commit myself into His hands, to work on someone else’s project and leave my own at the foot of His Cross. Maybe leave it there forever, maybe leave it for a time and get a fresh start.

God is profligate in “wasting” our talents; we are poured out like water before Him. He manages to muddle

through without anyone's valuable contribution, even mine.

This would not be the first time I've abandoned my baby, my file drawers overflow with manuscript starts I'll never complete.

One thing I have noticed about diving guidance, The Lord God Almighty is not too keen on maintaining my dignity, and yet He tolerates me. He seems quiet comfortable seeing me in the role of a servant.

Yeah, yeah, I know I'm supposed to say He "loves me" but I make a leap of faith just to say "tolerates", so deal with it. And that's another subject. Anyhow, I'm scheduled to meet with the young woman and her husband one day next week to give them my answer about working for them....Lord, What wilt Thou have me to do? Please be merciful to John Cowart, a sinner.

**Saturday, May 8, 2010
Ginny Wins Award!**



In a two-page letter yesterday Ginny's employer announced she has won an award for excellent performance.

In part Ginny's citation says—**“Congratulations on your outstanding service... We would like to publicly recognize your achievement...The Awards Committee thanks you for the outstanding contribution you make...”**

“Ms Cowart exceeds internal customer service by assisting with multiple programs...She creates reports that enable each program to track success beyond the normal criteria, all with a positive attitude... She worked on this project on her own initiative and ...”

Hey, people, I saw the report the letter mentions, that thing was over a foot thick! They should give her an award just for being able to lift the thing—much less compile and write it!

I’m proud of my kind, beautiful, intelligent, and gracious wife. She delights me.

And her testimony shines—Years ago one of her bosses buttonholed me at an office party and said, “Mr. Cowart, Virginia doesn’t have religious signs around her office. She hardly ever says anything and she doesn’t even wear a cross necklace—but nobody can walk into our office for five minutes without knowing she’s a Christian lady”.

The committee scheduled the awards banquet for later this month downtown.

Sunday, May 9, 2010 Glitter By Night; Sleaze By Day

Saint Paul, or John The Baptist, or one of those other Bible guys, said, “Godliness with contentment is great gain”. Well, I have little gain, and less godliness, but much contentment. Two out of three ain’t bad.

Yesterday, Mother’s Day, proved to be a day of great contentment for Ginny and me. We lingered for hours in our bathrobes sipping coffee outside in our garden talking of inconsequential things.

We discussed hummingbirds, taxes, the Gulf Oil Spill, sex, flowers, books, videos, tobacco growing, childhood memories, vacation plans, moving furniture, garage sales, the Lord, God Almighty, raccoons, chain saws, favorite foods, and—you get the idea. Just a free flowing, conversation of love and contentment.

After 42 years of marriage, we treasure such times and conversations more and more. We discussed many things we could be doing, but didn’t bother to do any of

them. We could have gone swimming, but the pool is over there and we're over here.

We ate a shrimp salad lunch outside on the deck overlooking Fishweir Creek at Harpoon Louie's where a guitarist played soft golden oldies as a background to our conversation—about retirement plans this time.

Then Ginny drove me around to three area strip clubs to snap photos.

I wanted some shots as illustrations for Patricia Grace's book, *The Way Out*; she's the pastor's wife who used to do exotic dances in such Gentlemen's Clubs". We've all seen the neon glitter of such places in the dark; I wanted snap shots to show their sleazy aspect in the light of day.

So, Ginny spent her Mother's Day driving her husband around to one strip bar after another. How did you spend yours?



Tuesday, May 11, 2010
Abused. Exploited. Delivered.

Yesterday, the preacher and his wife spent several hours talking with me about the book manuscript she wrote, a manuscript that tells how she once worked as an exotic dancer and what Christ has done in her life so far.

She's asked me to publish her book under my bluefish Books imprint.

My final decision hinged on their answers to two questions. One wrong answer would have killed my involvement in the project on the spot.

First, will the publication of this book damage your marriage?

They both assured me that during the 13 years they've been married, they've come to terms with their former lifestyles. And that their three children know about their situation and feel proud of their mama's triumph over adversity.

I directed my next question to the preacher: Will the publication of your wife's book damage your ministry, either with your present congregation or say 20 years in the future when you may be nominated for bishop or something?

He assured me that his church is fully aware of his wife's testimony and that her life, past and present, is an asset in his reaching people for Christ.

With those assurances, I decided to undertake the project. I estimate that, God willing, I can have proof pages in her hands in six to eight weeks; after that, if it goes well and there are no computer glitches, it will take another two to four weeks to finish her book and have it on the market.

So, the next three months of my life look to be tied up with this project. I imagine progress reports on this work will appear often in my diary.

For a guy whose spent years and years trying to write a book on the will of God, I stay confused about how God leads me.

In fact, I hesitate to say, "God lead me", I'm more inclined to say, "It looked like a good idea at the time".

In deciding to do the work on Patricia Grace's book (that's the pen name she chose), I weighed pros and cons, considered options, examined what of my own I'd have to give up to work on her book, and a bunch of other stuff.

Oddly enough, a strong factor in my reluctance to take on this project is the fact that she's a living person. That gives me pause. All the other autobiographies and diaries that I've published were written by people who died over a hundred years ago.

Those people have made their input, done their job of writing, and they give me no flack about how I do my job. They're easy to work with. Most agreeable. I get along with those folks fine. (Of course my friend Barbara is a living person too and I published four of her books and I'm slowly transcribing her prayer diaries a bit at a time—but she just handed me the raw materials and did not even want to see her books till I handed her the galleys to proofread).

Patricia Grace's autobiography, the working title is *The Way Out*, tells of her being abused as an 8-year-old child, being sexually exploited as a girl, choosing horrid bad things as a teenager, and being delivered by the Lord Jesus as a young adult.

She has important things to say and she says them well.

On my early readings of her manuscript, I'm impressed by the fact, that no matter what we have done, no matter what has been done to us, Jesus Christ came to save the lost, When we were yet without strength, Christ died for the ungodly.

So, as I've wallowed through my decision-making process about Patricia's request that I publish her book, I've weighed pros and cons, I've considered options, I've consulted expert friends, I've prayed, I've pondered, I read the last chapter of Ecclesiastes...And while I've done all this, a slow-growing conviction dimly dawned in my mind that it might be a good idea to undertake this project.

Some folks might say that's being lead by God. Others might say I entering a decision-making mode. Others might recognize that I am a project-oriented person. My Grandfather would have said, "Johnny's ciphering"--That's an old Florida Cracker expression meaning mulling an idea over. Ginny says I get obsessed with an idea.

But, I think one of my kids summed it all up best saying, "When Dad gets a bug up his ass..."

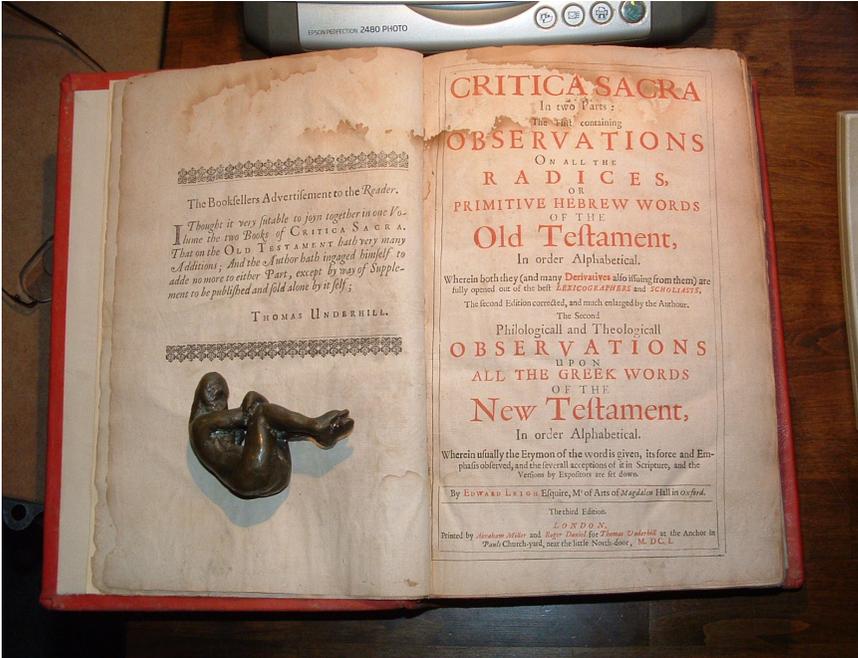
Wednesday, May 12, 2010 **The Original Greek**

Got up at my usual 3 a.m. Tuesday to write my diary, answer e-mails, transcribe three pages of *Barbara White's*

Prayer Diary, and read about the island of St. Croix in the Virgin Islands as background for Patricia Grace's *The Way Out*. (A book is the tip of an iceberg).

At dawn, when Ginny got up, I packed her lunch, feed our goldfish, fiddled with our broken pool pump, and then removed a dead baby possum from our back yard.

Not long afterwards, my friend Wes treated me to breakfast. He'd come over especially to show me a treasure he found:



Yes, last week Wes, who is proficient in these languages, bought this Hebrew/Greek Lexicon, printed in London in 1650.



To all such is are desirous of knowledge in the Original Text of the Old Testament.

Here are three Tongues (saith Hugo de sancto victore) most famous in the world, the Latine, Greek and Hebrew, because proper regions, Iudaea, Syria, & the Lande, first, because of the Nobility of the Romans, who as they subjected the people which they did conquer to their Lawe and custome, so did they perswade to have their Language, The second, because of the great Philologicall and wise men of the world left in the possession of the

Hebrew, because of the multitude of the Prophets, who in the Lawe and the interpretation of it by Moyses and the Prophets to the people of Israel the Hebrew Language (saith Venerus) were faithfully to be used, and chiefly upon the Creation: Latine in a common tongue, Greek, as a plain tongue, the Hebrew the most ancient and holy tongue, for Antiquity it is the tongue of Adam, for familiarity the tongue of Noah, in the tongue of the Prophet, and Patriarchs, in the tongue of the Angels that is men, in the tongue of the Prophets, and in the tongue of the Apostles, as it is thought, that the same is the

Hebrew, and that many proper Names in the Scriptures are derived from the Hebrew, And how significant are their Synonymes? As Adam, Eve, Cain, Abel, Seth, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Benjamin, Moses, Nadab, and Bina, which are in the Hebrew words of the new Testament which Drusius and Pafius have fully explained, one Hebrew word hath sometimes contrary, and usually other significations, which excepted the diversity and sundry variety of the

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We also talked about how people undergo “trial by mockings” in the Bible’s Faith Chapter, Hebrews Eleven.

The word *mockings* carries the meaning of a “false promise, false hope”. Such mockings can put us to a vicious trial: *Your check is in the mail... You’re safe with me; I had a vasectomy... Owned by an old lady who only drove to church...I’ll pay you back Friday...The job is yours...You may already be a winner...I’ll take care of it... Try it this once; one little sniff won’t hurt you...*

When we feel low down, the enemy of our souls loves to build our hopes up to high heaven with mocking promises—*This will heal you...Finish the course and our job placement service will find you a ... Here’s the answer to all your financial worries... Sure, you can afford the payments...Do this, and the promotion is yours...As soon as my divorce is final...*

Then, when our hope gets dashed by reality again and again, the evil one cackles like a fiend.

Well, what do you expect? he is a fiend. a fiend who specializes in putting you through the wringer by false promises.

And while your hopes are dashed, your dreams shattered, while you feel like a gullible fool, the evil one feels happy, or as happy as he can feel—and, to help you out of your dejection, he’s sure to make you a new promise even better than the last one.

And nothing delights the evil one more, nothing causes more human misery, than for us to lose confidence in God because we placed our hope on thinking God would do something that God never said He would do!

We latch onto some false promise claiming it is a promise of the Lord God Almighty and when our false hope gets squished in the mud, we despair and wail, “God failed me”.

Cursing is not the only way to take the name of the Lord in vain—nothing is more vain than to attribute something to God which He did not do. To say some will-o-wisp in our own mind is the promise of God.

Somewhere in the Bible, I forget where, one of the prophets compares leaning on a cracked, flimsy walking

stick to trusting in human promises—that flimsy stick will break and pierce the hand of the man who leans on it.

Enough of that horrid thought!

In a lighter vein, that “new” 1650s Lexicon sure makes Wes happy—it gives him one more tool to refute any theological position I take.

You see, I speak no foreign languages. So, no matter which Scripture I quote, or how accurately I interpret it, Wes always says, “Yes, John, but the Original Greek says...”

Wes is not the only one. Any preacher-type I know always tells me that, “Yes, John, but the Original Greek says...”

Who is this guy?

Why do religious people always cite him as the ultimate biblical authority?

Where does he live?

How come he knows so much about the Bible?

Just who the heck is the Original Greek? What does he look like?

Seeking an answer to these questions, I did a Bing image search for a photo of **The Original Greek** and I came up with this picture:



The Original Greek lives on an island in the Aegean Sea. There he fishes during the summer and drives a farm tractor all winter.

He enjoys a steady diet of octopus, olives and ouzu.

He must also be a quite a Bible scholar because preachers quote him all the time?

How this guy came to be the single most quoted Bible authority in the entire world, I can't guess!.

So now, anytime any preacher says to you, "But, the Original Greek says..."—I want you to recall The Original Greek's photo in your mind's eye... and have faith.

Friday, May 14, 2010 **Two Snags**

May have hit a snag with that book the preacher's wife wrote.

Couple of snags actually.

When she first told me about her book several months ago, the project interested me. And when she sent me an e-mail on May 3rd, I began groundwork preparing to help her with her book.

She sent me the raw plain text as an e-mail attachment ten days ago and I jumped right in with preliminary formatting that same day, before she and her husband even talked with me about details.

I formatted the text into my book template, re-sized font, removed over 1,600 blank spaces and Lord only knows how many manual line breaks. I set up headers and footers as well as forward materials.

Donkey work all.

Once the manuscript was manageable, I gave it the first reading while making notes. I moved the front acknowledgements to the back of the book with some others and began breaking paragraphs in a color-coded sequence...

For fun, and to make the book as readable as possible to the target audience, I began adding graphics and structured three sample book covers...

As I understand her goal, the preacher's wife, a former stripper, intends to sell her book when she speaks at church conferences and such—but, more important, she plans to visit titty bars and give free copies to the girls in their dressing rooms so they will have such a witness to the power of Christ to deliver. That's the reason for a simplified vocabulary and many graphics—so the girls will find this religious book attractive and read it.

Anyhow, last week, in the conference with the pastor and his wife, I explained how some of the process works. I showed them examples of books I've done for myself and they suggested an amount I'd get paid for completing her book within the next three months.

Apparently, they have a patron who told them he will provide financial backing for their project.

I forged ahead and got 130 pages into the second go-through of her manuscript adding graphics, Scripture text boxes, an interactive feature for the girls to comment on other Scriptures, etc.

You know, Whatsoever your hand findeth to do, do hardily as unto the Lord....And, Whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father by Him.

As I worked, I became more and more aware of derogatory things the manuscript said about her ex-husband. This gave me pause. I began looking up some on-line stuff about libel.

Last night the financial backer sent me an e-mail in which he seems to think I want to borrow money from him to publish the book and that I'm to pay back his investment out of book sales. He mentions writing up contracts. He questions accounting procedures and such.

I have enough debts of my own, thank you. I never dreamed of borrowing any money whatsoever from him. And I get the impression that he felt leery of my cheating him in some way.

See why most of my books deal with near-antiquity and history? I've never given libel laws a thought because they don't apply to documented historical events.

Most important: Even the remote possibility of getting caught in the cross-fire of bickering and lawsuits between

a divorced couple makes me shutter. I've suggested that the preacher and his wife have an attorney in their congregation read over her manuscript and warn them about possible pitfalls—if any.

If some legal problem arises, if they wish, I'll help the preacher and his wife publish her book under a different imprint through their own storefront instead of through my catalog. Lulu Press offers templates and wizards and tutorials and on-line classes to guide authors into print. So she can get it done; it will take longer but she can get it done.

I think the lady has some good things to say and—with a few sections subject to re-write—has a book well worth publishing... I'm still seeking the Lord's will about my own place in the process.

Looks like I may be the muzzled ox again.

Wouldn't be the first time.

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

Until I get word from the preacher and his wife, I intend to halt work on her book for today and mow our lawn. That's so much easier than fiddling with manuscripts.

Say, in the Bible didn't they have gleaners to cut the corners of your lawn?

Saturday, May 15, 2010
Pride Goeth Before Algae

The President and Congress of the United States have forbidden water-boarding captured enemy soldiers who have been trying to kill Americans.

The President and Congress of The United States don't seem to mind having me subjected to that same torture.

In case the Kid In The Attic's generation has forgotten, water boarding is the practice of strapping a terrorist down on his back and dripping water in his face till he goes nuts or tells plans for the next plot to kill more Americans.

In these enlightened times, interrogators are not allowed to use that method anymore; it's considered cruel and inhumane to do that to anybody except John Cowart.

You see, Ginny and I have this aboveground swimming pool. It's old. It was here when we moved into this house 15 years ago.

And last week the pump impeller broke.

And I removed the pump assembly.

Took the pump to the shop where the repairman charges \$40 every half hour or fraction thereof to fix it ...

(Considering that I'll be earning less than \$3 an hour for the work I'm doing on that book manuscript the preacher's wife wrote... Why did I bother to finish high school 60 years ago?).

Anyhow, the pump is now repaired.

The guy called for me to pick it up late yesterday afternoon

So this morning all I have to do is attach it again.

Brain surgeon type work... because over 20 years ago they stopped manufacturing parts for this particular model swimming pool And if I screw up and break the fixture while reinstalling the pump...

And here's the fun part:

To reattach the hose to the skimmer basket, I have to lie flat on my back on the ground in the mud and work on that attachment hanging over my head while water drips, drips, drips, drips, drips... straight down into my face.

And if I slip and break that fixture... if I zig instead of zag... if I don't tell the Men In Black the right answer... then 8,000 gallons of water gush into my face in one mighty burst... and once more America will be safe for democracy.

It is 3 a.m. when I'm writing this, and already I'm anticipating the main chore of my day; I could be transcribing *Barbara White's Prayer Diary*, or I could continue editing the preacher's wife's manuscript, or I could be despairing over that will of God manuscript.

Instead... drip, drip, drip, drip... I'm anticipating the chore awaiting me at dawn.

Two of my neighbors (the wimps) tore down their pools because they could not keep them clean, because debris from the trees clogged their filters, because it was too much work... Me, I have kept our pool in pristine condition all winter long.

Once the telephone repairman out front on the street climbed down from his pole to ask me how I managed to keep our pool so crystal (he'd seen into the backyard from the pole). My children admire our pool. The neighbors. Visitors. ..

I use the pool for my arthritis exercises; it really helps.

Also, the pool is my favorite prayer place. In the wee hours of the morning, I float on an air mattress looking up at the stars and contemplate the Lord God who holds all the universe in the palm of His wounded hand and yet cares about individual people with love, who regards my state and cares.

But my pool is not only a place of prayer, it's a place of pride.

While I feel so proud of how I keep our pool, how all winter I froze my ass to patch places in the liner, how other guys gave up their pools, how once over 900 people on the Internet clicked onto my website just because there was a photo of me with the caption "Poolboy In Black Socks". What did those 900 viewers expect to see???

Anyhow this week the temperature hovers around 90 degrees.

My pool had no pump.

Green slime invades.

Algae comes.

But first came pride.

And what, I ask you, What does the President and Congress of the United States do while I'm suffering from waterboarding this morning?

I imagine the lot of 'em cruise the internet looking for photos of pool boys in black socks!

Hey, guys, try the term "Black Socks" in my *Search This Site* box, upper right of this page.

Sunday, May 16, 2010
Craaaack!

Craaack! When a brain surgeon hears that sound, he strips off his gloves and says to the surgical team, "Let's leave off work here on his head and move down to his legs, he's not going to know the difference".

Craaaack! That's the sound I heard yesterday as I lay with my head in the mud with water drip, drip, dripping in my face as I worked to reinstall the pool pump.

Yes, a 15-year-old plastic fitting cracked. A fitting no longer manufactured. What to do? What to do?

Here's I'd begun work on the Grace book at 3 a.m., worked on that till dawn, assembled every tool I own, and settled down on my back in the mud to reattach hoses, filters and stuff above my head as I enjoyed being on the receiving end of waterboarding.

After three hours I almost had the job done... then CRAAAACK!

I said appropriate Christian words.

Then I crawled out from under the filter basket to smoke a pipe and ponder how to repair the damage I'd done. That's when Ginny snapped this photo of me radiating joy:



Ginny says this should be the cover photo for the next book in my *Dirty Old Man Goes Bad* series; she said the title for the 2010 edition should be *A Dirty Old Man Wallows In The Mud!*

Be that as it may, I solved the problem of the cracked fitting by piecing together a rig made of old vacuum cleaner hose, a bicycle inner tube, hose clamps, and a whatsit I made by combining bits of three long-ago-but-never-thrown-away thingies and screwing them together to make one whatsit.

It works!

Our pool flows again.

The Polaris Turtle cruises picking up leaf debris. Algaecide does it's job. I no longer crawl in the mud. Again America is safe for democracy.

On a less happy note, internally I've been struggling with resentment. Something happened a few days ago that opened old wounds, wounds I thought had healed.

They had not healed. Just scabbed over.

When someone triggers me, touches the right button, Craaaack! All my resentment and bitterness wells up and I wallow in the stinking mud.

Yes, they did me dirt.

Yes, I forgave them.

But the bastards won't stay forgiven.

They lurk in my mind ready to surge to the surface and take over.

Jesus said I should forgive the bastards seventy times seven. He just doesn't understand... or does He? Does God Himself know what it is to be wronged? To be undervalued? To be held in low regard? To feel unappreciated?

70X7== I don't know. I'm no good at math. I just know that as a Christian when I hear Craaaack, I lose it. The offenders occupy my mind—even when I'm trying to concentrate on repairing a pool pump—I can think of nothing else.

The slight I suffered this week hurt my feelings. My mind links this incident to ones that happened 30-40-50 years ago and draws parallels. This week's slight adds to a forgotten—supposedly forgiven—pile of hurts. The pile topples and spills bile all through my thoughts.

In one situation in the Grace book, the young lady tries to break free from the exploitive pimp. But she keeps returning to him again and again. That's the way I am with resentment. I know it poisons me. I want to be free. But again and again I return to the same old bitterness.

Why do I do that?

In one lovely passage of Scripture, St. Paul speaks of this cycle; he compare it to a dog that returns again to eat its own vomit.

Who shall deliver me from this body of death?

Lord, forgive me my trespasses a whole lot better than I forgive those who trespass against me. If You do not teach me to love—and we both know I can't do it on my own—then I'm going to spend the rest of my days wallowing in mud, being waterboarded by my own thoughts.

Monday, May 17, 2010
A Dangerous Place For Bunnies

The best days of my life are the hardest to write about—and Sunday proved just such a day. At dawn Ginny and I carried our coffees into the garden, sat by the fountain, and talked in love for five hours.

We enjoyed a continuation of a conversation started over 40 years ago as we reveal ourselves, discover fascinating things about each other, and relish the love growing between us.

I think it was Samuel Johnson who said, “The chief end of all human endeavor is to be happy at home”.

Bingo!

The flow of our conversation covered topics as varied as childhood memories, an enormous hawk that perched in a nearby tree, sex, office politics, moving furniture, air conditioner problems, vacation plans, the autobiography I'm working on by the pastor's wife who used to be a nightclub stripper, the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, Christian generosity, pool maintenance, dreams for our future, and regrets from our past.

We laughed watching a squirrel jump onto the roof of a neighbor's polished car and slide down the windshield and across the slick hood to land in surprise on the ground.

I told Ginny some truly tasteful obscene jokes and laughed as she tried to keep from laughing. And we watched a raccoon forage along the fence line, birds clustering around the feeders, and a lizard drinking from our fountain.

After a quick late breakfast, I rendered out pool sparkling spotless once again after the trauma of pump

repair; Ginny went in the house to pack gift boxes for some charity she supports.

Later we planed how to child-proof our house.

Later this week the pastor's wife is scheduled to come over for a marathon session of work on her manuscript. Her seven-year-old is having her tonsils out today and will be coming over with her mother.

Ginny and I figure it's been over three years since anyone under college-age has been inside our house. What do you need to do to make a safe place for a small child?

I keep boxes of matches for my pipes all over the house; they needed to be put out of reach. We have knives, scissors, sharp things all over; those need to be put up. All our pills and prescription medicines, raised up high. Lower cupboard doors—tie 'em shut.

Ginny picked up some peanuts from the store for the little girl to feed to backyard squirrels. As we loaded those charity boxes in the car, she pulled out a bunny-ears hat for the kid to wear. She plans to get some suitable videos for kids (I'm getting a 1919 Harold Lloyd comedy—the funniest movies ever made and in a format modern kids have never seen before—silent movies!).

What to feed 'em for lunch?

I plan to call the Chinese delivery place.

Then there's the matter of the swimming pool.

With just tonsils out, I'm not sure if the little girl will feel up to swimming—but just in case I made arrangements for a babysitter to mind her here all day while her mother and I concentrate on the work at hand.

I have huge amounts to do on the manuscript before the lady gets here...Need to rush to get it ready for this first conference. I'll need her answer to a lot of decisions before I move to the next step.

My mind stays focused on that work.

Last week at breakfast with my friend Wes, I outlined the project for him as part of our regular catch-up conversations.

Wes cautioned me that I do not know this lady, a former stripper; nor does she know me. He said that any time she's in the house, we need a chaperone present.

I said, "Wes, we're Christian adults. I don't think there will be any problem working together."

"Yes, John, I understand that," he said. "But the thing is that hanging around with a guy like you could ruin any stripper's reputation".

Wednesday, May 19, 2010
John Cowart, The Bernie Madoff Of
Christian Publishing

If I had integrity I wouldn't get so upset when someone accuses me of not having any.

And that's happened several times in the past two weeks; the latest being this afternoon.

It got through to me.

I reacted poorly.

Thus, I feel lower than Bernie Madoff this evening. A truly meek man would exercise the strength needed to not let pride so dictate to him. The strength of Christian humility is that it takes what's dished out and remains true to itself; while vanity must be defended staunchly, it cannot stand without props.

I need to learn to have the strength of a pillow—no matter how hard you hit, you can't punch a hole in a pillow. It absorbs the blow and keeps its shape, it is not hurt by the hitting—and it keeps on doing its job as though your hardest blow were nothing.

As a lamb before its shearer is dumb, so He openeth not His mouth.

Where are those shearers now?

This is difficult to write about. On one hand, I want to defend my integrity and explain what happened and justify my actions. On the other hand, the Apostle James speaks of bridling the tongue (Ginny and I read James after dinner tonight).

My upset has nothing to do with any other person, its my own internal vanity.

Me and Bernie, blood brothers in the sight of some.

So be it.

Phooey! This is not worth discussing. Deal with it John Cowart. If they can't see your halo, look in the mirror—you can't see it either.

On to two highpoints of my day:

- One, a seven-year-old spent the day at our house. Ginny had saved some peanuts for the little girl to feed the squirrels. The little girl scattered peanuts all around our yard and felt disappointed when no bird or squirrel picked them up.... But she and her mother had hardly left the house when a raccoon appeared in our backyard running here and there gathering the peanuts along the path.
- The second highpoint came in how this seven-year-old helped me solve an editing problem.

The girl's mother has written an intensely personal autobiography and asked me to help get it published. In this age of identity theft, I wanted to insure that no innocent person's real name or any identifying characteristic appears in print.

So I asked the help of the little girl.

On my computer screen I pulled up the 1,500 names on the passenger list of the *Titanic*.

As I slowly rolled the mouse wheel, I asked the child to point to any name that struck her fancy. I highlighted in red any name she pointed to, then wheeled down the pages again till she had picked about 20 names, first names only—those are the fictitious names I plan to insert in the autobiography with an editorial note explaining where these substitute names came from. That way there is no chance of any person's actual name or identity being revealed.

Most of my writing has involved the diaries, journals and autobiographies of people who died over a hundred years ago. I don't have to worry about identity theft or hassle with those folks.

I get along with the long dead much better than I do with the living.

In other news of the day, I bailed my daughter Eve out of jail.

A message on my answering machine told me that our daughter-in-law, Helen, had surgery yesterday. Apparently she and Donald just forgot to tell us before hand. She's doing fine.

Oh, by the way, Eve, was jailed for being an important celebrity in our community and the bail money raised to release her went to her favorite charity.

At least that's what she claims.

I think I believe her. After all, she is a person of integrity.

Friday, May 21, 2010 **On Editing A Fartless Book**

When Jennifer answered the phone the other day, I was intently working at my desk in an editorial conference; Jennifer said, "Dad, it's Eve. She's in jail and needs bail money".

Without looking up from my work, I said, "How much does she need"?

I remembered my response as I began work earlier this morning. Had the phone message come saying, "(Any member of the family other than Eve) is in jail and needs bail money", I'm sure my response would have been, "What did they do"?

When you're young you make your reputation; when you're old, your reputation makes you.

Good for Eve.

Hope she raised a bundle for charity in that Celebrity Arrest Event.

I've been getting a lot of work done.

Not necessarily my idea.

When the Lord blessed me with prostate cancer, He made sure a side-effect is the ability to work longer hours, at least at first. So I'm usually at work by 4 a.m. But Wednesday I got upset over something and could not get to sleep at all, So I was able to just keep on working all

night, about a 32 hour stint at my desk—very satisfying work...

Mostly.

The project I'm involved with at the moment is editing an autobiography written by a local pastor's wife. As a youth, she worked as an exotic dancer in strip clubs, today she works as a leader in various Christian women's endeavors.

In her book of testimony, she hopes to reach two varied readerships: staid church members on one hand, and girls who still dance naked in titty bars on the other hand.

So her book balances between speaking realistically to girls in the bars, and speaking with a decorum which will not offend the fastidious.

Wow. Did she come to the right editor. Fortunately I speak both languages fluently... although some conflict arises between me and the prim, proper churchlady author...

For instance, would real Christians know what a fart is?

When I inserted a Bible verse in the author's text, I chose a verse which speaks of the devil as being the prince of the power of the air. I pointed out that he's the prince of hot air and we all know where that comes from—he is the prince of farts and why should a fart have power over your life?

The Christian author of the book told me I went overboard with that observation. She wanted me to cut out the use of the word *fart*.

So, I cut a fart and moved on to other work.

Another point is that in formulating an interactive feature in the book, I quote Bible stories about women in Scripture and have readers pencil in their response to those stories.

Problem is I quote story after story after story from the King James Bible—the author tells me that she wants the stories and Bible verses mentioned in her book to be quoted from a modern speech translation.

So, I've been going back trying to transpose from one translation into another.

Drives me nuts!

I mean, all my Bible study tools are geared to the old Bible; but the new insidious version, although it says the same thing in core-word stuff, it's worded differently so the quotes I want to link from Bible to author's text don't fit.

For instance, in one place the author speaks to girls who feel trapped and exploited as exotic dancers; the author wants to tell the dancing girls about *hope* for a new life.

So, I place a text box with a Bible verse, a King James Bible verse, on that page of the book. The verse talks about hope not making us ashamed.

It fit.

But, when I tried to transpose that same verse from the new translation, the verse talks about *confidence*.

Not *hope*— *confidence*.

I figure that people who feel trapped need to know about *hope*.

I also figure that for a woman to dance around a pole naked in front of drunk strangers, she must have plenty of *confidence* already.

So, the author and I are working together to produce a fine book, a fartless book, but a fine book nonetheless.

Saturday, May 22, 2010

Flack

Although her book has moved only a quarter of the way toward being published, the pastor's wife, who used to be an exotic dancer, already catches flack.

And, from an unexpected source.

I find it awkward to keep referring to her as the pastor's wife as though she has no identity in her own right but draws on her husband's job to justify her existence; and I'm uncomfortable referring to her as an ex-stripper or former exotic dancer—that stage of her life ended more than a decade ago.

At my urging she writes under a pen name—but she’s waffled back and forth about which pseudonym to use, although we narrowed it down to be one among three choices.

And I’m darn sure not going to refer to her by her real name—therein lies madness.

So, for the moment, she keeps her secret identity (like Lois Lane...er, no, she didn’t have one; it was Clark Kent) —anyhow, for now I’ll keep calling her “the stripper”.

While in the past she was a stripper, while she now is a pastor’s wife, and while she answers to the name, *Mommy*, the important thing about her is that she aspires to walk with Christ as a child of God—and that’s what she wants to be known for. That’s her real identity.

She’s catching flack.

This weekend her church holds its annual jumble, rummage, yard sale.

Various ladies and various organizations set up booths around the churchyard selling this and that of donated items and craftwork to raise money for the church building fund and for missions.

The church opens this bazaar to the public.

Well, some louts showed up wanting to see the exotic dancer, somehow they’d learned the pastor’s wife used to strip in nightclubs. They besieged the booth she had set up; and they hounded the lady manning that booth—oddly enough, the pastor’s wife/ex-stripper was not on duty at the time.

Another woman was running that sales booth.

Ignoring that detail, the louts created a disturbance as they kept demanding to see the stripper.

If that were not enough trouble, some church ladies who manned other booths got upset because all the men clustered around the stripper’s booth, neglecting them and their booths.

Just people being human, I guess.

In telling me about the incident, the pastor’s wife/ex-stripper, said in disgust, “Men are pigs”.

As a man I resent her stereotyping all men in a lump with louts in such a sexist remark. I feel it incumbent on me to defend my gender.

So all I have to say in answer to such slander is, "Oink. Oink".

Monday, May 24, 2010 Masked Intruders

Odd how the biggest problem in your life can suddenly become only the second biggest.

Yesterday Ginny and I sat under the awning outside by the fountain in our garden sipping our morning coffee and discussing flowers, birds, plans and problems.

A canvas awning stretches over us, tied between two trees on one side and the front of an outside office. There I store hundreds and hundreds of valuable books as well as office supplies and visual aids I use to illustrate lectures and Bible classes.

As we talked, I worried over the biggest problem in my life—how to handle a knotty problem related to the preacher's wife's manuscript...

Then Ginny heard a scratching sound above our heads.

Something walked on the canvas awning.

She ran over beside the fig tree to see what was up there—a raccoon...or maybe it was two of them.

Her movement frightened the animal. It scurried across the awning and INTO A HOLE—a hole it has gnawed in the roof of the outside office!!!!

A hole gnawed overnight.

A hole as big around as a dinner plate.

In the roof.

Directly above the hundreds and hundreds of books stored in that building.

The first time rain falls—did I mention that hurricane seasons starts in two weeks?—rain will turn all those books into soggy pulp.

I have these book stacked floor-to-ceiling in there while Ginny and I have been revamping furnishings inside our home.

Now, in a matter of seconds, the biggest problem in my life shifted from worries about the preacher's wife's manuscript to concern for hundreds and hundreds of my books in danger of being soggyfied.

Last night during our regular prayer time after dinner, Ginny read a slightly amended portion of Psalm Seven:

O Lord my God, in Thee do I put my trust: save me from all the raccoons that persecute me, and deliver me from the masked intruders.

Amen!

It's only 5:26 Monday morning and already raccoons and books and manuscripts have been bumped to third place in my list of biggest problems; I'll write more tomorrow — or later. John

**Tuesday, May 25, 2010
A Family Of Musk Oxen**

A family mini-crisis yesterday generated an exchange of over 20 e-mails as the family rallied around a wounded, defeated member.

I see the circle forming.

It is a thing of beauty.



Back on June 14, 2009, I wrote about how when one of its members is injured, a herd of musk oxen form a circle of protection—rumps together, shoulders together, all horns facing out.

All a harassing enemy sees as it approaches is a wall of horns.



Note this however, what does the afflicted member of the herd in the center of the circle get to see?

Anywhere he looks, that one only sees asses turned toward him.

That's family.

Wednesday, May 26, 2010 Officially Decrepit

Here's the high point of my week:

Yesterday I visited the Department of Motor Vehicles and obtained official certification that I'm old, decrepit, useless, and able park in a Disabled Parking Place without having to pay a \$250 fine.

I'm officially labeled as a wobbly old fart.

Now, I'm officially registered in the State of Florida as a sour,



to

grumpy codger and I'm legally entitled to whack people who bug me with my cane.

If you don't believe me, step a little closer.

Yesterday also I visited with my daughter-in-law, who stays out of reach of my cane, and we talked for hours about her childhood growing up on Martha's Vineyard and racing yachts both there and here in Jacksonville's Mug Race on the St. Johns.

I never knew those things about her before.

We also consulted about her work on the book cover for the preacher's wife/ex-stripper's book. Helen is a graphic artist who designs book covers as well as operating her new art gallery at Jacksonville Landing.

The author sounds like she may back out of the deal altogether and she may possibly want to change her pen name—for the fourth time. I strongly suspect that the problem is that these people want me to work for free and that's what all the waffling is about, but they won't come right out and say that, so they keep raising all these other issues to make my work appear valueless.

Lord Jesus, I'm really tired of screwing around with these people. But I know You are more concerned with my being a loving person than a good businessman. Please give me a kind and loving spirit—and help them either paint or get off the ladder!

In other news, I called and called and called the city's animal control unit about the raccoon invading my outside office. After going through an interminable phone tree designed to discourage all but the most determined caller from ever talking to a city employee, I finally reached a live human being.

"Good morning, Sir," she said, "How may I serve you? What is the nature of your complaint?"

"A raccoon has gnawed a hole in the roof of my outside office," I said, "Would you please send an animal control officer out to trap it and haul it off".

"Sir, Our department does not deal with wild animals. We only pick up dogs and cats. For a raccoon, you have to hire a state licensed private trapper to come on your property to capture the animal. And you must pay him at your own expense".

"I'd like to change my request," I said.

"How do you wish to change it, Sir"?

I said, "There's this really ugly cat that's gnawed a hole in the..."

She cracked up laughing.

Thursday, May 27, 2010
Square One News

Yesterday my deal with the preacher's wife fell through.

In other news, yesterday also Ginny ran across news of triumph for a long-ago friend, Mr. Von Barlow. His is the opening act for the upcoming Jacksonville Jazz Festival. He is an accomplished drummer with many performances to his credit.

Back when we were poor and living in HUD housing, for ten years Mr. Barlow was our landlord. He became a family friend and took great interest in raising the Cowart children.

A year or so after we moved out of his rental property, he called me one day about a problem his then-current tenant worried about. She claimed to see the ghost of a fat white man smoking a pipe roaming the rooms of that large house.

Wasn't me.

But Mr. Barlow asked if we had ever been troubled by such a specter.

Never saw a thing in all the years we lived there. Maybe the frantic activities of the Cowart family scared the ghost into hiding. We had so many happy parties for our teens there. And when Donald and Eve went off to college, every holiday they'd bring in crowds of foreign students who'd been stranded at the university. Our living room looked like a battlefield with so many kids sleeping on the floor or draped over every stick of furniture.

I'm so pleased to learn of Mr. Barlow's prestigious role in next weekend's festival. Quite a feather in his cap.

Please visit his Jazz Journey concert at the festival, or at least drop by his website at

<http://www.vonbarlow.com/index.php> and say hi from the Cowart family.

Friday, May 28, 2010
Military History???

When he was young, my middle son, Johnny, served stints in two different branches of America's Armed Forces.

Yesterday in his e-mail about Memorial Day weekend observances, Johnny asked me about my own military service:

In 1957, I joined the army almost immediately after graduating from high school. A row with my parents shoved me in that direction—they fussed about my romance with a school teacher who was 17 years older than I was.

She and I married while I was in basic training on Tank Hill, Fort Jackson, South Carolina. (*After 12 years and two fine sons, we divorced*).

I thoroughly enjoyed combat training; my years as a Boy Scout made roughing it on bivouac a snap for me. I looked forward to going into combat, but the Army had other ideas.

They sent me to a school to learn the intricacies of peripheral electrical components for a Nike Guided Missile site. But, just after I completed learning what color wire attaches to that doodad without causing an explosion, the Nike Missile became obsolete and made redundant for newer more effective missiles to take its place.

My training in that area became useless.

I visited a Nike silo which the military had sold to a private school for delinquent boys—there's a lot to be said for holding classes for punks in rooms carved out of rock a hundred feet below ground—gives them a controlled environment.

Though I was trained in an obsolete and abandoned system, the Army decided I had other useful talents. They put me to picking up cigarette butts off the base parking lot.

Since I was not the only Nike man rendered obsolete by the change in technology, my two best buddies—one a

graduate from MIT, the other from Georgia Tech—were also assigned to picking up cigarette butts off the parking lots. Our Lieutenant loathed filter tips! We dared not let one escape our vigilance.

Two other odd things about that time in my military career: by a fluke I ended up riding to work each morning with a general. At the Post, we'd separate and he'd go do whatever generals do and I'd report to my butt detail. We'd meet back for our evening ride home together.

Also, since one office handled super-secret materials and since everyone working in there was a high rank person, and since they needed a low-rank flunky to collect and put away super-secret documents each evening, and even though I had no security clearance whatsoever—guess who got that job.

No fear of a security breach. All those papers I locked in the safe (yes, they gave me the combination) were so technical that I couldn't understand a one. Even the Eyes-Only ones. Just more stuff to lock away in my mind.

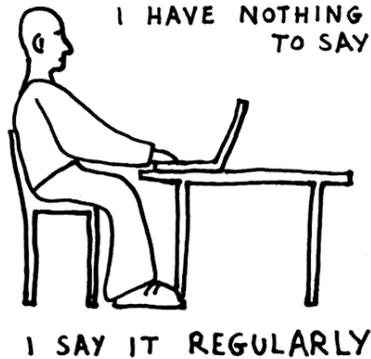
Such a dream posting could not last. The Army demoted me from parking lot clean up to a cartography unit where I was expected to draw tiny contour lines on sheets of acetate coated with gray emulsion. What fun!

And the maps I drew were so secret that they contained no place names, just indications of mountains, lakes and rivers. People with higher clearance would put in place names at a later sage of mapmaking. So I never knew even which continent I was drawing a map of. For all I know, I was plotting a map for a U.S. Army invasion of Hogwarts.

That's about it for my military experience—and to think they're holding a parade for veterans like me tomorrow!

But whenever I apply for a job and they ask about military experience, I can faithfully say, "If you need anybody to pick up cigarettes off your company's parking lot—I'm your man. The Army trained me to do that".

Have a great Memorial Day weekend; I'm out of here for a couple of days.



www.weblogcartoons.com

June, 2010

Tuesday, June 1, 2010

Two Important Conversations

Saturday, Ginny and I engaged in one of the most important conversations of my life.

We'd gone to a sandwich shop near St. Vincent's Hospital and, because it was an off hour, we were about the only customers in the place. We talked head to head in love for close to three hours.

A situation arose recently that frustrates me greatly. Aware of my anguish, Ginny offered an observation.

"John, you have some standards that..."

I laughed, "That's what you can engrave on my tombstone: John Cowart, He Had Some Standards".

She laughed too and went on, "John, you have some standards that drive you beyond measure. When you promise anybody anything, it becomes an obsession with you to do what you say no matter how circumstances change. You just can't let go".

She said that it's a good thing I'm not a doctor over in the hospital because even if my first patient died, I'd keep trying to revive the bastard for years to the neglect of all other patients—just because I'd promised to care for that first patient.

Case in point, that book on the will of God. Back in 1986 I promised Rodney that I'd write that book. Now, more than 20 years and 800 pages of notes later, I'm still trying to accomplish that distasteful task, even though I

find it impossible and I have a great aversion to even opening the damn file, yet I let my promises hang like a dead and rotting albatross around my neck. I can not write that book. I will never be able to write that book. And lacking common sense, I neglect a host of other possible projects while I still try to kick life into that dead bird.

Ginny also helped me view some other activities wherein I demonstrated my allegiance to the demon of promise to the detriment of myself and everyone around me.

I come by the root of this obsession honestly; my father was an honest man. I can remember no promise he ever made to anyone that he did not keep scrupulously. Daddy had been an Eagle Scout and lived by that tradition.

Somehow, when I a Boy Scout, I latched onto the idea that a real man is honest under all circumstances and that a man keeps his promises no matter what.

Ginny pointed out that the Scout oath contains the words “On my honor, I will *do my best*...”. She said, “John, after you’ve done your best, you still won’t give up. You are driven not by virtue but by pig-headed pride. You keep your standards in spite of God, or common sense, or how much hurt it causes the people around you”.

She mentioned the parade floats, sleeping on the cement floor, going 76 hours without sleep while driving, street preaching non-stop for ten hours at the Shrimp Festival because none of the guys who were supposed to showed up, etc. All rash promises I made, like that guy in the Bible who threw his daughter in the fire because he’d made a stupid vow.

That’s insanity. Vain insanity—John Cowart, *He Has Some Standards*

I reflected on that phrase in Psalm 15 which speaks of the upright man who “swearth to his own hurt, and changeth not”. How that Psalm condemns me because I can remember five promises in the history of my whole life that I have not kept. I hate to read the Bible because of verses like that.

To me it's a matter of pride to do whatever I say I'll do.

I'd think less of myself if I didn't.

Ginny pointed out how I use the Scripture in morose self flagellation—which is a way of taking the name of the Lord in vain. Psalm 15 says “to his own hurt” not to the extend of damaging his family and friends.

Scruples are not Scripture.

We laughed on recalling the time my friend Wes said, as we were discussing some moral issue, “Cowart, I'm sure glad that God's standards are so much lower than yours”.

When I do what I say I will, and other people don't, then I can look down on them, the poor human beings, from my superior position of self righteousness and I gloat.

What would normally be a commendable virtue, I twist into a sin.

Ginny made two suggestions related to impossible promises I've made. One, I followed immediately when we got home; the other, for other reasons, I did not.

I copied all those will of God files onto a disc, stored the disc in my archives, and deleted all those files from my computer. That dead bird is plucked and the picked-over carcass in the garbage can where it should have been placed years ago.

The other project, the preacher's wife's book, even though that situation changed so radically, I chose to finish simply because I was within only a couple of hours from finishing it when I got pissed and balked. I knocked off the remaining twenty pages over the weekend and sent for printer's proof pages yesterday. When those pages come back from the printer I will have done everything I said I would do on the first day I talked with the lady and her husband about it.

There is nothing I can do about the other three promises I made and have not kept, the principals involved are long dead. But, even if they weren't, I made rash promises, lived to regret it, and balked at continuing.

So sue me.

Screw 'em.

I cried a good bit during my conversation with Ginny, but they were cleansing tears, which ranged from remorse to peace. I am so thankful for my beautiful wife's wisdom. I'm sure we've talked about such things before, but this time I actually heard her.

All the time Jesus went around saying, "Let them with ears to hear..."

This time, I finally heard.

In vanity, I have carried a sack of rock-solid unreasonable promises for years, it's such a relief to set the damn sack down. I think a new life may be opening for me. I deeply regret all the years I pissed away trying to imitate John Wayne. I have wasted so much time in futility.

From now on, don't believe me if I promise anything—
I ain't gonna do it,

That, I promise.

Now, on to the second funny, happy conversation:

So, Ginny and I are sitting in our chairs when I want to show Ginny something on my computer screen. I get up, go to my desk, click around the net and find the file—all the while I'm talking to her about this important thing I want her to see...

I look around.

Ginny is gone???

I've been talking to an empty room for 15 minutes!

I search and find her in the bedroom folding laundry.

"You need to replace your hearing aid batteries," I said, "No wonder, you couldn't hear me! I've been talking to you for 15 minutes and you weren't even in the room. I have something important to tell you about".

"I'm sorry," she said. "What is it so important you want to tell me"?

Now, understand that I left my desk to hunt for her no more than 30 seconds earlier...

I stood there stunned.

"Honey, for the life of me, I can't remember"!

We fell into each other's arms laughing. Ginny said, "I've lost my hearing and you've lost your mind. That's what makes us such a great team".

Wednesday, June 2, 2010
Stand Aside, Boys. I'm Going In!

Back on May 24th, I wrote about how a raccoon gnawed through the roof of my outside office where I have many valuable books stored.

I draped a sheet of plastic over the books beneath that hole in the roof to protect those books (nowhere else to move them) but the raccoon (raccoons?) keep going in and out of that hole in the roof.

Yes, the evil raccoon(s) have taken possession of my old outside office and must be cast out. ... But, you say, raccoons are not evil, they are just one of God's little creatures, like Bambi or Thumper.

Evil! I say. EVIL! Any varmint that exposes my stored books to the ravages of rain must be Hell-spawn. Every Christian knows that anything that annoys us (mosquitoes, tax collectors, flat tires, teenagers, phone solicitors, ex-husbands or wives) is an evil sent by the devil and must be rebuked.

On May 26th, I wrote about my futile attempt to obtain aid from Caesar in his guise of city government; Caesar said I must hire a state licensed animal trapper at my own expense. No can do.

I prayed for the Lord to rebuke the evil raccoons. And I heard a voice from on high saying, "I don't do coons". I would have fasted and prayed, but that was our night out at Moon River Pizza, So that solution was out. After all, the children of the King travel first-class and the Lord wants His children to always prosper and have the very best, doesn't He? So I'm sure God would never want me to pass up a good pizza.

Jennifer, my eldest daughter, sent me a helpful e-mail link which says:

IS COONS TEARING UP YOUR GARDEN OR CORN

I CAN HELP I HAVE COON HOUNDS AND CAN GET RID OF YOUR COON PROBLEM. I HAVE DOGS THAT WILL ONLY CHASE AND TREE COONS. SO IF YOU HAVE BIG CORN

FIELDS OR GARDENS AND THE COONS ARE MESSING THEM UP I WILL BE GLAD TO HELP THANKS...

Ginny said that's just what we need, a pack of baying hounds ranging through her flower beds!

No, this is a spiritual problem and it calls for a spiritual solution.

A spiritual problem? Yes, many of the volumes stored out there are theology books, missionary biographies, lexicons, Bible reference tools, etc. from the days I had my Amstrad computer in that outside office. I donated many of my books to the seminary at my son's church, but I still have a couple of hundred stored in the building where the evil coons have taken possession.

So, in cases of possession, who you gonna call?

John Cowart, Rabid Fundamentalist Christian Exorcist Extraordinaire!

Yes, among my many talents I am an accomplished Fundamentalist Christian Cracker Exorcist. So today I plan to put on my exorcism vestments and cast out the evil coons:

Here's a photo Ginny snapped of me outside my office door in the full ecclesiastical regalia approved for casting out evil coons:



I wear my prayer kneepads—the cross on my office door tells in religious symbolism how that I long ago found a neat cross in the trash once.

In my right hand, I carry my five-pronged barbed fish spear, suitable whenever a rabid fundamentalist goes up against a rabid coon. I wear my Civil Defense orange flack jacket and carry a two-edged hunting knife in my belt. In my gloved left hand I carry a spray bottle of holy wa...

Wait a second here, I don't happen to have any holy water handy...so I filled my spray bottle with household ammonia. Think that'll do?

That bulge in my breast pocket is a rabbit's foot... No it is not! A rabbit's foot is a vestigial pagan good luck charm to ward off evil, no Christian wants a pagan good luck charm. Instead, ; I carry a pocket New Testament so

that if enemy sniper coons aim carefully at my heart, the Bible will deflect the bullet harmlessly.

(Note: godless atheists claim that a pack of playing cards is just as effective at stopping bullets. I'll tell you what—as a test of faith, I'll stand in front of a firing squad with a Bible in my breast pocked and the godless atheist can stand in front of them with a pack of playing cards in his shirt pocket, and we'll see.... Hey! That's not fair. That one marksman is aiming at my head not my heart... Instead of this, I'll pray for your rotten, sinning soul to be gloriously converted. That's a better idea. A pack of cards indeed!)

Anyhow, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, I place the helmet of salvation on my head... Don't have a helmet of salvation handy, but I do have an old fireman's helmet in the garden tool shed, one that has a protective face shield and a spark-arrester cape for the back of my neck.

What demon coon dare withstand the whole armor of God?

Er... what's this?... That fireman's hat has been hanging in the tool shed for years... I wiped dust off the face plate, but I didn't check inside the headband...

Roach eggs! Dozens and dozens of roach eggs cascade down inside my collar and the back of my neck when I clapped that helmet on my head.

AGAAHHH!

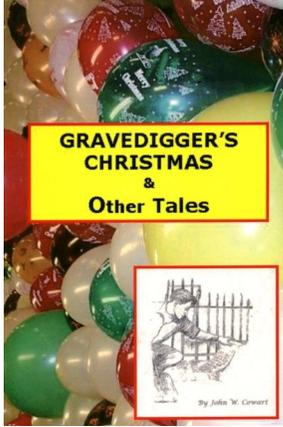
Tearing off all my clothes, I run naked for the garden water hose...

And, as the Bible says, "The last state of the man was worse than the first".

Friday, June 4, 2010 Christmas Gifts

On my sidebar, beneath the picture of the old man getting hit by lightning while reading a book on a ladder, is a link which will take you to the pdf free e-book I'm offering for June.

Each month I try to post a new e-book for free. These are all books I've written or edited myself.



June's free e-book is *Gravedigger's Christmas* .

Posting a Christmas book in June is a shameless ploy on my part to increase sales. I figure if you read the e-copy now, and like it, then come October or November when you're Christmas shopping, you'll think, *Hey, John's book will make a great gift for Aunt Sue, Brother Laurence,*

and Brad Pitt—I'll buy three copies!

Or not.

The book's title comes from a true incident that happened to my family back in the 1970s when I worked digging graves at a local cemetery. Other stories and essays in the book relate to other holidays and to the normal daily grind we all face.

Here's a note for the kid in the attic:

The biggest, most far-reaching news in Florida today is that sludge from greedy oil companies' off-shore drilling practices in the Gulf of Mexico now approaches Florida beaches. British Petroleum punched a hole underwater and let millions of gallons of raw oil gush into Gulf waters teeming with living creatures. BP today, who knows which other greedy company tomorrow.

So far they have not been able to plug the hole in the bottom of the sea. Oceanographers predict the oil slick will encircle the entire state of Florida and be carried north by the Atlantic's Gulf Stream.

Hope your generation has better sense than mine.

Anyhow this morning's *Boston Globe* newspaper at <http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/> carries some photos of some results of the oil spillage. These photos were taken off the coast of Louisiana—

Merry Christmas from the oil industry and the politicians who let them do it...And A Partridge In A Pear Tree.



Saturday, June 5, 2010
The Things That Keep Us Here

Months ago, Ginny and I trained to help in the Swine Flu (H1N1) vaccination program. We earned certification as non-medical personnel. We were issued photo ID badges... but as things worked out, we did not serve a single day in the field.

Apparently the flu epidemic did not develop into a monster catastrophe as many health officials had projected.

At least, not yet.

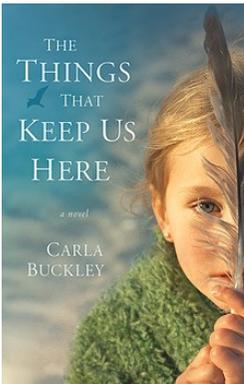
Although the potential for worldwide flu lurks behind every sneeze, every door handle, every push bar on a grocery cart, every flight that lands.

Historically here in my hometown of Jacksonville periodically, epidemics decimated the city—Yellow Jack, Spanish Lady, Typhoid, Tuberculosis, Typhus, Scarlet Fever, Breakbone Fever—each with its own death toll... And each sweep of each disease was soon forgotten by the children of survivors.

Spanish Lady killed more soldiers than all the bullets of World War I, and more American soldiers died right here in Jacksonville of Typhoid than were killed on all other fronts during the Spanish American War.

With such thoughts in mind, with great interest last week I read Carla Buckley's first novel *The Things That Keep Us Here* (Delacorte Press. © 2010)

Ms Buckley's story portrays a suburban family's life, trials and triumphs during a worldwide outbreak of Avian Flu (H5N1) that effectively quarantined them inside their own home for close to two years.



The father discovers a massive die-off of ducks. The mother fights for a cart in the grocery store. The kids bicker and demand to contact their friends.

Confined together in their house. No electricity. No tv. No cell phone. Dwindling food and water supplies. A constant litany of "I'm bored. Why can't we..."? An already shaky marriage comes under maximum strain.

Then one snowy night a neighbor, the wife's best friend, pounds on the front door, crying and coughing and pleading for the family to take in her baby.

Your best friend (sick of flu) ... Your own children (healthy so far)... a baby left on your snowy doorstep...

Time for a decision.

Ms Buckley's skill as a writer tests a host of conceivable



situations and problems and ingenious work-arounds as she portrays love, tensions and values in a time of flu.

Fine reading.

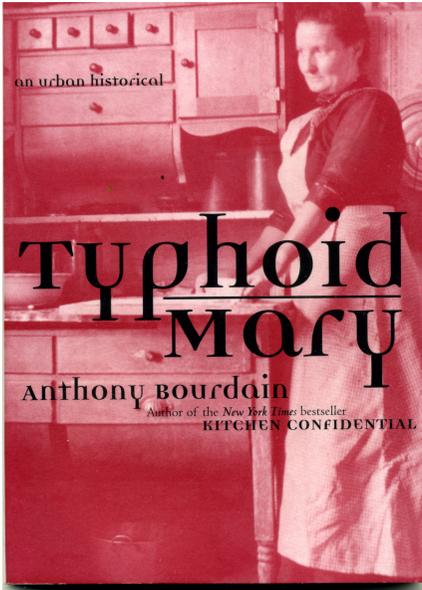
A thoroughly enjoyable adventure.

But when I closed the book, I went to check our pantry.

Ms Buckley's website can be found at <http://carlabuckley.com/>

Monday, June 7, 2010 Typhoid Mary

When he found her grave, executive chef Anthony Bourdain, of Brasserie Les Halles in New York, scraped soil from around her tombstone and buried a knife in the shallow hole.



He buried the first fine-quality chef's knife he ever owned as a tribute to Mary Mallon. "As one cook to another", he said.

Mary Mallon is the subject of a biography Bourdain wrote, *Typhoid Mary: An Urban Historical*. (Bloomsbury (St. Martin's Press) ©2001. 148 pages).

Over the weekend Ginny and I have read for hours on end. Oddly enough, much of our reading involved plagues or epidemics—not that we planned it that way, it was just how our reading worked out.

I read Carla Buckley's *The Things That Keep Us Here*, a novel set in the near future about avian flu. Ginny read Connie Willis' *Doomsday Book*, a science fiction novel set in the 14th Century about the Black Death.

Then, on a trip to Georgia, Ginny bought me a copy of *Typhoid Mary*—which I read at one sitting. Mary Mallon,

discovered to be a carrier of Typhoid but without ever showing symptoms of the disease herself, cooked for affluent New York families at the turn of the 20th Century.

When a health department associate tracked her down, he arrested her and, without hearing, trial or court order, confined her to an isolation unit on an island in the East River for five years.

Although at least 25 other carriers of the disease had been identified, because Mary worked as a cook, she became notorious among them. Health department officials seemed to mount a vendetta against her and many newspaper cartoonists portrayed her as a vile monster deliberately spreading infection:



On the other hand, A Hearst newspaper took up the issue of her unjust confinement and a judge released her for a time. She returned to cooking under an assumed name.



"TYPHOID MARY"

MOST HARMLESS



The Extraordinary Predicament of Mary Mallon, a Prisoner on New York's Quarantine Hospital Isle

It is probable that Mary Mallon is a prisoner for life, and she has succeeded in getting her name listed as a prisoner in any work, for she has not been imprisoned for any crime.

Mary Mallon for some time has been a prisoner in the famous quarantine hospital along with the other prisoners who are kept there to be isolated and because they are suffering from typhoid.

There is probably in the entire world no prisoner who has brought more trouble to health officials than the case of Mary Mallon. She has been a prisoner in the famous quarantine hospital along with the other prisoners who are kept there to be isolated and because they are suffering from typhoid.

Each such outbreak seems to have been the result of her being in the kitchen, for she has been a prisoner in the famous quarantine hospital along with the other prisoners who are kept there to be isolated and because they are suffering from typhoid.

By Dr. Wm. H. Parkh, New York Board of Health.

Mary Mallon is an interesting case. She is a prisoner in the famous quarantine hospital along with the other prisoners who are kept there to be isolated and because they are suffering from typhoid.

The Extraordinary and Disease

The Official Report of the

... of the Board of Health of the City of New York, in its report on the case of Mary Mallon, a prisoner in the famous quarantine hospital along with the other prisoners who are kept there to be isolated and because they are suffering from typhoid.

... of the Board of Health of the City of New York, in its report on the case of Mary Mallon, a prisoner in the famous quarantine hospital along with the other prisoners who are kept there to be isolated and because they are suffering from typhoid.

They caught her again and confined her to the island again till her death, from a stroke, 28 years later.

Again, no criminal charges, trial or legal rights involved.

She was confined simply because of the possibility she might be a menace to public health and infect other people—a far cry from today when AIDS-infected people do their thing unhindered and unidentified. Different world. When was the last time you heard of anyone



infected with Typhoid? Just asking.

Be that as it may, Anthony Bourdain wrote one fine and fascinating book, one I think only he could have written. Bringing his own background as a chef to the task, he writes about

CORBIS

the frustrations and problems a cook, especially a female cook, an Irish immigrant, struggled with at the turn of the century.

I found his biography a can't-put-down read. The man writes so well. I envy his skill as a researcher and as a writer. He conveys information and ideas with concise insightful, well-balanced sentences that flow.

He writes much better than I do—and his real profession is not writer, but chef—that's criminal!

So, he's an executive chef and a talented writer. So what!

I'll bet I can fry up a better corndog than he can any day!

Tuesday, June 8, 2010 Eighty Dead Gladiators

Teeth and claw marks on the bones show the man had been mauled by some large animal before he died... but the carnivore may not have killed him. If he were only wounded by the animal attack, someone on the Event Staff came along with a hammer and bashed a hole in his skull as he lay on the arena floor.



Yesterday archaeologists in the British city of York released news of discovering a Roman cemetery containing the bodies of 80 dead gladiators.

Yes, York had an arena where gladiators entertained cheering crowds by fighting lions and tigers and bears—and each other.

A loser was not sent home with his tail between his legs; he was either knocked on the head with a hammer or decapitated and buried with his head between his knees.... Or is that a pot, a funeral offering?



Roman legions occupied Britain till the year 410. Much evidence exists showing that Christianity had reached the island during the Roman occupation. I wonder if any of the men buried in York were Christians who had faced lions in the arena?

Archaeologists have discovered another such gladiator cemetery in Turkey, near the site where ancient Ephesus stood...

Reading about the discovery in Britain made me think about Saint Paul's veiled reference to one of his own experiences—a casual phrase mentioned in passing in his first letter to the Corinthians:

Paul said, "If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantage is it to me, if the dead rise not? Let us eat and drink; for to morrow we die.

"If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained"?

That's all he has to say about it.

If I had ever fought wild beasts (say a raccoon; see my June 2nd posting and the photo in which I resemble a

bold gladiator)—If I had ever fought wild beasts anywhere and survived, I'd give a blow by blow account.

Now, I'm certainly not saying that St. Paul was a gladiator, but it's pretty well documented that Pagans sometimes started the pre-game warm up in an arena by throwing Christians to the lions. Had this happened to Paul in Ephesus? The Scripture has nothing else to say about it.

In his letter, Paul had been talking, not about dying, but about our resurrection from the grave.

O yes, none of the dead stay dead.

Whether beheaded, hammered in the head, animal attack, heart attack, or lingering cancer...Yes, we die, but Jesus said that's not the end of the matter; Jesus said:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.

For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself;

And hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man.

Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice,

And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.

When I was younger I aspired to become an archaeologist. The happiest days of my youth were spent doing field work as part of an anthropological society's excavation on Amelia Island. I have held men's skulls in my hands as I reconstructed damage done by tree roots growing through eye sockets. and I marveled at how God knit our bones together in the first place...

And to think He will call forth dry dead bones, broken, scattered, powdered—called again by the Voice of Jesus into living people.

Wow!

Well, I've gotten far off my initial subject—which was my thrill and joy over the discovery of the 80 gladiator graves in York.

Google News provided over 300 links to the reports, but here are a few links telling about the discovery:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/7806829/Gladiator-burial-ground-discovered-in-York.html>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/7806829/Gladiator-burial-ground-discovered-in-York.html>

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1284835/Yorks-Spartacus-Decapitated-mauled-lions-cold-sent-warmer-undies--meet-Britains-Gladiator.html>

Wednesday, June 9, 2010

The Raccoon Of Resentment

It's 3:54 in the morning now and I just finished correcting the 181 pages of proofs on that book the preacher's wife wrote. God's blessing of prostate cancer wakes me early these days and since I'm up and awake anyhow, I just go ahead and start my day's work earlier and earlier each morning. Get more done that way.

I checked the live-trap and still no raccoon.

Yes, I borrowed a live-trap from Donald and Helen (I have no idea why they happened to have one) and I've been baiting it for the past couple of days hoping to catch the beast that gnawed a hole in the roof of my outside office.

The creature thrives on peanut butter crackers and granola bars, but has yet to spring the trap. The varmint better get caught soon or my next step till be either poison or the shotgun....

Maybe both.

Way I'm feeling this morning, I'd like to trap the coon, then instead of releasing him in the forest, I'd like to feed him poison through the wire, then shotgun him as he writhes in agony... That'll teach him to chew on my books!

Pipe dreams.

What I'll do is, since I borrowed the empty trap from Donald and Helen, I'll just return it to them full of live raccoon.

That's the Christian thing to do—always give back more than you get.

But, the raccoon is the least of my problems; my biggest one is resentment.

Yes, I still struggle with resentment and bitterness. A recent situation arose wherein somebody did me dirt and instead of forgiving them, I harbor bitterness—and bitterness is harder to get rid of than any coon!

It looks as though after 71 years on this earth, the last 50 or so of them as a Christian, I would have learned by now how to forgive people I feel have wronged me.

But, I haven't.

In my mind, I can still replay, in glowing color, offences that other kids did to me when I was a Boy Scout!

And the effect is cumulative.

My first boss. My first wife. My present wife. My children. My church. My neighbors. My dog. My neighbor's dog. My readers. My editor. My God... Is there anybody who hasn't wronged John Cowart?

There is no short list.

You know, when you're young, you can always flee youthful sins. That which is born of the flesh is flesh—but that's all it is. Flesh. But, at my age, I seethe in the sins an old man is able to commit.

I cherish the damn things.

This endangers my soul's health.

For years and years I have observed that as a Christian ages, and I've seen this lots of times, there is a tendency to either mellow or sour. And that in a man's advanced age, the Lord Christ sends some aggravation or test which kicks all the props out. Even a saintly man has chinks in his armor and the Lord scratches him through one of those chinks to gall the real man inside. And, the weak spot revealed, the man stands—though thoroughly shaken—or he rages in righteous indignation...

Ugly, ugly, ugly righteous indignation.

Sure, he is right.

But he's nasty about it.

I feel I'm on the brink of such a testing period in my life right now.

I can mellow and sweeten, or curdle and sour. And I'm not at all sure which it will be. Frustrating.

So, for relief of my stress, for my peace of mind, and for my spiritual growth in Christ, when I trap that coon, I'm going to stomp the crap out of him!

Isn't that what Jesus would do?

Thursday, June 10, 2010
Poor Planning

Ran across this letter while waiting for someone to show up who didn't:

Dear Sir,

I am writing in response to your request for additional information in Block 3 of the accident report form. I put "poor planning" as the cause of my accident. You asked for a fuller explanation and I trust the following details will be sufficient.

I am a bricklayer by trade. On the day of the accident, I was working alone on the roof of a new six-story building. When I completed my work, I found that I had some bricks left over which, when weighed later were found to be slightly in excess of 500 lbs.

Rather than carry the bricks down by hand, I decided to lower them in a barrel by using a pulley, which was attached to the side of the building on the sixth floor.

Securing the rope at ground I went up to the roof, swung the barrel out and loaded the bricks into it. Then I went down and untied the rope, holding it tightly to ensure a slow descent of the bricks.

You will note in Block 11 of the accident report form that I weigh 135 lbs.

Due to my surprise at being jerked off the ground so suddenly, I lost my presence of mind and forgot to let go of the rope. Needless to say, I proceeded at a rapid rate up the side of the building.

In the vicinity of the third floor, I met the barrel, which was now proceeding downward at an equally impressive speed. This explained the fractured skull, minor abrasions and the broken collar bone, as listed in section 3 of the accident report form.

Slowed only slightly, I continued my rapid ascent, not stopping until the fingers of my right hand were two knuckles deep into the pulley.

Fortunately by this time I had regained my presence of mind and was able to hold tightly to the rope, in spite of beginning to experience pain.

At approximately the same time, however, the barrel of bricks hit the ground and the bottom fell out of the barrel.

Now devoid of the weight of the bricks, that barrel weighed approximately 50 lbs. I refer you again to my weight. As you can imagine, I began a rapid descent, down the side of the building. In the vicinity of the third floor, I met the barrel coming up. This accounts for the two fractured ankles, broken tooth and several lacerations of my legs and lower body.

Here my luck began to change slightly. The encounter with the barrel seemed to slow me enough to lessen my injuries when I fell into the pile of bricks and fortunately only three vertebrae were cracked.

I am sorry to report, however, as I lay there on the pile of bricks, in pain, unable to move, I again lost my composure and presence of mind and let go of the rope and I lay there watching the empty barrel begin its journey back down onto me. This explains the two broken legs.

I hope this answers your inquiry.

Kevin R, Bricklayer.

NEWS ALERT! NEWS ALERT! VICIOUS COON CAPTURED!

It's safe to come out of your homes now.

Men, put away your shotguns. Ladies, unlace your chastity belts. Fathers, unlock her bedroom and let your daughter out...

John Cowart, modest superhero, has captured the mean, vicious, book-biting, roof-gnawing raccoon. Once again America is safe for democracy.

“The LORD is King for ever and ever, and the heathen are perished out of the land”! (Psalm 10:18)—that’s a verse from the Bible reading Ginny and I enjoyed in our devotions last night after supper.



As a Super Hero, I need to buy tights and a cape. I need to think up a secret identity, and a spiffy Superhero name... Coonman does not have quite the same ring to it as Batman or Spiderman, but I'll think of something classy.

The photo, taken by Ginny under duress (she was scared to get close to the cage) shows me earlier this morning feeding the captive coon peanuts as it glared, snarled, growled, and tried to bite me through the bars.

However, I am a magnanimous Superhero. I called a friend with a pickup truck and we carried the ungrateful, book-eating raccoon deep into a state forest and released it into the wildwood where there are none of my books for it to chew.

I'm tickled to death about this triumph of good (me) over evil (the coon). I have never trapped a coon before. This ranks as one of the major accomplishments of my life. Daniel Boone, the wimp, has nothing on me.

I am a real Macho Man! I can do anything. I'm a hero.

Say, does anybody out there know if Osama Bin Laden likes peanut butter crackers?

Friday, June 11, 2010
God Never Wastes A Hurt

First-stoners get ready.

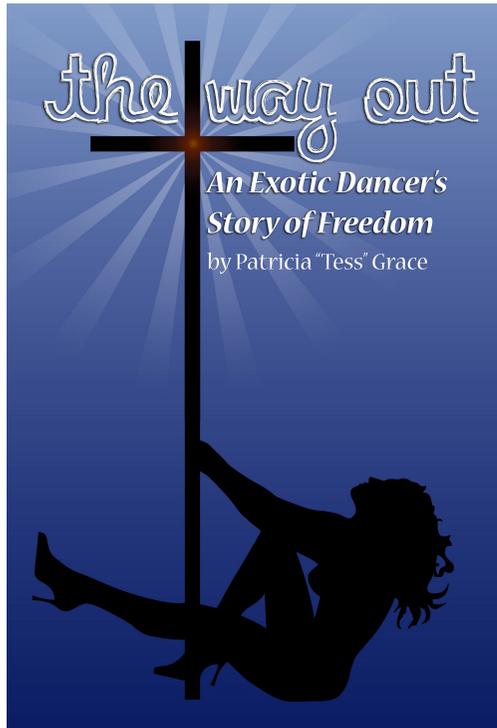
Target in sight.

The pastor's wife used to dance naked in front of strangers at "Gentlemen's Clubs".



As a stripper, she danced under the stage name "Tess"; as an author, she writes under the pen name Patricia Grace.

Thursday night I helped her to publish her autobiography, *The Way Out: An Exotic Dancer's Story Of Freedom*.



The book's cover design is by **Helen** of **Elemental Designs** <http://www.elemental.name/>

Technical problems, which I could not solve, hindered me from publishing the book in my Bluefish Books catalog, but I edited and formatted Patricia's manuscript for her and she published her book herself.

It can be found in both print and E-book formats at: <http://www.lulu.com/product/paperback/the-way-out-an-exotic-dancers-story-of-freedom/11269360> .

If anyone ever told me that someday I edit a true romance story, I'd have laughed. Perhaps God had other ideas. Because *The Way Out* is truly a love story. It is a powerful tribute to Patricia's husband, Mark, pastor of a local Anglican Church. He is her Knight In Shining Armor. They've been married for 13 years now. I've only met him once but he must be one hell of a guy.

I will not reveal his real name, or her real name, or the names of anyone else appearing in Patricia's book; as editor, I ask a seven-year-old child to point to random names among the 1,500+ names on the passenger list of

the *Titanic*, and those are the names I assigned people in Patricia's book.

Why?

Well, there are kooks who read my blog (present company excepted, of course).

I do not want to generate any hassle for the pastor or his wife—you would not *believe* the e-mail messages I received once years ago when I posted a photo of myself with the caption *Pool Boy In Black Socks!*

Anyhow, back to Patricia's book. This is a love story about how the Lord Jesus Christ touched Patricia and led her from a history of rape, abuse, neglect, fear, exploitation, and sin into freedom.

On that first level this book is grim.

But Patricia says, "God never wastes a hurt".

Her book is also a love story of the romance developing between a seminary student and a stripper. On that level, this book is innocent, almost naive.

I got tickled as she goes at length into the angst of a young girl waiting for *him* to call. He didn't call for two weeks, so she called his mother, who was a friend of her friend. And He wasn't home. She got his work number. She called him and he said...

The pure, bitter/sweet, seventh-grade note-passing agony of young love.

In its harsher sections, Patricia reveals what drove her to strip naked in front of strange men in bars. She examines her own motives, her impressions of the other dancers, and her impressions of the men who paid big bucks to see the girls naked.

One thing that impressed me about her story is that she began stripping after she first became a Christian.

Shock. Shock. Horror. Horror—gentlemen, pick up your rocks...

Then, I got to thinking about myself... When have my own biggest, most horrendous sins been committed? Before I came to Christ... or after?... Hummm, lets move on from there and talk about the book more.

Yes, Patricia is that honest about her greed, her lusts, her sins, her rebellion, her lack of common sense, her promiscuous affairs, her confusion... And her Savior.

Mostly her Savior.

In one especially poignant section of her book, Patricia tells how scared she was to tell the young seminary student she had fallen in love with, that she had previously been a stripper. Should she be honest with him? Or hide her past and live a lie? How would he react to that revelation?

But, if you think it must have been scary for her to tell Mark about her past... just imagine how Patricia must have felt when Mark's mother called her in for *The Talk!*

Beyond that, imagine how Patricia felt when Jane, Mark's mother, in Christian love and compassion opened her arms and hugged her and welcomed her into the family. Loved.. Approved. Accepted in the Beloved.

The main thing I observe in helping Patricia get her book published is that no matter what you have done, no matter what has been done to you, the Lord Jesus Christ cares about you.

He's the one who said, "Whoever will may come".

Saturday, June 12, 2010
Animal Attacks Increase In Florida

Apparently the recent raccoon invasion of my yard and office represents only a small facet of vicious animal attacks going on all over Florida.

Witness the following newspaper clippings:

Thursday's Shark Attack On Florida's Atlantic Coast

The *Florida Times-Union* said, "An 18-year-old Georgia woman from Gwinnett County is recovering from a shark bite she received while body-boarding off Jacksonville Beach.

Hannah Foster, who graduated recently from Brookwood High School, was in waist-deep water Thursday when a shark grabbed her left foot and leg.

Her boyfriend, Rick Hughes, pulled her to shore and summoned help.

Ms Foster received 29 stitches at Baptist Beaches Medical Center in Jacksonville and was discharged Thursday afternoon.

Jacksonville's TV-4 News carried this photo of a shark recently caught in the same area:



Sea Creatures Come Ashore On Florida's Gulf Coast:

The June 11th *Boston Globe's* Big Picture carried some photos Friday.

Apparently on Florida's Gulf Coast hundreds of thousands of sea creatures are invading the land. Turtles, crabs, shrimp—even oysters—crawl out of the sea onto the shore. You can hardly take a step without...

Oh, excuse me. The creatures did not crawl ashore. They were washed ashore dead. Somebody spilled some oil.

Here are two of the *Globe* photos:



And, here's a sign revealing who is responsible:



👤 FRIENDS OF IRONY

Dead Buffalo Attack In South Florida

Moving on, here is another Animal Attack article clipped last week from the *Miami Herald* to keep you abreast of the sort of thing going down in South Florida:

Deputies responding to a 911 call in the Florida Keys made an unusual find: A man trapped in a recliner chair after the stuffed head of a water buffalo* fell on him.

The Monroe County Sheriff's Office says dispatchers received a call early Friday from a man who could only yell his address and tell operators that he was crushed.

When deputies arrived at the home, they discovered the man trapped in his recliner chair. He had apparently fallen asleep and woken up when the head of a water buffalo, hanging on a wall, fell on his lap.

Authorities say the head was too heavy for the man to lift. He was able to reach his cell phone and call for help.



* I noticed that the photo accompanying the *Herald* article appears to be the head of a Cape Buffalo, not a water buffalo—but when you're asleep in your recliner and one falls on top of you, I doubt if you or I would notice the difference either.

One buffalo looks the pretty much the same as another when it's in your lap.

Vicious Beast Commandeers Van, Holds Up Checks!

Back to Jacksonville for this one—did you get your check in the mail last week?

No? There is a reason for that.

For four days last week at Ginny's office virtually all personnel evacuated the building in response to a crisis in the parking lot.

A suspicious noise coming from a white van drew crowds of office workers away from their desks—people from administration, from finance, from procurement, from dispersals, from accounting—as well as security guards and maintenance men—all gathered in the parking lot and circled the van.

The van did not move from the parking lot for four days. No pick ups. No deliveries. No checks dispersed.

Yet, Homeland Security was not called.

The matter was handled internally as scores of people offered first one suggestion then another to stop the hideous noise from the van. (They could have just started the van's engine, revved it up, and let it run—that's my suggestion).

But no. All these workers, stood around the parked van wringing their hands instead of writing your check—that's why you did not get a check in the mail.

Eventually an intrepid brave young man from downstairs dismantled the van's engine cowling and dragged the screeching culprit out of its den where it lurked in the radiator fan housing.

Here's why no checks got written by Ginny's office last week (Note, the oil on the young man's hands did not come from the BP Oil Spill):



Tuesday, June 15, 2010
Nothing Much Going On

My life hit the doldrums recently. Nothing much going on except that I'm mulling over several decisions that need to be made—or not.

No sooner had Ginny left for work Monday than my friend Wes called asking me to go to breakfast. Later this week he and some buddies plan to travel downstate to a seminar on Christian Apologetics.

I told him that when he returns I expect him to know how to apologize to me in a proper fashion; but he says it

is not a seminar on how to be polite (which would be wasted on that crew anyhow) but on the defense of biblical faith. In other words, Wes and company plan to gather more ammunition to refute me with when we talk theology.

I already have my own apologetic for what I believe; I believe because I'm a dumb Cracker bumpkin and it works for me. Deal with it.

Saw a tee-shirt saying, "I have found The Truth... and it makes no sense at all!".

An honest sentiment.

I can live with that.

I need to add one more Florida Animal Attack to my list in the previous posting; Wes says his home at the beach is being invaded by an armadillo digging up his year in search of grubs.



I wonder if this whole animal thing reflects what Saint Paul was talking about in Romans 8 when he said, "For we know that the whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body".

Makes sense to me.

I'm doing ok, yet I find a lot to groan about. Recently I have proved once again that my work is worthless. In order to move up a rung on the financial ladder, I'd need to become a migrant farm worker.

Which thought brings me to remember a visitor who came by just after Wes left, a person worried and fretting about immigration laws, a person recently cheated out of a large sum of money by a sleazy church pastor who preys on migrants promising to help with their immigration papers only to bilk them out of cash, exploit their labor, and give them nothing in return. The guy makes an industry out of this scam—but he's an equal opportunity cheat in that he's disappointed the hopes of migrants from Brazil, Viet Nam, Haiti, India, China, and a host of other nations.

This pastor is obeying a Scriptural injunction: "I was a stranger and ye took me in"—and this bastard is really taking these desperate people in big time!

I felt helpless over my visitor's situation because I have no pull in either the social services or governmental circles. O well, the Lord knoweth His own.

As soon as my foreign visitor left, my youngest daughter called and we talked for close to two hours. She says she's coming out of a bad patch.

All this talking with people pretty much shot my day.

I browsed internet porno sites for a while and browsed Calvin & Hobbes cartoons for the rest of the afternoon, all the while mulling over whether to use this format or that for my next book. This foundational stuff is so important because it determines the structure of the whole book project and I want to get it right to start off to save aggravation later.

Several people have suggested that I just give up and die, but like a stupid salmon I keep swimming against the stream, leaping at the rapids, and banging my head on rocks, getting more and more weary while waiting to feel the bear's claws sink into my spine.

This is the day the Lord hath made—What the hell happened to it?

Wednesday, June 16, 2010
Fun With The Pluperfect Subjunctive

Yesterday my friend Barbara treated me to breakfast.

As writers are wont to do, we discussed money, payments, plot lines and the pluperfect subjunctive mood.

Wow! Do I have fun with my friends!

Well, it would have been fun if either one of us could have remembered what a pluperfect subjunctive (Tense? Mood?) actually is.

Later, I looked the term up and I find that the subjunctive mood is a verb/mood typically used in dependent clauses to express a wish, emotion, possibility, opinion, necessity, or action that has not yet occurred. Or, in the past tense, it shows what might have happened, but didn't.

In the *Flinders University Languages Group Online Review*, Dr. Trevor G. Fennell, explains it more fully:

The introduction of the superfluous morpheme [v] into past unfulfilled if-clauses in modern English raises serious questions of analysis. How is one to parse a clause like: "If I had've known that...?"

It is proposed that the intrusive morpheme can be viewed as a marker of subjunctivity, whereby "real" and "unreal" pluperfects can be explicitly distinguished.

Here we shall examine structures such as:

1. If we had known that, we would have (would've) told you. - (i.e., past unfulfilled conditions) - in their non-standard version:

2. If we had / had've known that, we would / would've / would have told you.

This construction (perhaps by virtue of its non-standard nature) has not been widely discussed from a synchronic point of view. There is a brief diachronic reference in Quirk et al. (1985, 14.23, note [c], 1011-1012), where it is proposed that the 'would v' of the main clause is copied to the conditional clause, yielding "If I would v...". This is then reduced to "If I'd v...", and the resulting "I'd v" is misinterpreted as a contraction of "I had v".

Isn't that great to know?

Thank you Dr. Fennell.

I've been wondering about the pluperfect subjunctive for the past two weeks, but it took the conversation with Barbara to nudge me into looking it up.

One of the King Solomon's Proverbs says something about sharpening a knife blade by rubbing it against another piece of steel (like you do with the carving knife over the Christmas turkey) and the King likens that to one mind sharpening another through conversation and fellowship.

So, Barbara and I solved the mystery of the pluperfect subjunctive... unfortunately, neither one of us could think of any way to generate any money from our writing.

Thursday, June 17, 2010
Five, Six; Pick Up...

I spent Wednesday picking up sticks. Limbs and branches blown down in a recent windstorm. Most measured as mere sticks, a nuisance that needed to be picked up to keep them from nicking the lawnmower blade when I cut grass. Others were thumb-thick branches...

Say, did you know that once it was against the law to beat your wife with a stick thicker than your thumb? I don't think that law is on the books anymore....

And some of the limbs I removed from out yard weighted too much for me to pick up; I had to run an extension cord out, hook up my reciprocating saw and cut them into five-foot lengths so the yard trash truck will collect them.

I filled, to the weight limit, five garbage cans for the yard-trash men to get Friday.

All the while I was doing these prosaic mundane tasks, I also prayed to God, or plotted the outline of the next book I'm writing, or thought about internet porno sites and scenes.

Inconsistent?

Yes. But if I were to write a consistent CHRISTIAN posting here each morning, I'd be writing fiction. To be honest, I have to write about what is, not what ought to be. And since most of my life consists of the boring, the mundane, the obscene, and the routine—with only rare moments of godly insight—that's the stuff I record in my on-line diary.

So, I prayed, picked up sticks and thought about the dress Bambi wasn't wearing.

I don't think she owns one.

So, my sticks picked up, I go to dip in the pool, and guess what? More sticks. A bunch had fallen into the pool and clogged the automatic pool cleaner. So I picked up more sticks.

Then I went inside to shave and get ready to greet Ginny when she comes home from work... and I hear distant thunder. More thunder. Closer. Flashes of lightening. One bright bolt appears to strike between my office window and the cedar tree at the end of our driveway. Thunder from that one shook the house.

Crashes of thunder. Bangs on the roof of our house as a massive storm system prunes the surrounding tree canopy.

Blinding rains slashes the windows. Thumps as more limbs fall. Twisting wind rips off more branches all around out home. Hail falls. Gully-washer rains floods the street. I can no longer see the houses of our nearest neighbors.

I hear a sound.

An eerie sound. An almost musical sound. Like a saxophone? An Oboe? One of those long horns blown by shepherds in the Alps? The last trumpet? An Aeolian harp? I've never heard anything like this before in my life.

I check to see what causes this spooky sound.

As near as I can tell it's the downspout from the rain gutter over our front door. It seems as though the flow of water is so great that it created a whirlpool in the downspout and this whirlpool sucks air down the twelve-foot length of the spout creating a musical tone. Yet as the water splashes and leaves are caught up in the torrent, that column of air gets constricted or released causing the musical note to warble, to rise or ebb, staying the same but changing in intensity..

The sound haunts. Beautiful. Mysterious. Eerie. Scary.

I put on my shoes, make sure my pipe, matches and tobacco are in my pockets in case I have to take shelter in the hall or to evacuate. I listen for the roof to be torn off our house. Why hasn't the storm-warning radio sounded

an alert? I have never seen a worst storm short of hurricane weather.

The rain slackens. I can see across the street. Water gushes down the road into a gurgling storm drain. Our yard is flooded... and covered with sticks.

Branches and limbs litter the ground... My yard looks worse than it did this morning before I picked up the first twig. I have the whole job to do all over again, just as though I'd never done it in the first place.

I think this is what they call life.

You do it. You do it. You do it over again.

Is it futile to keep trying? Why wash dishes? The next time you eat they'll just get dirty again and you have to do the same task as before. Why shave? Why do laundry? Why feed the hungry? Why pray? Why care for dying patients? Why pay bills?

In the eternal scheme of things, what does it matter that I pick up a single stick from the ground?

In 1666, the Christian mystic Brother Lawrence, whose book *The Practice Of The Presence Of God* greatly influences my thinking, said, "We ought not to get tired of doing little things for the love of God, because He looks at the love rather than the work".

"That he had found his resolution to make the love of God the end of all his actions the only satisfactory one. He was happy when he could pick up a straw from the ground for the love of God, seeking Him alone, nothing else, not even his gifts"

So in the vast universe what does it matter whether or not I pick up one more stick? Will I make a difference? Will I change the world?

Maybe not, but there will be one less stick in the world for someone to trip over.

Saturday, June 19, 2010
Sorting Things For Future Need

I save things in case I need them later.

Problem is I don't know what it is that I'll need later; therefore, I save just about everything. It accumulates until our house overflows with stuff.

And—if I get caught up in some clutter reduction scheme and throw something away, just because I haven't used it in a year, then, sure as anything, weeks later I will find a use for the very thing I just threw away.

My someday-I'm-gonna-need-this mentality carries over into the things I buy: *I don't need it now, but someday I'll find a use for it*, I think. This mind-set really kicks in at garage sales where I'm inclined to buy stuff just because it's such a bargain even though I have no need for it at the moment—but I might someday.

In the checkout line, Ginny, who also loves to shop garage sales, looks over the things I plan to purchase and says, "One man's trash is another man's trash".

Apparently Jesus did not shop many garage sales for stuff He needed.

He said, "Seek not ye what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, neither be ye of doubtful mind.

"For all these things do the nations of the world seek after: and your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things.

"But rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you".

From this, I gather that my urge to accumulate things, *just in case*, arises from my doubtful mind. I question, *Will God really provide what I need when I need it, or do I have to provide for my own future—even though I do not know what that future is?*

"Your Father knoweth ye have need of...things".

Really?

What about books?

In preparation for my next writing project, I need two books that, months ago, I packed away and saved. To get those books, Friday I pulled out of the closet and unpacked a dozen or so heavy boxes...

Yes, here they are! Pleasant Daniel Gold's 1929 *History of Duval County Including Early History Of East Florida*, and T. Frederick Davis' *History Of Jacksonville, Florida, And Vicinity, 1513-1924*.

See there. If I had not saved those books, I'd be without them now. It would cost a fortune to replace them because they've been out of print for so many years.

That leaves the books in those other 15 boxes.

Am I going to need those someday too?

I mean, who can tell when I'll find an urgent need for information only found in Wilber Mattoon's 1925 *Common Forest Trees Of Florida*, or in Max Bloomfiend's 1884 *Condensed Guide of the St. John's, Ocklawaha, Halifax , and Indian Rivers*, or Baynard Kendrick's 1948 biography of John Houston McIntosh?

You're not going to readily find such books at Books A Million.

So, I unpacked all the boxes and squeezed them into six bookshelves. Now, they are all where I can lay hands on them in a hurry when I need them.

But, as I unpacked and re-shelved these books, I also culled some useless volumes out... *I'll never need that*, I thought.

Or, will I?

We never know what we will truly need. And we can not stockpile it all.

King Solomon said, "Boast not thyself of to morrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth".

And the Apostle James said, "Listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money'.

"Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow.

"What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

"Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that'. As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil".

So, with all that in mind, Friday I sorted and saved and culled boxes of books

I prayed for wisdom.

I used my best judgment at the moment.

And I went ahead with the job and got it done.
And most of all—I had fun!
Trash indeed!
I'm in my element here.

Tuesday, June 22, 2010
Phone Sex

Over the weekend Ginny and I bought a new telephone, a cordless system with three handsets.

We asked questions about the new system's features and the girl at the phone store said, "You people haven't bought a new phone any time recently, have you"?

Well, it's been about ten or 15 years. How could she tell?

Jacksonville's first telephone line stretched for a single city block. That line ran from the office of A.N. Beck at Main and Bay streets to the Inland Navigation Company at Bay and Laura streets.

That first phone line here was installed in 1878 - only two years after Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone.

Jacksonville businessman John G. Christopher of the firm of Wightman & Christopher quickly saw the advantages of the new invention. He contracted with B.D. DeForrest, assistant superintendent of the Southern Bell Telephone & Telegraph Co., and in 1880 Jacksonville's first exchange was formed with 34 subscribers.

In 1880, the Southern Bell Telephone & Telegraph Company leased telephone instruments to customers for \$51 a year -- payable in advance.



During the early days of phone service in Jacksonville, some people viewed the instrument with reservations. For instance, in 1883, small pox broke out in the city and the question arose: Could infection travel through the phone lines?

A quarantine hospital was set up and, a June 3, 1883, newspaper reported, "The hospital has been connected with the

telephone exchange and yesterday a *Times-Union* man mustered up courage enough to engage in a conversation with Dr. Babcock, of course at the safe distance of one and one-half miles and that after the Doctor had promised not to breath very hard while talking in the instrument”.

In May, 1885, Southern Bell announced a price increase of \$9 a year. This was during a time when people earned less. Lower prices reflected lower incomes; back then, quality blue jeans sold for 60¢ a pair and men's dress shirts cost only 47¢. The phone company's rate increase represented a considerable dip into people's wallets.

Two items in the national news distracted people's attention from the telephone rate increase for a time:

* Chief Geronimo and his band of Apache Indians daily eluded capture by the U.S. Army's 4th and 10 Calvary units.

* Popular French novelist Victor-Marie Hugo, author of *Les Miserables*, died. His funeral generated news coverage in 1885 like Princess Diana's did more recently.

But the telephone company's rate increase galled people.

A local businessman complained that everybody in Jacksonville was being "contemptuously treated by a scornful small agent of an autocratic monopoly".

At first, citizens of Jacksonville responded to the price hike with grumbling and complaints and many, many special meetings. The Board of Trade wrote a letter protesting the rate hike to Mr. Courson, Southern Bell's general manager in New York.

His answer?

"The company has been in business long enough to know how to make its own charges," he said.

"The telephone company is willing to part regretfully with any subscriber who does not care to pay the company's rates," he said.

Public relations was not Mr. Courson's strong point.

The phone company wrote an open letter to the citizens of Jacksonville saying, "The Southern Bell

Telephone and Telegraph Company has exclusive patent right of the Bell patent to the Southern States from Virginia to Mississippi inclusive...

“The rate has been universally raised from \$51 to \$60 in all the cities in the company's territory. **There is not the slightest prospect that the company would lower its rates if the whole city of Jacksonville withdraws its patronage...** The company is better prepared to lose the whole of (Jacksonville) than to lose the \$9 per annum per box in those other cities.”

Jacksonville citizens still refused to pay what they called "superfluous and absurd" telephone bills.

The Board of Trade contacted other southern cities urging united, determined resistance to the giant monopoly.

The phone company began removing telephones from Jacksonville.

The phone company removed more and more telephones until the citizens of Jacksonville knuckled under and paid the exorbitant increase—but the Board of Trade taxed the phone company to pay for road improvements.

By 1890, the number of Jacksonville subscribers grew to 288. Business rates “within one-half mile radius of the exchange” cost \$16 per quarter, while the residential rate was \$12.50. On July 26, 1897, long distance service was established between Jacksonville and Savannah, Ga.



By 1910, Southern Bell had 6,367 Jacksonville customers and people were constantly discovering new uses for their telephones:

“If anyone desires to select the right kind of wife,” said the February 12, 1912 issue of *Life*

magazine, "One should never see the lady, but should first talk with applicants over the telephone".

Applicants???

Life went on to say, "A woman's voice is a certain indication of her character. Selfishness, sympathy, shallowness, cultivation, reserve strength, control and the capacity to bore—all these things and much more are revealed in a woman's voice; therefore, make a list of girls... call them up on the telephone and select the voice you want. Never mind how she looks, she will always look well to you if you can listen to her with constantly increasing enjoyment".

Well, Ginny and I discovered the truth of that last night.

You see, for about 15 years, we kept all phone numbers we call posted on three sheets of paper taped to the kitchen wall (where a phone used to be but isn't any more) and to make a call we'd have to leave the living room (where the phone is now) and walk into the kitchen to look up the number on the wall, and stand there to make a call.

But our new cordless phone has a directory thingy built in to the answering machine thingy so that a lighted phone number listing shows up and you scroll through till you come to the number you want (for instance Donald and Helen have four phones) and punch the talk button and—one right after the other—you get four different answering machines instead of the person you wanted to talk to.

But first, you have to enter the phone numbers off the kitchen wall into the digital display unit... Do you have any idea who Susan and Garry are? And why we have their phone number on our kitchen wall?

And here's a number with no name—any idea who that is?

Me, neither.

Anyhow, while I read names and numbers off the kitchen wall, Ginny punched buttons on the digital display

for an hour and a half... then neither one of us could think of anybody we wanted to call right then anyhow.

However, our new cordless handsets have an intercom feature...

So, I called Ginny—who is seated three feet away from me... “I have a collect obscene phone call for Virginia Cowart, will you accept the charges”?

“I’ve told you not to call me at home. What if my husband answers”?

Yes indeed you can learn a lot about a wife applicant by talking with her on the telephone.

Then, we discovered out newfangled phones have a Speaker Phone attachment/feature/button so you can broadcast what is said to a whole room...

So we set our handsets on Speaker Phone and sang *Moon River* to our living room.

Who needs to be connected to the world, we have high-tech fun right here in the geriatric ward.

Wednesday, June 23, 2010 A Cloud Without Rain

This morning’s *Daily Mail* newspaper carries a photo of an odd cloud seen over Perthshire this weekend.

Brian Wilton, who took the photograph, said the cloud was an *altocumulus lenticularis*—an almond-shaped or lens-shaped mass of cloud that appears dense but quickly evaporates.



“We couldn't believe it,” said Mr Wilson. “It was like the scene in the film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* when the spaceship comes down.”

I've never seen a cloud shaped like that one, but clouds have played a big part in my life recently.

As Ginny and I drove home from the library last night, we noticed how clean our city looks. Heavy afternoon showers over the past couple of days scoured grime from buildings and streets. The rains washed away the yellow oak pollen which dusted tree leaves a week ago. Pollution has been washed from the air.

Old men surrounded by kibitzers play chess on the benches in Hemming Park. The joggers and the jigglers run on the sidewalks seeking health, youth or something—most likely each other. Sailboats cruise on the river. Seagulls soar above. Motorcyclists, ignoring helmet laws in the early summer evening, spurt away from traffic lights

Jacksonville sparkles.

That's my external world.

Internally, things are not so squeaky clean.

I feel like a dark cloud—black around the edges but containing no cleansing, life-giving rain. More like a dust cloud than a rain cloud.

King Solomon said, "Like a billowing cloud that bring no rain is the person who talks big but never produces". (That's Proverbs 25:14 from *The Message*). The Authorized Version renders that same verse as, "Whoso boasteth himself of a false gift is like clouds and wind without rain".

Those words describe me.

The last four projects I have undertaken produced nothing tangible. Lots of work; wasted time; never producing.

I wonder why I bother.

The game's not worth the candle.

I hear other Christians glorying in the triumphant Christian life... I strongly suspect they lie. But, maybe not. Perhaps the blessings of God are meant for other people.

Not me.

Perhaps God grades success and failure on some other scale, one I am not aware of.

But even my prayers recently bog down in murk; Like the Prophet Jeremiah, I say, "Lord, Thou hast covered thyself with a cloud, that our prayer should not pass through".

I've heard that insanity can be defined as doing the same thing over and over again but expecting some different result.

That's what I do.

Yet, King Solomon also said, "He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap. As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all".

The Message, a modern speech translation, renders that same verse as:

Don't sit there watching the wind. Do your own work.

Don't stare at the clouds. Get on with your life.

Just as you'll never understand the mystery of life forming in a pregnant woman,

So you'll never understand the mystery at work in all that God does.

So, even though I feel like a dust cloud producing nothing, even though my prayers bog down in murk, even though my work seems a waste of time, I keep slogging ahead doing the same thing expecting a better result.

The Psalmist prayed, “Lord, Thy mercy is great above the Heavens: and Thy truth reaches even into the clouds”.

Back in the '60s when Ginny and I were courting, a Viet Nam era folksong played often on the radio; sorry, I don't remember the singer's name, and I can only recall snatches of the lyrics—the song was about clouds and the last line said something like:

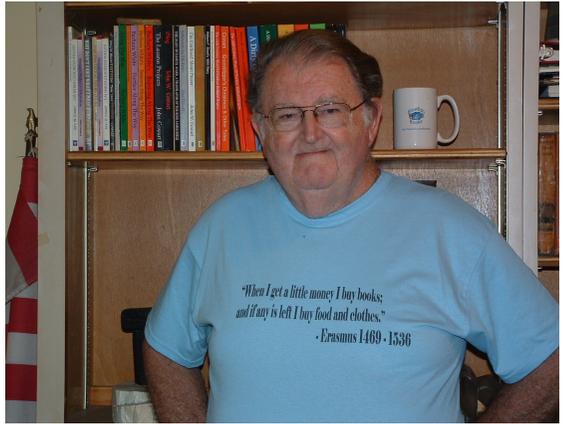
It's clouds' illusions I recall; I really don't know clouds at all.

Thursday, June 24, 2010
A New Shirt

Last night Eve, my middle daughter, a librarian, brought me a new tee shirt, one that advertises a local book store. Here's a photo of Eve:



And, here's a photo of me wearing the new shirt:



The quote from Erasmus says, “When I get a little money, I buy books, and if any is left I buy food and clothes”.

On the shelf behind me are some of the books I’ve published and a coffee mug given to me by Donald, my youngest son—the logo on the coffee mug is for Bluefish Books, our family’s publishing house.

On the back of the shirt Eve gave me is the slogan of Chamblin’s Book Mine, the area’s largest used book store. It announces that Chamblin’s is the place to search for “New, Used, Rare, Out-of-Print, and Non-Existent Books”.

Chamblin’s boasts of having over one million fine-quality books on the shelves for sale. Know how you can tell they’re fine-quality?

Because they don’t stock a single book I wrote.

For ages, Ginny and I, (and now our grown children) have shopped there all the time—unless we’re out buying food or clothes.

Friday, June 25, 2010 Playing Dolls

Two of these birds are different from the others:



Jennifer, my eldest daughter who is well over 30, collects solid perfume compacts. These are tiny jeweled perfume containers shaped like animals, buildings, fish, birds, etc.

She tells me they are not perfume bottles; that's something different.

Jennifer is entering a photo contest open to people who collect these trinkets and wish to display their collections. She came over Thursday asking my help taking photos of her solids. So I spent the day playing dolls with my little girl.

Here are some of her solids on a checker board:



Incidentally, if you have a compact perfume solid that you'd like to trade or sell cheap, please e-mail me and I'll put you in contact with Jennifer.

We made some photos, like this butterfly, outside in natural settings:



I used the backdrop of a brick wall and an old well for these:

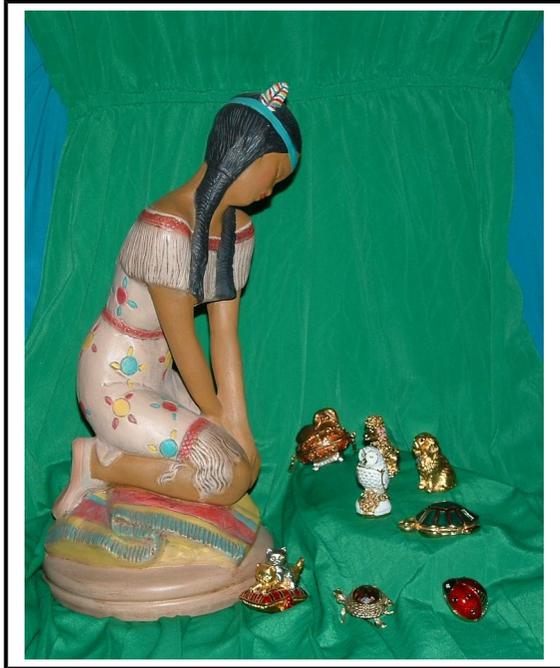


Here are jeweled turtles sunning on a log:



Inside, we arranged some displays, such as this Christmas tree and the Indian girl, on the kitchen table:





Lighting proved a problem with these two photos of Stonehenge when we use a computer screen in the background





By placing Jennifer's compacts directly on the screen, and not using a camera flash, but by shining a flashlight on the compacts, we got a little better result:



Altogether we made over a hundred photographs. And all the while we worked, my daughter happily told me all about each compact, where she got it, how she corresponded with other collectors, how she has made friends as she bought, sold and traded these things—she even knows the names of other collector's dogs!

Ginny has a sister and five brothers, and once Ginny's Dad told me that a father has two duties toward his children: to make them happy, and to make them miserable.

He was a wise man.

It's been a long time since I played dolls with one of my little girls, but today I think I made this one daughter happy.

**Saturday, June 26, 2010
And The Winner Is....**

Ginny!

Back in May, Ginny's employer announced she won an award for excellent performance and that she would be honored at an awards banquet.

Yesterday the official photo of that ceremony came through. Here is Ginny flanked by two of the Big Bosses:



In part Ginny's citation says—**“Congratulations on your outstanding service... We would like to publicly recognize your achievement...The Awards Committee thanks you for the outstanding contribution you make...”**

“Ms Cowart exceeds internal customer service by assisting with multiple programs...She creates reports that enable each program to track success beyond the normal criteria, all with a positive attitude... She worked on this project on her own initiative and ...”

Hey, people, I saw the report the letter mentions, that thing was over a foot thick!

They should give her an award just for being able to lift the thing—much less compile and write it!

I'm proud of my kind, beautiful, intelligent, and gracious wife. She delights me.

And her testimony shines.

Years ago one of her former bosses buttonholed me at an office party and said, "Mr. Cowart, Virginia doesn't have religious signs around her office. She hardly ever says anything and she doesn't even wear a cross necklace—but nobody can walk into our office for five minutes without knowing she's a Christian lady".

Yes, I have married a winner.

And guess what?

When she came home Thursday, Ginny brought a bouquet of flowers for me:



So I guess I'm a winner too.

But, alas, we can't all be winners.

Case in point::

Yesterday's *Times-Union* newspaper reported on the 52nd annual Big Rock Blue Marlin Fishing Tournament held last week in Morehead City, North Carolina.

The prize offered for the biggest blue marlin caught was just under one million dollars (\$912,825).

Peter Martin Wann, 22, of Alexandria, Virginia, aboard the good ship *Citation* hooked an 883-pound blue marlin, the biggest fish ever landed in the tournament.

Happy. Happy. Happy.

Or not.

On weigh-in at the dock, tournament officials discovered that Peter Martin Wann came from another state and he had not bothered to buy a \$30 Coastal Recreational Fishing License, which is required by North Carolina law.

This disqualified Wann's fish.

The prize money went to another fisherman on another boat.

Thus the crew of *Carnivore* won first with their 528.3 pound blue marlin and the crew of *Wet-N-Wild* won second place with their 460 pound blue marlin.

And, to top it off, officials of the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries fined Peter Martin Wann \$160 for fishing without a license.



Wednesday, June 30, 2010
And These Are The Generations Of...

I have not written about what I've been doing recently because I haven't been doing anything. My life has been a dull slogging along doing historical research for that western novel I'm working on.

No spiritual highs or lows, just slogging.

However, look at this:



Yes, I've had fun playing with the internet discovering several sites for fun. The above epithet, I made at Tombstone Generator at <http://www.jjchandler.com/tombstone/> . Isn't that fun!

And last night Ginny and I sat for four hours listening to the music of our youth on Pandora Radio at <http://www.pandora.com/#/about> . This great site allows listeners to chose their own play list and it plays the songs you chose. So we listened to the Beach Boys; Peter, Paul & Mary; the Kingston Trio; the Everly Brothers; the Mamas & The Pappas; Credence Clearwater Revival; and a bunch of other favorite groups.



This was the first time in ages we have done nothing but grove to “our” music. Great fun!

Oh, by the way, that Tombstone Generator site also links to one where you can create various warning signs—such as:

Glog: A Dinosaur Novel Of Sorts is my favorite of all the books I've written or edited.

Speaking of writing, four years ago today, I posted the following newspaper article in my diary under the heading:

America's Two Greatest Writers

NY Times

Friday, June 30, 2006

Stephen King Horrified!

Stephen King, America's Greatest Writer, expressed horror and dismay when interviewed at his home in Maine yesterday. King's hands trembled as he read a sheet of paper. "This is horrible!" King said. "It's the scariest thing I've ever read." The paper shows the book sales and royalties earned by fellow-writer John Cowart. "This poor guy must be starving," King said. "Who would ever believe that any writer, even one as lousy as Cowart, could work so hard and earn so little?" King, whose name reigns on every Best-seller list, is author of *Desperation*, *The Stand*, and *Salem's Lot*.

His books are sold everywhere. Cowart, whose name is unknown, is author of *Glog*, *The Lazarus* and, most recently, *A Duty Old Man Goes Bad*. His books are sold on-line at www.bluefishbooks.info. In a glitch described by the U.S. Postal Service as a "minor error," King's royalty statement was delivered to Cowart in Florida while Cowart's statement was delivered to King's home in Maine. Realizing the mistake, the horrified King said, "I want my money!" Cowart said, "Does this mean I have to return the BMW I bought?"

Ren folk imp The that rela the beh of a expi in it's beh con or v It m tote thin dec mos retu Son

This newspaper clipping is fake but fun.

I used Newspaper generator at <http://tools.fodey.com/generators/newspaper/snippet.asp> 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

Thursday, July 1, 2010

It Is What It Is.

Yesterday my friend Barbara began another round of chemotherapy. Her cancer has returned. We'd talked about this possibility over lunch Monday; and she was still in the doctor's office when I called her to ask the verdict;

"It is what it is," she said resigned to what God has next for her.

Yesterday also my friend Wes told me about the death of a friend of his over the weekend. AIDS. The young man, who lived in California, just got married in February not expecting the flare up of his disease so soon.

It is what it is.

Wes just returned from a conference on Christian apologetics, a course in reasons for our faith. We talked about families and faith for about five hours.

I wonder how you measure faith?

I believe less and less stuff as I grow older, yet I'm more and more confident about the few things I do still believe.

My faith boils down to a confidence that Jesus is the Son of God who deliberately chose to come into this world

as a human being to save sinners so we could see in living color, so to speak, what God is like.

We saw what God is like and we didn't like it.

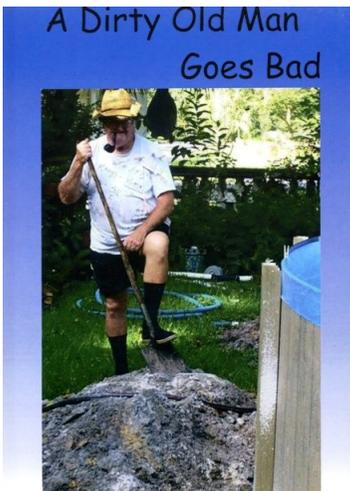
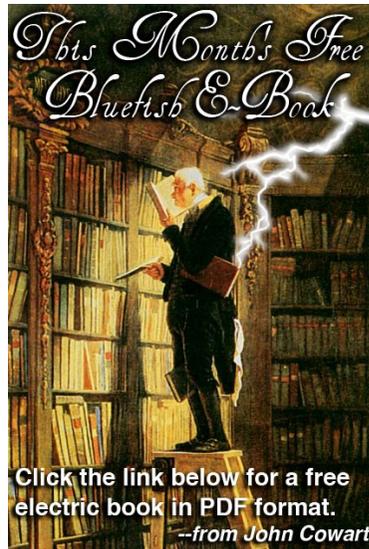
We crowned him with spiky thorns, scourged Him, nailed Him to a cross and gouged a hole in His side out of pure spite.

But because He is the source of all life, He retained life in Himself and rose from the grave to return to where He came from—for a time. I believe that He would kind of like for us to behave ourselves till He returns.

I believe religion is all about Him, not about us—especially not about me—and that I show my devotion to Him by the way I treat other people, starting with my wife, my children, my friends, my neighbors, and the stranger I chance to meet while buying tires for my car.

That just about sums up my faith, except for a few cultural scruples such as taking my hat off when talking to a lady and being kind to my dog. But scruples are not faith.

In other news, as today is the first day of July, I posted a new Free E-Book on my blog sidebar. The link is beneath that picture of the librarian on the ladder. I have him getting hit by lightning to show it's an electronic book. Isn't that clever?



John Cowart's 2005 Blog

My Free E-Book for July is *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad: John Cowart's 2005 Diary*. I've kept some kind of diary off and on

since I was a teenager and some of those old entries are just as interesting as the one you are reading now...Er, maybe that's not much of an enticement to read the first book in my Dirty Old Man series, but it cost nothing, so please check it out..

It is what it is.

One last bit of news: Ginny is taking some time off work over the 4th Of July holiday. We can't afford to go off anywhere on vacation... What the heck, we can't afford to stay here either, but we're going to.

Therefore, I do not plan to make any more blog postings for about ten days. While I'm off carousing in wild living, you may want to drop in on my e-friend Tracy's blog at <http://abundantliving-tracy.blogspot.com/> .I find her testimony today particularly helpful.

July 15th, 2010 **Isaiah 42:16**

I will lead the blind by ways they have not known,
along unfamiliar paths I will guide them;
I will turn the darkness into light before them
and make the rough places smooth.
These are the things I will do;
I will not forsake them.

Tuesday, July 20, 2010 **Crushed Grapes**

Ginny and I observed a lot of life going on around us during our stay-at-home vacation:

Hummingbirds—a family of hummingbirds began visiting our flowers. Starting with the mimosa tree and working their way to lantana, cigar plants and impatiens, the birds established a regular pattern of daily rounds—that's what saved our house from burning down.

Small House Fire—For 15 years a mirror has hung on a wooden wall outside the laundry room. One day last week as I sat outside reading while waiting for the hummingbirds to appear, I smelled something burning. A *neighbor burning trash*, I thought and went back to my Connie Willis book. Every now and then, .I'd glance to see if the hummingbirds were there yet.

I saw smoke rising above the roof of our house. I ran to that side and saw a hole about the size of a dinner plate in the wall flaming as smoke curled upward. I saw electric wires inside the hole.

I called the fire department and explained to the dispatcher that I had a small fire I'd like a fireman to check out...

Here comes, sirens blaring, five fire units: a pumper truck, a hook and ladder truck, a fire chief's car, a police cruiser, and an ambulance!

One fireman hosed down the flames, another used a pike to pull wooden siding away from the wall, another used a reciprocal saw to enlarge the hole, an officer used a thermal imaging camera to see inside the wall to detect hotspots...And while those four put out the fire, another six or eight firemen stood around admiring a mechanical barking dog I have at the back door; they'd never seen one of these before. It fascinated them.

Remember burning leaves with a magnifying glass when you were a kid? Well, the heat index was 105 that day and apparently my mirror focused a ray of direct sunlight on the wooden siding of our laundry room. It burned through the T-11 siding and the insulation and into the studs and beams of the laundry room wall.

Had I not been outside at just the right moment watching for the hummingbirds, the whole place might well have burned down.

Thank God I'm interested in bird watching.

Two Acts Of Kindness—Ginny and I went to a Sam's Club, a huge warehouse store which is supposed to be cheaper than other stores. You offset the lower prices by paying for a membership card. This being our first visit, we did not have such a card.

When Ginny went to buy a carton of cigarettes, the cashier turned her away and sent her to a long, long line at the customer service desk to buy a membership.

A young woman approached us asking if the carton of cigarettes was all we intended to buy. She offered to use her own pass card to buy the cigarettes if Ginny gave her the cash.

Turns out that the lady was just passing through Jacksonville, driving south from Tennessee and happened to exit the Interstate to buy gas. She'd seen our confusion in negotiating with that first cashier and took pity on us just out of the goodness of her heart.

I told her that I'd write about her in my blog someday.

Later, in the Sam's parking lot as I leaned against our car, I observed another act of kindness: a lady came out of the store pushing an old woman in a wheelchair and pulling a loaded cart of groceries.

A man at the entrance offered to help her and she refused. "I can manage," she said.

A teenage boy said, "Lady, I can help you with that".

Again, she said, "I can manage" and began pushing her awkward train across the parking lot.

A third man walked up and began pushing her grocery cart. She let go and accepted his help.

Two guys had offered but the third guy just latched onto the loaded cart and started pushing—there's some lesson for me here.

Up The Stairs—Ginny and I visited the 1870 lighthouse museum in St. Augustine. The tower is 165 feet tall. There are 219 steps to the observation deck, including the granite steps leading up to the metal stairs. The observation deck is the height of a fourteen-story building.

Here's a photo of Ginny at the bottom....



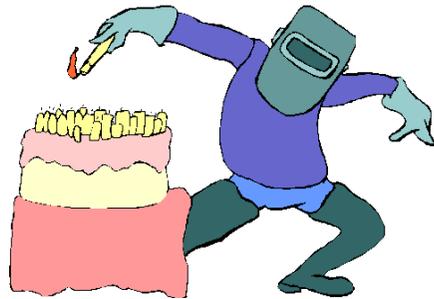
There will be no photo of any Cowart at the top...

Just climbing the ten steps leading into the museum proved all I could manage... Must be getting old.

Getting Older—Four members of our family have July birthdays: Helen, Donald, Ginny, and me.

To celebrate, our friend Barbara White invited a dozen of us to her home for a cookout.

I asked Barbara if she would present a devotional thought for us at the party and she gave a meditation of Isaiah 65:8, a passage that



pictures people and the events of our lives as a cluster of grapes, bruised, squished, crushed...

Barbara told of some things going on in her life at the moment, her cancer and chemotherapy, her granddaughter's considering an abortion, financial decisions, a feeling of dryness and emptiness in her own spiritual life.

Events like grapes in a cluster of days in our lives, bruised and battered by sin and circumstance.

Yet, the Prophet Isaiah said that the Lord will not destroy the bruised grapes because there is some juice left in the smushed cluster—some little bit of juice, enough for God to use to create something new.

No matter how old you get, no matter what you have done, no matter how bruised and battered you are, God does not utterly destroy you. He can still make —a new wine.

Wednesday, July 21, 2010

Love Is...

We show love in various ways.

For instance, a week or so ago, Ginny brought home a bouquet of flowers for me to enjoy.

Odd for a lady to give her husband flowers?

Not for us, it isn't.

For the birthday party Saturday, she baked a separate cake for me, one without any icing because I don't like icing; and she baked one with icing for everybody else.

Sometimes, little mundane actions speak louder than romantic, candlelight dinners and black lace negligees—although those are fun too!

Yesterday, out of love for Ginny, I drove 60 miles and visited six or eight stores looking for her brand of cigarettes. The stores where she usually buys them here in Jacksonville have stopped stocking her brand (and the Publix managers get snotty when I asked them to special order her kind—just see if I ever buy anything from one of those stores again).

However, by diligently searching, I discovered a store in Kingsland, Georgia, about 35 miles north of here, where they carry her brand.



While in Kingsland, I also chanced upon a book store I'd never visited before, The Book Cellar. As soon as I walked in the door, Sophie, the cat who owns the store, greeted me by jumping down from a top shelf and streaking toward the back.

Within minutes, Darlina, Sophie's human servant, helped me find a Florida history book missing from my collection. And the price was indeed affordable. Later, I told Ginny about this store and we plan to visit there to spend some time soon.

On my drive home along U.S.17 over miles of salt marshes at low tide, I felt overwhelmingly thankful at the goodness of the Lord Christ in letting me accomplish everything I'd scheduled for the day—that rarely happens.

Looking at the marsh teeming with living creatures of all descriptions, I admired the handiwork of God in creating with such imagination and variety. Repetition with constant variation. We are privileged to worship this High and Holy One Who holds all the created universe in the hollow of His nail-scared hand and Who yet considers our low estate.

For our devotions after dinner (a second breakfast actually, we had sausage, eggs and grits) Ginny and I read a parable which made no sense to us at all. Then we watched a video movie she likes—must be episode 3,892 of *Monarch Of The Glen*—till bedtime.

Hunting through strange stores, watching Scottish soap operas, of such things love is.

Saturday, July 24, 2010
Reading, Working, Aching, Thinking About Love

This week I finished reading the 700 pages of *The Winds Of Marble Arch*, by Connie Willis, and two short

books by Kurt Vonnegett: *God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian* and *Armageddon In Retrospect*.

All these short stories make me want to jump in and write more...

However, I can't seem to get a handle on that Cracker western I've been nosing around. I find I have a string of historical incidents but no central story. I'm trying to synthesize historical events, while avoiding anachronisms, into an overall plot set between 1829 and 1860 here in northeast Florida. But without the central plot, all I have are supporting events and isolated happenings—Indian massacres, renegade attacks, a burning riverboat, a public hanging, a godly circuit rider, the technology of a 19th Century itinerate photographer, and happenings in a historic Cowford whore house which also served as a bank.

The Cow Ford was the early name of Jacksonville before the city's name was changed in 1829. The old doggerel went:

Start a cow thief where you will,
He'll wind his way to Jacksonville.

While wallowing over the plotting of this novel, I've also caught up mostly on my yard work. I'd let our garden go to pot recently. You could film a Tarzan movie out there.

I get some of my best thinking and praying done while doing mundane hands-on chores. So I patched that hole the mirror burned in the laundry room wall.

I pruned.

I mowed.

I edged.

I ache!

Sitting on my ass reading for days on end then engaging hard physical labor aggravated my arthritis something fierce. Today I'm hobbling around the house on my cane. I should know better!

But I never seem to learn that lesson.

I do this every month.

I pay the price every month.

I live in pain a few days swearing, “Never Again” then I do the same thing the next time.

Yard work resembles sin in that respect.

Twice as I worked, people I know saw me outside working and came by the house to unburden themselves about severe problems—truly, life or death matters.

Yard work resembles sin in that respect too.

Here I am sweating like a pig, filthy with grass clippings and spider webs in my hair. Unshaven. Hot. Irritable. Thirsty. Preoccupied. Hurting—and here comes a poor lost soul with a need seeking Christ and His succor.

And they show up at my door step just at the time I’m hurrying to get finished with yard work so I can go in, shower, cool off, and browse porno sites on the internet!

The very time when I am least prepared to say a word as a Christian witness is the very time I’m called upon to do so.

When I am feeling least compassion, is when I bump into someone who needs compassion most. When I am down and discouraged, bottoming out in the pits, here comes someone needing uplifting and encouraging.

The old saying says, A Christian needs to be ready to preach, pray or die at a moment’s notice.

For me, that notice comes, that hurt person shows up, my witness and comfort is called for when I am least prepared for it.

That’s the moment God sends someone into my life who needs my help.

And all I can do is listen.

And here is the kicker—all morning long as I raked and chopped weeds and picked up fallen branches, I’ve been thinking about the nature of love.

Romantic love between Ginny and me, love of family, love of neighbors, of enemies, of nation, of God.

The cardinal Christian virtue is love, yet I do not know how to be a loving man.

All I could do was listen to my visitors’ woes and commensurate—don’t happen to have \$6,000 to solve

one girl's problem—and I hate to mouth “I'll pray for you” in the face of someone's real physical need.

That sounds so hollow, as though I'm some superior spiritual giant praying for the little people. So I avoid ever telling anyone I'll pray for them; I just do it and keep my mouth shut about it. They don't need to know what I'm doing. Only God does.

This morning I intended to write up my deep thoughts and conclusions on the nature of love.

Haven't figured out my own conclusions yet.

If I ever learn anything about love for God or man, I'll let you know.

Meanwhile, I still have the jungle path yet to clear.

Tarzan swings from the kudzu vines in the wayback.

Sunday, July 25, 2010 **A Squat Ugly Yellow Dog**

During a dry season in 1898 at Roberts Lakes in south Florida, 10,000 alligators gathered in the shallow water. When hide hunters began firing their rifles, “the shooting caused the alligators to stampede like cattle”.

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

Last week the *Clinch County News* displayed a video of a gator feeding frenzy at <http://www.theclinchcountynews.com/v2/content.aspx?ID=23750&MemberID=1340> .



Ginny and I found this video of particular interest because on the last day of our summer vacation earlier this month, we planned for a fall vacation. And Stephen C. Foster Georgia State Park on the Suwannee River (where the video was made) was on our short-list of places to go for a week to celebrate our 42nd Anniversary.

It has cabins available, it's within a hundred miles of home (my arthritis makes that my outside limit for sitting in a car), and it has access to the beautiful Suwannee River.

Last year we rented a cabin at Lafayette Blue Springs, a Florida state park about ten miles southwest of Luraville, where we swam in the Suwannee River. Here's a link to those photos at <http://www.cowart.info/blog/?p=1187> .

We had such a good time, that this year, God willing, we wanted s similar experience.

We chose another park for this year but Stephen C. Foster was a close second—but with this video of the feeding frenzy I don't think we'll be too anxious to swim in the Suwannee again.

When I forwarded this video to my eldest daughter, she reminisced about a family picnic, saying, "YIKES, Dad! I am so glad I was not in either of those boats! Remember when we swam across the Suwannee to look at the fossils in the limestone/rocks? That is one of my found memories of childhood just me and you exploring the rocks... I'm sure glad it wasn't us, and a gator swimming!! I love you Dad! Have a great weekend!

Once, when he was a teenager, Johnny, my middle son, and I, went of a weekend canoeing trip down the Suwannee with his church youth group. A bus took us someplace on the upper Suwannee where the group slept on the floor of a host church.

As a shining Christian example to the young people, I presented a devotional to the kids around a campfire that night.

The next day we put canoes in the river and floated down stream all day stopping to swim and explore as the current and the spirit moved us. Johnny and I had a great time splashing care free in the river.

Far downstream at the end of the day we all put ashore at a wooden dock where the bus was to met us. I stepped on a rotten plank which gave way, dropping my leg through the dock and barking my shin from ankle to kneecap. I said some words which had not been included in the previous evening's devotions.

Stop your ears, tender young people! Stop your ears!

Say, speaking of young people, wantta hear a great joke? One from my Boy Scout days? From 60 years ago when I was young myself?

There was this guy who owned a pit bull dog named Cuppie, best fighter in the land.

He would walk his pit bull in the park and turn it loose on other people's dogs and laugh to see his Cuppie tear the weaker dogs up.

One day he meets this man walking a squat, ugly yellow dog on a lease. The bully boasts, "My Cuppie can beat any dog. I'll bet you ten dollars he can take that squat, ugly yellow wimp of yours".

Cuppie rushed in for the kill.

Chomp! Chomp. The squat ugly yellow dog eats Cuppie up.

"Say! What the Hell kind of dog is that," the outraged bully cries.

"Well, before I cut his tail off and painted him yellow, he was an alligator".

Saturday, July 31, 2010
Great Is Diana Of The Ephesians

A couple of weeks ago at her office, Ginny bought a statue of a kneeling Indian girl for me. I'm delighted with this green ware piece.



Admiring this statue this morning, generated a thought-train in my mind (No, not the one about the Land-O-Lakes girl) but about a sculptor in ancient Ephesus. Here's the tale I imagined:

This sculptor sat puttering away in his workshop one day when a priest and a priestess arrived asking him to sculpt a statue of Diana, goddess of the hunt and goddess of fertility. They described what they wanted and provided him with a chunk of rock to carve into the statue.

They named a price for the work and he agreed.

As they boarded their chariot to leave the workshop, the priest said, "By the way, I expect a kickback of ten percent from your commission, but it's not for me—it's a tithe for my temple, so it's ok".

The sculptor thought that a bit tacky but since he occasionally made small sacrifices at another temple. *What the hell, one temple is pretty much the same as*

another, he thought. So he agreed and immediately began to rough out the statue he envisioned in the chunk of rock—a statue of Diana kneeling at a spring in the woods drawing water.

After a few days of chipping away with mallet and chisel at solid rock, the sculptor received a carrier pigeon message from the patrons. They wanted a detailed account of how a statue is made. Ok, the sculptor sent them a list of steps he'd use to turn the rock into a statue of the goddess. And he continued work.

Oh, by the way, the next carrier pigeon said, we're going on a religious retreat next month and will not be able to give you adult supervision then. The sculptor agreed to treat their statue as a rush order so the finished statue could be unveiled before the retreat.

Oh, by the way, the next pigeon said, the model we used in our plan for the statue has refused to sign a model's release form. She may sue you for everything you own if you produce a statue in which her features can be recognized.

"How the hell did she even find out about this statue", the sculptor asked. "She lives all the way up in Thessalonica"!

"We told her", they said.

"And, Oh by the way, we decided that the statue should not portray Diana kneeling drawing water, it would be better if she's standing drawing an arrow in her bow. Please make these minor adjustments—nothing to it, After all, drawing is drawing. Right"?

The sculptor made considerable adjustments to disguise the features of the model because he certainly did not want to get sued. But he still planed to make the beautiful statue they wanted. He also initiated work-around procedures to meet the other perimeters of the clients.

More pigeon stuff came: "By the way, we see you're carving our statue on a white marble base, we'd prefer it on a black marble base. Besides that, you're carving the letters of the inscription of the goddess in Etruscan script. No one reads that stuff anymore, un-carve those old-fashioned inscriptions and re-do them in Koine".

The sculptor agreed to un-carve and redo, to stand instead of kneel, black instead of white.

More pigeon stuff: We think you are overcharging us. Give us a guarantee we won't be cheated on our statue.

This came just two or three weeks before the sculptor's target date for the unveiling of the stature of the beautiful idol. His finished work would be ready in time.

So, the sculptor sent a pigeon message promising that a day or two before the public unveiling of Diana's finished statue, the priest and priestess could preview his completed work. If they were satisfied with his craftsmanship, they would pay him the agreed fee; if they were not 100% satisfied, they would pay nothing, and he would cancel the project absorbing any loss himself.

"Not good enough", said the next pigeon stuff. "Even though we have not paid you a single penny, we want you to sign a backdated contract lowering the payment we ourselves originally set, saying you are our employee, and obligating yourself to an unlimited time frame at our convenience".

The sculptor balked.

He resigned the commission letting them have their chunk of rock back and watched sorrowing as they walked away—maybe they could go to Demetrious to have their statue of the fertility goddess cast out of pure silver.

As they moved on, the sculptor could imagine hearing them say, "Well, he wasn't much of a craftsman anyhow. He wouldn't sign our contract. That proves he wasn't a real sculptor, just a chiseller".

August

Sunday, August 1, 2010 Further Along The Way—Free E-Book

Friday my friend Barbara White treated me to breakfast at the restaurant formerly known as Dave's. It was the first day of work for the young woman serving our table and she said she felt ill-at-ease getting familiar with her new job in the crowded busy dining room. Natural as anything, Barbara touch her arm and prayed for her to relax, have an easier day, and be at peace.

The young woman just about dissolved into tears, she said she was so touched by Barbara's kindness.

That sort of thing comes natural to Barbara.

She appears to live in the realm of the Spirit.

That's not my experience.

Last time I touched a young woman's arm, she too dissolved into tears—then she slapped me.

I don't do that any more.

Some folks soar on eagle's wings, others of us ooze along like snails. Of course, eagles make easy targets silhouetted up there against the clouds.

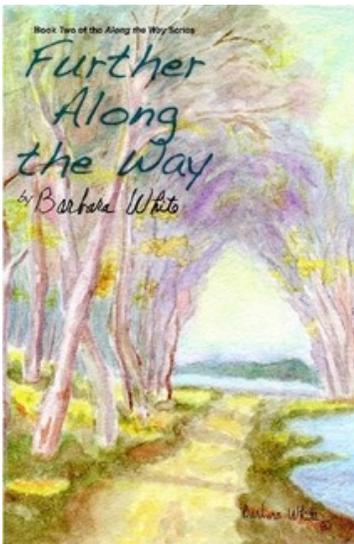
Nobody shoots us snails.

We got shells.

I've needed my shell recently. My banner at the top of this page declares that I'm a common ordinary Christian looking for spiritual reality in daily life. Recently I haven't seen much spiritual reality as I piddle away daily life.

My greatest accomplishment in the whole month of July was to repair and paint a bird feeder—can't really remember what I did with the rest of the month.

Time passed. I didn't.



Therefore, for the month of August, for the FREE E-BOOK I'm giving away in my blog sidebar, I'm offering a copy of Barbara White's *Further Along The Way*.

I feel Barbara's books are destined to become spiritual classics. She writes about walking with Jesus in the ordinary and the horrific events of her daily life. Barbara enters her third course of chemotherapy next week.

Maybe someday I'll tell about why and how she fussed at me about my life, writing, and character over that breakfast.

Eagles don't speak the same language as snails.

I think the poor things suffer from oxygen deprivation from all that high flying.

Know what the snail said when he rode on the turtle's back?

Wheee!

Monday, August 2, 2010 A Quick Note About Stuff

A family near us, poor bastards, were evicted from their home over the weekend. Their stuff is piled at the curb for any passerby to pick through.

Nothing I could do to help the poor; the landlord told me they owe back rent since November and he bent over backwards to help them stay in the house. I would help if I could. But I can't help pay that much back rent—

So I picked up a neat little workbench out of their stuff and carried into my backyard, thus adding to my own stuff.

Over the weekend Ginny and I talked a lot about moving furniture.

Didn't move any, but we talked about it.

Although we are not materialists, in our 40+ years of marriage we've accumulated a lot of stuff. She still has some paintings the kids did in kindergarten; I still treasure the very first Christmas present Ginny ever gave me.

Stuff accumulates.

When stuff accumulates to the point it endangers health and safety, when it interferes with the enjoyment of life, when it defines us, then it must be culled.

That's hard to do.

I recently read the book *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding And The Meaning Of Things* (Houghton, Mifflin Harcourt, © 2010) by Randy Frost and Gail Steketee. This book examines cases of extreme accumulations of stuff when folks have collected so much stuff their homes overflow with things and they must tunnel through mounds of things to move from room to room.

Dr. Frost says that sometimes we let our stuff define who we are—You Are What You Drive. BMW=MBA—that

sort of mindset, like the James Bond thriller *Goldfinger*, where the villain craved accumulating all the gold in Fort Knox or if he couldn't have it, he would not let anyone else own it either.

Some of us define ourselves by what we do (or have done) like the Civil War Kentucky Colonel whose one-time rank defined the rest of his life, or the beauty contest winner who yearns to be thought of as Miss Queen forever and ever after.

Some of define ourselves by what we believe; i.e. I am a Christian who enthusiastically believes the fundamental teachings of our faith . Trouble there is that to other people a Rabid Fundamentalist Christian may well be a derogatory designation of the worse sort.

But I'm getting far afield from thinking about stuff.

The desire that Ginny and I have to re-arrange our stuff to make living more convenient for us reveals our attachment to physical objects. The stuff chains us by mental links that say, *John, you may need me someday. If you get rid of me, you will be without when that time comes.*

Stuff says, *John, surely you can't get rid of me, that would be wasteful.*

Stuff says, *John Cowart! You should be ashamed of yourself for even thinking of throwing away that coffee mug. That belonged to your Dad and if you dispose of it, you dishonor his memory.*

Ah yes, stuff lays a million subtle claims on me...

I place value on stuff.

It owns me.

Tuesday, August 3, 2010

The Beginning Of Heaven

As I sat on a park bench waiting for Ginny to get off work yesterday, I filled my pipe with tobacco and took out a wooden kitchen match to light up—a preacher accosted me as he crossed the parking lot.

“You there,” he shouted, “Before you light that cigar, you ought to listen to my radio broadcast on Station ****”.

He named the station call letters and numbers three times. He must have been a strong man because he carried a Giant Economy-Sized Bible that must have weighed 45 pounds, and he carried in one hand.

“Jesus is coming back,” he proclaimed.

I nodded in agreement. I believe that.

“He’s coming back on ****” and the preacher named a specific date a few months from now.

“Not till then?” I said, “Then I still have plenty of time to finish my smoke”.

He got in his car and drove away.

Funny thing, this brother and I agree that Jesus promised to return.

When Jesus was on trial for His life, the High Priest asked, “*Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed*”?

And Jesus said, “I am. And ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven”.

Then the high priest rent his clothes, and said, What need we any further witnesses? Ye have heard the blasphemy: what think ye? And they all condemned Him to be guilty of death.

And some began to spit on Him, and to cover his face, and to buffet Him, and to say unto Him, “Prophecy”! And the servants did strike Him with the palms of their hands.

The next morning they nailed Him to a cross.

The trial was not the first time Jesus had promised to return from death.

At the Last Supper, He told the disciples, “*In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know*”.

Thomas saith unto him, “Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way”?

Jesus saith unto him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me".

Do you suppose Jesus was lying?

The bold preacher in the parking lot and I agree that the word of Jesus can be relied on, that He told the truth about His resurrection from death and His return to this world in clouds of glory.

The preacher seems to view this event as the end of the world, I prefer to view it as the beginning of Heaven. The return of Christ sounds the starting gun for wonderful things, things we can not even imagine.

A long time ago I wrote a newspaper column called "The Party At The End Of The World". It peeved some clergymen who petitioned the newspaper to have me fired. The management did not fire me but they would not let me write anymore columns, instead they assigned me to writing obituaries for the next couple of years.

If you are interested, that column can be found at The Party At The End Of The World at <http://www.cowart.info/Rabid%20Fun%20columns/Party%20at%20End/Party%20at%20the%20End.htm>

While it is clear that Jesus said He would return to set things right in this world, it is even clearer that He said again and again that no one can set a date for that event. Even angels don't know the time table. The train is sure to arrive, we don't know when, all we can do is wait at the station, ready, till we hear the whistle blow.

Jesus said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away. But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.

"Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is.

"For the Son of Man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch.

“Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you, I say unto all—Watch”.

Now, here’s a funny thing—while the preacher in the parking lot and I may disagree about setting a specific date for the return of Christ, we agree on many more levels.

In fact, were there to come a day when enemy soldiers demand that all Christians stand against that wall in front of the machine gun, that preacher and I are likely to stand there elbow to elbow—the physical return of the Lord Jesus into this world is not the only way for Heaven to begin.

Wednesday, August 4, 2010
A Dumb Ass In The Ditch

Recognize this picture?



It’s an internet photo from England of a cow that fell into an abandoned well; I’ve had it on my computer for a long time and something happened to me this morning

that reminded me of some Scripture, which, in turn, reminded me of that old photo file.

You see, two days ago I wrote about stuff.

My posting told about the book Drs Frost and Steketee wrote *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding And The Meaning Of Things* (Houghton, Mifflin Harcourt, © 2010).

I wrote about my attitude towards stuff and how I intended to get rid of much of the stuff cluttering my home, my computer, and my life. Ha!

Over the past two days more stuff, much more stuff, inundated our house!

Yes, Ginny and I did pack eight or ten boxes to take to the rescue mission for the poor to use. That should make a big dent in our stuff. Ha!

Ginny says, “Stuff abhors a vacuum. If there’s an empty space, stuff will come to fill it”.

How true!

The very day those ten boxes of stuff headed out of our house, my youngest son gave me a new office chair. A neighbor gave me a large box of computer ink cartridges—they don’t fit my printer but they are too valuable to trash. Two lamps and three VCRs came in out of nowhere, as well as a set of kitchen knives, and a big shopping bag stuffed with stuff.

Then, this morning—have I mentioned that some of our good friends and neighbors are being evicted from their rented home?—They abandoned huge mounds of their stuff at the curb for gleaners to pick through.

The folks being evicted impress me as being decent Christian people doing all that’s humanly possible to keep their family together and make their own way; and their landlord is a decent Christian gentleman doing all he can to help this family but he needs income from his property. No animosity is involved. Everyone involved is doing all they can to do the right thing in these troubled economic times.

I think everyone involved are all caught up in something called life.

Anyhow, this morning, the father of that family knocked on our front door. “John,” he said, “I have a favor

to ask... We have to be out of the house by this afternoon. Can we store some of our stuff in your yard. We hate to lose it but we have no place to put it yet. I just want to store it with you till we can get a new place”.

Thanks be to God, this week the family’s three children are in a summer church camp, so they do not have to undergo the trauma of seeing their games, toys and clothes piled at the curb like so much trash. These three children are some of the most polite, well-behaved pre-teens I have ever met.

The Lord Jesus once said, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”.

That’s a noble sentiment.

But Jesus did not have three kids in camp who would be coming home to find all their stuff gone.

Here I am trying to unclutter my life and home.

I don’t want any more stuff around our house.

What would Jesus do?

I imagine He’d run screaming into the bushes like any sensible Christian.

Well I am not all that much of a Christian and I’m certainly not sensible. And besides that, years ago I swore that I’d never ever, never ever, ever help anyone else move. I’m too old for that shit. And my arthritis hurts so bad I can hardly walk today.

But, Jesus is not a respecter of scruples. He once said, “Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the Sabbath day”?

I’m no interpreter of Scripture but I think that verse means that whenever an emergency situation confronts us, we are to do whatever we can to alleviate the misery.

Under the Mosaic Law we are instructed to help when there’s an ox in the ditch even if the ox belongs to—Well, Moses says it best:

“If thou meet thine enemy's ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again. If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying under his burden, and wouldest forbear to help him, thou shalt surely help with him”.



If we are to help an enemy's ox out of a ditch, then how much more should we help a brother in trouble?

So, the father arranged a tarp out in my side yard. He, his wife, and I stacked stuff (things less likely to be damaged by rain) on that tarp and covered it with another tarp.

That section of our lovely garden (that Ginny and I take such pride in) now looks as though it houses a Gypsy encampment.

So much for my dedicated resolve about ridding our home of stuff.

My battle with stuff dates back a long way; consider this diary entry from 2002—It's titled **My Great Brassier Hunt** at <http://www.cowart.info/Journal%20extracts/brassierhunt/My%20brassier%20hunt.htm> .

In contrast to stuff and clutter at our house, Ginny and I visited our middle daughter's new home for the first time this evening. Mark and Eve bought a new home and moved in on August 1st. Everything there is crisp and

clean and orderly. Even all their books are shelved alphabetically by author. Their home is lovely, happy and uncluttered. Their garage is so clean and spacious they can practice their ball room dancing in there.

Can these folks really be related to us?

It was a joy to see the kids so happy in their new home.

Over Eve's delicious roast, served on the thick marble table, Mark said one of his co-workers read a book I wrote and she said it was a factor, one of many I'm sure, that led her in volunteering to go to Haiti to help in earthquake relief work during her vacation time.

I don't know what to make of that.

I think I'm pleased.

This evening, my arthritis hurts like son of a bitch! I over did it moving stuff. I knew I should not have helped lift that washer and dryer. My furniture moving days should be over. That's a younger man's game. I need to remember that I'm not 70 any more and take it easy. I should know better. That was so stupid of me.

Strained and stiff and hurting.

Thought about stuff all day.

Moved stuff all day.

Yet piles of stuff still surround me.

And I feel like ... well, if you happen to see an ass in a ditch, his name is John.

Thursday, August 5, 2010 **Unearthed Stuff**

I'm not sure, but I may be receiving a box of human bones in the mail.

Yesterday, a young lady named Carla, who lives in another state, send me an e-mail containing this paragraph:

In cleaning out my parents closet, I've come across an old Kodak camera box - but on the outside of it is written in my daddy's hand - "Indian bones, Oystershell Mound, Mayport, Fl" - I VERY much would like for these to be returned to their proper resting place and I'm so very sorry, mortified, horrified that they

are in our keeping. Can you please, please help me find the right folks to contact about this?

Many of the mounds in the Mayport area have been excavated by archaeologists or lost to developers, but fortunately, I'm familiar with how to gain access to the one where the bones were most likely found.

So, I volunteered to take the bones to the site and return them to the mound if the lady chooses to mail her box to me. I also suggested several official agencies that might perform that same service.

We'll see what happens.

Here is a photograph of me in the 1950s helping survey a similar Indian Burial Mound; I'm on the left holding the transept pole as the archaeologist made a contour map of the site:



Incidentally, if the bones came from the mound I suspect they did, the dead Indian may well have been one of the Timucua or Guale tribes; many of those people here in Northeast Florida were Christianized through the efforts of Spanish missionaries.

No telling what you'll find when you clean out your Dad's closet, is there?

I wonder what our kids will make of the things they unearth when they clear out our house.

Speaking of unearthing...

While I was answering Carla's question, Ginny was packing things in boxes to go to the mission, to remove more stuff from our house as part of our most recent anti-clutter campaign.

She unearthed two things of interest:

As she packed an old stoneware milk pitcher, she noticed a date and signature on the bottom. I'd used the ugly thing to hold pipe cleaners. When Ginny checked online, she found a similar pitcher by the same potter recently sold for \$400.

Maybe so.

But it's still ugly.

And, if she does sent it out in one of the mission boxes just where does she expect me to store my pipe cleaners?

Ginny also unearthed three audio cassette tapes from 1995. They contain radio interviews where some guy asks me questions about a book I wrote. Neither Ginny nor I remember these radio programs. We don't have a clue about them...

And, although I'm sure these were important events to us in 1995, last night we neither one were interested enough to listen to the tapes.

Sic transit gloria mundi.

More stuff for the trash heap.

Speaking of a trash heap, poor people have swarmed among the household goods of that neighborhood family who were evicted. All that stuff piled along the curb is a treasure trove for other poor people.

My friend Rex, landlord of that house, came to visit me for a couple of hours this morning. I was so glad to see him and his son. We enjoyed a great time of catching up on family news and I went with him to tour his house. He had done everything possible to help that family out but since they had not been able to pay rent since November, he had no choice but to give them an eviction notice.

These are the same folks I helped move yesterday.

The evicted family left that house spotless. They mowed the grass. They cleaned the refrigerator. They washed the windows. They polished the floors. They swept the driveway—my house should be so clean.

I see God's kind hand in this whole deal as a Christian landlord and Christian tenants worked out the best deal they could in a tragic situation.

I'm convinced that much good will come from this circumstance.

But, today, I need to mow my own grass, blow off the roof, weedwhack the jungle path, and patch that burned place in the laundry room wall.

Stuff demands my attention.

And, O by the way, it might be best not to say anything to the mailman about any packages he may deliver to our house anytime soon.

Friday, August 6, 2010
When All I Can Do Ain't Enough...

I thought the saga of the evicted family was settled.

It's not.

I thought that the church their former landlord's family attends had taken this family under their wings and provided a place for them to live.

They didn't.

The family showed up on my doorstep again yesterday afternoon. The deal on the house they planned to move into fell through. They spent last night sleeping in their car at a highway rest area.

I could tell the whole story of how they came to this impoverished state but it would be like telling a bubble by bubble account of the sinking of the *Titanic*.

They're here. They're hurt. They're helpless.

In all Christian compassion, all I can say is "Tough tit".

I've helped all I care to help exhausting my emotional, financial, physical, and emotional resources—and these folks are still homeless.

Sometimes, all you can do ain't enough.

And I really feel as though they themselves have done all they can to remedy the situation but complex circumstances worked against them. Plus they were scammed by an exploitive preacher. They appear trapped.

They turned to me again for help.

I proved a cloud without rain.

The Lord talks about going a Second Mile when necessary, doing more than the minimum. He tells about the Good Samaritan who took in the hurt stranger, bound his wounds, and put him up in an inn, promising to pay any extra expenses incurred.

The Good Samaritan must have been rich.

I could not afford to stay in a hotel myself, much less put up a family of five there.

How come it is when I try to do good to folks, I end up feeling guilty?

When they showed up at my door yesterday, the evicted family hinted about staying the night sleeping on our living room floor.

Exercising my well-developed sense of Christian density, I deliberately did not take the hint. I referred them to a city agency, a secular city agency, which deals with homeless people all the time.

Funny thing, that.

I did not think of referring them to one of the many religious organizations where I have volunteered service in the past—not WESCO, nor Salvation Army, nor Clara White Mission, nor the Lord's Store, nor Circle of Love, nor Trinity, nor City Rescue Mission—all these places slipped my mind completely although I'm familiar with them all and I've dabbled at helping out with their soup kitchens at one time or another for years as time and inclination suited me.

In the past I've put this family in touch with Lutheran Social Services and with Catholic Charities, as well as some of the other Christian outfits around town—but nothing has worked out.

I also know that I could have called any one of my grown children and asked them to take in this family

temporarily, and I know the kids would have done it. I chose not to do that.

I could have called my friend Wes, a misanthrope well known for taking in strays in trouble; but he already has Ted, Reese, Mary and several other troubled folks under his wing at the moment. Or I could have called on Barbara, who in spite of her chemotherapy treatments, has been known to put folks up in a spare apartment at her old folks' home; But she has the ongoing Nathan and Brittany crisis to contend with.

I could have put these folks up in our home—Heaven knows when the kids were in college they'd bring home bus-loads of foreign exchange students stranded on campus alone every holiday and there'd be kids sleeping on every floor in living room, hallways and porch.

What's five or ten extra kids to the Cowart family? Somebody said that having a family is like having a bowling alley installed in your brain. As a silent, introspective man given to contemplation, I wonder how I survived.

Of course we lived in a much bigger house back then.

When Ginny and I took the Civilian Emergency Response Team disaster relief training, we prepared to use our home as a base of operations for a catastrophe in our neighborhood, so we could have treated this situation as a mass-casualty event—it is for the evicted family.

But I chose not to go into that mode.

To truth to tell, I just did not want to fool with anybody in our home at the moment. I'm tired. My arthritis hurts continuously (yes, I did yard work including blowing leaves off the roof yesterday morning so I'm in pain now). I have a book in the works that needs quite time for thinking. But mostly, I just did not want to be bothered.

I'm willing to follow Christ—up to a certain point, then I balk.

I've do what I'm willing to do.

Then I stop.

So, I referred the poor at my door to a secular agency.

No problem.

That's biblical.

I'm not the first guy in history to say, "There's no room at my inn".

On a happier note, for the second time in two weeks, I put out a fire in our house. Didn't need to call the fire department this time.

NOTE TO CONCERNED KIDS: Stop calling the nursing homes! It was not my fault this time either!

I was merely following the receipt in a cookbook about heating the olive oil to the point of smoking before browning the stew meat.

When I did that, two-foot-high flames erupted. With cool thinking, I clamped a lid over the flaming pan and put it out.

Rats! There was nobody else in the house to witness my act of heroism. Well, when Ginny got home, she did notice the smoke hanging in the air—but she just thought I was trying a new brand of pipe tobacco.

Honest, I am not a danger to anybody—and the stew was delicious.

Saturday, August 7, 2010
Today's My Brother's Birthday

Here's the birthday message I sent my brother this morning:

Happy Birthday David!

I'm sorry your cat broke your arm when you stepped on the creature last month.

Attached is a newspaper want ad you may want to answer.

Thinking of you.

John



Tuesday, August 10, 2010
On Doing Less With More

I expend more and more energy getting less and less done.

At the end of July I composed a work schedule for August which would account for every hour of my day from 4 a.m. when I wake to 10 p.m. when I fall asleep.

What a laugh.

The Bible says, Boast not thyself of tomorrow for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.

Some wag said, Want to hear God laugh?—Make plans.

I almost managed one single day of my work plan. That was on August first. Since then, I feel as though I've been juggling chain saws.

When I make plans for my day and make a 2do2da checklist of things I want to get done, something interrupts—I think it's called life.

Urgent needs bump my plans off the map.

How do other writers ever get a book written?

Beats me.

I plot and gather materials and think things through. I format the manuscript pages and envision the finished book...

Then life attacks...

Yesterday, a neighbor and his wife looking for a lost cat asked to search my yard.

And two little boys asked to hunt lizards in my garden.

Postman needs a package signed for. Lawnchair cushions need to be covered before they get wet. Pool hose springs a leak; got to fix it. Guy wants to get a dog house from next door. My garbage cans need to be moved out of the street. Someone smashed a soda bottle at the end of our drive and I need to sweep it up before we get a flat tire. A report comes that just before garbage pickup, a thief dumped a neighbor's garbage cans on his lawn and ran off stealing his garbage cans.

The folks looking for the lost cat found it, took it to the vet who put it down because the cat's cancer was too advanced. The young lady threw herself into my arms sobbing while her husband stood by crying in grief for their pet.

Ginny and I had to re-schedule a library trip and go by the bank to withdraw cash for today's activities.

And how much writing did I get done yesterday?

Answered a couple of e-mails—but not a word on my next book.

Who cares?

The news this morning tells me that according to Google's Advanced Algorithms, to date, there have been 129,864,880 books published. The couple I wrote drowned in this sea of pages and if I finished this next one and up the world total to 129,864,881—what does it matter?

What have I accomplished?

How do other men get so much done in life?

I remember an old cartoon where a middle-aged man fusses at his schoolboy son about homework.

The man says, "When Abraham Lincoln was your age, he walked ten miles to school and studied his books by firelight".

The kid replies, "Dad, when Abraham Lincoln was your age, he was President of the United States".

Wednesday, August 11, 2010
Funny things happen on our way to Jesus

A slight electrical problem prevented me from making a diary entry earlier today; here are two photos looking east and west in front of my house this morning:



Does that explain why I am so late? Now, for today's posting:

A 16th Century Puritan preacher advised his students, "Be thou not overly pious".

By that standard, (and none other) I'd have made a great Puritan had I lived 500 years ago. Case in point:

Tuesday my eldest daughter accompanied me on a drive up to Kingsland, Georgia, a town about 25 miles north of here.

A silly mood struck us as we drove.

With giddy laughter we exchanged jokes and foolhardy comments like you might hear from a couple of 12-year-olds. We joked about funerals. We chuckled about my prostate cancer. We roared with laughter about a bull that blunder into a church service. Birds that crash into window glass. Cats. Nurses. Cheese Grits. Any topic we picked set off gales of insane laughter over... nothing at all.

In the beautiful summer morning, we just felt happy and giddy and silly and nonsensical for no discernable reason at all.

As proof of how serious our trip was, the main accomplishment of the day was our buying a lampshade featuring a dull-color picture of Elvis!

Hoot!

After I dropped Jennifer back at her house, and went home, I found several telephone messages awaiting my attention.

Remember last week how I wrote mentioning a poor family in our neighborhood being evicted from their home? I just mentioned it as an important thing happening in my life.

Well, Monday morning I received this e-mail from a lady who lives on the other side of the Atlantic:

Dear John C,

It's half four in the morning and I ought to be in bed.

The thought of the homeless family is keeping me awake. Is there a US bank account to where I can send some tithe to Help out, even only for a short time.

I am not rich, living on disabled persons pension, but I have been blessed when giving tithe, and feel I should do so now. Maybe I could send money to you? Then it would be totally anonymous, and that's half the secret with giving. The left hand should not know what the right one is doing.

I replied to the lady on the far side of the sea:

It is so good that this kindness is in your heart. Jesus said that the poor are always with us and we may do them good whenever we wish. However, this gets complicated.

I feel very uncomfortable about handling someone else's money. Therefore I asked several people how to handle it. I'll tell you the options and you can choose the one best for you. First, Ginny suggested that instead of sending your gift over here, that you donate it to some poor person closer to your own home, to some poor family in your own country.

She replied that she felt strongly her gift should go to the poor family here in Jacksonville. Thing is, I know nothing about how to transfer money from one country to another; neither does she. However, Donald, my grown son here, and her beautiful college student daughter on the far side of the sea both know the ropes of computers. The two of them arranged a transfer.

The lady and I agree that without computer literate children, we would be lost in cyberspace! But thanks to our children's caring and skill, Yesterday evening I sent this e-mail:

You will be pleased to know that an hour ago, I picked up the \$500 cash from Donald; and about 15 minutes ago, I handed it over to (the poor family's parents) in the presence of their three children. The mother cried, the children cheered, and the father shook his head in utter disbelief at your kindness. They all praised Jesus for His care.

Tonight will be their last night of sleeping on the street. They tell me that this afternoon they found an apartment but the landlord wanted \$250 deposit in advance. Even though they did not have a penny, The mother told him she would be back and pay that deposit in the morning. You made her step of blind faith possible as a reality.

Ruth 2:12 says it best:

The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel under Whose wings thou art come to rest.

This morning the following e-mail arrived in my inbox:

Dear John C,

The honor and the glory belong to the living God ...

I just listened to a cry before going to sleep. One thing I have got confirmed though, is that the more foolish old

satan tells me I am acting, the more am I on the right path.

I did cost me some courage to write to you and ask. Like your wife said, I could have found someone nearer to help.

That was not how I felt. I was so deeply touched by your writing, I felt like climbing mountains..

I hope you know I am not to thank at all. I know God also touched my daughter's heart, when I told her about the lost family.

She was there on the minute to help me out.

So was your son.

At the end of another day I feel so grateful and happy, I feel like singing and dancing, but I shall have to go to bed.

Saint Paul said, "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which works all in all..."

"God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues... But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet show I unto you a more excellent way... "The greatest of these is love".

The gift of helps—isn't that a strange phrase?

And somehow it ties into love.

Now in all this I have only been an innocent bystander. That's what my life of faith amounts too—I just stand on the sidelines and watch to see what God may be doing. And sometimes I kibitz the real players.

For our after-supper devotions Monday night, Ginny read that portion of the Gospel where a bunch of kids gathered around Jesus but the disciples, serious godly men to a man, wanted to chase the kids away but Jesus kept talking with those kids.

I speculated about what in the world Jesus would find to talk about with a bunch of kids? Did He teach them some great theological truth?

Ginny said, "I'll bet they were telling Knock-Knock jokes".

I think she's right. That sounds like Jesus to me.

Friday, August 13, 2010
Reconnaissance Trip To An Indian Mound

Back on Thursday, August 5th, I wrote about how Carla, a lady up north, found a box of human bones when she cleaned out her father's closet.

The box label said they were Indian bones from a mound at Mayport, a fishing village at the mouth of the St. John's River. Carla's father may have dug in the mound back in the 1950s and kept the bones as souvenirs. Carla wanted these bones returned to their resting place with respect.

She had read something or another that I wrote and e-mailed me about the situation.

Indian burial mounds dot the sea islands of northeast Florida but I had a good idea of which mound these bones came from.

Carla mailed the bones to me asking that I re-bury them in the mound.

I intended to bury the box unopened till one of my grown daughters asked, "Dad, you have never met this lady. How do you know that she didn't off her boss or her landlord or her husband and is mailing you the bones to dispose of the evidence"?

So, I opened the box and examined the crumbled bone fragments. The bones are those of a person (or persons) who died at least five to seven hundred years ago.

I'm no forensic anthropologist but in my younger days I did help catalog human remains excavated from Indian mounds for Florida State University's museum collection. I'm satisfied that the bones Carla mailed to me are exactly as she believes them to be.

No boss or landlord or husband was in the box.

I have raised six suspicious kids.

Anyhow, I asked my grown children if they would like to go with Ginny and me next Sunday to re-inter the

bones holding a brief burial service, then go for a seafood dinner in Mayport.

Now, it's been 40+ years since I last saw the mound where I think these bones came from... Is it still there?

Unfortunately, civilization has not been kind to Indian burial mounds or kitchen middens in Florida. For years the state bulldozed mounds for road-building materials. Developers paved over mounds. Pot-hunters vandalized. Only recently have laws been enacted to protect these sites.

So I wondered if the mound I remembered was still in existence?

Trouble—a Google map search showed a parking lot there. Even the satellite view looked murky.

I searched for reports of professional excavations in the area.

I turned up a book by Drs. J. Mark Williams and Daniel Elliot, *A World Engraved: Archaeology Of The Swift Creek Culture* (University of Alabama Press, © 1998). The book describes finds in a mound designated 8DU96 in Mayport, Florida.

Worrisome—As I recall from my boyhood, there were five mounds in close proximity; have all been destroyed? Or is the most accessible one still there?

Friday morning I drove Ginny to work so I could go see before dragging a car caravan of people through the woods searching for something I may remember from 40+ years ago.

Found it!

My concerns were for naught.

I snapped a few background photos of the site which sits directly on the bank of a tidal estuary:



The mound lies just to the left of the five palms in the foreground of this next photo:



Used to be able to wade into the site from a bridge to the east, but it looks awfully slick and muddy to take the women in via that approach.

I circled through the undergrowth to the South where I encountered a hobo nest booby-trapped to keep intruders out. I let him sleep.

Heart-breaking, but debris now trashes up much of the area where uncaring people have dumped concrete chunks, tires, old bed springs, beer bottles, roofing materials—in my boyhood this was just wildwood.

On that side of the burial mound, someone has bulldozed and leveled much of the kitchen midden that once marked the village; it's a miracle the burial mound still lies hidden in the swamp.

Here is a photo of the northern approach through the jungle undergrowth (notice the thick trailer of wild grapevine amid the dead palm fronds):



More undergrowth clogs the western reaches:



Wiggling this way and that through a combination of twisting approaches, I reached the eastern slope of the mound:



This is the place I plan to burry the ancient Indian. The Williams' book says Swift Creek Culture Indians inhabited this area long before Columbus came to the New World.

As far as I know no remnant to these ancient people lives today; the last of the Gauli people died in 1715, and the Swift Creek People pre-dated them. I think their mounds deserve more respect than to be used a dumping ground. Scientific study of their culture is one thing; illegal dumping is another.

Be that as it may, I am happy to see the site I remember remains. Maybe it's a good thing it's so hard to get to.

A major roadway barely misses plowing through this mound. I'm glad the highway did not obliterate it.

Here is a photo of the marsh with U.S. Navy ships docked at Mayport Naval Station poking up antenna in the far distance...

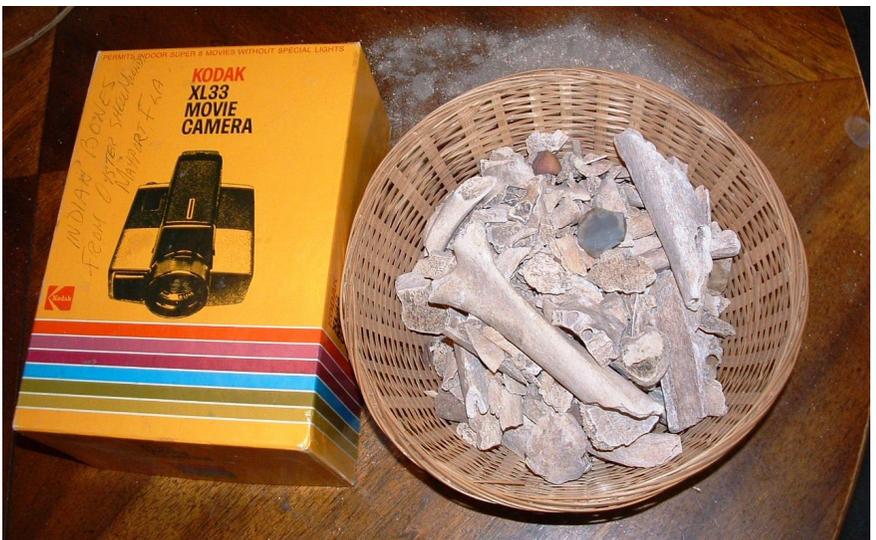


While, above the marsh a heron scans the estuary for fish just as he did in the times of the Indians.



Monday, August 16, 2010
Basket Burial

To bury the human bones, which Carla had mailed me in an old Kodak film box, the first thing I did Sunday morning was to transfer the bones into a basket. This seemed appropriate to me because Indian mounds in Florida often contain basket burials.



While many bodies were laid out flat on their backs and others curled up as if to sleep, in some cases, the bones of people were gathered up from a charnel house, transported to an existing burial mound in baskets, a hole dug in that mound, then the basket of bones buried.

Some anthropologists theorize that, since ancestors were considered a part of the family unit, then whenever a family moved to a new camp site, the bodies of ancestors were dug up and moved, then buried anew at the “sacred spot” near the new encampment.

Ginny and I invited our children to accompany us to Mayport to bury the ancient Indian



bones Carla found in her father’s closet; Ginny snapped this photo of Donald (on the left), Helen, Eve, Mark, and me.

I’m glad I scoped out the site Friday because even though I found the easiest way into the site, we still had to contend with a lot of undergrowth:



Mark, a transplanted yankee, worried about alligators from the adjacent marsh; I was more concerned about the danger of ticks and snakes in the tangles of vines.

Huge amounts of trash, construction debris, concrete chunks, old tires, coils of wire and just plain junk litter the mound area, but we found a clear spot to dig in the side of the mound:



Often the Mound-Builders (Gauli or Timuqua ?) started a mound with the funeral of some important person. As years went by and other people died, their bodies were honored in burial by laying them atop the initial burial. This went on till a considerable mound was raised.

The mourners often covered the person with a layer of red pigment or red clay. Sometimes, funeral offerings accompanied the dead,

and often a layer of oyster shells covered the body to keep animals from digging it up.

As we buried the bones Carla sent, I placed a few oyster shells over the basket. Not having any red clay handy, we wrapped the bones in a red napkin. I included in a sealed packet a printout of correspondence explaining how this



particular basket burial came to be where it is (just in case archaeologists excavate this mound in the near future). And, because God graced us with the gift of tobacco through the Indians, I sprinkled a pinch of pipe tobacco from my pouch in the grave:

Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.

Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men.

For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night. ...we spend our years as a tale that is told.

The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away. ... So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

Thus begins Psalm 90 as Donald read the Service For The Burial Of The Dead from *the Book Of Common Prayer*.



I had no way of knowing from the evidence of the bones, whether the person we were returning to the mound had been a man or woman, (I could tell from mandible fragments that he or she was about 40 years old). Nor could I tell from the flint chips and potsherds mixed with the dust if this were a pagan, Spanish catholic or French protestant Huguenot (all three co-existed in northeast Florida in the early 1500s, therefore, I felt the Prayer Book service would seemly honor the dead Indian —after all, someone is likely to read this same service over my own body when I die.

I read a section from John's Gospel where Jesus said,

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live...

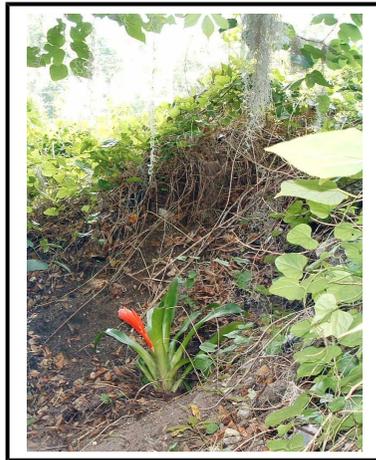
Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.

Strange to think that these dry bones will rise again as a living person, same and you and I will rise in the sure and certain hope of Christ's resurrection.

Exciting times lie ahead for us all!

To finish off the grave site, we planted a hearty bromeliad from our garden to mark the spot amid the debris now ruining this ancient monument raised by a long forgotten people...

Well, maybe not utterly forgotten.



Wednesday, August 18, 2010
A Five-Hour Breakfast With Wes

My friend Wes, world's most opinionated and charitable man, treated me to breakfast and conversation Tuesday morning. At Ayer's Restaurant we chowed down on fried corned-beef hash, fried eggs, grits lathered with butter, and sausage-gravy biscuits—the health food special.

Hey, it must be healthy; we thrive on it.

On the drive over, Wes told me about the most recent plight of a poor family he has helped for years and years and years, yet they continue to act hell-bent with more self-destructive decisions. Wes batted away tears as he told this latest episode in their saga.

I'll say more about his compassion later.

He just returned from a trip to Atlanta where he relished discussing theology and hymnology with a couple of like-minded guys and gals he has been mentoring up there.

He brought me a white Panama hat.

Only if I wear this white hat will anyone ever be able to tell I'm one of the good guys.

For five hours we smoked our pipes and discussed: the glory of God, election, abortion, the Tabernacle, Revelation, murder, the natural immortality of the human soul (or lack thereof), the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Prophet Jeremiah, the meaning of the word *Blessed*, and a host of other such subjects.

Wes and I disagree on just about every issue without being disagreeable.

That sparks our conversations into so much fun.

Far be it from me to misrepresent his opinions, so I won't go into detail.

Wes summed up one topic by saying, "John, it may be just my own humble opinion, which nevertheless is always right, but I believe...".

We had a blast talking!

As we drove back to my house, we saw a young mother on foot with a brood of five, six or eight knee-high kids. She was in obvious distress on the other side of the hot, dusty highway.

"Looks like they're in trouble," Wes said.

"Looks like a bottomless pit of trouble," I said. "Tell you what... You be the priest and I'll be the Levite. That means we can leave them for the Good Samaritan to find.... Or the wolves—whichever comes along first".

Friday, August 20, 2010
When they said they'd pray for me, I cringed.

Yesterday my friend Barbara White treated me to breakfast. Barbara is the author of the *Along The Way* series of books (available at www.bluefishbooks.info). I believe that her writings will someday be ranked among the great Christian spiritual classics.

We've been friends for over 30 years and she's practically a member of my family.

She's undergoing another round of chemotherapy for her cancer. She's over 80 and gets around with the help of an aluminum walker. Age, the cancer, and it's treatment have worn her down. She's weary.

The church Barbara attends believes strongly in healing and the efficacy of prayer.

A few days ago a group of women buttonholed her after church, saying they wanted to pray for her. "John, when they said they'd pray for me, I cringed".

I don't recall a single incident where Jesus ever cured anyone of old age. It takes energy to be prayed for.

But Barbara need not have cringed; the wise leader of this group of women asked Barbara, "What do you want us to pray"?

Barbara said she prays that her death will not be too painful and that it not be too messy.

And that's what the group prayed for.

Saturday, August 21, 2010
A Bucket Of Worms

Ginny off yesterday for a doctor's appointment; later we spent the afternoon moving furniture around—my favorite chair to the curb for the trashmen (too shabby for Goodwill), the rocker from the tv room to the living room, the new chair Jennifer gave us to the tv room for Gin to sit in while watching.

Did I mention that my favorite chair, the only comfortable one in the house went to the curb as garbage? So it was tattered with stuffing coming out and

it sagged. Big deal. It sagged in the same places I do. I feel loss. Live with it, John.

Paid Donald back the \$200 I'd borrowed from him last month to have had money for our vacation trip. I hate to borrow money. So I'm relieved to be able to pay this back. Donald said that he'd forgotten that I borrowed it, but the debt has weighted heavy on my mind.

Held Ginny in my lap for 40 minutes telling her how much I loved her, how beautiful she is, how smart. I reminisced about romantic moments from 40 years ago telling her the details of a dress she wore to an office dinner, about walks in the park beside the waterfall, how crazy I was about her then and now.

I asked her what she remembered about our romantic courtship? After ten minutes of total silence, she finally thought of something. "You've been a nice husband," she said.

Well, if you can't say anything good about someone, say nothing at all.

Later we watched a tv show about a lady school teacher and a 16-year-old boy. I identified with that. Kid was a useless piece of crap!

While I was at my daughter's picking up the chair she gave us, I helped the girls with a slight problem—worms.

Many, many worms.

The girls had left a big bucket containing chemical fire logs out by the barbecue pit. The lid didn't fit tight and rain water filled the bucket to the brim. When they removed the lid yesterday, they found the bucket working alive with large insect larvae—so many the water appeared to boil.

The bucket of worms was too heavy to lift or even tip over.

I have no idea what kind of larvae—thick, white, about an inch and a half long. Reminded me of the sawyer worms we used to use a fish bait when I was a kid.

The girls had poured Clorox into the bucket. Didn't seem to bother the worms at all.

Only one thing to do.

Call dad.

I propped a section of window screen wire on some bricks and used a dipper to strain water through the wire capturing the wiggling worms. When the wire was full, I knocked it out into a plastic leaf bag. That technique lowered the water/worm lever some.

But those chemical logs in the bucket prevented me from dipping more.

Nothing left for it.

I had to plunge my hands into the bucket of squirming worms and lift out each water-logged log and throw it into a garbage can.

Up to my elbows in worms.

Again and again.

Eight logs in the tub. Eight logs lifted out.

That lightened the bucket enough I could pour the remaining wormwater through my makeshift sieve.

Worms that escaped the process onto the patio, I squished underfoot like a mad stomp dancer.

Put all the debris into a big black plastic leaf bag. Put the bucket and lid in there too. Sealed it up and dragged it to the curb. Hosed off the patio.

And that was the highpoint of my life today.

Sunday, August 22, 2010 Queen Of Sheba

Saturday night Mark and Eve treated us to dinner at the Queen of Sheba Ethiopian Restaurant, a spacious room decorated with drapes of red, black, green and yellow—the colors of the Ethiopian flag. Large woven baskets and chargers of dark carved wood are on display, as well as fabric printed with Coptic scenes.

The menu was printed in both English and Ethiopian Coptic script.

I ordered a dish known as Platter Number 44—in Coptic that's pronounced as Platter Number 44. It consisted of tasty stuff on a plate—very spicy stuff.

You have to request tableware because you use a large pancake, soft flatbread known as *injera* to pick up

lamb, beef and various spicy mixtures of beans and vegetables.

Be warned. The cool-looking salad is the hottest thing on your plate! It's coated with a light pepper oil that you notice immediately.

We enjoyed conversation about books and jobs in the relaxed atmosphere.

Of course, the name of the restaurant reminds me of my dog Sheba who lived with us for 17 years before her death a few years back:



I also thought of Sheba when my daughter Jennifer forwarded me the following e-mail story:

A man and his dog were walking along a road. The man was enjoying the scenery, when it suddenly occurred to him that he was dead.

He remembered dying, and that the dog walking beside him had been dead for years. He wondered where the road was leading them.

After a while, they came to a high, white stone wall along one side of the road.

It looked like fine marble. At the top of a long hill, it was broken by a tall arch that glowed in the sunlight. When he was standing before it, he saw a magnificent gate in the arch that looked like mother-of-pearl, and the street that led to the gate looked like pure gold.

He and the dog walked toward the gate, and as he got closer, he saw a man at a desk to one side. When he was close enough, he called out, 'Excuse me, where are we?'

'This is Heaven, sir,' the man answered.

'Wow! Would you happen to have some water?' the man asked.

'Of course, sir. Come right in, and I'll have some ice water brought right up.'

The man gestured, and the gate began to open. 'Can my friend,' gesturing toward his dog, 'come in, too?' the traveler asked.

'I'm sorry, sir, but we don't accept pets.'

The man thought a moment and then turned back toward the road and continued the way he had been going with his dog.

After another long walk, and at the top of another long hill, he came to a dirt road leading through a farm gate that looked as if it had never been closed. There was no fence.

As he approached the gate, he saw a man inside, leaning against a tree and reading a book....

'Excuse me!' he called to the man. 'Do you have any water?'

'Yeah, sure, there's a pump over there, come on in.'

'How about my friend here?' the traveler gestured to the dog.

'There should be a bowl by the pump,' said the man.

They went through the gate, and sure enough, there was an old-fashioned hand pump with a bowl beside it.

The traveler filled the water bowl and took a long drink himself, then he gave some to the dog.

When they were full, he and the dog walked back toward the man who was standing by the tree.

'What do you call this place?' the traveler asked.

'This is Heaven,' he answered.

'Well, that's confusing,' the traveler said.

'The man down the road said that was Heaven, too.'

'Oh, you mean the place with the gold street and pearly gates? Nope. That's Hell.'

'Doesn't it make you mad for them to use your name like that?'

'No, we're just happy that they screen out the folks who would leave their best friends behind.'

**Monday, August 23, 2010
Ax Handle Saturday**

All this week local media and organizations emphasize Ax Handle Saturday, August 27, 1960, when an episode of racial violence broke out in Jacksonville.

Here is a 50-year-old newspaper clipping describing it:

An overview of related events can be found at

<http://jacksonville.com/news/metro/2010-08-22/story/ax-handle-saturday-1960-day-defia> .

Page 118 of my book *Heroes All: A History Of Firefighting In Jacksonville, Florida* (www.bluefishbooks.info) tells about an incident of forgiveness related to Ax Handle Saturday:

FORGIVENESS

On Ax Handle Saturday, when he got off work and headed home, a 17-year-old cafeteria worker at Morrison's on Monroe Street, across from Hemming Park, was beaten about the head and shoulders.

He ran to a policeman for aid; the cop brushed him off saying, "Get out of town before they kill you".

**VIOLENCE FLARES
IN JACKSONVILLE**

**50 Injured as White Gangs
Clash With Negroes—
16-Year-Old Stabbed**

By United Press International.

JACKSONVILLE, Fla., Aug. 27—Angry bands of club-swinging whites clashed with Negroes in the streets of downtown Jacksonville today.

At least fifty persons were injured. A white youth was stabbed and two Negroes suffered minor bullet wounds. Patrolmen armed with shotguns and threatening to use fire hoses succeeded in dispersing most of the crowd of 3,000 that gathered in the downtown area.

However, there were reports of incidents far into the night, particularly in Negro districts and outlying areas.

Years later, the people of Jacksonville elected that same young man, Nat Glover, as our first black sheriff since Reconstruction days.

In 1999, as part of an oral history project, Sheriff Glover made an audio recording in which he told about an experience he had at a community meeting:



A gentleman approached me and asked if he could talk with me. I told him: 'You certainly may,' but I had to finish what I was doing at the time. I can remember he was standing off on the side waiting patiently to speak to me. Somehow it was

clear in my mind that he wanted to be the last one to speak to me, ... He didn't want anyone to hear what he had to say.

And he did diligently wait, and he came up afterward . . . everybody had pretty much left, and he said that he had read in the newspaper about my account of the incident when I was a student, a 17-year-old youngster at Morrison's cafeteria and the confrontation I had at Woolworth's that day. And that he had been a part of that mob that day.

And he wanted me to forgive him. I think as he stood there with tears in his eyes and obviously emotionally distraught as a result of it, my response to him was that if any way my forgiving you would vindicate you from this emotional trauma you are feeling as a result of being a part of that . . . I wanted him to know that I forgave him.

And he left. And that was rather traumatic for me emotionally as well.

But I have to say, to sit here as sheriff of my hometown, a city which I love and have been a resident of all my life, it's truly been a blessing. And as I reflect on that incident and where I've been able to come from to where I am now, I have to think that somehow God allowed me to experience that day so that I can be here this day as sheriff of Duval County, 'cause certainly it allows me to have the sensitivity in having experienced those . . . the

type of incident that I experienced. It makes me a better, more sensitive sheriff.'

Wednesday, August 25, 2010 Lumps Of Coal

In cleaning out my office storage shed yesterday I discovered a bag containing lumps of black coal.

They brought back memories—but not enough of them.

Back years ago when I taught an adult Bible class, one of the studies covered the book of Job. In those days I had an odd talent of using various physical items to illustrate Bible chapters.

For instance, I used a beach ball for class members to toss to one another while wearing funny hats to illustrate the sequence of speeches given by the main characters in Job. To illustrate another chapter in the book, I wore a mask shaped like the head of an ostrich. And I used a battery-run paper shredder to grind up dollar bills.

Then, of course, you can't teach the book of Job without passing the skull of a sail catfish around among class members.

All this foolishness generated laughs, served as memory aids, sparked interest, and prepared our minds for the deadly serious lessons to be gleaned from Job.

After the course in Job finished, I packed all these teaching aids away in my office storage shed just in case I ever would be called upon to teach that series of lessons again.

I wasn't.

Year after year this stuff sat deteriorating, gathering dust, falling apart. My ostrich mask molted—the bright hot-pink feathers shed away in the plastic storage bag. Xeroxed copies of Scripture chapters yellowed, curled and crumbled.

This week I am throwing out old stuff stored in that shed to make room for new stuff to suffer the same fate as my ostrich. ...

Although I may never touch this stuff again, I feel reluctant to let it go into the garbage can. What if I ever

need it again? Will I ever be able to replace this thing? Will one of my children follow in my footsteps as a Bible teacher and want to use the object lessons I spent so much time and energy collecting?

Or does this stuff, having once served its purpose, perish in the using?

Was the thing and my use of the thing for that moment only?

I suspect so.

One dusty, crumbling box I unpacked contained lumps of coal. Lumps of coal I used to illustrate a chapter in Job. I remember that lesson well... Almost. Coal is a rarity here in Florida; where could I find lumps of coal for my lesson. Old railroad tracks run near our house. I walked for miles along those tracks picking up lumps of coal that had been dropped from trains in a bygone age. Got them home, washed and polished them. Selected the right-sized ones. One for each class member. Wrote a Bible verse in white ink on each lump of coal. Wrapped it in a bright red napkin ... taught the lesson. People took their lumps of coal home to use as paperweights.

The extra lumps of coal, I packed away... until yesterday.

I remember so much about those lumps of coal. I smile remembering how excited class members were about all the odd little object lessons, how they generated laughter and sometimes tears.

One problem.

I have forgotten which Scripture verse the lumps of coal illustrated.

I racked my brain trying to recall what I had been teaching. What was the verse printed in white on the black rocks? Why the red napkins? What was God telling us in the Scripture about His character, love, and intentions for us in times of trouble? What does Job teach me about how to live in a world where man that is born of woman is few of days and full of troubles?

My mind remains blank.

The lumps of coal are no longer conveyers of truth and beauty. I have forgotten their meaning. They are just dusty old rocks.

I threw them in the trash.

Thursday, August 26, 2010
I am poor and needy. Yet...

Earlier this morning I happened to read Psalm 40 which contains the phrase, "I am poor and needy. Yet the Lord thinketh on me". I think that perhaps maybe I saw an example of this yesterday as I continued to clean out the shed where hundreds of my books are stored and where the raccoons gnawed a hole through the roof about six weeks ago.

(See my June 2nd posting in the archives for details of my adventures with the raccoons).

Yesterday I shifted huge amounts of stuff from that shed—books, boxes, papers, files, teaching aids. I culled as I worked and filled four garbage cans with papers and object lessons and stuff I had saved for God only knows what reason.

As I worked in the 90+ degree heat—the Jacksonville weather bureau marks this summer as the hottest since 1871—as I worked in the 90+ degree heat unpacking old boxes and deciding what to continue saving and what to toss out, I discovered some awards I had won decades ago.

I'd forgotten all about these awards.

Not given them a thought in ages.

Are they something to keep? Or something to toss?

These are not like an Olympic Gold Metal, or an Oscar—just trinkets showing that long ago I once won first prize in a craft show, a safe truck driving award, fourth place in a writer's recognition thing.

Who knows or cares about yesteryear's honors? Pawnshop windows abound in tarnished gold-looking trophies and silver-looking loving cups testifying that some dead guy once hit a ball.

But life's triumphs come rare enough to me and I relish every one. So I gloated over these awards I once

won and chose to re-pack them in boxes with books I wished to keep and put them back in office storage.

Problem... where in office storage?

The whole point in repairing the coon-ravished roof and cleaning out the office shed was to make more room for new things that need (???) to be stored for future use.

And cleaning out this area was hot, dirty work because to start with I climbed a ladder and cut tree branches overhanging above the shed to deny future raccoons access. And I worked down from there patching the roof, removing a dead coon from the rafters, sorting and cleaning and packing and deciding and remembering.

I decided the best place to store the heavy boxes of books, object lessons, and my precious awards was up in the rafters.

Problem... I can not lift those boxes and climb the ladder at the same time.

I am 71 years old, I am fat and weak (though still handsome), and I have arthritis something fierce so that some times I can hardly walk even with a cane.

How am I to climb a 12-foot ladder carrying a box of books, reach above my head, and store that box in the rafters?

I am poor and needy.... Yet...

I decided the task was impossible for me to do. I'd have to manipulate stuff around and consider other options...

My future work on the shed this whole week was blocked until I could dispose of these boxes first.

I sat in the shade panting from my exertions and puffing my pipe and ruminating over what to do and how to do it... and a car pulled in the drive.

A young man who used to live in the neighborhood "happened" to be driving by and thought, on the spur of the moment, to drop in to see me and talk about Tuesday's election results.

A strong young man. Strong. Agile. Spry.

In moments, he scampered up the ladder with a box on his shoulder. Then another one. Then another one...

Six times he climbed the ladder and placed my treasures in the rafters safe from coons, rain, wind, termites, and dark of night.

And he wasn't even breathing hard.

Why had he stopped by my house at just the moment I needed help?

Happenstance?

Circumstance?

A desire to know my political views?

Or a divine impulse to stop in to see a poor and needy old man too much of a wimp to lift a box of books?

No big miraculous event this, but it was a help I needed at that moment.

His eye is on the sparrow. The hairs of your head. He calls each star by name.

I am poor and needy, yet the Lord thinketh on me.

Oh, by the way, if you're interested in my political views, I vote a straight Moe ticket. You know, among candidates of equal appeal, I stand in the voting booth and say, "*Eeny, meeny, miny, moe...*"

Friday, August 27, 2010 On The Other Hand...

Yesterday (Thursday) I wrote about how I detected God's loving hand in the fact that when I needed help lifting some heavy boxes on Wednesday, a young man showed up out of the blue to lift them for me.

On the other hand, yesterday (Thursday) I desperately needed help moving two heavy seven-foot tall bookcases, nobody showed up to help and I just about strained a gut manhandling the damn things from one wall across the room to another.

Does that mean that God saw my need Wednesday and loved me enough to send help, but Thursday He ignored me?

Does He love us one day but not the next?

Or when things went well for me Wednesday did I read God's love into the happy circumstance when He had nothing to do with it; but when things turned to crap on

Thursday did I conclude that He does not love me when He had nothing to do with moving bookcases?

In other words, do I see God in places He ain't?

Do I not see Him in places He is?

Does God reveal Himself and His character and His love in immediate circumstance?

Help lifting boxes = He loves me; No help moving bookcases = He hates me.

When things go well, Yea, God. When things go ill, Why hast Thou forsaken me?

How do I know God cares when I have to tip a seven-foot-tall bookcase toward me? These bookcases are solid oak built back in the 1920s and if I tip one too far, it would squish me like a bug.

I rock it back and forth and walk it till I hit and break a hanging light fixture I forgot was overhead. So I try sliding the bookcase, pulling and tugging and pushing till the carpet wrinkles and rips, while I sweat and curse and pray and strain muscles and pinch my fingers against the wall and set it down on an ingrown toenail.

Does God's love depend on immediate circumstance?

What says the Scripture?

"The love of God is shown toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us".

And, He is the lamb slain before the foundation of the world.

Yes, sometimes immediate things go well for us and it is right and proper to give Him thanks, but His love is eternal and when things go ill, that's just a sign that we live in a temporal world where we get old and weak and bookcases get heavier with each passing year.

Our faith rests on nothing less than the historic event of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Nothing less.

Jesus Christ the son of God, who has life in Himself, who died for us and rose again because He is the Lord of life, the almighty God come to earth, to do something more than help me move bookcases.

OK. Now I got the bookcases to the opposite wall by the strength of my mighty arm and skillful maneuverings. Now what?

I climbed the ladder, drilled holes and anchored the things. I dusted them and sprayed insecticide to prevent silverfish from eating my books.

Have I mentioned that here in Jacksonville, Florida, this is the hottest summer on record since 1871? For 50 days straight our temperature has risen above 90 degrees; and just about every afternoon we get torrential rainfalls (yesterday the weather man said we were getting three inches of rain an hour).

And have I mentioned that the reason I'm moving all these books is that raccoons had gnawed holes (four of them) in the roof of my office storage shed where I warehouse hundreds of valuable books?

So, after wrestling those bookcases into place, ripping the carpet and cracking the light fixture in the process, it was time to move the books from the two desks where I had piled them in head-high stacks...

Mildew.

My books stick together.

The heat and humidity act like Superglue binding cover to cover. Spines warp and pages wrinkle.

After all the work I've put into saving these books over the past four months, I may lose them all anyhow.

Moving those bookcases was a final step in a process that may well prove to have been in vain anyhow.

I have devoted so much energy to this. I've worked so hard. I feel so frustrated and tired and frustrated and stymied and frustrated and exhausted and frustrated...

All those books need to be in a humidity and temperature-controlled environment...

Hell comes to mind!

Tuesday, August 31, 2010
Books In My Mind's Eye

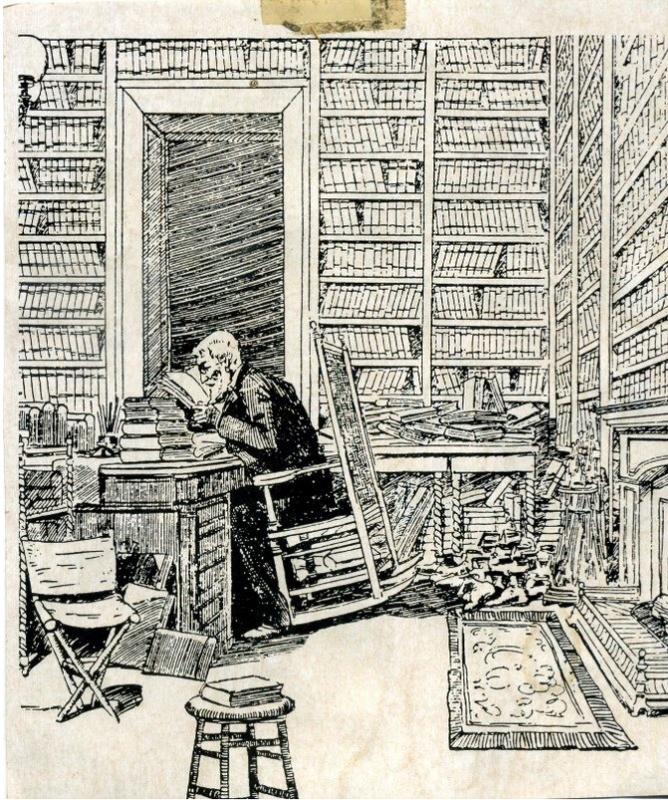
Since May when raccoons gnawed a hole in the roof of my outside office where I stored many, many books, I have worked to repair the damages.

Turns out there were four holes, three of which I could not see till I climbed on the roof. I trapped one raccoon and released it into a state forest. Unfortunately in clearing out the books, I discovered two raccoons had died in there—I've heard of an elephant graveyard in Africa... could it be that my office shed is the long-lost place where raccoons go to die?

Anyhow, as I worked to rescue my hundreds and hundreds of books, files and papers, I've been inundated with books and decisions to make about them. I've sent boxes full of theology books to a local seminary, more boxes to the Friends of the Library sale, and some to a local bookstore for resale. I carry loads of books in my sleep:



In moving a bookcase the other day I discovered a picture from some old magazine taped to the side; in my mind's eye, I see myself in this picture:



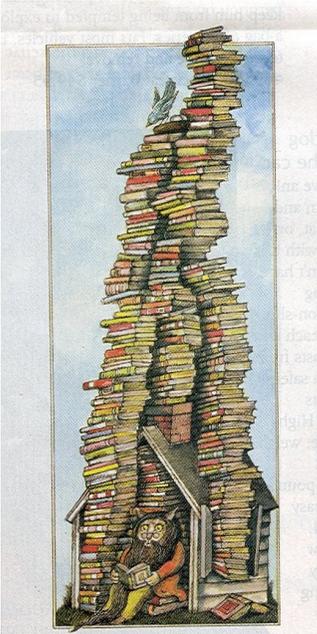
I have read only a tiny portion of the books I own. But I like to appear as a serious scholarly kind of guy and what better way to appear educated when I'm not than to have my photo taken with a case full of books in the background? Don't I look intelegent? intellegint?

inteligunt?

Smart?



When you don't have the reality, then sport the trappings. Like, how can anyone ever know I'm a Christian if I don't have a bumper sticker? I mean if they just look at how I behave, how would they ever guess?



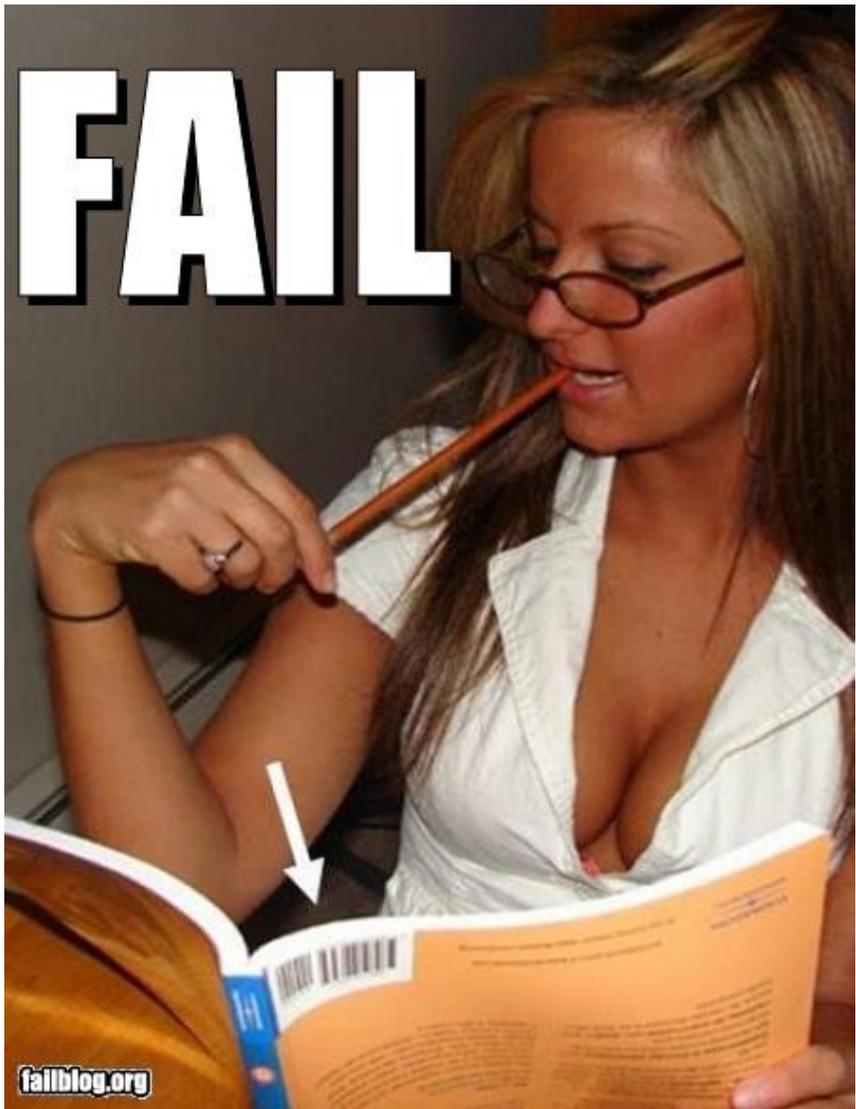
Anyway, as I approach the end of my book-clearing project, in my mind's eye I see myself as swamped by heavy volumes:

Of course as a writer, I need books written by other people for research. Especially when I write local history books, I rely on ancient written records compiled by writers who lived years before me. So I have piles of old books which I can quote from without fear of copyright violation because the authors are long-dead.

I entertain a vision of my next book, one which is sure to top the popularity charts, which will win me world-wide acclaim, and make

me not only famous but wealthy beyond any dream of avarice.

Also in my mind's eye, I picture a typical fan who buys and reads books I have written. Recently I came across a photo of my typical reader on the Fail Blog. You can tell she's reading one of my books by looking at the bar-code:

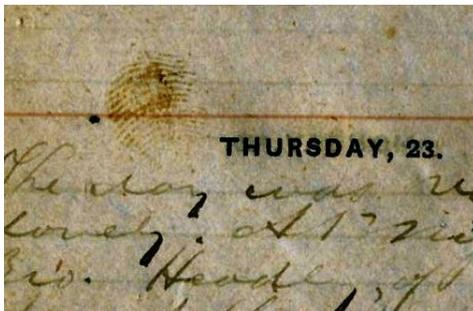


Wednesday, September 1, 2010
**September's Free E-Book and A 150-Year-
Old Fingerprint**

Of all the books the books I've ever written or edited—I think there have been 22 of them—working with *William F. Short's 1854 Diary* gave me the most fun.



One night I got so excited that I ran and dragged Ginny out of the shower and rushed her naked and dripping to the computer to show her how with computer enhancements I'd discovered a 150-year-old fingerprint in the pages of the diary. Here's a photo—not of Ginny, of the fingerprint:



Ginny was not as thrilled as I was. She has no sense of adventure.

Reading between the lines of William Short's Diary, we trace the convoluted love-life and temptations of a 19th Century Methodist teacher/circuit rider, a happy man, as he records his daily activities.

I find his diary charming.

Therefore, my Bluefish Books Free E-Book for September is *William F. Short's 1854 Diary* in pdf format.

To download your free copy to read on your computer or e-book reader, simply click on the **sidebar** link beneath the picture of the little man getting hit by lightning as he reads atop a ladder.

If you'd like to read a description of my own adventures editing this diary, check out my July 2nd through 16th entries in my 2009 archives.

Ginny says it doesn't take much to thrill me.... (I think she finds me amusing).

Thursday, September 2, 2010 Marriage Questions

My e-friend Sherri at Matter Of Fact (at <http://matteroffactsite.blogspot.com/>) plans to speak at a marriage conference and she's ask that her readers answer 20 questions about their marriages.

I volunteered and I asked Ginny if she would be interested in answering the same questions from her point of view. She's not.

Ginny says that marriage is not a one-size-fits-all proposition and that no one knows what goes on inside a marriage except the two principals involved.

Therefore I am filling out this questionnaire without adult supervision. My answers are totally my own and I am not responsible for their content:

1. How long have you been married?

Ginny and I have been married for 43 years and the longer we're married, the less I know about marriage.

2. What most surprised you about married life?

I'd been married once before and it surprised me that some of the same problems in my first marriage cropped

up in my second one and since the women were different, the only common denominator was—me.

3. What initially attracted you to your mate?

Dumb question!

But on reflection, I remember thinking that when Ginny married, she would be totally dedicated to the lucky guy.

4. Is that particular quality/attribute still present?

Yes. She still retains all the qualities I admired in her from the start.

5. If you could change one thing about your marriage, what would it be?

I would earn enough to support my family.

6. What is the best thing about your relationship?

We feel secure and comfortable with each other. She is my best friend. I feel I can rely on her.

7. What do you argue about most?

We have different views of what we want out of life at this point.

8. Have you ever contemplated divorce?

Yes... When we'd been married about two years, I earned a bonus check for \$700 and deposited it in the bank. I wrote checks for that \$700. Ginny also wrote checks for that same \$700!

Checks bounced like popcorn from an uncovered pan!

We were out of town when this happened and in the ensuing argument, I drove her to the bus station in Booneville, Missouri, at 3 a.m. so she could leave me permanently. The next bus would not come till 6 a.m. so we sat alone fuming in the darkened terminal... We decided that we wanted to stay together no matter what. So we left and drove on, still furious with each other, with no problem of checks resolved, but still together.

9. Is there anything you resent about your mate?

Yes, over the years Ginny lost much of her hearing and sometimes I suspect that she chooses not to hear me when she doesn't want to.

10. What do you need most from your relationship?

Compliments.

11. Do you have a "date night" regularly?

Yes. For years we set aside Friday nights for time together. If we can afford nothing else, we walk down to the park and share a Three Musketeers candy bar.

12. What do you do for fun?

We both love to read and virtually every week we have a library night. We also love to go to garage sales where I buy wonderful treasures (But Ginny says, "One man's trash is another man's trash".)

13. Do you feel you have grown closer or further apart during your marriage?

Both.

14. How important do you think sex is in a marriage relationship?

Nothing is more important! Nothing!

15. Do you tell your mate you love them, or compliment them regularly? And vice versa?

Every morning before we dress for work, I hold Ginny on my lap, kiss her, touch her, pray for her and tell her that I adore her.

She tolerates me.

16. If you have children, did your relationship strengthen or become strained/weaker afterward?

I am the father of six children, three daughters and three sons. Having a family is like having a bowling alley installed in your head.

17. Which word best describes your relationship?
*Stale *Exciting *Exhausting *Loving *Empty
*other _____

Enduring.

18. Have you or would you consider counseling if needed?

Yes. Some wise Englishman said, "The chief end of all human endeavor is to be happy at home". Ginny and I do all we can to protect the blessing we've been given.

19. What do you think is the most important factor in a marriage?

See question 14 above!

The next most important thing is to always assume the good will of your mate even when you do not understand the what or why of what she's doing at the moment.

Maintain an "Us Against The World" attitude.

Never, never, never put her down. The whole damn world is against you and belittling you so never let that happen in your marriage.

20. What advice would you give an engaged couple?

Buy a bicycle.

In a box.

(You are going to give it to some poor kid in the slums).

Then the two of you take it home and assemble it together.

If you still want to get married after putting a bicycle together, then you have a good chance of making it as a married couple.

Friday, September 3, 2010

A Twenty-Year-Old Encounter With God

My friend Barbara White's blood cell count was so off this week that the oncologist could not give her chemotherapy so she came over yesterday and treated me to a Chinese lunch at Silver Star.

Barbara is the author of the *Along The Way* series of books at www.bluefishbooks.info .

I asked her if the blood count thing is good news or bad; she said "It just is".

We mostly talked about books and movies and gardening—the comfortable trivia of old friends.

A year or two ago Barbara entrusted me with a stack of spiral-bound notebooks, her prayer diaries for 40+ years. I have been slowly transcribing and editing these for eventual publication. I'm up to mid-September in 1990. Back then, Barbara, religion editor at the *Florida*

Times-Union newspaper, was a much sought after speaker for Bible conferences and seminars.

Here is a transcription of some retreat notes in *Barbara White's Prayer Diary* from 1990:

September 15, 1990

Read John 20:24-31.

Doubting Thomas was not looking for signs or things, he wanted an encounter with Jesus, the Risen Christ. He was not convinced by the testimony of others: he heard the testimony, he believed the testimonies with a grain of salt, he hungered for it, but he insisted on his own encounter. The testimony of others creates hunger and gives credibility but it does not give the encounter.

An encounter with Christ is a realization of God's presence in your own life.

Mystics tell us that a deep awareness of God involves three things:

1. Waiting on God—wasting time as with a friend. Waiting is a kind of prayer.

2. Listening—not singing or praying or reading or studying, but listening.

3. Experiencing—I want God to make His word happen for me.

It's real. Or it's not real. God is alive. Or not alive.

An encounter with God demands things:

1. Being comfortable in the presence of God—we're so sin conscious that we're not God conscious. If you're uncomfortable in God's presence, you won't want to be there.

2. Loving attention to God's Person.

3. Willingness to waste time with God.

4. Know that God is always seeking you. God works while you wait expressing your dependence on Him.

When you stop burning the oil, you start burning the wick; when you stop living God's life, you burn out.

There are two kinds of Divine Presence: His omnipresence and His Manifest Presence. Begin your seeking by thinking on His presence everywhere. In Him we live and move and have our very beings. As you do this, you become aware of His manifest presence in your own life and situation.

When your mind wanders, think on one Bible verse. Focus on that. If an intruding thought persist, write it down.

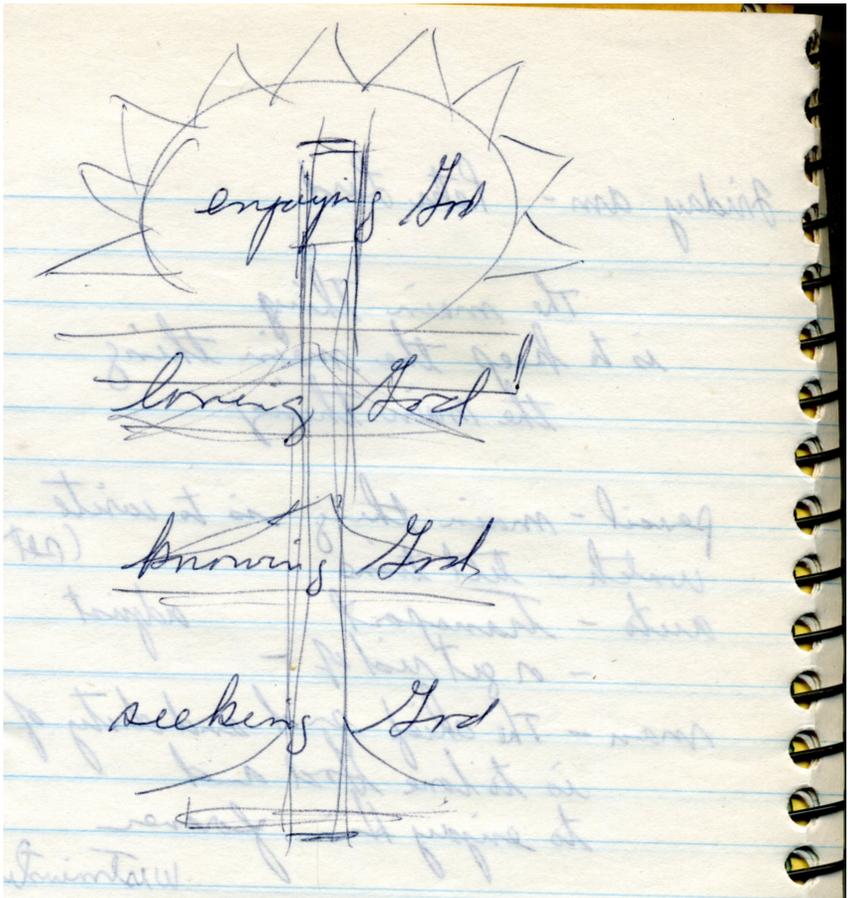
If nothing happens, keep silent, then speak to God Himself. The Lord longs to be gracious to us. He wants us to wait so He can have compassion on us, for He is a God of justice to those who wait.

Friday morning

The cowboy in the movie said, “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing”.

The main thing of a pencil is to write. The main thing of a watch is to tell time. The main thing of a car is to transport. The chief end and duty of man is to love God and enjoy Him forever.

Jesus told Martha, You are careful of many things; one thing is needed and Mary has chosen the better part —to sit and listen.



A man bought a canary. It would not sing.
He bought a perch, the bird did not sing.
He bought it a swing, the bird still did not sing.
He bought a mirror, but the bird still would not sing.
The bird died without singing.
He never bought it birdseed.

Our spiritual birdseed is the Word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. All our conferences, seminars, books, magazine articles—perches and mirrors.

Without the presence of the risen Christ, there is no life.

Without the presence of the risen Christ, there is no song.

“Be still and know that I am God”.

Tuesday, September 7, 2010
PLA++++ns

Last week and over the long weekend I tied up several major projects. Ginny and I also bought a new sofa and rearranged our living room. *“Now,”* I thought, *“My life is finally under control. I can get on with my plans”*.....Then the phone rang.

Whenever the phone rings, Ginny says, “Oh goody, there’s somebody with plans for our life”.

Yes, my plans for this week abruptly changed.

Like the Patriarch Job, I say, “My days are past, my purposes are broken off, even the thoughts of my heart”.

King Solomon warns me about focusing on my own plans; he said, “John Cowart, Boast not thyself of to morrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth”.

Yes, I envisioned exactly how my week was going to go. Thinking myself to be psychic, I thought, “First, I’ll do this. Then next, I’ll do that. And once those things are done, then I’ll...”.

Some wag said that if you ever want to hear God laugh, make plans.

Don’t get me wrong. We are not leaves in a stream drifting without purpose, circling the drain. Some plans are prudent and Jesus encourages them.

For instance, He once said, “Whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him...”

“Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand”?

Jesus wants me to follow Him without reservation.

In my favorite Stephen King novel, *Desperation*, an eleven-year-old boy ends up leading a group of adults to combat an evil monster. When one man asks, “What’s our plan?” the kid says, “Well, we’ll go up to the cave, then do whatever God tells us”.

Good plan.

On occasion, I squeeze God into my plans... Like in the cartoon I once saw of a guy talking to his pastor saying, “I want to volunteer, to advance the Kingdom of God on earth, to save the lost, to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, comfort the feebleminded, and change the world for the better. I’m free between two and four on Thursday afternoons”.

Yes, I’m one of those Christians who wants Jesus to be prominent in my life, but not preeminent.

I mean God in your life is decorative. Having Him around enhances my reputation—like showing up for the prom with Marilyn Monroe hanging on my arm.

Folks will think I’m so cool with God.

But I’m getting far afield from what I planed to write—about plans and their interruption.

I’m not the first writer to get sidetracked like this: Even in the next to the last book of the Bible, Saint Jude began to write about one thing but ended up writing about heresy; he said, “Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints”.

Plans change.

So, God wants me to plan long-range for Eternity and count the cost, yet to hold my daily plans loosely and not get upset when they have to be set aside for something that takes precedence.

Yes, I am to have plans.

But my plans are not the most important things in the world.

James said, “Go to now, ye that say, ‘To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain’: Whereas ye know

not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, 'If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that'".

It is a sophistry but when speaking or writing of any proposal, I often include the ritualistic catchphrase *God Willing* or in print *D.V.* (Latin, *Deo volente* meaning God willing). That's a nice way of saying I intend to do such and so come Hell or high water unless God interferes with my plans.

All this does not mean I do not live according to plan. It does mean that I feel another plan is superimposed over my own.



Jeremiah 29:11 –“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD,. “They are plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope”.

Thursday, September 9, 2010

My Brand of Rabid Christian Fundamentalism

While Stephen Hawking, reputed to be the world's smartest man, creates news by saying something or another about God not creating the universe, and while a church a few miles south of where I live threatens to burn copies of the Koran on Saturday, and while radical Moslem fundamentalists threaten to kill people if the church does that—while all that goes on around me, I muddle through trying more or less to live a Christian life without getting burned or bombed or smarter.

That's because I'm a rabid Christian fundamentalist.

Thing is, the fundamentals I see in the Christian faith, don't always jive with the things other people see as essential.

More
power to 'em.

Saw a
Doctor Fun



cartoon the other day that made me think of my role in religious life:

I admit that I have not bothered to read Stephen Hawking's argument; I figure that if he is wrong, then he's wrong. Being smart won't get you to Cleveland if you're on the road to Dallas. But if he is right, then there is no such thing as intelligence and thoughts are the result of random electrons bumping into each other in brain cells and the thoughts of the smartest man in the world are no different and no more true and of no more value than the thoughts of the bag lady on the corner who claims to be the bride of Elvis.

I do not burn anybody else's books and I've never bombed anybody, yet I do adhere to certain fundamentals religiously, even enthusiastically. Hence I've been called a rabid fundamentalist. I doubt the teasers meant that title as a compliment, but it is descriptive, so I own up to it. Therefore I call my website The Rabid Fundamentalist.

I believe in four fundamentals (and a few peripheral issues that don't matter much to anybody else)

The basic fundamental is simply:

God Is Great.

Magnificent! Beautiful. Powerful. Sparkling! Joyous! Awesome! Incredibly complicated, too profound for the wisest person to comprehend yet so simple a retarded child can feel His love.

God Is Holy.

He is set apart and far above all He created. He is as far above mountains as He is above mosquitoes. Archangels and cockroaches and people are His creations. There is nothing and no one like Him. He is Creator, all else is created. He is the High and Holy One Who inhabits eternity, He stands outside and above the universe He created. He holds all galaxies, small as a hazelnut, in His nail-scared hand.

And, He stands in white-hot purity above all else.

God Is Love.

God cares about the things He made.

In His caring and in His righteousness, God gave us laws to keep us from getting hurt. Our breaking His law does not harm God a bit; it does us incredible damage. When I steal, what has God lost? But that act makes me a thief. Murdering another does neither God nor that other person permanent damage (our bodily resurrection is one of those peripheral issues I mentioned) but the act of murdering makes me a murderer, just as the act of committing adultery makes me a cheat.

Breaking God's law separates me from the glory He intends for me. It alienates me from Him.

It would take nothing less than an act of God to restore me—and that's just what happened. "The love of God is shown toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ dies for us". The mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace became Emmanuel—God with us—to suffer on the cross because of my sin.

And yours.

After all, God expects us to behave. We are to love Him heart and soul and mind and strength and to love other people in the same way He does. He expects His followers to be the most loving people on earth.

But, we ain't.

As the Prince of Life, the very source of life, the Son of God could not be held by the grave. The living Lord rose from His borrowed tomb and returned to where He came from originally. There, He prepares a place for us. We can expect His return any day now. And when He returns, we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is.

God Is Near.

In Him we live and move and have our very being. He is far above the universe but not far away—close as a thought, close as a prayer. The Scripture says, Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.

If I am not as close to God as I once was, guess who moved?

And guess how easy it is to return?

Easy for us, costly for Him.

Yet, the Bible says Whosoever will may come.

Jesus invites, "Come unto me all ye who are weary and heavy laden".

In Him we live and move and have our being... How close is up to us.

Christ have mercy on John Cowart.

Sunday, September 12, 2010 Names For News

Several days last week I visited a home where they have a tv set. We let ours go when they switched to the new system figuring that we would not miss much. But the two things I miss most about not having a tv are football games and news broadcasts.

While I was visiting, I watched a number of morning, evening and noon news broadcasts on the 108-channel huge-screen tv set.

What happened to journalism in the few months since I last watched the evening news every day?

On station after station the anchor persons resorted to name-calling when I expected them to be reporting events, relaying facts, or telling about current events.

Instead, across the board, these tv personalities cat-called like nasty, ill-brought-up children squabbling by the sandbox.

In ranting about the Rev. Terry Jones, pastor of the Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, Fla., various news personalities called him a "nutter...whackjob...wacko... lunatic... imbecile..."

Whether a journalist agrees with his subject or not, isn't name-calling a bit unprofessional?

One guy in a suit on tv (forgive me if I'm wrong, but I think it was on CNN) made the classic impartial unbiased statement, "He gives crazy religious fanatics everywhere a bad name".

That stuck me as so funny!

I wonder if tv people are that out of touch with their own training?

They certainly have every right to disagree with the Rev. Jones' ideas, I disagree with most of them myself, but name-calling is for the playground not the newsroom.

Another funny/sad report I watched involved a blond young woman with a hair-do, she wore a suit, and she talked about the economy. She reported about job losses in this country. And she conveyed the astounding fact that so-and-so many people in America "live below the property line".

Maybe she just misspoke herself. I've done that.

Maybe she is in the process of buying a home and property lines are uppermost in her mind. I understand that.

Or maybe she's just a plain...

Well, that would be name-calling.

I can't do that. I'm not a journalist.

God bless her and I pray she never learns the meaning of the word *poverty*.

Anyhow, the news programs disappointed me so much; I expected better of them.

But I couldn't find a football game to watch.

So I settled for watching Channel 45's *Dirty Harry Marathon*.

It was so refreshing to watch something wholesome.

Wednesday, September 15, 2010 Today--29 Years Ago

After breakfast and conversation with my friend Wes yesterday—we talked about material possessions and how God ultimately owns all things—I shuffled books. Seems as though that's all I've done for the past few weeks.

As I worked sorting books in a back closet, I discovered my own hand-written diary for the year 1981.

Yes, I have kept a daily diary, off and on, since I was a teenager. Recording the events and thoughts of my life sometimes helps me make sense of it (or not). And seeing

God's dealings with me on a day by day basis sometimes encourages me in my present circumstance.

So, I browsed through the pages of my 1981 diary thinking it might be fun to see what I was doing back then.

Not a good idea.

I browsed through page after page of flat car tires with no spare, late rent payments, sparse groceries, troubles with neighbors, lack of money, aggravation from my mother, witnessing about Christ without visible results, self-condemnation, resentments, and things best long left behind and buried for 29 years.

Even with all those downers, my old diary reveals that our family worshiped together, we laughed a lot, we rejoiced in love. We survived.

Sometime I wonder why I never got more books written over the years? How has my life dribbled away without my having more to show for it? Other men achieve success while I have just passed time.

In September, 1981, I'd just sold a magazine article, "The Suspicious Seeds", mailed out five or six other articles to various magazines, and I was working on my first novel *The Lazarus Projects*. I also worked tearing down a condemned building for an old farmer who refused to pay me after I'd done the job—"Don't have any change on me today, John". At the same time, while writing at home, I was babysitting while Ginny was away from home attending a college class.

Here's my journal entry for today's date in 1981:

Baby sitting is a full-time activity. In the afternoon I noticed the baby's aroma and decided to change her. Had to chase her down.

I caught her .

Laid her on the bed and looked for a clean diaper. There were none in the drawer.

So I had to go outside to the clothes line to get one.

Then catch her again and lay her down again.

The mess was smeared.

So, I called Donald to bring me a washrag. He couldn't find one. So I had to go get it myself. And she escaped again.

So I caught her again, washed her, and changed her.

Took the messy diaper to the bathroom only to discover the diaper pail was not there; it was on the back porch by the washer. Fetched it and found that she had taken the offending diaper to glop around in the hall. I rescued it and filled the diaper pail, adding bleach...

And while I did that, she got her tea cups set and slopped in the toilet.

I spanked her.

And while I washed the tea set cups, she got into Ginny's sewing box and scattered yarn, thread and needles. And while I picked up pins, she...

(For some reason, I never finished that diary entry—nor many of the novels I planned to write 29 years ago). Isn't it great that Jesus is Lord even over ordinary days?

Friday, September 17, 2010
Wheels Within Wheels?

I thought I knew where I was going and why I was going there.

I didn't.

I mean I had my own purpose in driving 30 miles up into Georgia yesterday and I did accomplish the chores I set out to do, but, on reflection, I wonder if my purposes were the real reason I made this onerous trip.

I suspect something more important than buying my brand of pipe tobacco (the Jacksonville store stopped carrying my brand months ago and when I requested it the manager said the stocking of brands on the shelves is a policy decision made at corporate headquarters in Peru or West Lisastan or Chicago or someplace where they pay no attention to customer requests—so every few weeks I drive to Georgia where a store still stocks my brand).

I feel that's a noble purpose for travel. Besides I do a half-dozen other chores while up there.

And on the drive from my home, I pass six bookstores. I chose to visit one, and there I feel the owner cheated me

big time. (I may write about that experience tomorrow but there's something more important to write about now).

Earlier this week my friend Barbara White, author of the four *Along The Way* books (www.bluefishbooks.info) told me that singing helps her focus in her devotional life. Since my own devotional life rides in the proverbial hand-basket recently, I sang to myself as I drove through beautiful stretches of marsh and forest.

I'm not a music person.

Glad that works for Barbara. Didn't do a thing for me.

Since one of the bookstores I intended to visit was not yet open, I stopped for breakfast and noticed the waitress.

Poor woman. First day on the job. Bullied by experienced waitresses. Looking harried. Looks to have led a tough life. Anxious to get things right. Troubled. A child of God. Hurting. Worried. Had to keep this job. Tired...

Maybe I was just reading things into her demeanor, but those are the things I think I picked up on.

No time for conversation—besides she may have thought I was hitting on her or something.

In one of the boxes I carried for one bookstore, I had packed a brand new book on prayer and comfort. I felt a prompting to go out to the car, unpack that book, sign it and give it to this stranger.

She seemed touched by the gift and put it in her purse behind the cashier desk.

As I tended to my own business (with varying degrees of success and failure—mostly failure) the rest of the day, I could not help but wonder if, while I had my own reasons for driving to another state to buy pipe tobacco, if the Lord had not nudged me into making this trip just to deliver that book to a harried soul?

I've often wondered if God does not guide us while we are unconscious of it.

Does He manage to accomplish some eternal purpose as we go about mundane business?

Seldom in my life have I ever felt "I'm On A Mission From God". When somebody says something like that, I

look askance. But I wonder if God moves us to help His children while we remain unaware of anything going on above us. We just go about our daily tasks oblivious to the supernatural world. Like fish swim without thinking about water, we live and move and have our being in Him without thinking about God.

We see through a glass darkly, but every once in a while, the gears mesh and we catch a glimpse of something going on more important than what we thought was happening. That's rare but it does happen.

I wouldn't swear to it, but I suspect that's what happened yesterday, my little wheel may have meshed with a bigger wheel. I don't know, but I wonder?

When it comes to charitable acts, Jesus said not to let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

I do Him one better—most of the time my right hand does not know what my right hand is doing.

Saturday, September 18, 2010 **Take The Wrong**

I felt cheated.

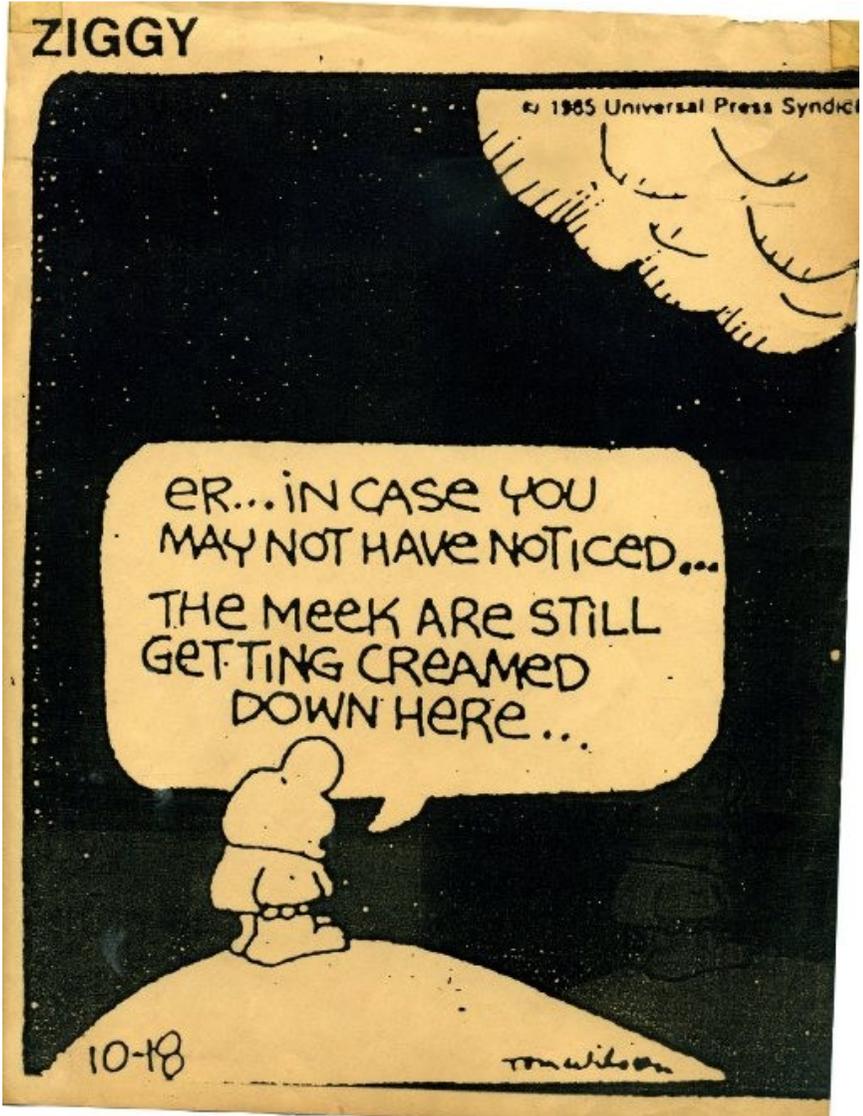
I drove up into Georgia Thursday to buy my brand of pipe tobacco which is no longer carried by Jacksonville stores. On that hundred-mile round-trip drive from my home, I pass six bookstores. I chose to visit one and there the owner cheated me big time.

I do not like to be cheated, belittled, taken advantage of, treated like a fool.

Now I believe that a commercial business should make a profit, but the guy in this particular store seemed to want to wring all his profit out of one customer—me.

Last week in culling my library, I ran across this yellowed Ziggy cartoon which I must have clipped from some newspaper back in 1985:

ZIGGY



I thought of that cartoon the minute the bookman played his game of scam the customer. I resented the fact that he was treating me like an ignorant boob who did not know value.

I have worked in and around books all my life. For ten years I worked on an inventory team at the Library of Congress; I've handled a Guttenberg Bible as well as other incunabula. I've handled velum illuminated manuscripts—some of the most valuable books in the world. I've also worked in a warehouse where valueless books were shredded for pulping to make grocery bags. I

have written or edited books. I have sold books; I bought books—Lord, have I bought books! I have an inkling of their value.

But this guy in the store treated me like some bum off the street who'd wandered wanting to sell a paperback he'd found on the bus bench.

Didn't he realize I was someone important.

Well, if he didn't, I sure did!

His dealings excited my riseabilities.

I grew indignant.

I started to flare.

At that moment I remembered the Ziggy cartoon, a conversation about property rights I'd had with my friend Wes last Tuesday, and an odd combination of Scriptures I had not thought about in years.

I calmed down.

Tuesday Wes told me about how all property belongs to God and that we "own" it only in trust. There is nothing we permanently keep, and that the extensive Old Testament property laws ensure the orderly transfer of that trust. And we talked about the passages that speak of selling all you own and giving to the poor.

But my stuff is MINE! Don't you dare touch it!—that's my attitude.

And when somebody does me dirt, I do it right back to them with bells on!

When somebody mistreats me (real or imagined) I...

"Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow His steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth: Who, when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not; but committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously: Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed".

That's what Saint Peter said.

Am I, a servant of the living Christ, to be treated better than He was?

Saint Paul told the Corinthians not to engage in lawsuits and asked, "Why do ye not rather take wrong? Why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?"

Take the wrong?

You mean I'm to be a doormat and let people walk all over me?

Why not?

Christ Himself serves as our doormat: we only get to Heaven by stepping on His shoulders. Is a servant better than his Master?

But wouldn't the world lose all respect for me if I just stand there and take the wrong instead of standing firm and fighting for my rights?

What's wrong with the world losing all respect for me?

Take the wrong.

Resist not evil.

God's ways are not my ways.

His kingdom is not of this world.

Standing in that book store Thursday being obviously cheated, belittled, taken advantage of, taken for a fool, I thought of The Book of Hebrews where the Scripture says:

Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord... It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God....

Call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions... whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions... And took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in Heaven a better and an enduring substance.

Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.

Hummm. That's something for me to percolate.

Reviled not again.

Took joyfully the spoiling of goods.

Take the wrong.

Hummmm This ain't the way I normally think about things.

My idea of meek is Dr. David Banner who turns into the Incredible Hulk when bugged. Or mild-mannered Clark Kent who changes into Superman to fight wrongdoers. Or Mighty John Cowart who speaks softly while looking for a big stick as he fumes and sulks and resents and plots how to even.

But deliberately taking the wrong done to you for Jesus sake?

Naw, that can't be right.

The way I figure it, the Bible says the meek shall inherit the earth... And when we take over this place, we're going to kick ass!

Tuesday, September 21, 2010
Maria's Translation

Yesterday I received an e-mail from my e-friend Maria in Russia. For about two years now, although undergoing great personal difficulties, this lady has been translating a chapter from my book *Strangers On The Earth* (www.bluefishbooks.info) into the Russian language.



I feel honored and humbled that this lady would go to so much trouble. I often wonder if my writing is worth the trouble; she is such an encouragement to me.

It amazes me that I can write a piece here on a dead-end street in a backwater section of an obscure Southern town, and yet God uses that work to reach across the world as a tiny witness to His grace.

Thank you, Maria.

I appreciate your work.

Here's a photo of Maria hugging two orphans at Matveevka Orphanage:



As soon as I can get access to my website, I'll publish the whole text on line. But here is the first page as a sample.

Добродетельная дама при развращённом дворе

Жанна-Мари Бувье де ла Мотт Гийон
(1648-1717)



Из книги «Люди, чья вера доставила им проблемы» (IVP, 1990)

(2005)

Пересказано Джоном Ковартом

При расточительном дворе Короля-солнце Луи XIV во Франции развернулась активная светская деятельность вокруг...сидений.

Три вида сидений: стулья с ручками, стулья без ручек и стулья без спинок на трёх ножках, называемые табуретом.

Когда придворные дамы собирались в зале, графиня могла сесть на стул с ручками, маркиза должна была сидеть на стуле без ручек, а баронесса - на табурете. Но, если герцогиня, титул которой был выше других, заходила в зал, она садилась на стул с ручками, столкнув других дам на один уровень ниже. Никто из имевших более низкий титул, не мог сесть в присутствии обладателя более высокого титула прежде, чем эта особа не усядется как следует, из-за чего титулованная ниже всех баронесса должна была стоять.

Wednesday, September 22, 2010
A Whisky Case Saved My Ship From The Raccoons

Back in the 1970s my middle son Johnny gave me a kit to build a model ship, the *Cutty Sark*, most famous of the China Tea Clippers, for Christmas. Although under-aged at the time, he also went to a liquor store, with Ginny, and bought me a half-pint of Cutty Sark scotch to sip as I constructed the model.

Took me about three years of happy intense work to build this model. Here's a photo I snapped of it yesterday



I found the intense attention I had to exercise in rigging this model so relaxing—I mean, you can think of nothing else, no trouble of this world can hang in my mind when I rig the lines and tie the knots—so relaxing that over the years I constructed many other model sailing ships.

To display my ships, I placed them on shelves in my outside office at home—the same office the vile, evil, wild raccoons attacked.

This saga of my battle with the coons dates back to May of this year when they gnawed holes in that office roof..

When we first moved here 16 years ago, I kept two Amstrad computers out in that office and wrote many of my books on those machines. But when our youngest son, Donald, a computer network manager, gave me an IBM clone, I moved inside the house for ease of wiring hookups and relegated my outside office to storing hundreds of books, files, statues, and my model ships.

Years back I found a wooden box in the trash—a wooden case bearing the logo of the Cutty Sark liquor company:



Well, what an appropriate display case for my Cutty Sark Clipper Ship model.

I put the ship in the box and the box on a bookshelf in that outside office.

I placed five other sailing ship models out there on book shelves too.

Raccoons sank my fleet.

Yes the vile brutes tore the hell out of three of my ships, ripped them to shreds. Gnawed on the hulls, ate the anchors, unfurled the sails, sank my fleet—except for the *Cutty Sark* model. Being ensconced in the wooden whisky case protected it.

Three of the models I'd worked on for years could only be thrown in the trash.

One of my models may be repairable—someday if my eyesight sharpens and my hands stop quivering with age.

But the *Cutty Sark* model sustained minimal damage in the fight with the coons.

I cleaned it up a bit and brought it inside our home to reside on one of the book cases in the foyer.

News reports claimed that a welder's torch left on during restoration work on the ship cause the fire. I think raccoons set the blaze.

Friday, September 24, 2010
The Funny Business Of Writing



Clearing debris from an old desk in my outside office Wednesday, I found a batch of yellowed old cartoons related to writing. Some of these were taped to a wall behind a bookcase, others stuffed in a desk drawer. I do not remember the sources..

For 35+ years I have worked as a free lance writer. That means most of my work is self-generated, such as my favorite novel, Glog (www.bluefishbooks.info).

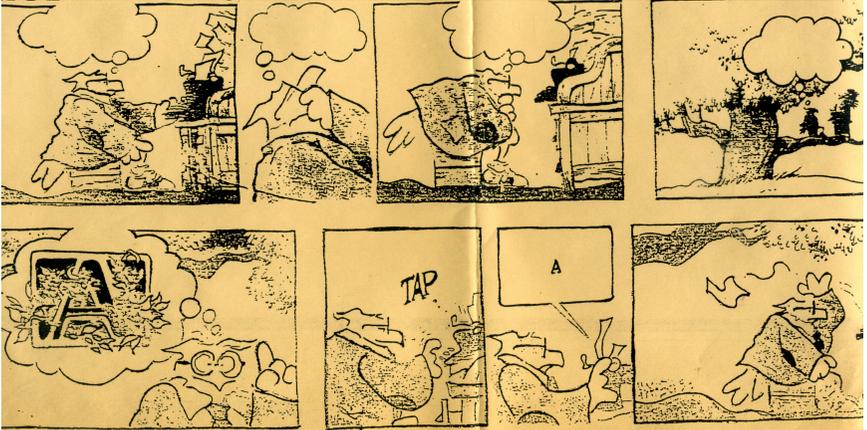
Although on occasion editors asked me to write assignments for them. Thus, I got to cover such plum topics as the "Warehouses Of Jacksonville".

Yes, I wrote that opus back in the late 1970s.

I'm still waiting to hear from the Pulitzer people.

Here are a few of the cartoons I had clipped out of newspapers and magazines to save because I found them so inspirational.

The Owl/Editor, Shoe, reveals the difference between what I envision as a writer and what I'm able to produce:



Shoe also pinpoints my main activity as a writer:



Getting started on a book manuscript always presents a problem to me, but Andy Capp solves the problem:



Then, once I have written one book, the desire to top it, freezes me. Will I ever be able to write again?

The New Breed

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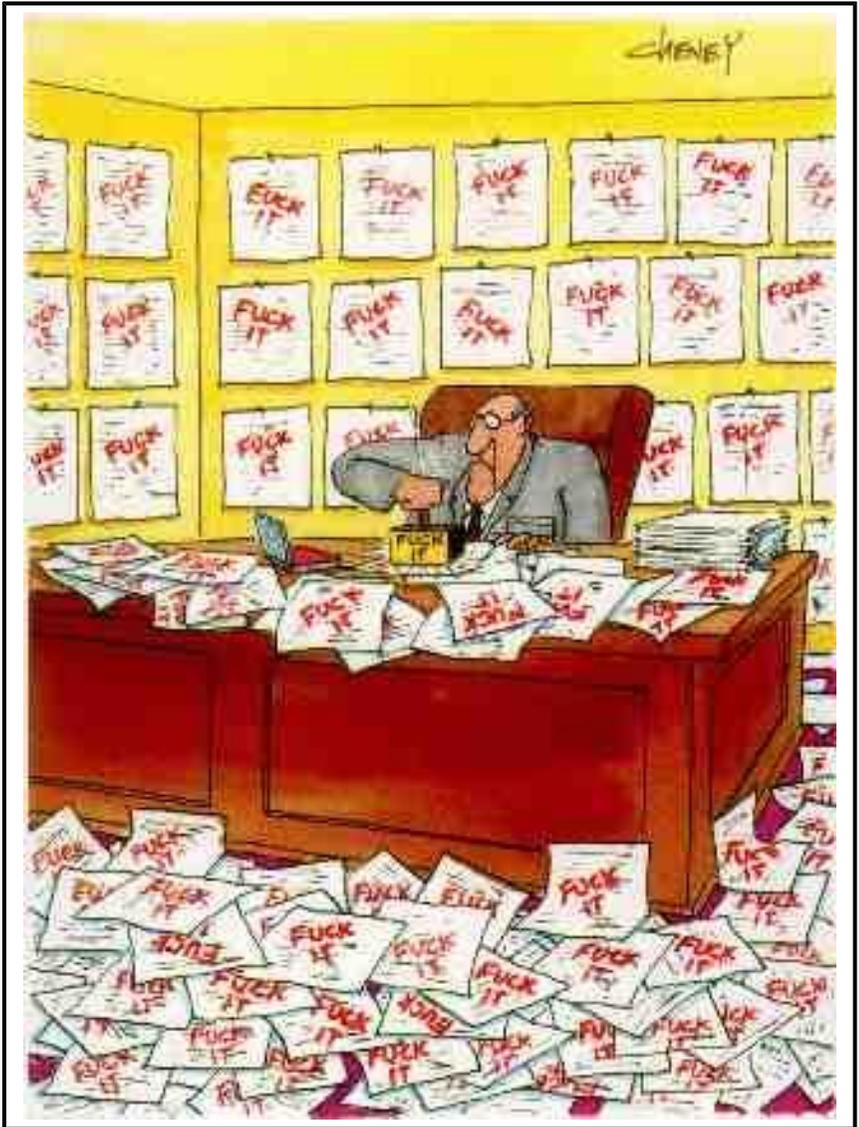
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Margaret Shulock

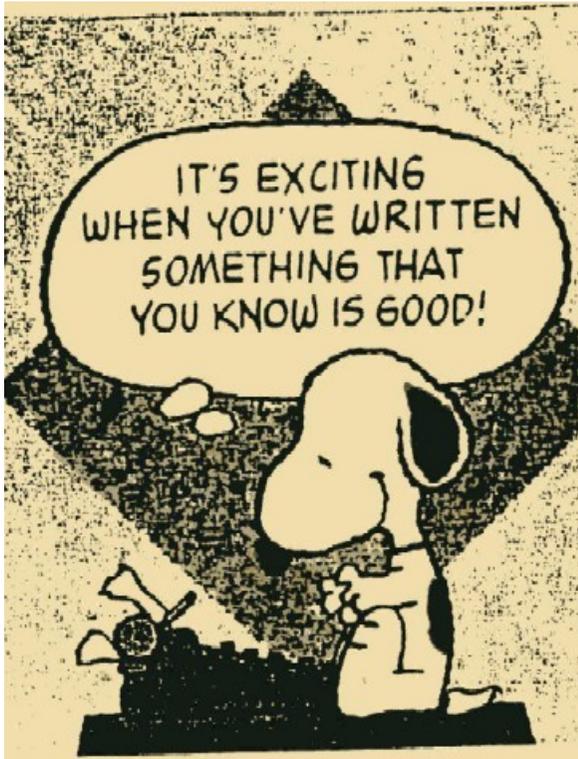
"He wrote one helluva monograph on acorns a few years back, then ... nothin'."

And, then there's the fear of rejection... I had a manuscript rejected once:

Well, rejected more than once. In fact once an angry editor actually stabbed holes with a blue pencil completely through one of my manuscript submissions for a magazine article. Not everybody loves my work. In my mind's eye I see an editor carefully critiquing my highly crafted manuscript like this:



Nevertheless, I continue to write. There comes a certain satisfaction in the painful process:



Due to the raccoon attack, Ginny and I decided to phase out my outside office and turn that building into a gazebo or a Florida screen room, or a greenhouse, or whatever. We're not sure what to make of it yet. But before we can do anything of the sort, I must finish clearing it out. Already I have sold, donated, given away, trashed or saved over a thousand books. Remaining are eight steel file drawers stuffed with notes, clippings and printouts of articles and manuscripts I have produced over the years.

Why did I keep all this stuff?

If I had thrown it out right after an article appeared in print, I would not be overwhelmed by this stuff now. My dilemma resembles that of the woman whom popular author Sharon McCrumb overheard in the grocery checkout line—the woman ahead of her said, "If I'd shot him the day I met him, I'd be a free woman by now".

I understand that sentiment when it applies to saving written materials.

The idea that I may need it someday haunts me.

All the time other writers ask me for additional information about some topic I wrote about years and years ago, and I always try to help them out because so many, many writers have helped me along my own way.

Thanks be to God.

Tuesday, September 28, 2010
The Mouse Will...

Ginny left yesterday for a week-long convention at a resort hotel down south. That leaves me alone in the house. This will be about the longest time we've been apart in the past 40 years.

I hope she will be ok at that resort. But I can't help but worry. You hear about what goes on when a bunch of accountants get together for an out-of-town convention. Oh, the wild stories I hear!

But, while the cat's away, the mouse will—well, essentially I'll be doing the same stuff I did when the cat was here.

I've almost forgotten how to be a bachelor. What do unmarried men do with all their free time—Oh, yes, I've heard stories about that too.

I'm off to a good start in my own wild living plans.

Why, yesterday I polished a bronze ashtray I've been meaning to polish for ages.

And... Are you ready for this?

I ate pizza for breakfast.

Cold pizza!

Say, I can get used to this swinging bachelor life.

Thursday, September 30, 2010
Byline Clips

For 30+ years I have worked as a free lance writer—that means I did not work for any particular publication, but wrote and sold my articles and books one at a time as one-shot deals.

I do not recommend this life style.

Be sensible.

Play Lotto instead.

That's a more stable way to earn a living.

When I'd sell a newspaper or magazine article, when it was published, I'd clip it out with scissors and stick it in a file folder and put the file-folders here and there for future reference.

Yesterday as part of my clean-up-fix-up campaign (forced upon me by those raccoons I've been writing about since May) I gathered clippings from here and there, eliminated duplicates, sorted, and boxed them to keep.

Why?

I don't know.

I don't remember ever writing half these things.

They are simply mementos of a wasted life, dribbled away when I could have been working for a living.

But vanity encourages me to keep "my babies". My creations.

They all bear my byline.

I snapped this photo of my clippings before I filed them away—all in one place this time:



As I sifted through those ancient articles from my distant past, I came across the first article I ever had accepted for publication; Didn't pay anything, only contributor's copies, but it launched my career as a Published Author. It appeared in the March, 1973, issue of the *Hoosier Conference Reporter*.

Did you catch that reference? *Contributors copies*.

That means I did not get paid in cash money.

Instead, I got the glory of seeing my byline in print.

Soon, I learned to sell my articles, not give them away.

The main trouble with being a freelancer is getting paid. Over the years, it took more work to pry my payment from editors than it did to write the article in the first place.

That experience helped make me into a bitter, cynical old man.

So, if it were not for the money, then why did I write all this stuff?

Byline vanity.

Yes, the euphoria of seeing my name in print.

The addiction of seeing those golden words: **by John W. Cowart.**

Oh what a thrill!

A literary orgasm.

Having a byline in print proved that I'm somebody. That I matter. That I have something to say worth listening to. That I'm important.

Vanity costs.

It costs energy. Freelancers are the trashmen of the publishing industry. We provide filler. Editors can assign a subject to a freelancer that no one on the staff wants to fool with. Editors know that a byline hungry freelancer will do it. Say the publication needs an article the week after Christmas. Give it to a freelancer. No telling how many holidays I spent researching and writing an article to turn in on December 26th.

And truly dumb tasks—editors know where to find a sucker for those.

Once an editor wanted a ghost writer for a famous singer's novel. The singer staged a test for the writer: the singer had had a dream and wanted the writer to write a piece about that dream—but the singer would not tell what he had dreamed! The dumb writer was supposed to spiritually discern the dream and its meaning and write a book chapter about that dream.

Who in the world would try such a dumb thing?

By John W. Cowart.

I envisioned my byline on the cover of the As-Told-To book.

And I tried to tell that other man's dream without ever having spoken to him.

Is there any other profession in the world where the worker would be required to do such a thing?

Well, maybe necromancer.

No.. Necromancers have standards.

The singer rejected my chapter.

The way of a freelancer, like that of a transgressor, is hard.

Years ago I decided that by and large magazine writing is not worth the trouble, so I concentrated on producing books (www.bluefishbooks.info). My books don't sell all that well either, but Ginny says writing keeps me off the streets.

Besides, I get my byline on the book cover.

Last night Helen and Donald invited me to their house for dinner.

In our conversation, Donald observed that some things start problems and some things finish problems.

I may (or may not) be the start of a problem, but I can, with God's help, contribute to finishing a problem.

My son's words gave me a lot to think about.

As far as problems go, Jesus said, "Come unto me all ye who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest".

Problems I start. Problems someone else started, He can end... or give you the rest/strength to endure.

We also talked about computer stuff and Helen explained that the Google Analytics figures show about a thousand readers a month read my on-line diary although hardly anyone comments.

As we dined surrounded by cats wanting a taste of Helen's delicious roast, she broke out her I-Pad and we watched a You-Tube film about a pride of lions catching a cape buffalo calf at a waterhole and a crocodile snatched

the calf. And the lions and crocodile had a tug of war pulling opposite ends of the screaming calf.

I think that calf was a free-lance writer.

Didn't catch his name in the film credits.

Poor thing.

No byline.

OCTOBER

Friday, October 1, 2010

Too Heavy For Me

Gone but not forgotten.

Breaking up is hard to do.

Parting is such sweet sorrow.

For the past seven or eight weeks I have packed books, breaking up my accumulated library to donate volumes to the Friends of the Library book sale scheduled for next weekend.

After loading and delivering one load in our SUV, it became obvious to me that I no longer have the physical strength to handle all these books. So I began calling around to make arrangements for a truck to pick them up. A bit frustrating.

But yesterday the library van finally arrived and a young man named Pat, strong, handsome and pure-hearted, wheeled box after box of books to the van and carted them away to be sold.

In bygone days when slaves saw their children carted away to be sold to a new owner... well, that's the picture that sprang to mind as I watched my treasured books carted away into oblivion never to be seen again.

Glad the process is finally over, but sad to see them go.

In the afternoon a young lady called asking me to drive her for a couple of errands. We enjoyed lunch at a Mexican restaurant where she told me about a writing project she is undertaking—she needs a couple of reference books related to writing a non-fiction manuscript...

I have a number of such books... Had a number of such books? Still have some of them? Or did they all go off in the van?

Knew it!

Soon as you get rid of something you know you'll never need again, within a week, you need it!

Never fails!

I think they call this life.

One of her errands involved buying a jar of baby food at Wal-Mart, the Abandon-Hope-All-Ye-Who-Enter-Here store.

While she shopped, I waited in the parking lot.

And I waited.

And waited.

An hour later, I went inside and asked the Customer-Ha-Service desk to page her on the store intercom.

I waited and waited.

In pain.

At this time of day my arthritic hip hurts. My feet swell, burn and sting.

I waited in pain.

I asked a security guard about using his cell phone to call the shopper. He directed me to a pay phone. Had to get change. Look up her cell phone number. The pay phone is secured to the wall about two feet off the ground so you have to kneel on your knees to make a call. It swallowed my 50 cents. Got more change. Knelt. Called. Got no answer.

Considered driving off and leaving her.

Let her call a cab to get home.

Knew some guys who did that once. On their motorcycles they carried these two good ol girls out to the beach fifteen miles away and when the girls proved reluctant to put out, the gentlemen got on their bikes and rode back to town abandoning the ladies to find their own way home as best they could.

Am I that kind of guy?

In my heart, yes.

But I didn't abandon her.

How long can it take to buy a can of baby food?

To Hell with starving babies! My feet hurt. My ass hurts. It's boiling hot in the car. I'm in tribulation here. I'm doing someone a favor and I'm suffering for it.

Is that the way things are supposed to be?

At this point, the Holy Spirit or my guilty conscience, or a repressed memory, or something kicked in and I thought, *John, you are doing a favor. Big deal. If an aching ass and burning feet are all you have to endure this day, then you are one of the luckiest men in the world. If Jesus asked you to suffer for His sake and you said yes, and then all He asked of you is to wait an hour and 45 minutes in a Wal-Mart parking lot, then you'd be disappointed. You, a real soldier of the Cross, think you are made for better things.*

So I stayed at my post.

Fumed. But stayed.

She eventually came out excited about her bargain purchases.

I survived my ordeal.

Wasn't gracious about it, but I survived.

As my friend Wes once told me, "Sometimes when tribulation comes, all you can do is stand there and tribulate".

Saturday, October 2, 2010 Welcome Home!

Last night Ginny returned home safely from her week-long accounting convention. She learned all sorts of techniques and sources of information which will improve her skills and efficiency. "I wish I could have taken these seminars five years ago," she said.

While she was away learning advanced job skills, the Upper Management did not stand idle. As a cost-cutting measure the office administration cut employees' salaries two percent across the board. They have also changed Ginny's pension plan and reduced her benefits package.

This, of course, in no way affects how Ginny plans to do her job. She's often said that she feels God placed her in her position; she works for Him, not for them.

That has not changed at all.

Sunday, October 3, 2010
An Important Religious Bulletin!

Yesterday here in sunny Jacksonville, Florida, the temperature hovered around 82 degrees so Ginny and I enjoyed our favorite style of gardening. By that I mean we sat in lawn chairs out by the fountain for four hours talking about work the garden needs, but we didn't do a lick of work.

For lunch we went to our favorite BBQ restaurant for baby back ribs. We often go on Saturdays because that day they offer a special meal deal for senior citizens. We call it their Decrepit Discount.

That's on Saturdays.

But the restaurant has added something new for Sundays.

A new notice posted on the door announced that from now on anyone coming in on Sundays and bringing a church bulletin will get a ten percent discount off their bill.

Gave me a great idea.

We do not intend to go to church Sunday, but... I can go on the Internet, Google for a church bulletin, call it up, print it out, and present it to the cashier for my discount.

My brilliant idea appalled Ginny.

She says I've been watching too many vcr tape episodes of the *Sopranos* to come up with such a scheme.

It's good to have her back home, but she cramps my style.

Only one problem with my Internet bulletin plan: Will the cashier really believe that we went to church this morning in Chicago?

Monday, October 4, 2010
Bottle Party

On January 21, 1987, Ginny and I hosted a bottle party for about 15 friends. The following Saturday ,our

friend Barbara White wrote about it in her newspaper column. Yesterday, cleaning out an old file drawer, I found a long-forgotten clipping of Barbara's column:

Whole Picture Should be Seen As Shipbuilder Shapes

I was invited to a bottle party recently. Before anyone gets upset, let me assure you that this was not the "bring your own bottle of alcoholic beverage" kind of party. It was a "watch me put a miniature sailing ship into a bottle" party.

This man I know who builds model ships thought some of his friends might like to see the process involved in getting the finished miniature inside its bottle home.

He was right. Several of us accepted his invitation. (They did offer refreshments, soft drinks or coffee, chips and fresh vegetables and dip, and cheeses and crackers.)

When the big moment came, we crowded around his desk and watched him grasp the tiny ship model in a pair of long, curved tweezers and maneuver it through the neck of the bottle.

Its masts, hinged for the purpose, were tucked temporarily onto the deck. The sails were bunched momentarily into small white billows. Trailing from them were several black threads long enough to extend through the neck of the bottle.

Two of the miniature cannons that were poised for battle along the edge of the ship's deck were dislodged in the process of putting the model through the neck of the bottle. Once the ship was safely at rest in a small sea of Elmer's Glue inside the bottle, my friend fished the tiny black pieces out again and then reglued them in place, using more long curved instruments and a magnifying glass.

Once they were reappplied, he held the ship down with a tool while he gently pulled on the black threads. The masts slowly rose to standing positions and the sails reopened.

My friend said that after the glue under the ship had dried thoroughly, he would tighten the threads until the sails were taut, then fasten the lines to the bowsprit and clip off the excess.

With the "bottle" part of the evening successfully behind us, we retired to the living room for the "party" part — refreshments and conversation.

But before we left his study, he showed me through the magnifying glass some of the tiny details, such as a coil of "rope" on the deck near the stern and a minuscule brass fitting near the bow.

I talked to my friend a couple of days later. He thanked me for coming — he didn't often have an audience for his successes, he said — and I thanked him for inviting me — I had never seen the opera-

Barbara White

Religion columnist

tion before.

Then my friend said that not only had he enjoyed doing something well in front of an audience, he also had gained a useful spiritual insight in the process.

He said that he had seen his model as a whole, complete ship for the first time when he was showing it to me through the magnifying glass. Before then, he had only concentrated on each miniature part, lining up the tiny rungs of the ladders that ran from deck to mast top, making sure each part was in proper proportion to the others.

"I guess that's the way we are about what God is doing in our lives," he said. "All we see are the individual things — the cutting away here, the glueing down there — and we don't see the whole picture of what he is doing."

This is particularly true when it concerns the tough things that God does in our lives, he said.

This is a significant insight for my friend. He has had more than his share of knocks and bumps and has at times found it hard to generate any enthusiasm about life.

It's hard to see the various difficulties and problems as part of a construction process in which God is both the architect and the engineer, but that's what they must be. If he can remember that God is the one at work in his life, then perhaps he can maintain a more positive outlook.

And not only him, of course. I need that lesson, too. So, I suspect, do others.

First, of course, we have to believe that God *does* work this way, that he *does* occasionally put us through a painful process in shaping us in the image he has in his mind. Otherwise we won't be able to trust him at all.

Then, if we remember that the Lord not only has a picture of the finished product in his mind — although we cannot necessarily see it — and that he is able to complete what he has started, we should be able to bear the processes with more equanimity, more peace.

We might even be able to rejoice and give thanks, as Scripture tells us to do.

Three things stand out to me as I remember that bottle party:

First, constructing a model of the *Providence*, the first command of Revolutionary War hero John Paul Jones, and putting it in a bottle signaled a highpoint in my life. Seldom have I ever accomplished anything and felt that I'd finally done it right.

OK, putting a toy boat in a beer bottle is not a mark of greatness, but I did it right and I'm proud of it. Little else in my life I can say that about.

Second, the food Barbara mentions—I recall that was the last scrap of food we had in the house. Ginny and I had no idea what we'd feed the children the next day. What business had we in throwing a party under those impoverished circumstances?

We were Christians, young and dumb and "living by faith" (not all it's cracked up to be) and we believed "God will provide".

Well, He must have, because we got the kids grown and we're still around. But I wonder if throwing a party with your last scraps of food is wise, spiritual, or fool-hardy.

Third, Barbara's article portrays me as a morose, depressed, down, grump. Why would she say that? Must have caught me on an off day.

I assure you that in my entire life I have only had one single grumpy mood.

Unfortunately that mood has lasted 71 years so far.

But anyhow, here's a photo of me in my Moment Of Life Triumph. I use this photo as my avatar:



Tuesday, October 5, 2010
Thirty-Four Rejections; One Acceptance



Yesterday I found a folded clipping of this old Peanuts cartoon as I culled files.

And going through, sorting, saving, or throwing out old files, I encountered one folder containing rejection slips from 34 publishers.

In 1987, on my 35th submission of that same manuscript, InterVarsity Press bought my book *People Whose Faith Got Them Into Trouble*. Sales of that book proved less than spectacular and it soon went out of print.

But before it did, editions appeared in the Philippines, in Germany, in Indonesia, and portions of it appeared in a bunch of other languages. It was used as a radio script and, although I've never seen a copy, I understand that it was also transcribed into Braille.

After IVP dropped it, I revised my manuscript, added a couple of more chapters, and re-published it under the title *Strangers On The Earth* at www.bluefishbooks.info.

Just last month, my e-friend Maria in Russia translated a chapter into her mother tongue. And (as soon as my son fixes my internet connection so I can get on my own website—that's a subtle hint to Donald) I plan to publish her Russian translation online.

That's a pretty good run for failed manuscript rejected 34 times.

Yet the sting of rejection still hurts.

Looking at that file folder brought me a resurgence of such pain. Despair. Anguish. Disappointment. Squelched hope. Defeat.

I remember the sting of every one of those rejections. I remember having my hopes dashed again and again.

As I looked at those wrinkled rejection slips, I relived all that just as though they were crisp new letters.

Back in those days writing and publishing was considered a gentlemen's profession, in that simultaneous submissions were verboten. I'd mail my manuscript to one company, wait months and months and months for their reply with a mimeographed rejection slip—or sometimes even a scribbled editor's note that gave me euphoria—then I'd repackage the manuscript and submit it to a different company.

The idea behind this process was that a publisher did not want to waste time reading your manuscript if another publisher might want to consider buying it.

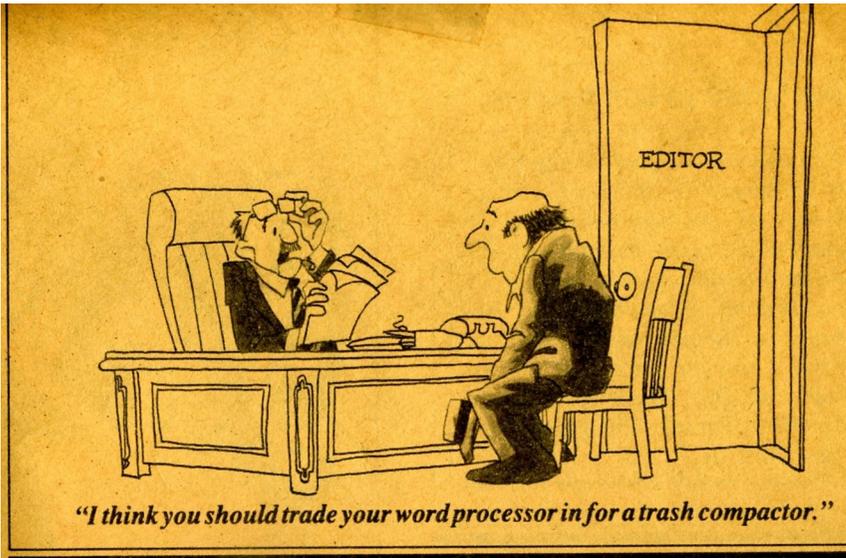
How dumb! That's like the grocery store only letting customers look at lettuce one at a time.

The practice, gentlemanly for them, screwed writers.

Of course I can't complain about them; after IVP had published two of my books, to my eternal shame, I defaulted on a contract for a third book and cost them \$1,700 in advance money.

I never was able to write that third book and after 20+ years of trying; just last month I finally stored my notes on that will of God book that's haunted me for so long.

Anyhow, yesterday I trashed all those rejection notes. I don't need written reminders of rejection. Here's another yellowed cartoon from God-knows-where I found in my rejection file:



But as I threw those yellowed pink-slips in the trashcan, I could not help reflecting on the Scripture which refers to Jesus as “despised and rejected of men”.

And I could not help but reflect on how I have rejected and disappointed Him a whole lot more than a mere 34 times.

How can such a worm as I even claim to be a Christian?

My hope lies in that we are “accepted in the Beloved”.

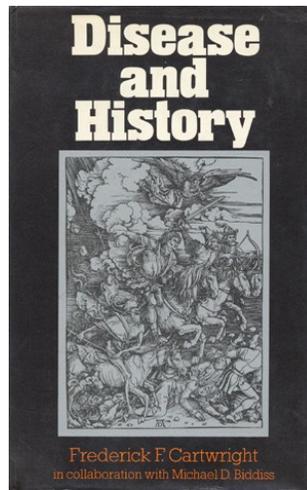
That one acceptance means everything.

Everything.

He suffered rejection so that we don’t have to.

Wednesday, October 6, 2010 Disease And History

My great-aunt Hazel wore a mask to the office where she worked in downtown Jacksonville, Florida, because of Spanish Lady. Aunt Hazel said that churches canceled services. Bars and theatres closed. Whole households



died within days, sometimes within hours, of each other during the flu epidemic of 1918.

During the Spanish American War, more American soldiers died in Jacksonville than on any battlefield of the war. Typhoid Fever.

Construction projects near Gateway Mall on Jacksonville's northside often unearth skeletons from unmarked plague pits. Mass burials from the Yellow Jack epidemic of 1888.

When I was a kid and misbehaved, my mother threatened to send me to "The Pest House". That fearsome place in the Panama Park section of Jacksonville was a sanitarium for Pests—you know, victims of the Pestilence, tuberculosis patients.

Theoretically Jacksonville's healthy climate helped TB victims live longer. Oddly enough, medical men of the day thought that playing the flute exercised the lungs of TB sufferers; so, in the evenings they sat in rockers on the broad porches of the Pest House and played flutes. Haunting music floated in Jacksonville's summer air.

A book I finished reading yesterday brought to mind these tidbits of information about the affect of disease on my hometown. The book, by Drs. Frederick Cartwright and Michael Biddis, is titled. *Disease & History*. 2nd Edition. (Sutton Publishing, London. ©2000. 230 pages. Bibliography. Indexed).

The book fascinates me.

I can't get over how just a few short years ago many millions and millions of people died, dropping like flies in a mist of Raid, yet the world chugs on without them, without giving them a thought. It's as though they never existed in the first place.

Boast not thyself of tomorrow, for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.

The authors of *Disease & History* trace the great epidemics of history—Black Death, Malaria, AIDS, Cholera, Smallpox, Syphilis, Tuberculosis—and show how they influence our lives today.

The authors interweave that approach with individual biographical sketches showing how disease may have

made individuals do what they did—Joan of Arc, King George III, Czar Nicholas, David Livingston, Hitler, Napoleon, King Henry VIII—Diseases influenced their decisions and actions, and moved the course of history.

The authors trace medical theories, discoveries, and progress—and failures—as well as sociological and technological changes in the world.

They hint at an overarching Providence controlling historical events—at least they say our lives and futures are not entirely in our own hands.

And they do all this in a style which reads like a thriller.

I found their book fascinating, informative and fun.

Only one problem.

Feel my forehead.

Do I have a fever?

Monday, October 11, 2010 **Did Anybody Notice I Was Gone?**

Our great phone company, AT&T—WE PUT THE CUSS IN CUSTOMER SERVICE—knocked out our telephone and internet service last Wednesday and did not get it turned back on till about noon today. That's why I haven't posted for a week.

Busy Doing

Yesterday I had to do the things I needed to do to get ready to do the things I have to do before I can do the thing I want to do...

Er, I think I just told the story of my whole life.

Tuesday, October 12, 2010 **Can I Trust God For A New Rat?**

It was a once in a lifetime find.

A real treasure.

Never before had I seen such a thing, except maybe in a museum.

I found it about 20 years ago while exploring an abandoned attic room in an old building. I doubt if anyone had been up there since 1930. Empty attic room. Not a thing up there except a May Pole—and a long- dead rat.

In the almost air-tight room the rat had died stretched full-length on the dusty floor. Over the years all the meat and moisture had evaporated mummifying the corpse, leaving only a fully-articulated skeleton—a thing of beauty. Perfectly preserved.

Sliding a sheet of cardboard carefully under it, I was able to lift the rat skeleton without losing or misplacing a single bone.

I knew just what I would do with it.

I'm a Bible teacher.

I recalled a magic trick I'd learned from a Cub Scout handbook.

Yesterday, I called my daughter Eve because years ago when she was a teenager, she helped me prepare the rat box; she cut out the flowers and such. She has an artistic flare which she now exercises preparing book and holiday promotional displays at her library.

In my general clean up and shutting down of my old office, I'm considering getting rid of my long-dead rat—but I hesitate to just let it go to waste.

I thought Eve might want my rat. She doesn't.

What am I to do with it?

I don't really have anyplace to keep it, but if I throw it out, will I ever be able to find another one?

I mean, rat skeletons don't just grow on trees. And were I ever to teach an adult Bible class again and needed a rat skeleton for a lesson and I did not keep this one, would God let me find another one? Can He be trusted for things like that?

I mean, I'm sure the Lord directed my find in that dusty attic all those years ago. It was not just happenchance that led me to explore and to realized how that skeleton would illustrate the Scripture. I felt God was leading me in this. I think He gave me the idea of how to make a rat box.

First I found a wooden chest, a wine box hinged with brass fittings. I lined it with royal blue velvet and glued the white rat skeleton on that cushion. Eve made the flowers and I dug through my dresser drawers for a handful of award certificates.

The adult Bible class had reach the 23rd chapter of Matthew's Gospel and I was ready to teach:

I showed the class the closed ornate wine chest explaining:

"This box represents my life. I want to impress God with what a great life I live. So I garnish it with prestigious awards to show Him my accomplishments".

I boasted about my Boy Scout badges, taping each one to the lid of the wine chest as I talked. I added a blue ribbon I won at a craft show for one of my model sailing ships and my Five-Year Safe Driver award. My membership in the National Geographic Society. A certificate signed by a bishop certifying that on John Cowart "Were conveyed the Seven Fold Gifts Of The Holy Spirit"! And I taped to the lid of the chest a notice from Publishers Clearing House stating that I may already be a winner!

To those decorations I also plastered the lid of the box with a gold-colored plaque from the blood bank honoring me as a ten-gallon donor. And window-stickers for Save The Whales, the American Automobile Association, the Police Athletic League, Nature Conservancy, and a card proving that I am a **Special Preferred Customer** and qualify for a 10% off special offer from Domino's Pizza.

Wow! What a guy. Won't the Lord be tickled pink with me and all my accomplishments?

Then, I read to the class that Scripture where Jesus said:

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye make clean the outside... but within are full of extortion and excess. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whitened sepulchers which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead bones and all uncleanness.

“Even so ye also appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity”.

Then I opened the box, revealing my life from the inside.

The mummified skeleton of a dead rat in a decorated box—all prestigious outside, but rotted away inside.

People look at our outward appearance, God looks at our hearts. Men see what we do; God sees why we do it.

We clean up the outside, but Christ comes into the heart and works from the inside.

Again, I opened the lid of the box. The rat skeleton had disappeared!

That’s where the Cub Scout trick came in...

Flowers now sprang up from where corruption and putrefaction had been before. Not a trace of the rat anymore.

It was a simple but memorable way of presenting an aspect of the Gospel. And I have used the rat box in teaching classes a number of times over the years. To drunks and addicts and homeless people at the rescue mission, to physicians, attorneys, and architects at a society church....

In essence the lesson went:: Here is my life—



Here is my life all gussied up—



But, here is my life inside—



And, here is what Christ can make of my life—



I wish the Christian life were really so simple. It isn't, but the rat box helped me convey the general idea that life with Christ is better than life without Him.

The rat box and other gimmicks I used to teach are props, crutches to help me get by because I'm so nervous about speaking in public.

One danger I found in using such things as teaching props is that it is so easy to focus on the gimmick instead of on the Lord God we worship. I fell into that trap again and again.

Anyhow, yesterday when I got the rat box down from storage, I found it had deteriorated and needs thorough refurbishing—or to be simply thrown in the garbage.

That's why I called Eve to see if she wanted it.

I seriously doubt that I'll ever teach a class again. I'm too aware of my facial deformity and my quivering shakes to be comfortable appearing in that sort of public setting again. That part of my life is over...

Yet, I feel reluctant to get rid of my rat box.

Where would I ever find one again should I need it.

I find it easier to trust God for big things—salvation, eternal life, Heaven, and all that jazz—but can I trust God not for just the then and there, but for the here and now?

If I ever need one again, can I trust God for a new dead rat?

Wednesday, October 13, 2010
Oh, John Cowart, Ye Of Little Faith

Yesterday morning I wrote about my dilemma over deciding what to do with my rat skeleton in the box.

OK, there are bigger problems in the world for me to worry about, but deciding what to do about the rat box obsessed my mind.

I have no need of the thing. But if I threw it away, where would I ever find one again? If I ever needed a rat skeleton, could God provide one—the one I have is the only one I've ever seen in my whole life.

I posed the question, "Can I trust God—not for just the then and there, but for the here and now"?

Exercising my great faith, I decided that while the Lord God is OK for the big stuff, I'm going to keep my rat skeleton. A rat in hand is better than... You know the rest.

So, I cleaned my rat skeleton using a compressed air canister meant for computer keyboards—if the company that makes those need a testimonial, compressed air is great for dusting rat skeletons. Because some kind of little white bugs crawled among the ribs, I also sprayed my rat with insecticide. Then I sealed the whole box in a big white plastic bag and made room for it in a storage closet.

Now, my rat is safe for future use should the need arise.

Faith in God's provision is one thing, but you've got to be practical too.

That matter settled, I went back to cleaning our shed, my former office invaded by the raccoons last May. Ginny and I envision turning that building into a screened Florida room, maybe installing a hot tub, or making it into a greenhouse for her dirt-eating plants in clod weather.

Do you think God plays practical jokes on His children?

Do you think He ever gets in a playful mood?

Do you think God sometimes teases us?

When I removed a panel section from the office wall to check for termite damage, guess what I found:



Yes, for the second time in my life, I found a mummified rat!

Cracked me up.

I laughed and laughed.

Here just hours beforehand, I'd carefully preserved my rat skeleton sure that I'd never again find one, and here a different one lay at my feet.

Two thoughts came to mind—one is that I have such minuscule faith. Is anything too hard for the Almighty? *Sure, lots of things. Practical things. Move over Jesus I'll take it from here.*

Then I thought about the playfulness of God. Yes He is the high and mighty One Who inhabits eternity, who numbers the hairs on my head and calls each star by name. But He is also the same God who created a dog which chases thrown sticks, and otters which slide down the riverbanks, and dolphins which roll in the waves. He is Creator of the camel, the platypus, and woman.

Who says He is never out for fun?

Then the Scripture passage came to my mind where Jesus said, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends..."

Jesus calls us friends.

Friends!

How do friends behave?

What do I and my friends do?

Well, we just hang out and talk about stuff. We respect one another. We discuss problems. We comfort one another in sorrow. We tell jokes. We tease each other. We laugh over inanities.

So, since Jesus calls us friends, can't we expect a similar relationship with Him?

Is that unreasonable?

So, this is no big supernatural revelation, but I think Jesus set me up with that second rat. I suspect He was funning me.

Serious as eternity; fun as a friend—that's Jesus.

Speaking of a fun friend, this morning I drove Ginny to work so I could keep the car and drive across the river to have breakfast with our friend Barbara White.

Barbara is in the throes of chemotherapy for her cancer. Some side effects are severe and she contemplates stopping treatment to enter a hospice program but she's concerned that her son, who has health issues of his own, is not capable of tending to her and she may have to face this terminal illness alone.

I assured her that Ginny and I have talked it over and if she enters hospice, we'll call a family conference with our grown children and set up a rotating schedule so some member of our family would visit to see about her for an hour or so every day... Except...

I told her, "Except, if you die on Superbowl Sunday, too bad. You're on your own. We'll all be watching the game".

She choked laughing till she cried.
Friends tease.

Saturday, October 16, 2010
My Work Stands On Other
People's Shoulders

Добродетельная дама при
развращённом дворе

Жанна-Мари Бувье де ла Мотт
Гийон

(1648-1717)



Last month Maria, a citizen of Russia, finished her translation of a chapter from one of my books, *Strangers On The Earth* (www.blusfishbooks.info).

I appreciate her dedication and hard work to do this difficult task.

The chapter is about Madam Jeanne Guyon, a Christian lady serving in the court of one of history's most corrupt and licentious kings.

Until now, a computer glitch hindered me from posting her text online. But Thursday my son Donald, a computer network administrator, worked on my machine for five hours to untangle warring programs and allow me onto my own website.

Now, I can publish Maria's translation:

Here is the link to Maria's Russian translation at <http://www.cowart.info/documents/Guyonpdffile.pdf> --Here is the link to the chapter with both Russian and English in parallel columns at <http://www.cowart.info/documents/GuyonRusianParallelte xts.pdf> --And here is the link to the English version from my book at <http://www.cowart.info/John%27s %20Books/Guyon/Guyon.htm>

Many thanks to Maria and to Donald; without your skills and expertise this could not have happened. You have opened a window into a Christian life for a different segment of the world to see.

Monday, October 18, 2010
My Boss Is A Jewish Carpenter; I'm Not

Yes, Jesus worked for a time as a carpenter—a skill He did not pass on to His followers in apostolic succession.

Don't know if He were a cabinetmaker kind of carpenter crafting furniture, or a construction worker hammering together buildings.

Either way, this weekend Ginny and I proved that carpentry is not one of the gifts of the Spirit. We are refurbishing the shed that used to be my office and turning it into a greenhouse/Florida room.

The rule of carpentry is "Measure twice; saw once". I go them one better: I measure twice, saw once, cuss, measure again, saw again, cuss again, hammer the damn board into place anyhow, and say, "close enough".

My technique must be successful.

The shed is still standing.

This weekend's carpentry experience reminds me of the time my friend Wes and I build a wheelchair ramp for an old lady... I wrote about that in my diary back in December, 2006.

Here's that diary entry:

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.

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, we’re to say that it was atheists who built the ramp. He doesn’t want His name associated with it”.

Thursday, October 21, 2010
All Coons Work Together For Good To Those
Who...

I apologize.

Since last May I have maligned raccoons daily because they ate holes in the roof and walls of my home office.

The raccoons shredded books and papers.

They defaced pictures.

They chewed up carpets.

They disrupted my life.

They forced me to make changes.

Although I cursed the vile creatures and complained daily about their ravages, I’m beginning to wonder if God may have sent them.

First, I tried to repel the coons, exorcising them as evil (see my June 2, 2010 posting for the rite of Fundamentalist Cracker Exorcism). Then I tried to trap the coons and transport them to a state park for release. (see my June 10th posting). Finally, I surrendered, closed that office, and began transforming that old wooden building into a gazebo.

All the while I worked mumbling about the evils of masked intruders as instruments of the devil.

But recently... recently, I've begun to look at the results of all my anti-coon activity.

Years ago in a fit of religious fervor I prayed, "Lord Jesus, everything I am, everything I have, everything I ever will be. All my time, all my possessions, all my energy—it is all 100% at Your disposal".

A noble sentiment.

But, then in real life, every time the faith hits the fan, I balk.

I want more and more of me. The line of demarcation between what belongs to Jesus and what I claim for me gets sharper. His slice of the pie gets smaller.

Then come the raccoons.

They put things in prospective.

For instance, coon activity forced me to disburse my library. Courtesy of the raccoons more than 20 boxes of books on Bible study and prayer went to my son who plans to cull and pass them on to a seminary; the Friends of the Library sent a van to load general fiction and history books for their book sale this month; I sold \$12 worth of humor books; and seven boxes of books went to the thrift store of Habitant For Humanity—all donated courtesy of the raccoons.

The raccoons forces me to store my 35-year collection of Florida history books.

In that outside office I had eight steel file drawers stuffed with article notes from pieces I've written over the years; I reduced those to a single file drawer (the garbage men dread driving past my house).

Then, courtesy of the raccoons I began the refurbishing of the office into a gazebo. The project keeps me working outside thus avoiding the frustration of the current book I struggle with, and Friday my doctor noted that I've lost 19 pounds—all courtesy of the raccoons.

As the Scripture says, All raccoons work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose; for whom He did foreknow, He did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son.

The giving up of MY books and possessions, the challenges of refurbishing this building, the physical exercise, the thoughts that cross my mind while I'm sawing and hammering—all this is changing me, conforming me into a different person...

And here's the kicker...

In doing all this I'm finding an element of joy.

Yesterday, as I discussed carpentry problems, my friend Wes pointed out that I'm like an eight-year-old boy building my own Secret-Club-House-In-The-Woods-No-Girls-Allowed.

I'm having fun.

Thank you, raccoons.

Thank You, Lord.

Monday, October 25, 2010 Impromptu Family Reunion

Our youngest daughter showed up in town and the eight members of the Florida branch of the Cowart family gathered at a Chinese buffet restaurant for dinner.

Ever see the movie *Last Days Of Pompeii*?

We had a blast, in a refined mob scene sort of way.

Who was that girl stuffing almond cookies in her purse?\

The Orientals have a name for people who do that.

Table talk ranged from the opening of Helen's art gallery to drunks at the Florida Georgia football game scheduled for next weekend. And everybody got to tell me what all I'm doing wrong about refurbishing my former office which is now degenerated into a shed.

As grown children are want to do when dining with elderly decrepit parents, conversation changed to who gets what when Ginny and I die.

Ginny explained various facets of her will and mentioned funeral arrangements—she intends to cremate me and bury my ashes in the backyard beside the grave of my wonderful black lab, Sheba, the faithful dog who lived with us for 17 years.

I'm honored.

In estate planning, I explained that I plan to leave each kid a meat cleaver and the last person standing gets my entire estate.

But I also explained that the most important thing about death is resurrection.

Nothing is more important.

Jesus once said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself ... Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation".

When the rich man dies, people ask, "How much did he leave?"

All of it.

As I recall, in the book of Acts, twenty-one sermons are recorded and the central point of eighteen of them is the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Is it any wonder that the Christian church grew by leaps and bounds in those days?

When are we likely to hear a sermon centered in the resurrection today?

Is it any wonder that the modern church stagnates into ho hum amateur sociology in these days?

Without the resurrection, His historically and ours eventually, we have nothing.

I heard a great joke, a takeoff on the parable of the good Samaritan, from my friend Barbara when I phoned her last night:

Bandits waylaid this traveler on his way to Jericho. They stole his money and his horse. They beat him and kicked him and left him bleeding in the ditch.

Two sociologists came upon him moaning in the dirt. One says to the other, “Really! The sort of people who would do a thing like this really need our help”.

**Sunday, October 31, 2010
Halloween Flower**



Surprise!

Last night our Nightblooming Ceres, a plant we’ve kept for over 30 years, bloomed.

Usually this plant only blossoms once a year, and only for a single night, in June or July, but as a special Halloween surprise it opened last night with five highly aromatic flowers.



Ginny and I sat on our back deck smoking and talking and watching the flowers open—yes, they open fast enough you can actually see the pedals move as they spread open to about the size of a dinner plate.

The plant is also called Queen Of The Night.

NOVEMBER

November 1, 2010
Treasure In A Bag

Last night Ginny and I set up tables and chairs outside in our driveway by the Halloween display. We had a blast as between 30 and 40 Trick-r-Treaters came to our door for the packets of candy, toys, and comicbook tracts we'd prepared.

And best of all, off and on, about ten of our adult neighbors came over to sit around our driveway in lawn chairs to gossip and chat. We meet several people who are new to the neighborhood as well as some folks we usually only see in passing.

All this struck us funny because I'd anticipated hardly any visitors and intended to sit with Beauty talking about sex, vacation plans, sex, retirement plans, sex, car repairs, relationship issues, and sex.

Alas, the best plans of mice and men to get laid off times go astray!

So much for time alone to talk.

Nevertheless, we spent a beautiful evening having fun with friends and strangers. Beforehand, we'd prayed that the Lord would draw the people He wanted us to meet, and though we'd only had eight or ten kids show up last year, we felt inclined to prepare for more visitors this year.

Last night, one kid refused to take the toys and evangelistic tracts; "I just want **My Candy**," he demanded.

"Sure thing," I said giving him the packet of candy bars. Then he asked for more candy since he was not taking the other things.

"No," I said, "I've given you the best I have to give. Now bug off and have a Happy Halloween".

As he sulked away grumbling, my first reaction was to scorn his rude behavior; then I thought of how often I treat the gifts God offers me with the same contempt saying in effect, "Gee thanks, God, but I don't want that other stuff. All I want is MY Candy"!

When folks stopped coming by, Ginny and I put away most of the display and we came inside to watch a Made-In-Mexico-Lots-Of-Naked-Women-Guns-Gore-And-Explosions zombie movie which I would have thought great if I were still nine years old.

Speaking of being nine-years-old... when I was about that age, my grandmother gave me a treasure box—a cedar chest filled with imagination.

Items a kid would treasure—a hawk feather, a polished rock, an Indian arrowhead, fishing lures, twisted bits of metal, a matchbook cover from a truck stop, a snake's shed skin, an ancient penny—just stuff to puzzle over and make up stories in your head about what it was and how it was used and how it came to be in that little wooden box.

A box full of imagination.

Best present I ever got.

Years ago, I decided that if I ever had grandkids, I would give them such a treasure box. So, as I walked the streets before we owned a car, I began to collect stuff I found here and there to go in a kid's treasure box.

I collected.

And I collected.

And I collected some more.

Saturday, as Ginny and I cleaned out the shed, we began to sort the stuff I've accumulated over the years.

I seems unlikely that we will ever have grandkids, but our middle-daughter, Eve, is a librarian; and for a library project for kids, she asked us for things she can bury in a sandbox for kids to dig up and discover for an archaeology unit.

Ginny and I sorted the treasures on hand and found that when consolidated and bagged, we filled two 45-gallon black plastic trashbags with sacks and boxes of imagination treasures for Eve's project!

Hey, here's a BMW pin...and a teargas canister...and a statue of an eagle.. and a gyroscope... and a flattened silver spoon... and an action figure of the Incredible Hulk... and a tea pot from a dollhouse, and a snapping turtle's skull...and a lady's ring that may have a real

diamond (or a cubic zirconium) ... a penny bank shaped like a bust of John F. Kenedy... strings of Mardi Gras beads thrown to Ginny from parade floats when we were in New Orleans in 1970... and ...

Cool stuff.

The stuff of imagine.

The stuff of happy memory.

Beauty and I shared a host of memories about where and when we'd found these treasures, some of them we collected when we were dating back in the 1960s! And some treasure trove items, we could not remember ever having seen before!

What fun we had sorting, talking, remembering. Imagining.

The Lord God fills His world with wonders—most of which we step right over without notice.

He offers joy.

But I want My Candy.

“But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become ...”

And we hold these treasures in earthen vessels.

Or in plastic garbage bags.

Wednesday, November 3, 2010 Shedding

Sometimes, on rare occasions, around our house, common sense prevails.

Tuesday, Carol, my sister-in-law, phoned offering to fly Ginny and me up north for a massive family Thanksgiving reunion. She would make airline reservation, arrange for a car for us once there, provide us with a place to stay...

Her generous offer tempted us.

However, last night I called her saying I want to pass on the opportunity; and Ginny, even though she could go without me, feels she wants to stay here with me.

Hey, I'm not that decrepit—even though my eldest daughter offered to give me an aluminum walker—I get done what needs to get done.

I just act feeble to garner sympathy.

You should have seen me crawl up on the roof last week to blow off accumulated leaves and branches. Jackie Chan couldn't have done it better.

And, although it has taken me five months, off and on, last week I finished work converting my old office into a presentable shed. Here are a couple of snapshots of my work::



My youngest daughter helped me lay bricks (salvaged from the old train station) from the garden fountain to the expanded entrance where Ginny and I enjoy morning coffee from the rolling cart.



See, not a trace of the raccoon ravages left.

I cut four large windows and rigged shelving for knickknacks and for Ginny to use as a greenhouse for her potted plants.



Soon, plants will fill the window boxes and hanging plants dangle from the sills. Here is a photo showing the beaten silver spoons of a tea-pot windchime:



I don't doubt that a younger, stronger man could have done in days what has taken me months to do, but I got it done and I'm proud. By God's grace I managed to learn new skills (after a fashion) and convert this building into a pleasant, more usable space.

And, by using scrounged scrap materials, I did not spend a penny on this project; we could not have afforded it otherwise.

You know, once in a while working in our garden, I find the shed skin of a snake. That means the creature has grown. Expanded. Enlarged.

In a way, this shed project has caused me to shed my sedentary ways and expand into areas I've never imagined before. I'm not a hammer and nails kind of guy. My Skillsaw had not cut a single board in the previous 30 years...

But I studied and figured and planned and ciphered and measured and...

Thing is, God sent His raccoons to force me to shed set-in-my-ways habits and move into new things. And as I dabbled making this shed, I've thought a lot about unaccustomed areas of Scripture when God had people build things like Noah's arc, Moses' Tabernacle, Solomon's Temple...

And I've thought a lot about what Christ may be building out of the lumber of my life, not a tavern but a temple.

He's good at that sort of thing.

If I understand Scripture, God's intends to form us into godly people, Christ-like people.

Considering what He's got to work with in my case, He's got His work cut out for Him!

Thursday, November 4, 2010 Superman's Wife

In cleaning up debris from my shed project I discovered a few awards I've won over the years.

They used to hang on the Vanity Wall of my office. At sometime in the past, I'd put up new bookcases without removing the awards so they remained hidden away behind a bookcase and I'd forgotten them, only to rediscover them when I removed the bookcases.

I trashed most of these testaments to my prowess as a person; who needs to know I won a safe driving award

from a trucking company back in 1972? All that means is that by the grace of God other drivers stayed out of my way on the road. Because of white line fever I was asleep or in a daze most of the miles I traveled back then.

However, I kept three special awards from my beautiful wife, Ginny.

One that tickled me she had printed somewhere, somehow. I don't remember the occasion, but here's a copy:



Another one pleases me greatly:



This third one, she made in a silk-screening class she took back in the mid 1970s. Originally it graced the chest of a tee-shirt she made for me:



I wore holes in the shirt. But years later framed the emblem.

She made me feel like Superman back then.

She still does.

Yes, I know I'm feeble. My body shakes and quivers uncontrollably at times. My teeth are gone. My eyes weaken. I drool.

I feel weaker all over... except like the other dirty old man in the joke who says:

I get stronger every year. When I was young, I couldn't bend that thing with both hands. Now, I can tie knots in it!

Even with all those infirmities, as we approach our 42nd anniversary, Ginny still treats me like Superman.

My awards for long-ago accomplishments mean nothing nowadays. Most I trashed. A few I removed from the frames, folded, and stashed in a file drawer. My vanity remains as strong as ever.

But as I re-discovered the things Ginny gave me, I recalled a poem I learned in High School.

I looked it up. And I changed James Henry Hunt's spelling of the word *Jenny*. But, it rings true:

Ginny kissed me when we met,
Jumping from the chair she sat in;
Time, you thief, who love to get
Sweets into your list, put that in!
Say I'm weary, say I'm sad,
Say that health and wealth have missed me,
Say I'm growing old, but add,
Ginny kissed me.



**Friday, November 5, 2010
Rockets And Leviathan**

NASA scheduled the launch of the final space shuttle mission for this afternoon; if it's not postponed again, I'll watch the rocket's flight from our backyard.

I do not understand America's space program. I pray our leaders understand things better than I do. It makes no sense to me to stop the launches. We did that just after the successful moon missions and fell behind in space technology. Looks like we're repeating that same mistake.

It seems reasonable to me to take the high ground then if any enemy pesters America, to drop rocks on his head.

Leviathan

In a newspaper clipping from the *London Daily Mail*, I learned that while hunting with friends last Sunday night,

in Lake Washington, just west of Melbourne (Florida), an Englishman, Tres Ammerman, harpooned an enormous alligator:



The gator measures 14 feet, three and a half inches. It weighed 654 pounds.

The gator fought his line for 30 minutes before Ammerman could land it. This Leviathan was too large to fit in the boat.

“He was running, jumping, rolling, fighting and trying to bite up on my boat ... I was thinking we got Godzilla here,” Ammerman said.

Because the gator was too large to fit into the boat, they spent two hours dragging it behind them before hauling it into the back of their truck.

The hunter is planning to sell his catch to a taxidermist at \$1,000 a foot, netting him in excess of \$14,000. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has confirmed that Ammerman's catch is a new state record.



I'm reminded of what King David said in Psalm 74:

God is my King of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth.

Lord, Thou didst divide the sea by Thy strength:
Thou brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters.

Thou brakest the heads of leviathan in pieces,
And gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness.

Thou didst cleave the fountain and the flood:
Thou driedst up mighty rivers.

The day is Thine, the night also is Thine:
Thou hast prepared the light and the sun.
Thou hast set all the borders of the earth.

Saturday, November 6, 2010
The Lord God Of Alzheimer's And Puppies

Jennifer, my eldest daughter, a nurse, has an e-friend, Lila, who lives in a state far north of us. For years Lila's father suffered from Alzheimer's; now, Lila's mother suffers from the same disease.

Jennifer also suffers from a physically debilitating disease. Here is a letter Jennifer recently wrote to her friend:

Hey Girl,

Glad to see I don't have to smack you in the head as that may hurt my arms and my chunky thigh. Darn sure I shouldn't be doing any karate round-kicks, or any kind of movements that put my thigh higher than pulling my pants on!!!

LOL!! Oh, I just got tickled cuz that sounds so funny in thought... its early/late and I am goofy as usual. Plus my typing is getting worse. Sorry bout that.

Yes! Alzheimer's sucks ass majorly! It is a lot more than forgetfulness.

I worked in two nursing homes for very short periods of time bcs I actually was a bad nurse there. I couldn't just "pass medications' and put on the call bell to let the aide help the patient go the bathroom. I got wrote up first time in nursing for med passes too slow. 20+ patients to pass meds, and do tube feedings, drug changes, chart, and with the expectation to just pretty much ignore the patients just do...ggggggggggrrrrrrrrrrrr.

I really really really hate some nursing homes!

I have seen some good ones, but OMG you absolutely must carry a tablet, write down every staff name and dates they don't take care of something when you tell them a concern and pup up all times of middle of the night, lunch, dinner, etc., that keeps them on their toes and scares the crap out of them to care better. That doesn't suck butt. You have to be so almost threatening to the admin and nice to the aides.

The nurses and aides need food bribes and nice talk often bcs they do not get paid enough for the care they do their best to give.

As far as the Alzheimer's. the sundown, loosing the ability to remember how to talk, walk, feed yourself, the loss of the simplest things, I have seen people who did not know how to do anything and sit almost comatose/blank. There is a struggle every day/minute to find something, some way to reach them inside of the hole inside they fall into.

But Lila, I want you to remember that no matter how horrible all of that seems to us on the outside, inside, most Alzheimer's patients (not all) get some source of peace somewhere.

I have seen a color, a fabric, a toy, a song, a repetitive touch, somewhere wherever they fall inside they do not fall far because that is when God is carrying them.

We can't see it but they have it.

God inside and angels outside hold them together, that comforts them deeply. Even when we see blank, they have something we can't see.

Even in the angst of seeming lost, they are not.

Kind of like when T. told me I was lost bcs I went driving I-10 to find the beach to take a vacation. I told her "I'm not lost. You can't be lost if you don't know where you are going."

I truly believe it is so much harder on us to see someone we love loosing control, loosing function. Not being that strong person, mother, father we knew and remember. Becoming meaner, becoming unspeaking, becoming leery of us bcs we are now a stranger to them.

No matter how hard it is on us, God is holding and carrying them.

Keep repeating the footprints prayer to yourself. Read it daily to your mother. Be sure to talk about old times, old family members, favorite toy, favorite color, play old music. The older stuff stays in there and comes up bcs it's been there longer.

I am so sorry that you and your family and your mom are going thru this. But she is being carried by God and you just need to let HIM carry her. Thank Him for doing it. Let HIM do it. And the only thing you are to do is love her and enjoy the time with her however it is.

If she is scratching the shit out of you, sit back in a room and let her know you are there. Introduce yourself. Give her her favorite candy. Enjoy when she resurfaces and trust God is carrying her otherwise.

And one day, when it is time, He will carry all of us home. Where THEN we live with NO RSD, Alzheimer's, worries, fears, tears, or crying, or cancer, or AIDS, or murders, or rapes, or any of the horror that sometimes we face in this world.

I love the idea that one day I will sit on the lap of God happier than my heart ever could imagine and see how all the bad was working for His good all along.

I think it will be so awesome to review the ups and downs and say "Gee I was so dumb not to trust You in that".

And God will say, "That's is okay, I was using that all along to do this"..... And it will be like the best movie I have ever seen and I GET TO LIVE ETERNALLY WITH GOD AS THE HAPPY ENDING!! WOW!! NOW THAT IS SOMETHING TO CELEBRATE AND REMEMBER!

OK, Lets dry our eyes now and think about sitting in the lap of God. Being so happy bcs your mom is ok and no matter what happens, she will be ok and so will you. Somewhere in all the experience God is using her, using you to make a magnificent movie and I personally think we will be the best stars!!

God hand-selected us for the movie He wants us to star in. What an amazing feeling that is. I, personally, am trying to make my movie be good ups downs and all, but in all actuality I just need to ask the Director what He wants me to do.

I know that God is moving and He wants us to know. Something is happening. A miracle just happened so quickly and amazingly. I don't know what the movie is. I'm waiting for the Director to tell me what to do next.

In the meantime, I am to sit back, trust that He ABSOLUTELY knows what He is doing. We can enjoy knowing His work is occurring. We do not have to struggle with anything. HE has it all under control. Relax in his humongous loving lap! Feel his warm, encompassing love. Let ALL the burdens fall away. He has already got it all worked out. We just can't see that because we are not supposed to see the whole movie till he is done with it. To us it is the odd clips, negatives and strange bit reels. To HIM it is the perfect movie and we ARE His beloved stars. THANKS BE TO GOD!!

P.S.—I just got an email with a photo of a Christmas Nativity Scene with a German shepherd curled up asleep on the lap of a plastic baby Jesus!



Holy cow!!!!!!! I just got finished writing to you about the Alzheimer's and being in God's/Jesus's lap when I opened this email... I believe that God was giving that Message directly for you!!!!

Lila, the email I just wrote you was straight from God to let you know He has your mom in his lap and that you need to just rest there too. I am really amazed and stunned right now. I realize that God just used me to give you His message for you.

This simple email as soon as I opened it read it and saw the picture I knew with 100% surety that God is speaking right to you. I am blown away right now and I am giving God thanks for showing me He uses me too.

Thank you, God, for using me and for letting Lila know to rest in your lap. You are at work, God, and I thank You for all the blessings you are blanketing Lila, her family, and her mother with as I type as she reads this and as we don't even know your work.

Thank You for your greatness and for loving us so much. For showing me this small miracle. For showing me to listen to you the Greatest Director of the heavens and Earth. I cannot sing your praise enough.

Thank you for my friend, Lila. Thank you for bringing her into my life and heart. Thank you God for all of your blessings. Help me be the vessel you want me to be. Thank you God. I praise your name straight thru the computer. From my heart. Thank you for blanketing us with your love even when I don't feel good or worthy. You are so amazing and wonderful. Amen.

Jennifer

Tuesday, November 9, 2010
Ginny And I Visit A Confederate
Submarine

On February 17, 1864, the Confederate States Submarine *Hunley* attacked and sank the *USS Housatonic* in Charleston Harbor—the first successful submarine attack in history.

Yes, during the Civil War the South had a submarine.

It compromised the northern blockade which was strangling the southern coastline.

In a pre-Veteran's Day event in Jacksonville's Confederate Park, the Kirby Smith Camp #1200 of the Sons Of Confederate Veterans exhibited a full-sized, cut-away replica of the *Hunley* along with other historic American military treasures.

Ginny and I found the Southern ingenuity demonstrated in the *Hunley's* design fascinating. Here's a photo of Ginny viewing the propulsion and steering mechanisms as she read the bio sheets on each crewmember:



Here's a photo of her alongside the hull:

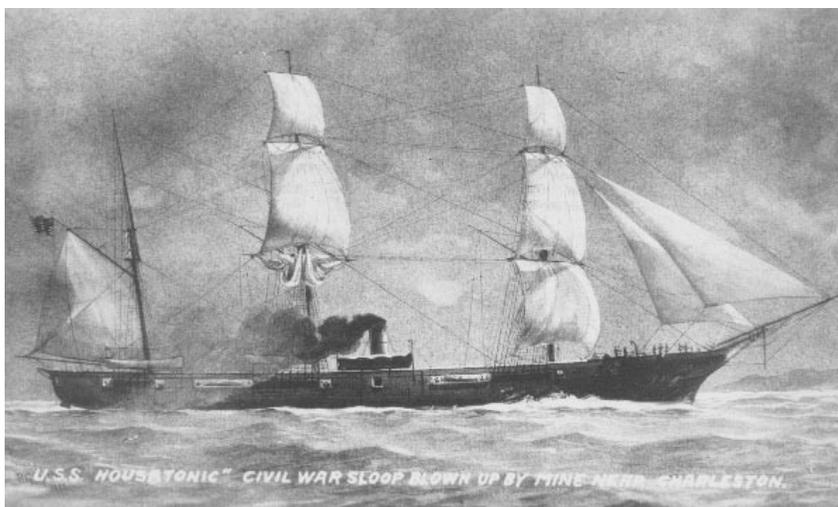


To the left, a 26-foot-long spar sticks from the bow of the Confederate submarine. A 195-pound harpooned-barbed explosive torpedo formed the sub's arsenal. The

Hunley rammed that charge into the wooden hull of the *Housatonic* and blew her up.



Here's a contemporary view of the *Housatonic*, , a 1,240-ton steam-powered sloop-of-war armed with 12 large cannons. Lookouts aboard the *Housatonic* saw something moving in the water and opened fire on the sub but could not depress their cannon enough to be effective.



The *Hunley* was hand-powered by her eight crewmen. They turned camshaft cranks to spin her propeller, and manually worked to raise and lower diving planes, to pump the billows which exchanged foul air for fresh—and to trigger the explosive charge at the end of the ram.

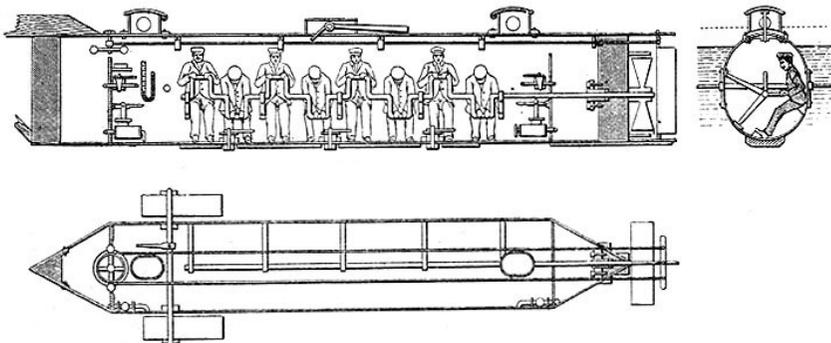


Fig. 175 à 177. — Le *David* de Hunley reconstitué d'après les dessins de M. William-A. Alexander (1863).

Here is a photo Ginny snapped of me at the stern of the ship:



The *Housatonic* sank within five minutes after the explosion.

The *Hunley* then surfaced long enough for her crew to signal their comrades on the shore at Sullivan's Island

with a blue magnesium light, indicating a successful mission. The shore crew stoked their signal fires and anxiously awaited the *Hunley's* safe return.

But, apparently the physical exertion of the mission used up more air than the submarine's billows system could replace because shortly after her historic achievement, the *Hunley* and all hands onboard vanished into the sea—until, after being lost underwater for 137 years, the sunken sub was raised intact by marine archaeologists on August 8, 2000.

Although the *Hunley* only sank one enemy ship, the impact of that attack generated far repercussions; unsure of how many of these new secret undersea weapons the South possessed, the yankee blockaders doubled watches and worries.

Every ripple in the water might be another Confederate submarine.

Here in Jacksonville, Confederate forces mined the St Johns River with torpedoes, waterproof kegs of gunpowder rigged with percussion fuses to explode on contact with enemy ships. A mine like this one sank the *Maple Leaf*, a yankee transport ship now being excavated by local archaeologists. More can be learned about the *Maple Leaf* at <http://www.mapleleafshipwreck.com/>

Here's a photo of me learning more about these Confederate mines:



More can be learned about the Confederate States Submarine at <http://www.hunley.org/>

Ginny and I spent a pleasant, peaceful day amid the artifacts of war.

Wednesday, November 10, 2010 America's First Veterans

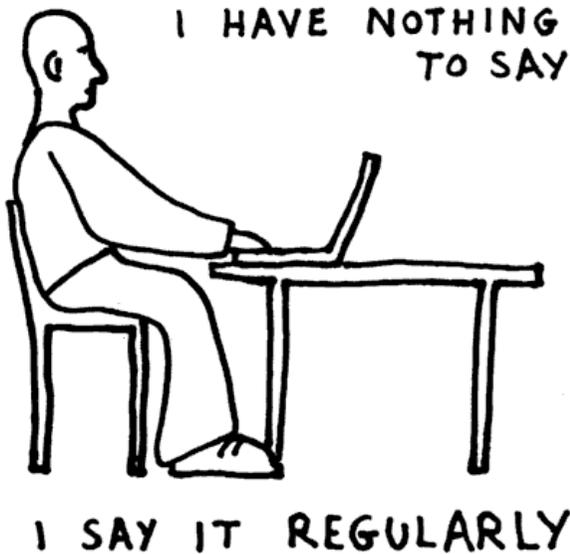
After the Revolutionary War the Continental Army required men mustering out to chop two cords of firewood for the army's use.

In order to draw their final pay or to qualify for military pensions America's first veterans also had to write or dictate statements detailing their activities during the War For Independence.

These statements of service were stored in the National Archives. Besides those statements, some veterans wrote books about their war experiences.

Using such sources, I have compiled a few of these first-hand accounts for this article as a Word read-only document at <http://www.cowart.info/documents/AmericasFirstVeteransformatted.doc>

**Thursday, November 10, 2010
Need Time Off**



www.weblogcartoons.com

I feel depleted.

Worn and world-weary.

Haven't had a spiritual thought in ages.

I need some time off to recharge my batteries..

**Saturday, November 20, 2010
The Nurse Dropped The Baby.**

The nurse dropped the baby.

In a time of civil unrest when gangsters attacked the house and slaughtered the family, the nurse snatched up the baby and ran. In her haste to escape the killing, she dropped the kid.

She picked him up again and ran to hide in terror. The child lived. But both his legs were broken and twisted. The bones never set right. All his life he was lame.

Yesterday my friend Barbara White and I talked about this situation over breakfast. I'd driven across town to visit her because she was unable to drive at the moment. The twin devils of cancer and chemo manifest themselves in typical miserable symptoms in her body.

Barbara gets around with the aid of an aluminum walker. I often need the help of a cane because of my arthritis. Just getting in or out of the car involves pain and ridiculous contortions.

So, over French toast we talked about Mephibosheth, the crippled son of Jonathan, King David's friend who had been killed in the civil strife which resulted in David's becoming king.

I have trouble pronouncing or spelling Mephibosheth! But his story is found in the Bible in the Second Book of Samuel in chapter four and in chapter nine.

Barbara pointed out parallels between the story of this lame guy back then and our present day Christian life.

One day King David asked his servants if anyone from Jonathan's family survived, "That I may show the kindness of God unto him"?

The king drew Mephibosheth to him, restored his family's property and declared, "As for Mephibosheth, he shall eat at my table as one of my own sons for all his life".

And that's what happened.

Of course the story get more complicated later on, but the broken, twisted, lame man always ate at the king's own table as part of the family.

Barbara pointed out that the broken man had done nothing to deserve this honor; he was included because of what someone else had done. He sat at the table, not by merit but because the King claimed him as family.

She said that from the way life works out, it seems that every single one of us was dropped on our heads at birth!

We live twisted, broken, lame lives and the bones never seem to set just right. Broken at birth, broken at life, and, alas, all too often, broken by choice.

How long can a person blame the childhood nurse for everything?

We move and function—but with a limp. Some hurts visible, some invisible. But nevertheless, we live sin-broken, twisted, lame.

Yet, the Eternal King offers to show us the kindness of God. Not because of what we have accomplished but because of what Christ did.

And Christ invites us to His table. He said, “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me”.

Yes we are invited to the King’s banquet as part of His family. Yes, to as many as receive Him, to them gave He the power to become the children of God.

I can’t claim to be family—only the King can say who is family and who is not.

With ups and downs Mephilosheth dined with the king for the rest of his life.

I wonder if this situation ever crossed King David’s mind when he wrote Psalm 23?

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies... surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Monday, November 22, 2010
Two Bits Of Troubling, One Of Happy, News

Earlier this month while Ginny and I celebrated our 43rd Anniversary at a cabin General Coffee State Park, Georgia, she came down with a fierce cold; she’s been miserable sick for over a week now.



Poor thing!

Here’s a photo of our rustic cabin’s interior:

We enjoyed huge blocks of time rocking on the porch talking about memories of our past, our present life, and our hopes for coming days.



While we camped, I underwent one of my periodic bouts of suicidal depression. While I am basically a happy person and a Christian, nevertheless occasionally I have to cope with strong urges to kill myself.

Seems that just about anything can trigger one of these urges. Rocking on this porch in the wee hours of the morning, smoking my pipe and thinking, I mentally constructed elaborate rituals involving killing myself.

I didn't.

Three factors presented themselves:

Oddly enough, the thought that God loves me did not weigh heavily in my thinking. In so far as I can tell, suicide is not sin but a way to escape unbearable pain.

I think the Lord understands that and does not hold it against any person who kills themselves. Judas gives suicide a bad name. The Scripture describes the Lord Jesus as "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" and I see no reason to think He does not welcome with open arms those poor people who succumb to suicide.

The thought that Ginny loves me also did not carry a lot of weight in my deliberations. She is a strong, independent person in her own right. On my death I imagine she will grieve a bit then carry on with her life free of the weight of me.

Also, my children are all grown and well established in their individual lifestyles. I suspect they would get along quite well without me.

Now this is strange, but the strongest factor that kept me from suicide is the very same factor that urges me towards it—my sense of failure.

I fear that if I tried to kill myself, I'd fail at that too and end up as a boiled vegetable. While I fail at being a man, I have no reason to suspect I'd make a successful turnip.

But, enough of that crap. I want to tell more about our happy anniversary vacation.

Besides rocking and talking, Ginny and I hiked a nature trail. Thank God , my arthritis, did not flare up that day and we strolled on a boardwalk through a cyprus swamp. At various times we saw a flock of wild turkey and a herd of deer.



At one point we encountered a flock of six or eight pilated woodpeckers. These large colorful birds usually travel in pairs and this was the largest group of them we have ever seen. The birds proved too quick and shy for me to get a photo of them, so I settled for a photo of Ginny watching the birds:



We also shopped in the nearby town of Douglas, Georgia, and when we got back to our cabin, Ginny, looking happy and beautiful, modeled her new outfits for me:

Georgia's General Coffee State Park features a pioneer farm centered around a log cabin built in 1830 by—sorry, I've forgotten his name (Samuel Meeks??). It consists of two ground-floor rooms and a sleeping loft for the children. The pioneer farmer and his wife raised 13 children in that small cabin.



The farm animals enchanted Ginny! We visited that farm three times so she could feed the animals. Here's a photo of her feeding goats:



And here's a photo of me with a jackass: I'm the one on the left:



Ginny picked a gourd to make into a birdhouse for the wrens that frequent our yard:



Every year at Harvest Time the park rangers and local farm ladies present a feast called A Taste Of The Farm. They cook dishes according to old-timey styles. The lavish spread included Hopping-John, stewed summer squash, savory winter squash, herb biscuits, cornbreads, greens, chicken & dumplings, blueberry buckle, pumpkin pie, and an array of other dishes harvested and cooked right there on the farm:



This feast spread over three serving tables—so, of course, when I moved to the head of the line and the lady asked me what I wanted, I told her I wanted a Big Mac and fries!

She didn't kick me out.

At the table Ginny and I shared the feast with Doug and Kathy, a young couple from a near-by community. Doug, a former railroad employee, is a history buff and his ambition is to visit every historical site in Georgia; he and Kathy (hope I've spelled her name right) have worked half way down their list of sites.

Kathy is an elementary school teacher. She said a big problem is that her kids expect to be amused and entertained because they are exposed to so much entertainment on tv and internet that they find school classes boring. A lone teacher can not keep up the pace of rapid switching kids see in media. But one thing her kids have that no amount of tv and internet can give them—in Kathy they have a living adult who loves them and listens to their problems. Media can not provide that.

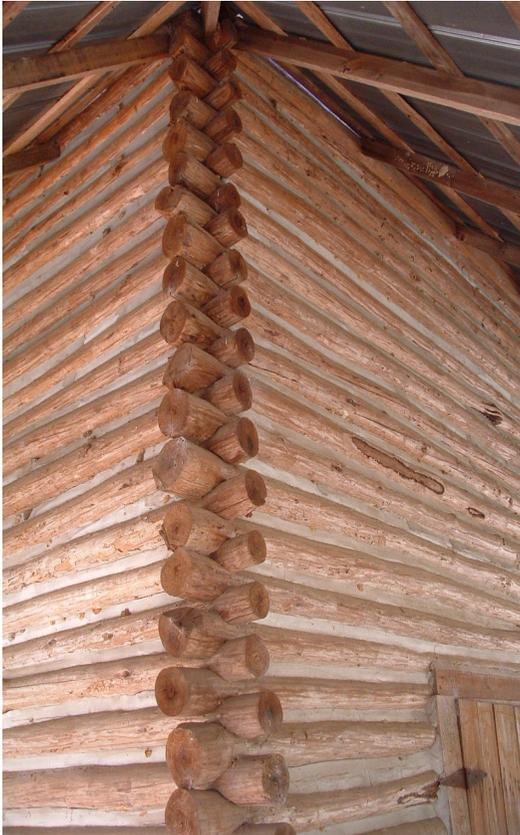
One thing I really enjoyed about the pioneer farm was getting to prowl the tobacco barn and talk with two tobacco growers about how to grow my own pipe tobacco.

Ginny snapped this photo of me fingering dry tobacco leaves:



Next Spring, God willing, I plan to plant, grow and cure my own.

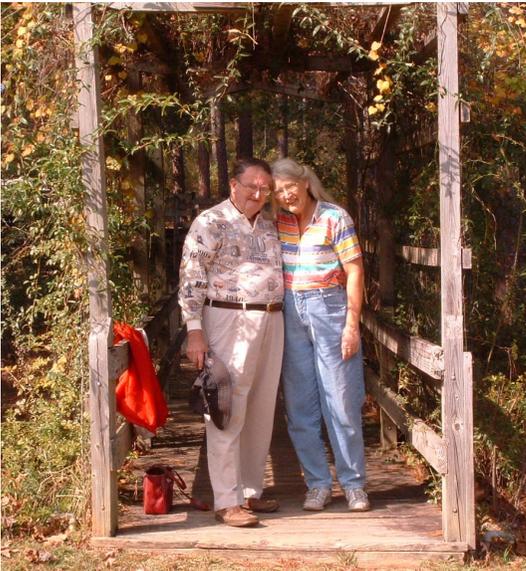
The structure of this tobacco barn intrigued me:



When we'd get tired of walking amid the herds of loose chickens of every variety, Ginny and I rested by the lake where I took this photo of my beautiful bride with the twilight reflection of Autumn leaves behind her:



On the last day of our anniversary vacation, a passing stranger took this photo of Ginny and me framed by the rose arbor covering a rustic bridge:



Also on the last day of our anniversary vacation we said good-bye to one of Ginny's favorite feeding recipients pets who faces Thanksgiving with anticipation:



Tuesday, November 23, 2010
Thoughts On The Original Cold

 Ginny recovered enough to return to work today.

 For the past eight or ten days my poor darling has suffered with a monstrous miserable cold. She coughed and hacked and dribbled in misery. She went through two and a half boxes of Kleenex, two bags of cough drops, cans of soup, zinc, vitamin C, and galleons of juice.

 All to no avail.

 The cold just had to play itself out.

 I cooked cinnamon oatmeal and dry toast for her. I warmed soup. I fed her jello—all my ministrations useless. She felt too sick to read or to watch the DVD movies I got for her comfort.

 Then, last night her fever broke. She perked up. She packed a few boxes for Goodwill. She talked to me...

 Ginny's getting well. But, alas she also gave me her cold.

 Yes, she passed it on to me. Why is that? Here I've been a nice guy, an attentive husband, an understanding solace—yet, I now have her cold.

 It just isn't fair!

 Something is dire wrong in the universe when I can catch another person's cold.

 I'm one of the good guys!

 Yet, this has been the way it always has been from the darkest reaches of history. Egyptologists have found mummies who exhibit signs of cold symptoms. And, I imagine that if archaeologists were to excavate the right dry cave, they'd find the floor littered with prehistoric Kleenex.

 Contagious things infect other members of a family.

 I remember when our kids were little and one came down with chicken pox. Ginny and I wore ourselves out in sleepless nights changing sheets, finding teddy bears, ladling chicken soup, spooning lime sherbet—but as soon as that kid got over the disease, he passed the chicken pox baton on to the next kid.

Everybody knows that colds pass from one person to another.

Common knowledge.

Always been that way as far back as anybody knows.

Strange then that some folks balk at the idea of original sin.

How strange is it that some infection our most remote ancestor picked up keeps recurring in subsequent generations?

But, not only that, but—take me for example—I exacerbate that original infection with bells on. While Adam only ate the forbidden fruit, I grow it, stew it up, smush it into applesauce, fill the swimming pool with it, and dive in! Wallow in the stuff.

Adam ain't the blame for everything.

One of the first school books printed in America contains the ditty:

In Adam's Fall;
We sinned all.

In other words, we caught Adam's cold. It runs through the family.

As Saint Paul said, "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of One shall many be made righteous... As sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ".

You see grace and righteousness run in God's family; it's passed along to us, sort of like an infection if you will, from Jesus.

By that reasoning... Jesus is the cure for the common cold???

That can't be right.

I'm missing something here.

Besides, what about innocent babies who die before reaching the age of responsibility?

As a 71-year-old man, I think that fabled age of responsibility, age of accountability, must mean age 75. That means I'm no-account. Ask anybody who knows me.

When it comes to babies, let's give God a little credit for common sense, mercy and compassion. Those kids are in good hands.

As the Prophet Isaiah said, "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young".

Even given the little we know about Jesus, who would expect anything less?

But alas, theology is too deep for me. I should leave such thoughts to the learned.

This morning I can't think straight. I have a cold. My nose drips. My throat scratches. My head throbs. My lungs wheeze. My muscles ache...

Even my hair hurts.

I have a cold.

Lord Jesus, please have mercy on John Cowart, a sinner.

Tuesday, November 30, 2010 Glass In The Street

Every few days, some citizen smashes a bottle in the middle of the only intersection of streets leading out of the cul-de-sac where we live.

There's a convenience store about a block across the railroad tracks. Apparently the bottle breaker buys a soda pop there, drinks it while walking down the main drag, finished the last drop near the intersection, then smashes the bottle there.

A lot of pedestrians use that route. Ginny and I always walked that way to the bus stop before we had a car.

I assume that the bottle breaker is a pedestrian who cares nothing about the threat broken glass is to car tires.... But I think the problem goes beyond simply not caring. I think the bottle breaker acts out of contempt.

Why else break bottles in the middle of that intersection?

Plenty of other places along the way to smash a bottle.

I think the person who does this wants to cause damage to any unknown driver who passes the intersection.

Give 'em a flat tire! What do I care!

Life is hard. The essence of sin is to make it harder for someone else than it needs to be.

Hence, we have wickedness—the impulse to cause damage to others even when there is no personal gain to us.

I mean you can understand a man stealing your groceries if his own family is hungry. You may not like it, but you can understand it.

But the world is full of malicious people who destroy the groceries in a house they burglarize even though they eat none of those groceries themselves!

Vandalism for the sheer joy of vandalism.

Evil just to be evil.

Wicked doing what wicked does.

No advantage to the person doing it. No gain. Maliciousness for its own sake.

Just goes to show you how lost in darkness this unregenerate world is.

They is bad.

I is good.

I'd never do anything that...

That's a lie.

I have done things exactly like that. Bad things that cause heartache and trouble for some unknown stranger whom I have nothing against. I have done evil things which I knew beforehand would bring me no profit, no benefit, no advantage.

I have done evil for evil's sake.

Can't say I've ever broke a bottle to flatten somebody's tire (No virtue there, back when I was growing up you could get a nickel deposit when you returned a coke bottle).

But I have done hurtful things to others then blithely went on my way.

One of the Hebrew prophets said, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, Who can know it?”.

Guess what?

Christmas is coming.

And Christ said He had come into the world to save sinners.

Guys like me... and the bottle breaker.

Joy to the world.

DECEMBER

Wednesday, December 1, 2010 Winding Down, Starting Up

I feel my workdays are limited for the rest of the year.

About the middle of the month my two older sons plan to drive down from up north, and my youngest daughter and her husband plan to drive up from down state, to join the resident Cowart community for the holidays.

Whatever work I intend to get done, needs to get done over the next ten days.

Overwhelms me.

I hope to have three new books ready to publish on my Bluefish Books site in January... Over extending myself as usual.

God willing, I plan to publish the sixth book in my Dirty Old Man Goes Bad series, (those are my personal diaries). I also plan to publish Barbara White’s Prayer Diary (Barbara is author of the Along The Way series). And...

Remember how all summer long I have battled raccoons—yes, I’m back on raccoons, the evil villains. They gnawed holes in the roof of my outside office rendering it unusable as an office anymore—a pox upon them.

All summer long I have cleared that office and turned it into a gazebo of sorts and in that process I reduced nine file drawers stuffed with book and article notes—do I

really need to save my notes from a 1982 article on the warehouses of Jacksonville?—into a single file drawer

Well, in reviewing files to throw out or save, I encountered a bunch of short stories I wrote years and years ago. Some of these I do not remember ever having written. And some of them are not awful.

In fact some of them are pretty good.

Hummm...

How about *Stories Nobody Reads: The Collected Short Stories Of John W. Cowart* for a title.

While Ginny and I have felt so sick following our anniversary vacation, I could hardly read a full book, so I read several short story collections including *The Dark End Of The Street: New Stories Of Sex and Crime*, edited by Johnathan Santlofer and S.J. Rozan.

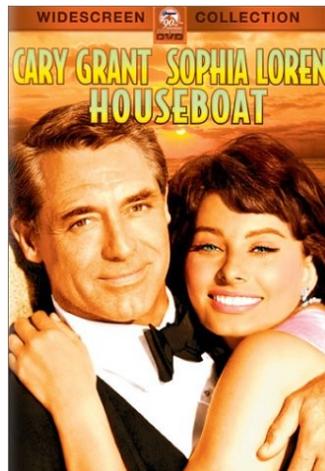
Excellent!

One tale in particular struck my fancy: Stephen L. Carter's "The Hereditary Thurifer". Hauntingly beautiful. Carter's clarity of language and strong but mystical storyline intrigued me. This guy is good!

Unfortunately, the editors did not include author bio bits and I had to look up Stephen L. Carter online. Turns out he's a law professor at Yale. No wonder he's such a good writer! So when Ginny and I went to the library last night, I checked out a couple of his full-length novels.

He inspires me.

Ginny and I also checked out and watched the 1958 video *Houseboat* which the previews modestly proclaim is the greatest romantic story ever filmed. It stars Cary Grant and Sophia Loren—two people who bear a striking resemblance to Ginny and me in our youth.



Go ahead. Laugh. We were not awful—at least in each other's eyes.

The western novel I toyed with a few months back went belly up in my mind so I'm trying to finish the three book projects on the table while waiting for some other idea. And that Will Of God book eludes me as it has for years.

I'm convinced that God does indeed guide us, but I have no idea how.

He remains unpredictable.

Anyhow, that's why I'm so busy and why I rush to get my work done in the limited days I have before the kids come for the holidays...

Ever notice that no matter how busy a person is, they always have time to stop and tell you how busy they are?

Thursday, December 2, 2010

Some On Boards, Some On Broken Pieces

In one of the Bible's most dramatic chapters, Acts Chapter 27, Saint Paul, a card-carrying Five Star Christian, realized that he could not walk on water.

Paul, a giant of the faith, is aboard a floundering ship in a storm. He, along with more than 260 people on board, face drowning at sea as a tempestuous wind, called Euroclydon battered the wooden sailing ship.

Luke, the author of Acts who was onboard with Paul, said:

"When the ship was caught, and could not bear up into the wind, we let her drive. And running under a certain island which is called Claudia, we had much work to come by the boat: which when they had taken up, they used helps, undergirding the ship; and, fearing lest they should fall into the quicksands, strake sail, and so were driven. And we being exceedingly tossed with a tempest, the next day they lightened the ship; and the third day we cast out with our own hands the tackling of the ship. And when neither sun nor stars in many days appeared, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope that we should be saved was then taken away".

Scary stuff.

An angel of God appeared to reassure Paul.

It was still scary stuff.

The ship ran aground. Rigging fell. Waves broke up the hull. People dove overboard swimming in panic. Those who could not swim grabbed hold of planks and spars and baskets—anything that would float—gasping and choking and spitting seawater, they struggled to the beach.

Paul struggled for dear life right along with those other survivors.

Nice what the angel said, but Paul grabbed a floating board and treaded water as hard as he could—this was a matter, not of theology or faith, but survival.

Paul and the others did what comes naturally; they responded to the human urge to survive, to preserve the self, to live by whatever handy board floated their way.

Luke says everyone made it to shore...

Spoke with my friend Barbara White last night.

During another conference with her physician yesterday she decided to go ahead with another round of chemotherapy—a different kind; the kind she has been undergoing failed to halt her cancer. Last month her numbers jumped right back up to where they were when she started.

She sees this new brand of chemo as a temporary relief.

It is so unpleasant.

Ghastly, actually.

“John, sometimes I can’t tell whether my symptoms are from the cancer or from the chemo,” she said.

Barbara, Ginny, me, and a whole bunch of other Christians have prayed about the decision Barbara had to make today about whether or not to try this different kind of chemo.

What is the will of God in such a situation?

Which is the path of faith?

A hard decision to make.

Resignation and rest in a hospice program? Or grasping at the straw of a different chemotherapy regime?

Who knows?

Maybe it's not a straw, but a floating board.

Different subject:

Yesterday morning I boasted about how I'd reduced my files from nine file drawers to one. So proud of me. I is a good boy.

Yesterday afternoon as I worked I needed to check a quote. Knew right where it was. In that file on Florida panthers. Went to the file drawer. Discovered that the panther file was one of those that I'd thrown away a few weeks ago... Story of my life.

Friday, December 3, 2010 Amateur And Professional Christians

"It's doubtful that God can use any man greatly until He's hurt him deeply".

—A.W. Tozer

Thursday over a waffle breakfast at Country Kitchen Restaurant my friend Wes and I discussed the phenomena of God-inflicted pain in relation to a young man Wes knows who is a candidate for a Christian ministry.

We feel that the young man faces great pain in his future

He's one of these dedicated Christian young men who fits neither the world nor organized church bodies.

Now both Wes and I are amateur Christians.

We fear this young man faces heartbreak in his attempt to become a professional Christian. It takes a special kind of Christian to deal with the realities of the professional religious world without getting the faith, among other things, kicked out of him.

We also talked about our own role as amateurs in "ministry". Wes feels God often calls him to be on display as a testimony to people who watch him in daily life; he does not know who these people are who keep an eye on him as he works, plays or goes to church, but he's positive they are there watching.

He feels that we all remain unconscious of much of our "ministry".

After breakfast we ventured into that great testing arena of faith—the local Wal-Mart. Actually, we went to two different Wal-Marts so Wes could buy 12 matching shower curtains (Don't ask).

Hey, if you can be a Christian in a Wal-Mart checkout line, you can be a Christian anywhere.

We also visited my daughter and delivered my pool pump motor to the repair shop (Yes, it's broken again).

When Wes drove me back to my house, he showed me this poem by an anonymous author; it relates all too well to my own life, worries, insecurities, anxieties, and conflicts—(*Are you sure God is the one doing this??? I thought He liked me!*):

God Knows What He's About

When God wants to drill a man,
And thrill a man,
And skill a man
When God wants to mold a man
To play the noblest part;

When He yearns with all His heart
To create so great and bold a man
That all the world shall be amazed,
Watch His methods, watch His ways!

How He ruthlessly perfects
Whom He royally elects!
How He hammers him and hurts him,
And with mighty blows converts him

Into trial shapes of clay which
Only God understands;
While his tortured heart is crying
And he lifts beseeching hands!

How He bends but never breaks
When his good He undertakes;
How He uses whom He chooses,
And which every purpose fuses him;
By every act induces him
To try His splendor out—
God knows what He's about.

In speaking of amateur and professional “ministry, Wes also pointed out this line from A.W. Tozer's book *The Pursuit Of God*:

“It is not what a man does that determines whether his work is sacred or secular, it is why he does it. The motive is everything. Let a man sanctify the Lord God in his heart and he can thereafter do no common act”.

In the afternoon, I watched NASA-TV for their live scientific press conference about the discovery of bacteria which can live with an arsenic base to their DNA instead of the usual (on earth) phosphorous component, which previously been considered one of the six elements essential for life.

Tickled me to watch the scientists just about wet themselves in excitement over this development.

I love to watch people who love what they are doing.

Tuesday, December 21, 2010 One Long Dark Night

I am writing this about 3 a.m. on December 21st, the night of the Winter Solstice, longest night of the year; it is also the night of a total eclipse of the moon, making this the darkest night of the year.



According to Geoff Chester of the U.S. Naval Observatory, the same astronomical situation will not happen again till the year 2094. The last time it happened was in the year 1638; and the time before that was in the year A.D. One....Curious.

Around our house, it has been a dark time all this month.

Ginny had a small lump on the side of her neck. In about three days time it ballooned up to the size of a computer mouse and suppurated.

Emergency room doctors admitted her immediately. After being seen by anywhere from eight to fifteen physicians and subjected to CAT scans, MRI, biopsy, tissue cultures, X-rays, and scads of other tests, Ginny rated her pain level on a scale from one to ten as a TWELVE. She said it felt more painful than giving birth.

Being a diabetic and having such a massive infection put Ginny in real danger.

The battery of physicians could not agree on the cause of the abscess. One suggested melanoma. Another said maybe a spider bite. Another said she got it from petting animals (bet it was a cat!). And another said it was an ingrown hair follicle.

Although no one pinpointed the cause, they gave her excellent care!

The cause of a thing matters less than the cure.

An emergency surgery left a pothole in Ginny's neck the size of the bowl on one of my pipes; and the wound had to be kept open so healing could work from the inside out.

Family, friends and medical professionals rallied around giving us all sorts of support.

Once we got Ginny back home, a visiting nurse taught me how to pack the wound with anti-biotic tape and apply sterile dressings.

That's been my life since.

Now, I'm exhausted....But enjoying my view of the moon.

And on this darkest night of the year, as the eclipse fades, I see a tiny glimmer of light ahead.

PS: The day before Gin got so sick, my computer went out (Thanks to Donald for fixing it the other day) but I've been so swamped that I would not have been able to post anyhow.

Thursday, December 23, 2010 **Job & Job-ette**

One of the many physicians treating Ginny in the hospital actually called that eruption on her neck a carbuncle. That's the only time in my life outside the Bible that I've ever heard anyone speak that word.

Poor old Job, in addition to his other troubles, was stricken with "sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown". He self-medicated with a potsherd scraper and ashes—about the only treatment Ginny's doctors haven't tried.....Yet.



Thanks to Dad Hengeveld (See Job 1)

09-19-2005

FIRST THINGS FIRST, MR. JOB ... ARE YOU AWARE THAT YOU ARE DUSTY, ASHEN, AND WEARING SACKCLOTH?

In joking about all our troubles Ginny and I took to calling each other Job and Job-ette.

Troubles?

Oh, yes. Everything of a sudden is breaking down around us.

The day before the emergency room, our internet connection failed.

The previous week the pool pump burned out and green algae thrived.

Then the lawnmower motor burned out.

Our garden fountain clogged up.

A cold snap decimated even the plants we had protected.

Then of course Ginny broke down—I told the doctors if she needs a whole-head transplant, next time I want a redhead.

Naturally, about this time another of my teeth began hurting and my prostate cancer let itself be heard from, my arthritis acted up, and my legs began shaking again.

Old age is a bitch.

However, St. Paul tells us to rejoice in afflictions... Humm, did St Paul ever have a toothache? This is the day which the Lord hath made; what the hell happened to it?

Job and Job-ette. That's us.

On the brighter side, a number of good things happened to us recently.

First off, with my keen powers of Christian observation I perceived that some of the nurses walking hospital corridors are really stacked.

Then, one morning in the small hours Ginny and I, for the first time in ages, actually enjoyed our morning prayers together. Usually in the rush of the workaday world we have to pray separately in the mornings.

One morning as my son Donald and I ate breakfast in a coffee shop across the street from the hospital, an excited lady pointed to the tv set in the corner where news coverage of a space rocket launch played—and at the same time she pointed out that we could actually see the rocket blast off right through the coffee shop window. We even saw the booster stage fall away from the capsule.

Another great thing is that Clint and Patti, our youngest daughter, drove up from downstate; and Fred and Johnny, my two older sons, drove down from Maryland. For the first time in years all six of my children with their spouses are in town at the same time.

Here is a family photo showing all of us, except for one, gathered in our living room:



From left to right, Standing are: Donald, Mark, Eve, Johnny, Fred, Patricia, and Clint. Seated from right to left are: Jennifer, Maggie, Helen, Ginny and me.

Because both Jennifer and Eve celebrated birthdays this week, the kids and friends used our house as a staging area for a long-scheduled hayride on Luminary night:



Of course, with Ginny being sick—doctors say she has to stay off work for another one to three weeks—we could not go out on the Luminary hayride. Without us, the kids had a blast. All week long they have gathered at one home or another for various activities: video games, computer stuff, art galleries, shopping, meals at restaurants, birthday parties, etc.

It's such a joy for me to see my children being great friends and having fun together.

They also kept tabs on me and my poor ailing wife. They brought in food. The girls mopped the kitchen. They ran errands and made themselves helpful in all sorts of practical ways to help Ginny and me get through this tough time.

Even in this time of serious illness and assorted minor troubles, our house continually rings with laughter. We must be crazy. Our situation borders on being desperate, yet ... we are hurt but happy.

As the visiting nurse taught me to pack the wound in Ginny's neck and to change the bandages, Ginny and I joked through her pain. As I sterilized tweezers, scissors, and probes and donned sterile gloves, and arranged implements on a white tray, I told Ginny and the nurse that I'm an expert at medical procedures because I once saw an episode of *House* on tv.

I told Ginny, "I know just what to do, young lady. To demonstrate my bedside manner, I want you to lay on your back and put your feet up in the stirrups".

In spite of all our joking, I observe scrupulous procedures in caring for her; this is deadly serious stuff.

That's the nature of Christian faith, serious joy.

Our pain is real, but so is our joy.

Sometimes life is a bitch, but life is not all there is.

The last time Ginny and I went to lunch with our friend Barbara White, who herself is undergoing chemotherapy and all that entails, Barbara gave us this prayer poem written by some Puritan ages ago. It talks about what heights we can see in the lowest darkness:

The Valley Of Vision

Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly, Thou hast brought me to the valley of vision, where I live in the depths but see Thee in the heights; hemmed in by mountains of sin, I behold Thy glory.

Let me learn by paradox that the way down is the way up,

That to be low is to be high,

That the broken heart is the healed heart,

That the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,

That the repenting soul is the victorious soul,

That to have nothing is to possess all,

That to bear the cross is to wear the crown,

That to give is to receive,

That the valley is the place of vision.

Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from deepest wells,

And the deeper the wells the brighter Thy stars shine;

Let me find Thy light in my darkness,

Thy life in my death,

Thy joy in my sorrow,

Thy grace in my sin,

Thy riches in my poverty,

Thy glory in my valley.

From *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions*, edited by Arthur Bennett

There is a heresy afoot which proclaims that God is found in prosperity, affluence and a trouble-free life.

Bull.

Jesus suffered on the cross for a reason and it wasn't so I could avoid toothaches, get a good job and buy a new car. Jesus is the ultimate realist.



Thanks to John Verbrugge (See 1Chronicles 4:9-10)

01-23-2002

YOU MUST BE JOB ... MY NAME IS JABEZ, I'M YOUR NEW NEIGHBOR

When our friend Wes came to visit earlier this week, he told this great joke: Ms Baxter, the Sunday School teacher, asked the kids in her class about the way of salvation. "Can you go to Heaven by keeping the Ten Commandments," she asked.

"Noooo, Ms Baxter" the kids responded.

"Can you get to Heaven by being good"?

"Noooo".

Can you get to Heaven by going to church"?

"No, Mam".

"Then, let's see...Billy, tell us how do you get to go to Heaven".

Billy said, "Well first, you got to fucking die".

**Sunday, December 26, 2010
Red Letter Day?**



On Christmas Eve my son Johnny and I visited my parents' grave and talked about our family background and history.



Then on Christmas day, when I opened the present my brother, David, sent me, I found a photo of my father taken about 1937 when he had worked as a tap dancer on a riverboat in the St. Johns. When the Depression struck, Daddy went to work in a foundry and eventually became a master molder.

For some reason my computer screen suddenly began underlining everything and printing in red

Ginny and I drove to Mark and our daughter Eve's home for the festivities as our children gathered to exchange gifts and feast. This was the first time in weeks that Ginny has been able to get dressed and sit up for about four hours.

For me a high point came when Mark and Eve played a YouTube video they dedicated to me! In the video they used cat figurines in a Nativity Play.

You can check out this video on YouTube at :
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aSl6fVBxleE&feature=youtube_gdata_player

This red in ink drives me nuts!

Some of it just disappeared???

I can't go on typing like this.

Bill Gates hates me.

Friday, December 31, 2010
Out Of The Closet And Into Next Year As A
Perfect Grapefruit

Since December 7th when Ginny underwent emergency surgery, this month has been one long day with brief interludes for naps and visits with family or friends. I hardly posted anything in my diary, nor answered e-mails, or wrote comments on the blogs I follow. I just have not had the energy.

I've spent my time nursing, worrying, cooking, worrying, cleaning, worrying, praying and worrying.

However, today for the first time in weeks, Ginny was able to sit outside by the backyard fountain and watch the birds (yellow-rumped warblers). She actually stayed awake all day!

I take her to the doctor's again next Tuesday and we anticipate that she'll soon be able to return to work.

Thanks be to God!

I want to write about two things tonight: a stomp-down, drag-out fight Ginny and I had two days before she went into the hospital, and a brief look at highlights of my past year—that will be very brief because essentially I have accomplished little.

First lets look at the day I came out of the closet:

A friend of a friend of a friend told me about this young man, a college student, who came out of the closet announcing himself to be a homosexual to his assembled family on Thanksgiving day.

Made for interesting table talk.

His parents, highly religious people, hit the ceiling in condemnation.

His grandmother, also a highly religious person, merely said, "Yes, there are some people like that".

Two very different religious attitudes over a controversial issue.

Now, my own tale:

A Saturday just days after Thanksgiving dawned bright and beautiful here in Florida. Temperature in the mid-70s. Not a cloud in the sky. A perfect day for... I suggested we go to the zoo, or visit a mall for window shopping, or go to the flea market, or feed ducks in the park, or stroll on the Riverwalk.

Ginny felt it was a perfect day too—a perfect day to clean the front closet!

Yes, Dear....Damnit.

Now to my way of thinking, if the door can be closed, the closet is clean.

The female mind does not work that way. Ginny had me remove all the coats on hangers, unload all the boxes, break out all the tax papers (which dated back to 1967), pull out the grammar school papers from our youngest daughter (who is now 30), reach out the 16 hats stored on

the top shelf, remove two life-sized rubber vultures, throw away signs from the yard sale we had three years ago...

Get the idea?

Now, a number of years ago a fad swept the homeowner's world—wire shelving.

Wobbly wire shelving.

Flimsy wire shelving.

The kind almost supported by $\frac{1}{4}$ inch hollow tinfoil tubes. Tiny plastic pins anchor these shelves into closet wallboard which must be manufactured by the same great folks who bring you Kleenex.

What the hardware salesman does not tell you, is that the wire shelving is only held up by the boxes stacked underneath it.

So when I removed those 1967 tax records, the shelving collapsed on top of me. Here is a photo:



Whoops. Wrong photo. But you get the idea.

Like any devout Christian gentleman, I said the appropriate words—loudly.

Ginny, who you understand has never actually been inside this closet, offered encouraging suggestions about how I should have done it.

Can you see where this is going?

In a screaming hissyfit, I attempted to hoist the wire shelves back into place and they retaliated by ripping out of the wall. Actually, I did a little of the ripping myself.

Ginny wanted me to put them back the way they were. Impossible. Because by this time I twisted the wire entanglements and drug the whole mess out into the front yard.

“But where will I hang my umbrella?” she said.

And I told her where she could put her umbrella.

Things deteriorated from there.

Things deteriorated in an increased volume followed by an even louder silence.

I replaced the wire shelves with some old rusty steel shelves—hey, we’re talking inside a closet here.

Did Ginny and I kiss and make up.

No. That’s storybook stuff. After 43 years of marriage we’ve learned to kiss and move on.

Agreement is not always necessary to love.

Eventually I came out of the closet. The door now closes again and the damn thing looks exactly the same as it did before I ever went into the closet.

Here’s something interesting:

For years, before Ginny goes off to her office in the morning, I always, always, make sure that the last thing she hears me say before she closes the car door is, “I love you”.

I’ve know folks who’s life ended after an argument with their spouse; the last words between them were harsh words.

What a heavy thing to carry.

I thought about the closet incident a lot while Ginny was in the hospital. Yes, I know our fight was merely an incident. An unusual incident. But an incident is nothing more than an incident. It is not life. It is not the tone of our marriage. It does not fit the overall caring we have for each other.

So, what is the Christian couple's secret for a happy marriage—come out of the closet and stay out!

Now for a summary of my 2010 highlights:

- Our youngest daughter got married last January 1st.
- I renewed my driver's license and got a handicapped parking sticker.
- I ventured tentatively into e-book publishing.
- My friend Barbara White was diagnosed with cancer.
- Ginny and I took training to help out with swine flu (H1N1) vaccinations.
- I finally gave up on writing that book on the will of God that I've worked on for 20 years—giving up in failure proved a great relief.
- On May 8th Ginny won an award for outstanding service
- A huge flight of cedar waxwings flocked to our fountain.
- In May raccoons attacked my outside office and I exorcised them on June 2nd -but the coons won and I had to tear down my office and turn it into a gazebo.



Here's a photo of me in my Christian Coon Exorcist vestments:



- Because of the raccoon attack, I had to give away much of my library; whereas before I stocked 11 stuffed bookcases, I reduced my library to only five bookcases—this was a painful experience. Damn coons!
- During the week of August 16th, I buried an Indian.
- In December Fred and Johnny came down and for the first time in umpteen years, all six of my children were together at the same time for Christmas.
- My e-friend in Russia, Maria, translated a chapter from my books *Strangers On The Earth* into her nation's language.
- I plunged my hands into a bucket of worms—something all good dads do.
- Helen, our daughter-in-law, opened her new art gallery at a prestigious address in Jacksonville Landing.
- I helped Patricia Grace with her book, *The Way Out: An Exotic Dancer's Story Of Freedom*. Her book can be found in both print and E-book



formats at:
<http://www.lulu.com/product/paperback/the-way-out-an-exotic-dancers-story-of-freedom/11269360> .

- A publisher in the Philippines mailed me a royalty check for \$5.42 for sales of an edition of my book on prayer in that country—Stephen King need not worry that I'll bump him off the best seller list yet.
 - I continue to be addicted to internet pornography.
 - And, this afternoon Ginny sat down with her calculator and added up my reading diary for the year. In 2010 I have read 22,672 pages in 74 books. The subject matter has ranged from a biography of Typhoid Mary and a history of the Timuqua Indians to murder mysteries and Dave Barry... mostly light fiction.

Maybe I should read less and work more.

So, these are the highpoints of my year.

I've done hardly anything worth doing. Yet I consider my self a perfect Christian.

Why?

Consider the grapefruit.

We tend to think of a golden globe filled with juice and luscious meat. That's a perfect grapefruit.

But in Spring look at the budding grapefruit, small as your thumbnail, hard as a nut, vile bitter to taste—yet that also is a perfect grapefruit. Perfect for its time and place and stage of life.

So I'm bitter, vain, sour, and self-centered. So I yell at my wife. Avoid phone calls. Browse girly sites. Don't pay my bills on time. Daydream. Read light fiction. Avoid church meetings. Buy a Lotto ticket every week. Worry a lot. Have a lot of doubts...

Like the guy in the Bible who said, "Lord, I believe; Help Thou my unbelief".

Yet, this dirty old man is a perfect Christian grapefruit considering what he is. And though I'm 71 years old, I just need to mature a bit.

And that's pretty much it for the year 2010.

Is This The End Of My Battle With The Coons?

On Friday, January 14th, 2011, I made the following entry in my diary:

Dead Coon

This may not be the most important thing that happened to me today but it is the most memorable—As I dipped leaves off the bottom of the pool, I netted a dead raccoon.

A very, very dead coon.

Because of the algae buildup because of the broken pool pump, the pool water turned dark green and scads of leaves accumulated on the bottom. So I could not see what I was raking up till I netted that coon. It had been on bottom so long that when I tried to pick it up, fur, skin and flesh sloughed off.

Aromatic, too.

I bagged the little creature and put it in the trash.

Maybe that's the end of my coon troubles.

For Now???

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