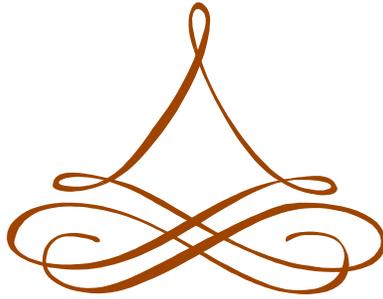


A Dirty Old Man Tells All



John Cowart's 2011 Diary



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TELLS ALL**

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John W. Cowart

Bluefish Books



**Cowart Communications
Jacksonville, Florida**

www.bluefishbooks.info

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To Ginny



The Brains Behind This Dirty Old Man

JANUARY 2011

Saturday, January 1, 2011 Out Of The Closet And Into Next Year As A Perfect Grapefruit

Since December 7th last year, when Ginny underwent emergency surgery, the past 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 let's 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 whose 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 outstanding service award.



- 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.
- My e-friend in Russia, Maria, translated a chapter from my books *Strangers On The Earth* into her nation's language.
- 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.
- I plunged my hands into a bucket of worms—something all good dads do.
- A huge flight of cedar waxwings flocked to our fountain.



- 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>.
- 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 Marry and a history of the Timucua 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.

Monday, January 3, 2011
Helpless

Two more doctors' appointments scheduled this week before Ginny and I will know where we stand in regard to her staph infection.

During our appointment last Monday with a different doctor, he said that given the nature of her infection, her neck wound, and her diabetic condition, it is a wonder that she is healing as well as she is. He said, "This is the grace of God".

I admit that God had a hand in Ginny's healing, but I claim some credit myself. After all I have scrupulously nursed her, packing the wound and changing the dressings and observing sterile procedures and giving her the best home medical care I possibly could.

Besides that, I myself have cooked recently observing the highest standards of culinary standards... of course there was that incident with the grilled cheese sandwich. Did you know that you are supposed to put the cheese on the bread before you grill it? How was I to know? But Julia Child herself can't boil ramen noodles any better than I can!

And when it came to medical care, I'm far in advance of Jacksonville's physicians.

For instance, as the infection and the antibiotics both cause symptoms, yesterday Ginny felt exhausted, down and depressed.

So, as she lay in her bed of pain, I began to suck on her big toe while humming "*Jingle Bells*". She laughed so hard she almost cried.

Why don't other medical professionals try that technique?

Bet they never taught that at Johns Hopkins.

Maybe the grace of God comes in in that Ginny seems to be surviving and healing in spite of my tender (but inept) care.

The grace of God plays a role in the lives of a number of people around me. While Ginny and I live anchored to the house, several people have called me describing tragic, desperate, dangerous and even hopeless situations in their lives.

And here's the kicker:

I can do nothing to help them!

Nothing.

I feel powerless and helpless.

The various issues, business, financial, medical, emotional, are all beyond my ability to help even on a minimal level.

I was a Boy Scout; wanting to help people is ingrained into my make up. Being a Christian magnifies this desire to be helpful. And I can't.

Even if Ginny were not ill, I'd be able to do nothing to help these folks. I have not the money, the knowledge, the skill, the energy, the time, the strength...nothing.

As I thought on this this morning, I realized that I'm in the same state as the rest of humanity—dependent on the grace of God. We are all God's charity cases. In realizing my helpless state, I reflected on the Scripture:

“When we were yet without strength, Christ died for the ungodly”.

Without strength.

Oh, we all do what we can. That's human nature and that's good.

But you can't live long without realizing that much is beyond your power to do much beyond sucking a toe and humming *Jingle Bells*.

The rest is the grace of God.

Wednesday, January 5, 2011
Back To Whelmed

Thanks be to God.

Yesterday Dr. Woody released Ginny!

Under my tender care, she's recovered that much.

Today she can return to work to earn money to support me in the style to which I have become accustomed.

We face a month without income and things may get a bit tighter.

Fortunately, as prudent Floridians we keep a hurricane supply closet stocked with what we might need

to endure a long time without restocking. So we do not face any dire need at the moment. We plan to treat the aftermath of her illness as though we'd survived a passing hurricane.

I feel greatly relieved at her recovery. I'm sick of her being sick.

I rejoice that I have no more wounds to pack or bandages to change or ... one funny thing:

Ginny occasionally mis-speaks herself, using a word close to and similar to the one she actually means to use, but after 43 years as her husband I usually manage to interpret her true meaning. Thus, the other day when she asked me, "Isn't it time to change my batteries?" I knew that was Ginny-speak for, "Isn't it time to change the bandages?".

She has recovered. She goes back to work. She can resume cooking.

Thanks be to God!

All the extra stuff I've been doing this past month while she's been ill overwhelmed me. Now I can go back to normal work and stuff. All the work I've neglected to take care of Beauty still awaits me.

Instead of being overwhelmed, I return to just being whelmed.

Thanks be to God.

Thursday, January 6, 2011

Where Do I Go Now? What Should I Do? And Why?

As a project oriented person reaching a goal knocks me off balance.

For a month now, since December 7th, my only goal, my primary project, was to take care of Ginny. But now that she's well again, I meander through life with no project in mind, no goal ahead.

Before she got sick I planned to have three books ready for publication this month, but with the break, I view those projects as ashes. What had seemed important then, doesn't seem to matter now. What seemed an urgent purpose in my life, now appears useless make-work.

As a Christian I understand that God means to make me into a godly man, a Christ-like person.

I object to His methods. Surely there's a better way.

Yeah, sure, all things work together for good—but when good happens, do I recognize it? I keep thinking I'm a pin in God's bowling alley.

Enough whining.

I'm just undergoing a post-Christmas let-down. The world revolves around something other than me. It shouldn't, but it does.

An interesting item in this morning's news: In Maryland over two million dead fish line the shores of Chesapeake Bay. The CNN report can be found at <http://www.cnn.com/2011/US/01/06/maryland.fish.kill/> Here's a photo from the Maryland Department of the Environment:



This interests me because in my book *Glog: A Dinosaur Novel Of Sorts* a massive fish kill on the Chesapeake initiates the action.

Did I write prophetically?

Oddly enough, since I wrote that book, two other items that I had envisioned through pure speculation appeared in news reports: a near-LOCA at a nuclear

power plant, and the discovery of dinosaur remains in Antarctica which revealed that the allosaurus, close cousin to the dryptosaurus, did indeed possess a pineal window!

When I wrote this stuff in *Glog*, I created it solely by imagine, yet my speculations seemed to have been accurate as touching these three news items.

That's spooky.

I was just writing an entertainment, not a projection.

Just coincidence? Maybe.

But, sometimes I wonder if God influences people (even me) without us being in the slightest aware of it.

Interesting pipe dream for discussion by sophomores, but it does not answer my questions about what am I to do now.

Friday, January 14, 2011

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.

It proved aromatic too asl bagged the creature and put it in the trash.

On a happier note, a painted bunting came to the front bird feeder right at our front window.

Saturday, January 15, 2011

A Pair of Eagles

As Ginny and I sipped coffee out by the garden fountain, she spotted a pair of eagles land in a tall tree at the edge of Rex's yard. One sat patiently while the other picked apart some small animal to eat.

We fetched the binoculars and bird book to confirm our initial identification as we observed them clearly.

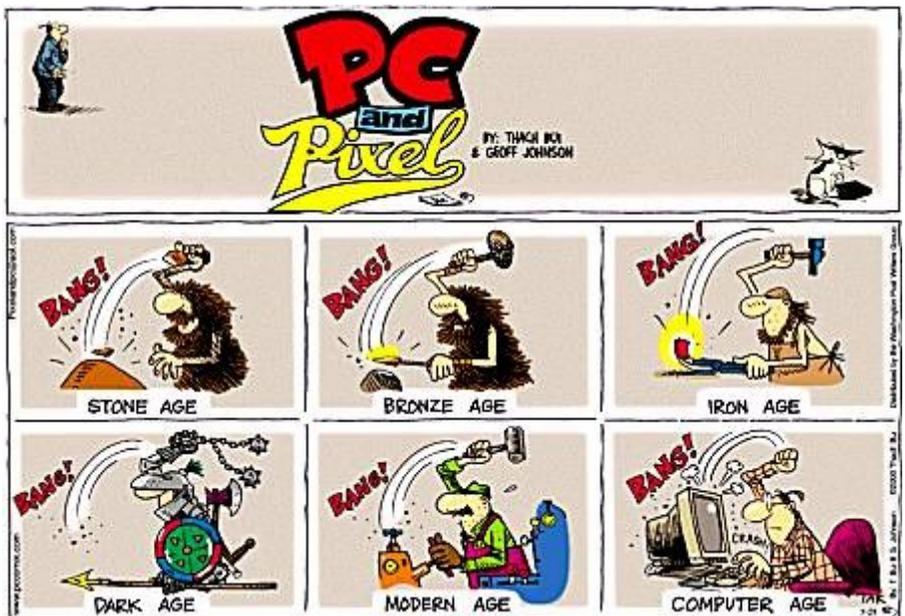
Monday, January 24, 2011
Haywired, Re-Wired & Reading



On Friday January 7th, a Friday afternoon, my computer went down... AGAIN!.

The cheerful lady in Borneo or some such place on the AT&T help line (We Put The Cuss In Customer Service) told me my system was beyond repair unless I paid an exorbitant hostage release fee.

I found this frustrating.



I called my youngest son, Donald, who is a computer network manager for his company, to look at my problem. He determined that somewhere there was a break in my wiring.



Helen, my daughter-in-law, claimed a raccoon, or maybe a cat, tangled the wiring; I have an on-going battle with raccoons around our house.

In fact, On Friday, January 14th, 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.

Anyhow, back to this weekend, after two long days' work, Donald located the real source of my computer problem:



Last Saturday Donald re-wired half our house and got me on-line again.

Many thanks, Donald. I could never have done this by myself but now I'm back on line.



(NOTE: Some of the above photos come from Donald's own website at <http://rdex.net/>)

What have I been doing while cut off from on-line humanity?

Well, the raccoon attack last summer forced me to get rid of about half my books one way or another. That sad action left me with only five bookcases stuffed with books--books I've long planned to get around to reading someday...Welcome to Someday.

Yes, instead of the usual library books, I've been reading my own books right off my own shelves. As of this morning, I'm up to page 578 in Robinson's *History Of Medieval Times* (©1902). That brings me to about 2/3s of the way through that particular volume.

So far in this computerless January, I've read 14 other books on topics ranging from true crime and police procedures to cartoons about dogs.

I read an autobiography of a mortuary attendant, a social history of America, , two art history books, a Christian theology book—don't get excited, it was Robert Short's *The Gospel According To Peanuts* (John Knox Press. ©1965)—and a handful of murder mysteries.

Here's a photo of a cool tee-shirt my daughter Eve gave me last year:. The little green alien says, "Take Me To Your Reader... All Intelligent Life Reads".

Also, while the computer's been down, and having no working tv to watch football games, I read a dictionary for writers which teaches all about words and how to use them—such as *affect* and *effect*, or *that* and *which*, or *lay* and *lie*. The author wasted his time trying to teach me such stuff; I never can keep those words straight.

Even mnemonics don't help me. Does a *stalagmite* hold up the roof of a cave with all its might, or must I



worry that a *stalagmite* hanging from the roof might drop on my head?

However, reading is educational and reading this book did make me think a lot about words...

For instance, did you know that the word *homogenous* does not refer to a very, very smart gay guy?

Wednesday, January 26, 2011

Rosa Belle and The Value of a Diminished Life

Playing in the kitchen the little retarded girl pulled a pot of boiling water off the stove onto her head. The scalding water burned and disfigured her face for the rest of her life.

Her name was Rosa Belle. This happened to her back in 1929 or 30.

Because of her disabilities, mental and physical, she could not attend school or live an independent life.

She stayed with her parents till they died; then, as an adult, she lived in an institution where she learned the joy of Crayons and coloring books.

Rosa Belle matured, aged, and finally died, a lady in her 80s, last summer.

Although my friend Wes is not the pastor of a church, Rosa Belle's relatives asked him to give a talk at her funeral.

What could be said?

What could I have possibly said on such an occasion?

What would you have said?

I asked Wes to write a transcription of his talk on his blog at <http://ithinksoibelieve.blogspot.com/> . Here is a copy of his graveside talk:

The Value of a Diminished Life by Wes Bassett

We are gathered here today to pay our last respects to our sister, aunt, cousin, Rosa Belle. Rosa Belle was born in a small, now almost non-existent town in North Florida in 1924. She was the oldest child of Faire Belle and Cephas.

We are all well aware that Rosa Belle was significantly handicapped. A part of this handicap was mental and may have been congenital. But at about the age of five years, as my father has told me, she was severely injured in an accident. She was pushing my father around in a wooden crate in the little house where they lived. Her mother had a gallon can of water boiling on the stove. Somehow Rosa Belle pulled the can of water over on her and the boiling water poured down the right side of her neck, right arm and down the right side of her body. She was badly burned. There was little medical help and less money to get it. So the burns healed into disfiguring and disabling scars.

Because of these disabilities, Rosa Belle was limited in her education. She had to be taken out of school early. She was unable to live away from her parents for the rest of their lives. She was limited in her associations to immediate family and had few friends. She had no independent life, yet she was mentally aware enough to know how her disabilities diminished her life.

After both her parents died, she moved into an assisted living facility. There she discovered the world of coloring. She loved to color. How much less the grinding boredom of most of her life would have been if we had known this. We could have kept her in coloring books and crayons.

As we think about this life of suffering today, we must address an obvious question: What was the purpose of this diminished life in God's plan? What value can we understand to attach to such a life? And what lessons can we learn from it?

1. In Romans eleven, the last few verses, St. Paul teaches that God's ways are so wise and His purposes so high that they are past finding out.

The "why" of God in allowing things like this, as the Psalmist says, is "too high for us; we cannot attain to it."

2. In Daniel four, the LORD God taught a world dictator an important lesson in the only way he would learn it and like only God can teach it. In reciting the lesson back, Nebuchadnezzar said, "I praised the most High He doeth according to His will in the army of

heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. And none can stay His hand, or say to Him, "What doest thou?"

God does as He wills. He is not caught off guard. He is not and cannot be frustrated in His purposes. His will cannot be thwarted. He accomplishes all that He sets out to do.

3. In Exodus chapters three and four and in John chapter nine, we are instructed that handicapped and diminished lives are created by the Lord in order that He might be glorified through them. This is a hard lesson.

The Lord uses the harsh effects of sin in a fallen, broken world to bring glory to Himself.

4. In Matthew chapter twenty-five we see that the Lord Jesus appears in disguise in the world, masquerading as "the least of these" to test how we might treat Him.

Jesus often appears in our world in the costume of a diminished life.

So, we ask again, what is the value of a diminished life?

Its value is that God uses it to accomplish His purpose for good in a fallen, broken world in a way that, in the end, His creation will glorify Him.

And what lessons may we learn from such a life?

1. The fear of the Lord: These weighty disabilities and their sequelae remind us that the Lord is to be feared for what he could do to each of us.

2. Gratitude: Those whom God has permitted or caused to suffer so should make us give thanks to God that He gives us better and more than we deserve. He is kind to the wicked and the unthankful. That is us.

3. Compassion: We, as recipients of God's abundant and undeserved kindness through Christ in our day to day lives, have an obligation to show compassion to the suffering as indirectly repaying kindnesses to Christ Himself.

4. Hope: As the diminished life reminds us that we live in a fallen world, so it awakes in us the intuition that God must set things right. Thus we are made keen and receptive to the doctrine of a future life and the restitution of all things, which are the results of God's

ultimate act of kindness, the forgiveness of our sins through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, His only-begotten Son.

Moses, in Psalm ninety reminds us of our mortality:

Lord, thou hast been our refuge from one generation to another.

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the earth and the world were made, thou are God from everlasting, and world without end.

Thou turnest man to destruction; again thou sayest Come again, 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.

The days of our age are threescore and ten; and though men be so strong that they come to fourscore years, yet is their strength then but labor and sorrow; so soon passeth it away, and we are gone.

So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

St. Paul tells us in I Corinthians fifteen of the promise of a resurrection to immortality for those who put their trust in Jesus Christ:

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.

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption.

Behold, I show you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the

saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, Where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?

And Jesus teaches us in John fourteen that He is the way to the Father and to eternal life:

I go to prepare a place for you. And I will come again and receive you to myself, that where I am, ye may be also. I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

Let us pray:

O merciful God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Resurrection and the Life; in Whom whosoever believeth, shall live, though he die; and whosoever liveth and believeth in Him, shall not die eternally, who also hath taught us by his holy Apostle Saint Paul, not to be sorry, as men without hope, for those who sleep in Him; We humbly beseech thee, O Father, to raise us from the death of sin unto the life of righteousness; that, when we shall depart this life, may rest in Him; and that, at the general Resurrection in the last day, we may be found acceptable in Thy sight; and receive that blessing, which Thy well-beloved Son shall then pronounce to all who love and fear Thee, saying, Come, ye blessed children of my Father, receive the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world. Grant this, we beseech thee, O merciful Father, through Jesus Christ, our Mediator and Redeemer. Amen

Unto Almighty God we commend our departed loved one and we commit her body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection unto eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ; at Whose coming in glorious majesty to judge the world, the earth and the sea shall give up their dead; and the corruptible bodies of those who sleep in Him shall be changed, and make like unto His own glorious body; according to the mighty working whereby He is able to subdue all things unto Himself.

Thus ends the service.

Friday, January 28, 2011
Events And Conditions

Events and conditions comprise our lives.

I noticed this yesterday as I went over my diary entries for last year as I formatted the text for the next book in my Dirty Old Man series.

What I noticed is that I record events more often than conditions. Events pinpoint a specific action or happening out of the ordinary. Usually we can assign a specific date or time span for them—my birthday, Christmas holidays, the day I buried the Indian, our vacation.

On the other hand, conditions are so commonplace, so everyday, so ordinary that we do them or experience them almost without being aware of them—mowing grass, washing dishes, reading books, sinning.

My diaries and the history books I read often record events: The Battle of Hastings, the American Revolution, Pearl Harbor, Nine-Eleven; on the other hand, the conditions of life seldom get mentioned, drinking clean water, indoor toilets, grocery shopping.

Yet it's the conditions of life where we spend most of our lives.

We read, think, pray, sin, drink, walk, work, breathe so often that we go through life hardly aware of our condition or the conditions around us. They become so commonplace as to be beneath our notice. And when someone calls them to our attention, they surprise us or strike us as curious.

And we sometimes deny their existence.

Or we even admit that they exist but say, "So What?"

We think the way things are, the way we are, are the way things have always been, the way all people are.

Nothing to get excited about.

Nothing to notice.

So the medieval serf lighted his hovel by torches hooked on the wall—how else is there to light up a dark room? Candles? Whale-oil lamps? Glass lights? Incandescent bulbs? Track lighting? Florescent tubes?

Light is light. Why mention it?

So it is with the human mind—we notice events while our conditions form everyday background noise.

And, in a mental flip-flop, I confuse the two.

For instance, When I studied karate, I smashed a cinderblock with my bare hand. That was an isolated event over 40 years ago; yet in my mind I feel as though I could take on Jackie Chan today. In reality, today I could not fight my way out of a wet paper bag.

Haven't practiced in years—but in my heart I think that I'm *only a little out of condition!*

Ask me about my weight and I think of my once trim ideal weight as though the roll of fat around my waist is an anomaly, not my present condition.

As I peruse my diary, finding that I record events and hardly mention conditions, my thoughts turned to the religious question of faith and works—what I do and what I believe. The stuff I do are events; the stuff I believe are foundational conditions.

I confuse those elements of my life also.

I tend to regard isolated events in which I did some good deed as the norm for my character.

Ain't so.

Big deal. So I helped an old lady cross the street once. That is not something I do everyday—in fact the last time I helped an old lady cross the street was in 1972—yet I think of myself as strong, handsome, and pure-hearted. A Christian gentleman.

On the other hand, I regard my sins as isolated events, when in reality I constantly lust, resent, gripe, envy, covet, , grump, hate, and wallow in self-pity and bitterness and hypocrisy. Yet, I write off this ongoing condition saying, "I'm just tired today". Hardly ever do I think of myself as a sinner.

And Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

The good guys have no use for a Savior.

Then, there's the question of the cross of Jesus—Event? Or Condition?

We point to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as a historical event, something that happened on a specific weekend in the reign of Pontius Pilate. That's the way the creeds word it: *He suffered under Pontius Pilate...*

Yet, after Jesus rose from the tomb, the nail scars remained in His hands, the spear wound in His side. Crucifixion hurt. And He did not *get over it*.

More mysterious still, the Bible refers to Christ as the *Lamb Slain Before The Foundation Of The World*.

The condition existed before the event.

Great indeed is the mystery of godliness.

The Bible also says, “The love of God is shown toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”.

Event? Or Condition?

February

Tuesday, February 1, 2011

Volunteer Of The Year Puts Me To Shame

Had Ginny and I not known our friend Barbara White for over 30 years, we’d have known nothing about her award. She remains silent about most such things.

But at lunch last week, Barbara casually mentioned that she’d been named Volunteer Of The Year by an organization over on her side of town. If her health permits, she plans to attend a state-wide banquet honoring Volunteer Of The Year from each region next month in Orlando.

Yes, a lot of people around the state have been recognized for their efforts in helping other people. We think Barbara is special not only because she’s done all sorts of good deeds for all the years we’ve known her, but also because she labors under a bit of a handicap.

First off, far be it from me to reveal a lady’s age, but let’s just say that Barbara is 80 plus shipping and handling.

Barbara wears a steel brace on one leg and gets around with the help of an aluminum walker. She has a life-threatening cancer and suffers under the side-effects of chemotherapy which causes the skin on



the soles of her feet to slough off and on some days that makes it almost impossible for her to walk at all.

Yet, over the years she has sorted clothes for a mission, helped in a hospice program, spoon-fed Alzheimer patients, served on the welcoming committee and as a mentor at an old folks home—and while she can't get around much with her present chemotherapy, she's been knitting baby clothes for indigent mothers at a charity hospital.

And those are just the things I know about. She keeps most of her activities private.

Barbara is a retired newspaper editor and columnist who won all sorts of awards for her writing. A couple of years ago I collected some of her columns into the four books of her *Along The Way* series.

So, for February, I'm offering a free e-book PDF edition of Barbara's book *Rejoicing Along The Way*. A road sign introduces each section in her *Along The Way* series. You can find the link on the sidebar to the right beneath the picture of the reader getting hit by lightning on the ladder.

Here is a sample chapter from that book:



God's Plans For Us
by
Barbara White

I heard a wonderful story about a cheeseburger recently.

Actually, there was a cheeseburger in the story, but the story was really about the blessings of obedience.

The woman who told the story, the wife of a local minister, said all of this had happened a few years ago when she had decided to learn Hebrew.

She had gone to the first session of the class and had been very attracted to the teacher.

She said she didn't speak to the woman at all. Just listened to her, admired her and decided to pray for her.

And at the end of the class, along with everyone else, she turned in her check to cover the cost of the course.

Then she headed home.

And that's where the cheeseburger came in. She had passed a McDonald's on her way to the class and had decided then that she would stop and get a cheeseburger on her way home.

So she headed back toward the McDonald's expectantly.

Only to believe she heard God telling her to pray and fast for her teacher.

Prayer she had already decided to give. But fasting, too! That had not been part of her plan at all.

Had she really heard God? she wondered. Perhaps it wasn't him. Perhaps she had misunderstood.

With every thought, she was coming closer to the McDonald's.

At the last moment she made her choice — to fast.

If she was going to make a mistake, she was going to make it on the side of obedience rather than disobedience, she decided.

So she passed the McDonald's by and went home.

And prayed.

But in between the prayers, she thought about cheeseburgers and how hungry she was.

This can't be doing any good, she told God. All she could think about was how hungry she was.

When her children came home from school — and began to eat their after-school snack — she went outside to sweep the patio so she wouldn't have to watch. She was still complaining — and praying.

The telephone rang.

It was the teacher.

The teacher said she had been going through the checks and had seen from the names printed on my friend's check — drawn on a joint checking account — that she was a minister's wife.

And she wanted to know if she could talk to her about the Lord!

Would the teacher have called if my friend had eaten the cheeseburger?

We'll never know. But my friend is glad she did not refuse to do what she felt God was telling her to do.

God always blesses our obedience in measures far beyond what we have done, she said. And obedience in small things leads to bigger opportunities. Sometimes, of course, the results are not as clear and as quick as that. But obedience is given for love's sake, not for what we get out of it.

And one real benefit is that we learn obedience by doing it.

We also learn trust as we recognize the blessings that follow.

Trust is vital, for there is always a risk factor in obedience.

God seldom, if ever, gives the whole scenario to us at the beginning. He gives just one part of it — one piece of the jigsaw puzzle, as it were. And when we do the right thing with that piece, he gives us another.

But in the beginning, we can't be sure, absolutely certain, of anything but Him. We cannot know what will be involved, what the cost may be, what we might be asked to do or say or where we might be required to go.

We can only be sure that it will bring joy — not necessarily happiness, but definitely joy.

But what if you don't think God ever speaks to you? How can you hear God's orders?

My friend says you can try saying: "God, speak to me — and I will do what you say."

Sure, it's risky. But joy is worth the risk.

Friday, February 4, 2011
God's Weebles

I play with my vitamin D capsules; they remind me of Weebles.

They also remind me of those little live animals that Jaba The Hut ate in that one *Star Wars* movie. You know, the little animals that ran around on the table trying to escape before he scooped them up and popped them in his mouth.

My vitamin D capsules wobble around like that because of their egg-shape and fluid content (They've got fish oil in them I think).

I take two of them every night at the dinner table and I like to bump the edge of the table to watch them scramble in erratic patters as though they are trying to avoid being scooped up.

Back when our kids were little, they loved to play with Weebles. Weebles are little cartoon characters painted on plastic egg shapes. An off-center weight lies in big end of each egg. So when you touch the Weeble, it wobbles in a charming motion. The tv commercial for the toy proclaimed: **Weebles Wobble, But They Don't Fall Down.**



They wouldn't.

No matter what you did to a Weeble, it would not fall down.

Recently Ginny and I have joked about us being God's Weebles. A lot of nit-picking things have befallen us. Again and again we have taken hits—O nothing that taken alone would amount to a disaster, but each little thing rocks us, wobbles us, knocks us about, breaks our spirit, squelches our hope,. throws cold water on our passions, disappoints our dreams, shakes our foundations.

No biggies. Just life's little things.

If a whale attacks you, you can harpoon the sucker, but what can you do when you're being eaten alive by minnows?

The other night during our devotions after dinner, we prayed this ancient prayer from an old book:

O God, who knowest us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers that by reason of the frailty of our nature we can not always stand upright; Grant to us such strength and protection as may support us in all dangers, and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

When we got to that phrase, "We can not always stand upright", we looked at each other and laughed—we both thought of Weebles at the same time. Ginny said, "We must be God's Weebles".

So, while Ginny was in the hospital during December, we lived for six weeks with no income. So the pool pump burned out and algae turned the water green. So the lawn mower balks at starting and leaves cover our yard. So the computer broke three times since Donald last fixed it. So the driver's side car window stuck down and we had to take the car to the garage three times last week. So my books sell like used Edsels. So I'm getting more and more forgetful and have the age-related staggers more often. So my spirit is broken. So I'm turning into a sour, bitter, dirty old man. So life goes on...

Nevertheless, by the grace of God, we wobble.

We can not always stand upright.

The common, ordinary vicissitudes of life, things that happen to everybody, send me reeling. I know that Moses, Joshua and Paul made a big deal out of Standing Fast In The Faith.

Good for them.

Standing is for stronger folks, younger folks, more faithful folks, than me.

Each minnow of life's troubles rocks me, scatters my faith, generates doubts about God's nature and love, knocks me on my ass. Doesn't take much to wobble me...

I'm not much for standing firm.

Every crisis of life, every crisis of faith, every bump in the road—and I despair.

But I am still here.

I may suffer from battered Christian syndrome; but I'm still here.

And let's have no remarks about my pear-shaped ass. My off-center weight is settled at the big end of the egg so that I only wobble. I don't fall down.

Not yet, anyhow.

Sunday, February 6, 2011 Finagling Faith

Payday! Payday! Thank God, Friday was Payday!

Yes, after more than six weeks without income, Ginny finally got her paycheck.

I don't know how we survived. In normal times we live from one paycheck to the next paycheck; but while Ginny was ill, we lived from her last paycheck till God-only-knows-when.

My own income is negligible. She not only brings home the bacon but fries it up in a pan. I live as a kept man, a boy-toy, a drone—otherwise known as a freelance writer. When my books sell, well and good; when they don't, Ginny works to support me in the style to which I have become accustomed.

In other words, we live by faith.

In reality, my faith is in paychecks, not in God.

So, living without income for the past six weeks proved harrowing for me. I've worried that we were not going to make it, that we'd lose home and car and end up living in a cardboard box on the corner of Main and Bay streets... We never stood in danger of that, but my mind worries toward the extreme dramatic. I fear a lot of things that never happen.

Yet, here at the end of this ordeal, I see that we have never missed a meal, our mortgage and car payments have been on time, our lights stayed on, all other bills are current, I have plenty of pipe tobacco, and our standard of living has not suffered noticeably.

How come?

How can we still be in such good financial shape without having had a paycheck for six weeks?

On one hand, the pious side of me wants to testify to God's kindness and to give Him credit for having such good taste as to lovingly provide for us because we so deserve good stuff.

Horse shit!

I have faith in God, but I depend on a regular paycheck.

We managed to get through this touch time not by faith but by finagling.

As Saint Paul ought to have said in Romans, "The just shall live by manipulation".

That's how we survived these tough scary times. It's not that we trusted God, but that we arranged things.

While every good and perfect gift does indeed come down from the Father of Lights, and He is the underlying source of supply for every human being, yet God uses means to achieve ends. Throughout the history of the world every meal anyone has ever eaten has been manna.

I believe that.

Yet mankind tills the field, plants the seed, harvests the grain, and bakes the bread.

I'm having a hard time saying what I want to say here.

When I ask myself how Ginny and I have survived this tough time without income, I think about how she, as an accountant, had organized our bills into manageable chunks. I think about how every year we stock our hurricane supply closet and how over the past few weeks again and again I've been able to pull meals out of that closet. I think of how our children and our friends have helped out again with cash and hands-on labor to keep us

going. I think of how toward the end of our ordeal we were able to use our credit card to buy groceries. I think of how Ginny's office co-workers donated leave time to her account. I think of how neighbors came to our aid. I think of how Ginny's physicians and the folks at the hospital used their skill to heal her. I think of...I think I'm probably leaving someone out

But most of all I think of how I never once saw the direct hand of God helping one bit.

The thing is, there is nothing purely physical and darn little that is purely spiritual.

We live as spiritual beings in a physical world.

So, what did I expect?

I believe that the Lord is my Shepherd... but where was He in all this?

I'd kind of like to have seen some mighty supernatural act, a burning bush, water into wine, a mighty rushing wind—some act of God I can point to and claim that He helped us get through a bad patch.

I want to see manna from Heaven. Instead, I see ramen noodles from the closet.

It's just as though God did not exist at all.

Has He worked our deliverance by slight of hand? Has He used the means of hospital workers, neighbors, and children to show His love and practical care for us?

I'd like to feel thankful to the Lord, but I don't. I just feel relieved.

Here's a thought:

Jesus said that when we do good for the poor, we are to do it anonymously. To give in secret. To not let our right hand know what our left one is giving... Could it be that God Himself does that very thing?

That He gives aid secretly, without being seen, through indirect means?

The words of an old, half-remembered song come to my mind:

By the light of burning martyrs,
Jesus' bleeding feet I track;
Toiling Up new Cavalries ever,

With the cross that turns not back...
And behind the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadows
Keeping watch above His own.

Are my concerns about faith and finagling just my demand that God show Himself for my evaluation and approval, Am I looking for a sign?

But Jesus said, there is no sign but the sign of the prophet Jonah:

He answered and said unto them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth".

When I think about manipulating faith, I remember Lot's daughters. God delivered them from the fire and brimstone that fell on Sodom, but that wasn't good enough for them, they had to manipulate things because they were scared they couldn't catch a proper husband. Their faithless finagling resulted in the nation of Moab.

Trust in God is a delicate matter combining spiritual and physical elements; and it's sometimes hard for me to tell one from the other. I wish things were more clear cut than that. But they aren't.

By the way, do you know why Lot did not turn back toward Sodom to rescue his wife?

His doctor told him to avoid salt.

Tuesday, February 8, 2011
My Afternoon With The Perfume Lady

Perfumes smell sweet.

That's all I know about them.

The young lady who visited me yesterday afternoon knows a lot more. In fact, she's an expert on solid perfume compacts—that's the kind of sweet smellum you rub on instead of spray on. And solid perfumes come in fancy little boxes of every shape.



The young lady has asked my help in preparing a book on solid perfume compacts. She anticipates the full-color coffee-table book will run about 400 pages and contain encyclopedic information about perfume solids.

This sort of book is hardly my normal venue but since my own work has been sidetracked recently, I agreed to help publish her book in time for a international convention of solid perfume collectors next year.

Yes, there are that many people interested in empty perfume containers and they do hold international conventions.

That's news to me.

Therefore, I got to thinking about perfumes...

Once years ago up in Washington, D.C., a church group asked me to present a brief devotional at an upscale couples' Christmas party. Before the event, I went into the room and sprayed the area with tincture of myrrh—the perfume spice presented to baby Jesus by one of the Wise Men. Myrrh was a key ingredient in embalming spices—what an odd gift for a baby. Myrrh was also a perfume spice sexy young women rubbed themselves before bedtime frolics—must have been like trying to catch a greased pig!

I spoke on an obscure Bible verse from the Song Of Solomon: "Who is this that cometh out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all powders of the merchant?"

Who is it in the Bible who smells of myrrh and frankincense?

Well, there's Aaron the Jewish High Priest. Standing between God and the people he was anointed with a perfume containing myrrh, oil and frankincense—so much of it that it flowed down his beard.

And then in the Book of Proverbs, King Solomon warned about prostitutes who greased themselves with sweet smellum and soaked their beds in it to be alluring to innocent, inexperienced, and unsuspecting young men—guys like me.

Then, one of the few stories told in all four Gospels involves perfume; Here is Mark's account of the incident:

And being in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at meat, there came a woman having an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard very precious; and she brake the box, and poured it on his head. And there were some that had indignation within themselves, and said, "Why was this waste of the ointment made? For it might have been sold for more than three hundred pence, and have been given to the poor". And they murmured against her.

And Jesus said, "Let her alone; why trouble ye her? She hath wrought a good work on me. For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good: but me ye have not always.

"She hath done what she could: she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying.

"Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her".

"She hath done what she could".... Is there any higher praise that that?

And so it is that in every age, in every place that the story of Jesus is told, so also is the story of this woman and her perfume told also.

Oddly enough, this woman, Mary Magdalene, was the first person to see Jesus alive again after He rose from death; she'd gone to the tomb to add more spices to the 130 pounds of aloe that Nicodemus had wrapped in the burial clothes with the dead body when he took it down from the Cross. (We add stones or flowers to a grave; in those days, they placed spices).

I imagine Mary just abandoned her perfume in joy when she found Jesus alive again.

Anyhow, for the next few months I look to be involved with a lot of stuff formatting a book on perfume—which is odd because I thought my next book was to be about the first public hanging of a woman in Jacksonville.

But instead, I'll be soaked in perfume.

So, if you smell anything around here, it's me.

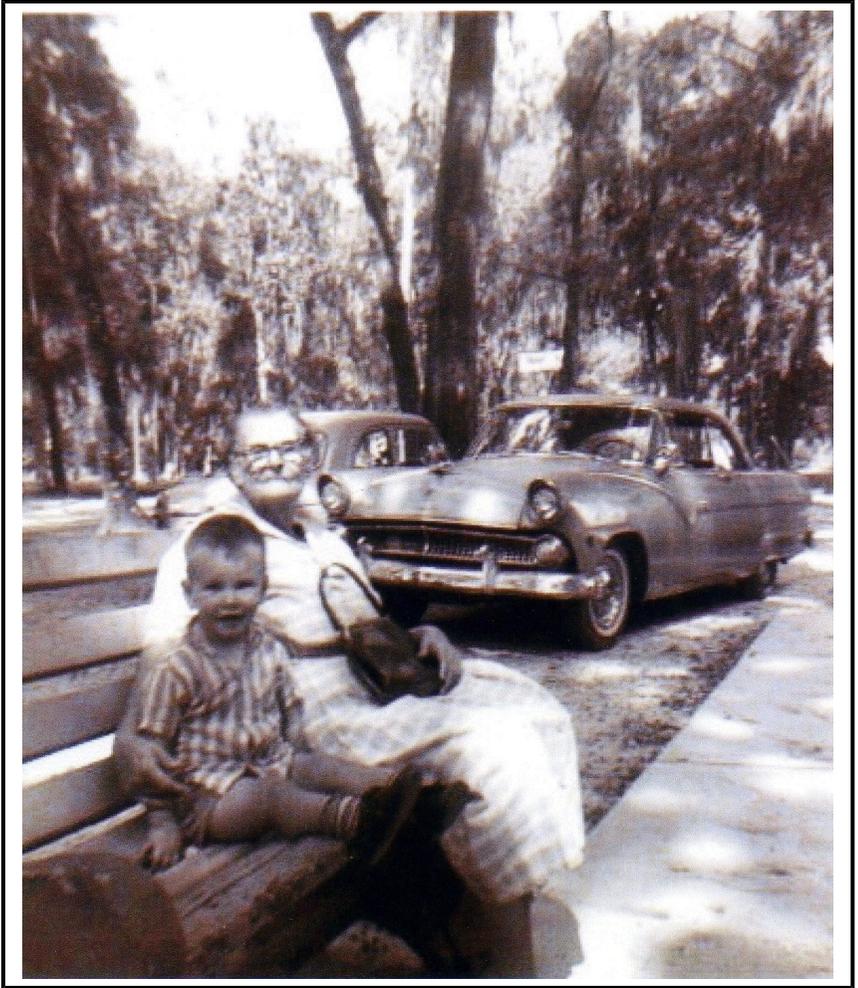
Thursday, February 10, 2011
Out Of The Pictures

Yesterday my brother, David, phoned me to see if I had received the photos he sent to me; I did not know what to say.

The postman delivered the three photos last week and I thought of calling David then. But I didn't. I tried to steel myself to call about these photos, but I couldn't.

Here is a photo of my grandmother, Laura Matilda Cowart (1893-1967). As far as I can remember, this is the only photograph I have ever seen of her.

David says he is the kid in the photo, but I recall her as being much younger when I was growing up.



Next comes a photo of my mother (L), Aunt Hazel, and her daughter Cathy:



The last photo in the packet, shows father, Zade Maxwell Cowart (1917-1979) and my mother, Ira Cowart (1918-1985).



I did not know how to respond to these photos David sent.

I do not do well with photographs.

Shortly after my father died, Mama gathered a bunch of us around the table in her back room. Dozens of relatives, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other people crowded the room. The group crowded me in a chair back against the window so that I could not get out. Trapped I had to watch the whole thing.

My mother put a huge stack of family photographs in the center of the table. She passed each one around the circle.

Anytime she found a photograph of me, she slowly, deliberately, methodically ripped it to shreds.

Anytime she found a group photograph where I was one of the group, she carefully tore me out of the picture before passing it on for everyone to see.

This sort of thing was typical of her behavior towards me, but in this particular instance, she felt she had a valid reason for tearing me out of all family pictures.

Mama blamed me for my father's death from colon cancer because I was the one who drove him to the hospital a few days before he died. The surgeons found his insides completely eaten away. Even though he'd been ghastly ill for weeks, Mama felt that if I had not driven him to the hospital, he would still be alive.

Ginny, my young wife, sat across the table from me and, being a Christian lady, Ginny stole six or eight of my mother's stack of photographs. Ginny dropped them in her lap then hid them in her purse.

Those stolen photographs are the only ones extant of me as a child, teenager, young man. Mama destroyed all the ones she found. Dozens of them.

I do not do well with family photographs.

Saturday, February 12, 2011

Birds, Books, And The Death Of A Queen

The doves which come to our backyard birdfeeder must be the dumbest birds in all God's creation.

For 15 years the same feeder has hung from the same branch catering to the same flocks of birds, each in their season. Practically every day Eurasian Ring-Necked Doves come to feed. Every day eight or ten of these doves fly in,

light on top of the feeder roof, and puzzle about how to get down to the perch so they can eat.

Ginny and I often laugh at their antics as daily these birds try this and that maneuver to get on the perch. Every day they act as though they have never encountered such an obstacle in their lives. Every day the doves have to solve this unique puzzle all over again. Apparently their memory kicks out when it comes to encountering the problem of how to eat today, the same food they ate yesterday.

Sometimes, I resemble a dove.

Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it.

I thought of our backyard birds this week as I finally finished reading James Harvey Robinson's 777-page, fine-print *History Of Medieval Times: An Introduction To The History Of Western Europe From The Dissolution Of The Roman Empire To The Opening Of The Great War Of 1914*. (Ginn And Company, Boston. ©1916).

From this book I learned how doves contributed to the French Revolution.

It seems that French nobility took a fancy to falconry. To supply birds for their falcons to hunt, the nobility raised doves. Some estates sported dove cotes as nesting places for 30,000 birds.

Well and good.

Unfortunately, the local serfs could be flogged or even hanged for molesting the landlord's doves.

French doves must be smarter than the ones in my backyard garden because those French doves knew where to find food—when the peasants planted seed crops, here flocked the doves. If the peasant's grain survived and ripened to harvest time, here flocked the doves.

Doves ate; peasants starved.

Unable to eat, the peasants got fed up.

Thus the landlords' doves contributed a final straw to the peasant revolt, the storming of the Bastille, the French Revolution, and the Reign of Terror.

I didn't know that.

Another book which interests me—yesterday an e-mail informed me that the printer has mailed my proof copy of my own 2010 Diary, *A Dirty Old Man VS The Coons*. I'll publish that one at www.bluefishbooks.info as soon as I correct the proofs.

Speaking of diaries, While Ginny was in the hospital during December, my youngest son, Donald, gave me an out-of-date Sony E-book Reader he no longer uses because he's up-graded to a newer model.

I can't figure out how to work the thing!

When it comes to computer stuff, I function as well as a backyard dove at the feeder.

However, this week I have used it to read the diary of John Manningham, a barrister-at-law during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. He kept his diary for the years 1602 and 1603.

I found one phrase Manningham uses of charming interest:

When his son married a young lady, Manningham refers to her not as to his daughter-in-law (a legal accretion for a family) but he speaks of her as his "daughter-in-love".

Daughter-In-Love—This phrase indicates how welcomed into the family this girl was, and how she was to be treated just as well as one of his natural-born children.

He uses that same phrase structure about his "father-in-love", a man he greatly admired.

I've never run across this terminology before. It's a shame that usage has passed out of our language. Daughter-In-Love, Mother-In-Love... Those terms say so much more than "in-laws".

Can you imagine anyone telling a sleazy mother-in-love joke?

On March 23, 1603, Manningham went to the Royal Palace at Richmond, where the great Queen Elizabeth I lay dying.

Manningham dined with Dr. Parry, the Queen's chief physician, who told him about her state.

Using his own spelling, Manningham wrote, "Shee always had hir perfect senses and memory, and yesterday signified by the lifting up of hir hand and eyes to heaven, a signe which Dr. Parry entreated of hir, that shee believed that faith which shee hath caused to be professed, and looked faythfully to be saved by Christes merits and mercy only, and no other meanes.

"Shee tooke great delight in hearing prayers, would often at the name of Jesus lift up hir hands and eyes to Heaven.

"Shee would not heare the Archbishop speake of hope for hir longer lyfe..."

Thus, the editor of Manningham's Diary said, "The Queen testified by gestures of her constancy in Protestantism which she had caused to be professed, and she hugged the hand of the archbishop when he urged upon her a hopeful consideration of the joys of a future life".

To the observers the Queen's action affirmed that the Protestant King James VI of Scotland, the king who later sponsored the translation of the Bible, would follow her as monarch of England.

Dr. Parry, recounted to John Manningham the particulars of the Queen's final illness:

"For this fortnight she has been extreame oppressed with melancholy, in soe much that shee refused to eate anie thing, to receive any phisike, or admit any rest... Shee hath bin in a manner speacheles for two dayes, very pensive and silent... sitting sometimes with hir eye fixed upon one object many howeres together..

"It was the opinion of her physicians that if, at an early period, she could have been persuaded to use means, she would unquestionably have recovered.

"But she would not. And princes must not be forced. A royall Maiesty is noe priviledge against death".

Dr. Parry said, "Her fatal obstinacy brought her at length into a condition which was irremediable....Then, dyed she of her own perverseness".

Isn't that what doctors always say?

Monday, February 14, 2011

Cute Little Bunnies For Valentine's Day

Ever run into the store to buy a loaf of bread and came out with a bagful of other things?

Ever searched online for one thing and ended up hours later browsing an entirely unrelated website?

One thing leads to another in my reading and research also.

For instance, a few weeks ago at the local library I browsed the new acquisitions shelves for a new Stephen King novel. I noticed a newly acquired biography of King James. Reading that I saw a footnote about a diary kept by a Bible translator named John Bois. Searching for his diary I realized that many of his notes were recorded in Greek, a language I don't know. However, a note in John Bois' Diary lead me to a diary kept in 1602 by a barrister named John Manningham.

And a note in Manningham's 1602-1603 diary told me about a lady who gave birth to a rabbit.

Stay with me here.

This gets interesting.

See why I never get any real work done?

I spend too much time chasing rabbits.

Now, last night Ginny and I watched a dvd movie about a tent revivalist who tricked people into thinking God used him. He employed skills in the audience; the planted sick people would jump out of wheelchairs and throw away crutches or fall out "slain in the spirit". He doctored a statue to make it weep real tears. He faked and cheated and misrepresented God.

Made my skin crawl.

What greater sin is there than to misrepresent God? To attribute to the Lord God almighty things He never did? To claim credit for things God did Himself? To fool people into thinking you are a pious person? To ignore the first two of the Commandments by making a mockery of God's Person?

Now, I find it a good practice whenever I feel appalled by some sin somebody else does, to examine my own heart to see if I have ever done the same sort of thing.

Instead of concentrating on the mote in the other guy's eye, I find it more helpful to examine the beam in my own eye.

Have I ever faked it?

Have I ever embellished something I was writing to make it a better story?

Have I ever tried to appear a godly man when I'm bogged down in sin?

As soon as I ask those questions, I realize that I'm no better than the false prophet in the movie—I just have a smaller audience.

For instance, once when a friend phoned he asked what I was reading and I replied piously that I was in the middle of St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Do you know what book lay open on my lap as I talked on the phone?—a copy of *MAD* magazine!

Isn't that crazy?

Yet, I felt offended by the movie portraying Christian fundamentalists as frauds, fakes, charlatans out to scam gullible people out of cash.

I felt offended because I'm a Christian who believes in the fundamentals of the Bible and I don't want people to think I'm the same sort of fake as the movie evangelist.

And religious scams abound.

Jesus said, "Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before".

Now, let me get back to the rabbit lady.

I wrote about John Manningham's 1602 Diary yesterday morning. Then last night at dinner as Ginny and I talked about life and books, I realized that I made a mistake in what I had written: I had attributed a quote to the wrong person.

That bothered me.

Ginny assured me that there is not a John Manningham fan club of people who will rise in arms because I misquoted him. She said that most people have never even heard of the guy (remember that a week ago, I had never heard of him) and that at most there are only two or three other people in the entire world who might ever know that I misquoted him.

Yes. But I know. And that bothered me a lot.

Sometimes I do try to be an honest man and I worried that someday some student of arcane Elizabethan literature may get his thesis wrong because he relied on the accuracy of my quote.

So...Nothing to it but for me to go back at in the evening and rewrite yesterday morning's material from scratch and get it right this time.

That's when I read a footnote and encountered the rabbit lady. I almost missed this footnote because John Manningham called her "a rabbit-breeder" and had I not followed up on his reference, I would have missed out on her fascinating story:

She was a controversial figure in the early 1700s. She said that when she was pregnant, a rabbit scared her so bad that she could only think about rabbits and that when it came time for her to deliver, she gave birth to bunnies instead of human children. Here's a contemporary engraving:



Now, I've known pregnant women who listened to classical music because they wanted their unborn child exposed to fine culture. And even today there is a dispute about whether what the mother sees, hears, or tastes has an effect on her unborn child.

That same controversy raged in John Manningham's day; one of his relatives, one Richard Manningham, was involved in the case. Some physicians swore they actually saw the lady actually gave birth to bunnies; others scorned the very idea.

Under clinical conditions (for the day), the lady lifted her skirts in the midst of further contortions and contractions—and out came a bunny. Then another one. Then another.

Unfortunately *You-Tube* did not exist back then.

However, when all was said and done, it all proved to be a fraud. The lady's accomplice skinned rabbits and inserted them far up her vagina. Then, when she went into anguished contractions before learned observers from the Royal College of Surgeons, she pushed out the skinned rabbits.

Hey, people paid cash money to see this phenomena.

They did not have cable.

Alas, once the fraud was exposed,. The young lady and her husband spent a couple of years in the Tower.

In one of my own books, *The Lazarus Projects*, a science-fiction book about the Resurrection of Christ, I wrote a chapter involving a physic who claimed to channel spirits and to prove her claim to supernatural power, when she danced naked before the scientists, she magically produced a *spirit-child's hand* made out of solid ice.

Investigating her apartment, they found a small rubber glove full of water in the freezer. You can guess the rest of the story.

Happy Valentine's Day.

Wednesday, February 16, 2011

Desperate Housewives In The 18th Century

Have you heard the gossip?

Everybody who is anybody talked about it.

You know, those rumors about Mrs. Henry Thrale and her daughter's music teacher, Gabriel Mario Piozzi.

The man actually lived in the manor house before her husband died and only three months after Henry's death, Piozzi and Hester Thrale announced their engagement. Scandalous!

Contrary to the advice of everyone who mattered, in 1784 she actually married that Piozzi man! Yes, aristocracy mingled beneath her station.

He lacked breeding and wealth. He was a foreigner—and you've heard about those Italians. And, not only that, he was a Papist!

Her behavior shocked and offended Dr. Samuel Johnson, the most noted man of letters of the day. Dr. Johnson, who compiled the first English dictionary, searched for words strong enough to denounce her.

Via Boswell's biography of him. Dr. Johnson is held even today in highest regard. He moved in the highest circles of England's nobility and he found Mrs. Thrale's behavior offensive. He told her that she was "ignominiously married"!

Her former friend Fanny Burney thought that she'd gone insane with sordid lust, that she'd given in to base desires, and that she was unable to control her passion.

Dr. Johnson and Fanny Burney wrote numerous letters to Queeney, Mrs. Thrale-Piozzi's daughter, comforting the girl over her mother's disgrace.

Last week, I read those letters—300 pages of sordid gossip from the 18th Century.

I found the collection of letters in a book that has sat on my shelves for years—God only know why.

This book survived the raccoon attacks of last summer and I have embarked on a campaign to read the stuff on my own bookshelves that I've meant to read for years.

I'd never heard of Hester Thrale, Piozzi, or Queeney before. I'd hardly heard of Dr. Johnson or Fanny Burney either (though both may be familiar to long-suffering English Lit. majors in college).

Here's a portrait of Hester and Queeney painted in 1711 by Sir Joshua Reynolds:



Doesn't Mrs. Thrale look the very picture of dissolution, a female Dr. Johnson could justly call a *fallen woman*, a desperate housewife of the 18th Century?

Have you heard: a servant in Mrs. Thrale's household told a servant of Fanny Burney's that while Mr. Thrale was still alive, once Piozzi may have actually seen Mrs. Thrale in her shift!

But you know who these servants are; they tell tales because they depend on their association with their master for their own sense of importance.

The book I read also includes letters from Hester to Queeney sharing gossip and discussing the deep issues of the day, such as *ton*—that was the 18th Century slang term for *fashion*.

While in London after her ignominious marriage, Mrs. Thrael-Piozzi wrote:

“The Dinner was very magnificent, & a profusion of Fruit, Ice, &c. but all served in Wedgewood’s Ware, of which the Foreigners seem excessively fond. We had Coffee Liquers &c. and a Heap of flashy French People came to Tea who run in the Train of two agreeable Women of Quality just landed from Parris... You would have been delighted with the two *Dames Francoises* in Straw Hats and *Chemises de la Reine* tyed round with Sashes, yet more like any of us, than if they had dropped from the Moon: mighty pretty though, and full of Prattle”

Yes, I actually read 300 pages of this stuff.

300 pages!

Mrs. Thrale-Piozzi also wrote some poetry, accounts of her European tour, and *Thraliana*, her published diary.

The editor of the book I read quotes a critic as saying, “Her writing lacks in interest, style, and good taste”. He observes that she and her affairs would have faded into historical insignificance and obscurity except for one thing—her association with Dr. Samuel Johnson. She kept the letters he wrote to her and, in 1786 after Johnson's death, she published them under the title, *Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson*.

Her fame came about from her association with him.

And I read page after page after page of this 300-year-old—what was the word she used?—Ah yes, Prattle.

Any wonder that as I read this book, my poor numbed mind wandered here and there to thoughts of family, God, gossip, what’s on tv tonight, and Judgment Day?

The idea of fame by association reminded me of something that happened in my own extended family on a Halloween night many years ago:

My brother, David, and his first wife, Charlotte, had two daughters, Pam and Kelly.

I've lost contact with these nieces over the years because after David and Charlotte divorced and he left town, I tried to sustain Charlotte and the girls while Charlotte tried to find a job and get on her feet. During this time my mother and Charlotte had some tiff and were not speaking—each used me as an intermediary to convey messages back and forth. Then, (I honestly don't remember why) both parties got mad at me being in the cross-fire. And then she said that he said that she said that...

I had nothing to do with it, but everybody got mad at me and, the last time I delivered food and cash, Charlotte told me to never darken her door again.

Anyhow, one Halloween, one of the little girls dressed in an elaborate costume as a butterfly complete with gossamer wings; the other girl dressed up too.

At one trick-or-treat door, the lady admired the one girl's elaborate costume, and, not to leave the other child out, she asked, "And what are you"?

The little girl said, "I'm just the butterfly's sister".

So often we gain our own identity by our association with somebody else.

Who would have ever heard of Matthew, Mark, Luke, Pontius Pilate, or John except for their association with Jesus.

Except as they figure into the story of Jesus, they would fade into more insignificance and obscurity than Hester Thrale.

As a Christian, I believe that is true of every human being. We are accepted in the Beloved. We are nameless cannon fodder except for our relationship with Him.

Here is an astounding thought—the God who knows every star and calls each one by name, the God who knows every sparrow that falls, the God who knows every hair on our heads—this same mighty Lord, omniscient, knowing all things—someday, the Scripture says, God will say He does not know some people!

What a horror!

In Luke 13, Jesus said:

Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.'

But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.'

Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.'

But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!'

There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.

We come to Judgment only in the merit of our relationship with Jesus—the God we hardly know. Whom we only see through a glass darkly. We are only His by adoption, by association.

But there comes a day, when we shall see Him face to face. When we will know even as we are known.

We will be known to the Father because of our relationship with the Son.

And guess what—knowing all the gossip, knowing all the facts, knowing every sordid detail, Jesus still wants to associate with us.

He's funny that way.

Thursday, February 17, 2011
Bartholomew

When I think of Bartholomew, I think of an old, redneck sexist joke:

What to know who loves you? Lock your wife and your dog in the trunk of your car. After an hour unlock the trunk. Guess which one is happy to see you.

Remember that joke while I tell about a nudge I received yesterday.

I began work at 4 am. transcribing Barbara White's Prayer Diaries from her hand-written notebooks into a Word Document—a project I've been at for months. A tedious task which requires intense concentration because on one hand, I've never really learned how to type, and on the other hand, with my weak eyes I find it difficult to see the pages.

I want this task done!

I think what I'm doing is important, but I'm sick of doing it.

I suspect that Barbara's writings may become Christian spiritual classics. I've already published four books in her *Along The Way* series (at www.bluefishbooks.info).

Because transcribing text challenges me so, I hate distractions. I lose my place when the phone rings. I resist going back to work if I take a break. I want to give up when a visitor knocks on the door.

I have plans and I don't want them interrupted.

But, yesterday afternoon as I worked I received a nudge—I can't tell if it were a nudge or a Nudge; know what I mean?

Once I tried to write a book on diving guidance. I had to give it up because I don't know how God guides us. I believe He does, but I can't always distinguish the guidance of the Lord from a momentary whim of my own—Or, as my kids say, "Dad's got a wild hair up his ass".

I hesitate to say, God lead me to do such and such, because so many times in the past I've done some really stupid things. Can't blame that stuff on Jesus. I just got an urge and ran with it.

Does the Lord Jesus ever guide us to do dumb things? I could debate that question with theologians.

Anyhow, yesterday afternoon in transcribing her diary I'd just got to a devotional poem Barbara had read at a Ladies' Prayer Breakfast on August 19, 1989:

Moment by moment, think on Me
And I will become your hour.

Hour by hour, think on Me
And I will become your day.

Day by day, think on Me,
And I will become your life.

I glanced out the window and saw Warren, a neighbor down the street, out pressure washing his drive way.

Immediately, I recognized one of those urges—Go talk with him.

I hit the save key on my computer, picked up my pipe, tobacco pouch, matches and cane. I left our front door unlocked because I did not want to go back for my keys. And I walked down the street to talk with him.

Turn's out that Sunday afternoon his dog, Bartholomew, a Boston Terrier, died.

Warren and his wife, Carol, doted on Bartholomew and their other Terrier, Natasha. Warren and Carol owned Bartholomew for eleven years. Carol never thought dry or canned dog food was good enough for her pets; she cooked special treats to feed them.

Never has a more energetic dog than Bartholomew jumped in greeting a stranger. Welcome! Welcome. Welcome, he seemed to shout gleefully This dog stood all of 15 inches high, yet every time I visited, Bartholomew would jump flatfooted from the floor high enough to lick my neck and nibble my ears!

It was like he bounced on a pogo stick.

Now, I had known nothing of the tragedy of Bartholomew's death. I just felt an urge in the urgency of my work to go talk.

Warren has been devastated by his dog's death.

I arrived on the scene at just the right time. I think I was of some comfort.

Warren opened up as we talked about lawns and leaves and dogs and serious matters. Warren suffers with the same problem as my eldest son. Warren gave me new insights into the hard difficult struggle to overcome this problem as he comforted me.

Why had I dropped important work to go over there?

Guided by God? Wild hair? Boredom with work? Just wanting back-fence gossip? None of the above? I don't know.

But, Warren and I enjoyed one of the most meaningful talks we've ever had.

Do dogs go to Heaven?

Doesn't specifically say so in the Bible, but when you walk through the Pearly Gates and a streak of black and white terrier pounces up off the golden pavement to lick your neck and nibble your ear—Relax, his name is Bartholomew.



Thursday, February 24, 2011
Fixed Again. Maybe?

It's fixed... No, it isn't.

It's fixed now... No, it isn't.

It's fixed this time....No. It's almost fixed but it still doesn't work quite right.

So, I'll fix it again... Well, it's not fixed right but I'll just have to live with it.

Do the above sequence refer to: My computer? My dripping faucet? My lawnmower? My pool pump? My vacuum cleaner? My manuscript? My whole life?

If you answered "All Of The Above"—you're right.

Recently I've spent my life fixing things, only to find I have to fix the same thing all over again. Then, when I think I've got it fixed, I discover the same problem, or another one just as bad as the first and I have to keep tinkering and tweaking and reassembling and then starting all over again.

I get so frustrated dealing with the same problem, the same set of problems, problems I thought were solved, only to find they crop up again and again and again. It's like punching a balloon filled with water—press it in one place and it bulges out in another.

Once I took the kids to a game room where I played Whack-A-Gopher. A bunch of holes covered the surface to the table, a gopher popped his head out of one hole or another. To win points I had to whack the gopher's head with a rubber mallet before he ducked back in the hole and popped out a different one.

I lost.

Perhaps that game represents an allegory picture of my life.

My friend Rex is good at mechanical things. He has often helped me with some mechanical problems around my house. Rex says that anything can be fixed if you invest enough time, energy and money into fixing it; but there comes a point when it takes so much time, energy and money, that you're better off to quit fixing and buy a new one.

Temptation works like that for me. Looking back over diaries that I've kept for many years, I see that I've tried to fix the same things in my life over and over again.

The gopher wins.

(Incidentally, today marks the 1,400th entry I've made in this on-line blog journal. Hoot! As the de-motivational poster proclaims—**Blogging: Now You Can Show The Whole World Why Nobody Listens To You.**)

Anyhow, the Bible teaches me that the Lord is not in the repair business. He does not patch me up, but creates me anew. Saint Paul said, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation; behold, old things are passed away and all things are become new, and all things are of God".

I've read that God doesn't make bad people nice, but makes dead people alive.

But I don't feel dead.

Duh. Do the dead feel dead?

Paul also says that we are dead in trespasses and sin before Christ makes us alive.

Unregenerate, we act like the walking dead, moving around, doing stuff, not realizing we're not living, not even knowing what living means.

My e-friend Amrita in India, recently said that we are so accustomed to living in sin that we don't realize that we are in sin—like a swimmer does not feel the weight of water. He's in his element. But when he climbs ashore and tries to lift a five-gallon bucket of water, only then does he realize that water had great weight.

As Paul said, "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light".

I am not to be fixed up, but awakened. Not patched together, but resurrected. Not repaired, but re-created.

Now for a different subject:

I phoned my friend Barbara White. Yesterday, with the concurrence of her oncologist, Barbara, who is in her 80s, decided to stop chemotherapy treatments for her cancer and enter a hospice program which will help her deal with discomfort and pain. Her physician told her that she should prepare to die in two or three months.

I rejoiced with her.

She said she knew I'd understand that this is good news. We laughed over it together. She has an exciting time to look forward to. I think she's made a wise choice.

Barbara, a retired newspaper editor, is author of the *Along The Way* books which I feel may well become classics of Christian devotion.

Just a couple of weeks ago, Barbara was named Volunteer Of the Year in her area of Jacksonville, and next month she was supposed to attend a state-wide award's banquet for winners in Orlando.

She said that when she made her decision to enter hospice the first thought to pop into her head was relief that she has a good excuse not to attend that ceremony. Over the years she's won many, many awards and attended many, many such banquets.

I said that dying is a pretty good excuse not to attend another banquet.

She said, "John, if I went as an honoree, I'd have to sit up front where everybody can see me and I'd have to behave myself. At these things I prefer to sit in the back row with friends where I can make snide remarks about the winners".

Friday, February 25, 2011

Off Balance

Friday knocked me off balance.

Things I thought would happen next Monday happened today; things I thought were to happen today were pushed back to Monday.

Times changed. E-mail addresses faulted. Cell phones were not turned on. Workmen barricaded roads. The expected, didn't; the unexpected, did.

Any wonder I'm unbalanced?

A doctor's appointment started my morning.

Dr. Woody said that for a man in my age and condition, I am a man of my age and condition.

The poor guy spent more time trying to repair a medical computer software glitch—a new system recently installed in his office and designed to improve patient care—than he did examining me. No problem there; I have no new physical glitches—just general decrepitude.

Physically, I can whomp Chuck Norris; as to mental acumen, Pee-wee Herman can beat me every time.

Ginny took the day off to drive me to the doctor's office. Later, our friend Barbara White treated us to lunch at Silver Star Chinese Restaurant where, for the first time, we met Barbara's friend Mary Ann Newsom.

Looks as though Barbara's days of being able to drive herself are over and Mary Ann volunteered to chauffeur her around today so we could meet for lunch and celebrate.

Mary Ann owns Annie Oakley's, a quality furniture gallery across the river. Her store specializes in oak furniture, hence the name. She is a woman of discerning insight, cultural refinement, and exquisite good taste—by that I mean she is actually reading one of the books I wrote.

Over pot after pot of tea, the four of us talked about family, food, and faith.

From the three women I gleaned several good work-related ideas for me to try next week. It pays for me to

listen even when a conversation does not revolve around “serious” spiritual issues.

Ginny and I visited two plant nurseries looking for hibiscus to replace ones we lost to the winter’s cold. We found two, a single red and a single yellow; and we bought a tray of snapdragons. But before we got these plants inside the gate back home, the phone rang— Whenever the phone rings, that means somebody has plans for my life.

My middle son, Johnny, who lives up in Maryland, undergoes surgery on Saturday. I tried to contact him several times but failed. I hope all goes well for him.

On a happier note, my daughter-in-love called to say that because she read on my blog that my lawnmower is broken, she plans to come over one day next week bringing her mower and cut the grass for me.

That happy news makes me enjoy being the owner of a broken mower.

So passed this off-balance day. My Bible says, “God is not the author of confusion”.

Based on my experiences of this past day as I walk with the Lord, those good words must be one of those mistranslations I’ve heard about but never found.

God willing, Ginny and I will get our new flowers in the ground over the weekend.

Monday, February 28, 2011 What Color Feathers?

First off, over the weekend, my middle son, Johnny, came through his operation fine. He and Fred continue plans to move back to Jacksonville in April, but since Johnny’s doctor discourages heavy lifting for a while, he plans to hire professional movers.

Next news: Ginny and I learned a happy thing Friday. While she was in the hospital and out recovering over the Christmas holidays, she used up all her leave time and we went without a paycheck for almost six weeks.

Well, it turns out that many co-workers in her office donated their own vacation days to her account to make up for her loss—their donated time not only covered all

the time she was out sick, but also they gave so much that she now has 80 extra hours leave in her account!

Ginny says that means that either she is well thought of in her office—or it could be that they all missed the candy jar she keeps for all comers on her desk.

Her job, the people she works with, and the poor people she serves, all make her very happy. She says she feels God put her in that place.

All weekend long we raked leaves. And then raked more leaves. Then raked more leaves. I obtained no deep spiritual insights from raking leaves.

Leaves are heathen!

A round-robin e-mail this morning informs me that the Russian translation of the profile I wrote about Madam Guyon has been published, apparently last week. I'm not sure from the e-mail, but possibly they may be considering a translation of *The Worst People On Earth* also. Both pieces are chapters from my book *Strangers On The Earth*.

It humbles me to think that people in far away lands find some value in my books.

When Ginny and I stopped raking leaves Saturday and went out to lunch at Georgie's, our favorite BBQ restaurant, my joke doubled the waitress over laughing.

She ran to the front to tell the other waitresses there. These girls serve us often and tease us about being honeymooners.

Anyhow, when the girl brought Ginny's ribs and my BBQ chicken platter, I said, "I need to know if this chicken had white feathers or red feathers or black feathers"?

"What"?

"I want you to go back and ask the cook if this chicken had red feathers".

"Why?"

"When I went to the doctor's Friday, he told me not to eat red meat".

MARCH

Tuesday, March 1, 2011
Important Two Points

Lots to write about this morning.

Too much happening to write about it all.

So I will just cover two important points:



Actress Jane Russell died yesterday; she was 89.

In 1950 or '51, when I was 11 or 12 years old, I saw her in the movie *The Outlaw* at the old Palace Theatre on Forsyth Street. Alas the Palace, the Imperial, The Empress—all the movie houses along Jacksonville's Forsyth Street theatre row—were demolished years ago. A parking garage now stands where their silver screens once entertained me with films starring Bob Steele, Roy Rogers, and Hopalong Cassidy—they carried six-shooters and wore white hats. Always got the bad guys and rode off into the sunset leaving the schoolmarm pining

The Outlaw had been filmed in the 1940s but the censorship board banned the movie for years till the director agreed to cut certain scenes..

I later learned that aircraft designer Howard Hughes, an expert in lift and support dynamics, engineered a special cantilevered, underwired garment to showcase Miss. Russell's assets. Comedian Bob Hope once introduced the actress as, "The two and only Jane Russell".

But, that day I walked out of the Palace, I felt disappointed. Being an incredibly stupid boy, I had gone

into the theatre thinking *The Outlaw* was supposed to be a cowboy movie.



Wednesday, March 2, 2011
Got It Licked?

As a household cleaning tip, my long-ago friend, the late Poke McHenry (aka Vic Smith), once told me how to get dust bunnies from underneath the bed with a tennis ball.

Poke said he'd just bounce the ball under the bed for his Pomeranian puppy to chase and fetch.

When Jennifer, my eldest daughter, called me in tears yesterday afternoon, I thought of what Poke said. Jennifer and Terry were at the vet's who said that Brat, their Pomeranian puppy, was beyond medical help and needed to be put down.

In near hysterics of grief, Jennifer asked me to drive to Terry's mother's house, dig a grave, and bury Brat's body in a back flower bed.

Of course, I agreed.

That's the sort of thing we dads do.

As I waited for Ginny to get home from work with the car, I gathered my spade, a hatchet in case roots needed to be chopped, and a vase of wildflowers that Terry had admired the other day while mowing my lawn for me...

And while I waited for my wife to get home, I thought about how dogs seem to think that licking can solve all the world's ills.

Brat was a licker. Whenever I visited Jennifer and Terry, Brat ran to lick me in greeting. That was the way he comforted people.

I do not care to be dog-licked so I'd let him smell my pipe and at that first whiff of tobacco, the little ball of fuzz would back off. Nevertheless, undeterred, he'd settle for licking my shoes.

Yes, dogs seem to feel licking chases away the woes of the world...

Who knows, maybe they're right.

For instance, the most wicked woman in the Bible, Jezebel, led God's people to forsake the Lord and worship the Canaanite goddess Ashtoreth in orgies and pagan rites.

Jezebel's husband, King Ahab, worshiped Baals, male fertility figures, in groves and high places causing Israel to sin.

God's prophet Elisha predicted that dogs would lick up the blood of the wicked king and queen.

Sure enough, in a battle with God's anointed, Ahab was killed when an arrow skewered him in his war chariot. Afterwards, as a servant, "Washed the chariot in the pool of Samaria; and the dogs licked up his blood; and they washed his armor; according unto the word of the LORD".

Jezebel faired no better.

When my kids were little, they loved the gory story of what happened to Jezebel:

After the battle where Ahab was killed, as Jehu, the victor, rode up to the tower of Jezreel where the wicked queen watched for her husband to return, Jehu yelled to her servants, "Throw her down".

The Bible says, "So they threw her down: and some of her blood was sprinkled on the wall, and on the horses: and he trod her under foot.

"And when Jehu was come in, he did eat and drink, and said, "Go, see now this cursed woman, and bury her: for she is a king's daughter".

And they went to bury her: but they found no more of her than the skull, and the feet, and the palms of her hands.

"Wherefore they came again, and told him. And he said, This is the word of the LORD, which he spake by his servant Elijah the Tishbite, saying, In the portion of Jezreel shall dogs eat the flesh of Jezebel".

Yeap, the dog licked up the wicked blood of that sorry pair.

I may have garbled that story a bit, if you want to check, the whole long tale is found in First Kings, chapter 22, and in Second Kings, chapter nine.

My kids loved that sweet bedtime Bible story—especially the part about dogs licking up the blood and eating everything but her skull, her feet, and the palms of her hands.

No wonder my kids grew up to be such happy, normal, well-balanced people.

There's another weird Bible story about Jesus, a Greek woman, and dogs:

When Jesus visited the city of Tyre, a woman of Canaan saw Him and cried, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil".

At first Jesus ignored her.

Then He said, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel".

Again she pleaded for His help.

He insulted her saying that It is not right to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs.

“Truth, Lord, she said, “Yet dogs under the table lick up the children's crumbs”.

Good answer!

It reminds me a quote from the world's most famous dog: in one Peanuts cartoon as Snoopy licked up crumbs under the table, he said, “Anything that falls on the floor is legally mine”.

Jesus must have thought that too.

He said, “O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt”; And the Bible says her daughter was made whole from that very hour.

At another time and place, Jesus told about crumbs, dogs, a beggar, and a rich man who fared sumptuously every day clothed in purple and fine linen.

The sick beggar lay on the pavement outside the rich man's gate.

Jesus said the beggar hungered to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table and that dogs came and licked his sores.

Yes, dogs think they can lick away the ills of the world.

Jesus said, “It came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; and in Hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and saw Abraham afar off”.

The rich man begged Abraham for even a drip of water. But Abraham explained about the great, impassable gulf separating Hell from Heaven.

The rich man begged Abraham to send the beggar back from the grave to warn his family “So that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment”.

Father Abraham reminded him that people on earth have the Bible to help them shun Hell and gain Heaven.

The rich man said, “Nay, Father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent”.

But alas, Abraham said unto him, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead".

Those are some of the things I thought about while waiting for my ride to go bury Brat, the little Pomeranian puppy who loved to lick away sorrows and comfort any person he met.

Now we all know for a fact that licking will not really make all the world's problems go away.

But dogs do not know that fact.

So they try.

Friday, March 4, 2011 Prepared?

Wednesday I gathered tools and prepared to bury Terry's Pomeranian puppy, Brat, but later the girls changed their minds and decided to cremate his body instead.

I felt relieved at not having to do that emotionally-laden chore—but the non-incident got me thinking about how often I have prepared for things that never happened.

For instance, yesterday at 4 a.m. I gathered materials for working on one manuscript but ended up working on an altogether different project.

Once a group invited me to deliver a lecture on Jacksonville history. I packed all sorts of materials to illustrate my lecture—an antique shotgun, arrowheads, pioneer ax, 1880s rum bottles, maps, charts, Civil War era coins. I really prepared.

But not one single person showed up for my display.

I sat in the lecture room alone for the designated hour surrounded by the artifacts, but nobody came.

I had prepared for something that didn't happen.

When I was a Boy Scout 60 years ago, the motto Be Prepared became entrenched in my mind. I prepare for all sorts of things whether they happen or not. Every year Ginny and I begin our hurricane preparations in the Spring for an anticipated Summer hurricane season. But, thanks

be to God, in recent years our part of Florida has only caught the fringes of the storms.

We prepared for something that didn't happen.

Even though it didn't happen, but it's prudent to prepare in case it might.

We have certain preparations in place for getting older. We have tentative retirement plans—but who really knows if they will get older or not? Today is the first day of the rest of your life—but today may also be your last.

Once when I drove an 18-wheeler over the road, I chanced to be on a mountain road on my way to Pickle Gap, Arkansas—yes, there is such a place. As I negotiated a hairpin curve on the narrow two-lane road coming down a steep grade, suddenly appeared before me the edge of a cliff. The road skirted a deep chasm. Skid marks on the pavement showed that drivers before me feared sailing off into space. And right at the bend in that curve, some group had erected a sign—**Prepare To Meet Thy God!**

Appropriate!

Memorable.

Striking.

While I have prepare to do a lot of things that never happen—that one is a sure thing. As the Scripture says, “Now we see through a glass darkly; but then, face to Face”.

Be prepared.

...

Last night Mark and Eve hosted a spaghetti feast for the family in honor of Mike's birthday. Mike is Mark's brother down visiting from Michigan for a week.

Things got weird, in that as far as I could see, the birthday boy did not get a single present. But Jennifer gave Mark a Christmas present, some Star Wars figures, that she'd forgotten to give him for three months. And Helen gave Jennifer a butterfly pendent that she'd intended to give her for Christmas.

The Cowart family runs a little behind the rest of the world.

And over the flaming chocolate birthday cake which Eve baked for Mike, we all engaged in roll-on-the-floor laughter as the family engaged in intellectually stimulating after-dinner conversation—about grout.

I'm serious.

They talked about grout—you know, the stuff that goes between tiles.

I was not prepared for that.

Monday, March 7, 2011
Opinions Poles Apart

This past weekend I received e-mails from two readers poles apart in geography and opinion..

Peter, lives far to the north of where I live. He gave his opinion related to a chapter from my book, *I'm Confused About Prayer* (www.bluefishbooks.info)

Here's an excerpt from what Peter wrote:

Hey John,

I have to tell you that I just love you website and articles. In part it's because we seem to think the same, and the greater reason is that you obviously make it your aim to glorify God in your writing....

I like about how you present yourself is the ability to say a lot in a short period of time. No dead wood and a lot of useful content....

Of all the webpages I've looked at within the realm of Christendom, I find yours to be one of the best. Great titles, creative content, and, of course, good biblical exegesis to back it up.

Sincerely, Pete

On the other hand, an e-mail from Pablo, who, I guess, lives far to the south of where I live, gave his opinion related to a chapter from my book *Strangers On The Earth* (www.bluefishbooks.info).

Here's an excerpt from what Pablo wrote:

Bloody American Rat

You are the worst people on earth ...I'm glad the Aucas killed those people ..They deserved it ..Your children are psychopaths and your women are WHORES

.... You are terrorists ..Hopefully North Korea decides to wipe you out from the face of earth once and for all ..They will be doing a favor to the human race ..Garbage of the world .

You have no right to judge other cultures and peoples based on your own culture ..Your culture stinks ..You are craving for drugs , your women are whores of the match ..you culture is based upon violence and racism ..you are the ones who MUST vanished forever ...

Thus Peter and Paul differ in their judgment about my writings.

One opinion puffs up my vanity, makes me feel good; the other opinion deflates my pride, troubles me.

Each gentleman expresses valid points in his e-mail and each brings his own background and expectations when he reads my work.

These two e-mails got me to thinking about Opinion Day.

Oh yes, Jesus said that Opinion Day will come when we will stand naked before His throne, and Almighty God will look each person straight in the eye, face to Face, and He will pronounce His honest opinion of each one of us.

Each of us can expect to hear Him say, "Well done..." or "Depart from Me..."

In that great and terrible Day of the Lord, no other opinion will count.

Come to think of it, no other opinion really counts in this day I'm starting right now this very Monday morning.

Tuesday, March 8, 2011
Snake Bit

On Sunday a snake or something bit me.

The puncture marks from the fangs measure a little more than a quarter of an inch apart on the web of my hand between my thumb and forefinger.

Nothing to it really.

I did not see what bit me; I figure it must have been a small snake or a large spider. Whatever it was, it bit me while I was on hands and knees cleaning an area thick

with leaves, twigs, and winter debris from around tree roots to clear a spot to plant more flowers.

By the way, garden gloves are for wimps.

Real men work bare-handed.

Maybe it wasn't even a snake or a spider; maybe I just scraped my hand on a thorn or sharp stick—but I think it was a snake.

This is Florida and we do have four species of poisonous snake: rattlesnakes, cottonmouths, copperheads, and coral snakes. Scores of species of non-poisonous serpents also thrive here. Our weather is getting warmer, time for snakes to slither out of winter hidey-holes.

Last weekend Ginny turned over a flowerpot to find a garden snake coiled underneath. Our policy on finding snakes in the yard is to leave them alone; they rid our yard of pests like mice, lizards, toads, cats and small neighborhood children.

I think it was a snake, probably non-poisonous, that bit me—but I'm all better now.

I did not even feel the bite at first. But as the morning wore on, the fang punctures began to swell, itch, and burn. By the time Ginny and I drove to Georgies BBQ to eat lunch with Donald and Helen, my wounds hurt.

What should a Christian do when snake bit?

A flaming liberal who does not believe the truth of Holy Scripture might rush to the emergency room; a fundamentalist might fast and pray and trust God and read the Bible—he might even pick up the snake and rebuke it and dare it to poison him.

I've seen signs outside rural churches up in Georgia advertising for rattlesnakes for use in their worship services. That sort of worship is beyond my own experience.

I'm the kind of Christian who finds it easier to believe remote theological portions of Scripture than practical ones. For instance, I have no problem with Intelligent Design or Eschatology; I can do nothing about how the world began or how it will end. Those doctrines make no demand on me.

But, when the Bible tells me I must love unlovable people and that I must forgive the son of a bitch who did me dirt—Scriptures like that, I find hard to swallow. They are hard to believe. But those are the ones that count.

Am I the only Christian like that?

But, getting back to my snake experience:

Christian snake handlers cite a section from the last chapter of Mark's Gospel which reads:

These signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.

Now some people say these words are not really in the original text but are an interpolation added by copyists after the Apostolic Age. Other people say that the abrupt ending of Mark's Gospel is indeed just as the Holy Spirit intended, that the end of Mark is a transition which winds down the age of eye-witnesses and ushers in an age of believers.

Neither the liberal nor the fundamentalist view of biblical exegesis appealed to me once the snake had already bitten the web of my thumb.

That sucker hurt.

For my middle-of-the-road Christian view of these matters I must examine the original Greek text of another verse of Scripture—the place where a man asked Jesus to heal his sick son.

On that occasion Jesus said something or another about faith, or belief, or something like that. Straightway the worried father of the child cried out, and said with tears, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief".

Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief!

That's the way the King James translators rendered the text.

Now, upon a close examination of this passage in the original Greek, with a particular emphasis on the snake that bit me, I find the text should read—Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief *by keeping snakes far away from*

me because if I see one I'm gonna stomp his ass or whack his head off with my hoe".

The words printed in italics are not found in Codex Sinaiticus but are here supplied by me, the translator, to make plain the English meaning of the text.

Say, did you know that the only reason Bible scholars study Hebrew or Koine Greek is so they can find loopholes in Scripture?

Why else would somebody study this stuff?

Anytime I argue theology with my friend Wes, who is a Hebrew and Greek scholar, he always refutes me by saying, "John, the original Greek says...". Lots of preachers say that sort of thing. I think they make it all up just to prove me wrong.

I know no more Greek than a radish.

Anyhow, by the time I looked up the appropriate Bible passages, I decided that I would not mention the snake bite to Ginny because she'd haul my ass to the emergency room, and I really, truly hate going to the doctor!

Why spend a pleasant Sunday hanging around the Emergency Ward waiting room for hours and hours and hours before they'd see me?

There's a reason they strap guys to a stretcher when the ambulance drives to a hospital—they don't want us to escape.

It's a guy thing.

A guy can fall into a chainsaw and instead of seeking medical help, he'll say, "It's just a sprain. Let's leave it alone and see if it gets better on its own".

Case in point: I've had this nagging toothache since February.

Have I been to a dentist to have that tooth pulled?

Don't be silly.

I'm learning to chew on the other side of my mouth while I wait for it to get better on its own.

This is not a matter of faith but of procrastination.

Anyhow, returning to my thoughts on snakes and Scripture—As I recall, Jesus once told us to be as harmless as doves and as wise as serpents. As I interpret that passage in Holy writ, it means that I'm to live without bothering anybody, but if anybody bothers me, I have God's permission to bite his ankle...

Maybe Sunday morning it was just a sharp stick that stuck me..

The pain is almost gone now. The fang marks shrank to look like nothing but tiny pimples.... Maybe that'll happen to my tooth—it I have faith.

Er... Did Jesus ever cure anybody of a toothache.

I wonder what the original Greek says.... Oh, here it is... "*John Cowart, you idiot, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God*".

Oh.

Wednesday, March 9, 2011 Happy News From Geekdom



About 9 o'clock last night Donald and Helen showed up at our door bringing Ginny a brand new laptop computer still in the box.

Sunday when the four of us ate BBQ at Georgies, Gin barely mentioned that her old sluggish computer's battery

was overheating and melting the plastic casing if she left it on more than 30 minutes—and right away the kids picked up on that and bought her this new zippy one.

Not feeling too well (nothing to do with the snake bite), I went to bed while the three of them crawled around on our living room floor for hours doing whatever it is that geeks do with brand new computers.



Thursday, March 10, 2011
A Dirty Old Man Makes A Mistake

I try to be careful, but I make mistakes—lots and lots and lots of mistakes.

I released this book for sale in my Bluefish Books On-Line Catalog yesterday. This is another book in my *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad* series.

A Dirty Old Man VS The Coons



John Cowart's 2010 Diary

In case you're wondering, I am the dirty old man in the title. I come by my title honestly. I am a man. I am old. I am dirty. Like Pigpin, of Peanuts cartoon fame, dirt seems to follow me around.



That's to say nothing of my mindset or the purity of my thoughts and actions.

Besides that, I don't find too many other Christian writers laying claim to the title of A Dirty Old Man, so the competition for that name is small. Not everyone understands the Dirty Old Man reference; Unto the pure, all things are pure; Everybody else thinks like I do.

My *Dirty Old Man* books are the outgrowth of daily diaries I have kept for many years. I'm almost 72 now and I began my first diary entries when I was a teenager. I started keeping that first journal because as a kid I read Bram Stoker's book *Dracula*, a novel written in diary format. It fascinated me that some people lived lives so interesting that they kept a daily record, a record which proved invaluable in killing vampires.

Alas, my diaries record nothing so serious as battling vampires—but I gave those raccoons one hell of a fight.

You know something, for a guy who doesn't do anything, I lead a very interesting life—a life with a lot of love shown to me, a life with a lot of mistakes. But with a happy triumph every now and then. And even with a serious thought every once in a while.

The past couple of weeks I have been correcting my book manuscript's proof pages checking for mistakes.

The dictionary defines the word mistake as “a wrong action attributable to bad judgment or ignorance or inattention”.

I've made a lot of mistakes in life by that criteria—and a bunch of typos in my book manuscript.

Do you know that the word *mistake* does not appear in the Bible?

I looked it up.

No *mistake*.

The Scripture writers use the words *sin* and *unrighteousness* and *wickedness* and *ungodliness*—but no *mistake*. The word just never appears in the Bible.

That's interesting.

I found plenty of mistakes in the 480 pages of my *A Dirty Old Man vs The Coons*.

Now, when I first sent my manuscript to the printer, I thought it was perfect. It should have been.

After all I follow a scrupulous procedure to produce every page.

I write the first draft in Word. And check it.

I transfer it into my book format template. And check it.

I post each page on my blog site. And check it.

I reformat and proofread every page before it goes to the printer. And check it.

When the printer mails the proof pages back to me, I go over every line with a red pencil marking every mistake for correction and come up with a card full of correction notes. Here, for instance, is the first of several correction cards for **A Dirty Old Man vs The Coons:**

Every number and mark on that 5X7 index card represents a mistake I made in the printer's page proofs of this, my most recent book.

Kinda takes the wind out of my sails to see that I made that many mistakes when I thought I'd produced a perfect manuscript.

Anyhow, I corrected every one of these before releasing the book for sale.

If you happen to buy either a print paperback or an E-book copy (at www.bluefishbooks.info) and if you find a mistake...

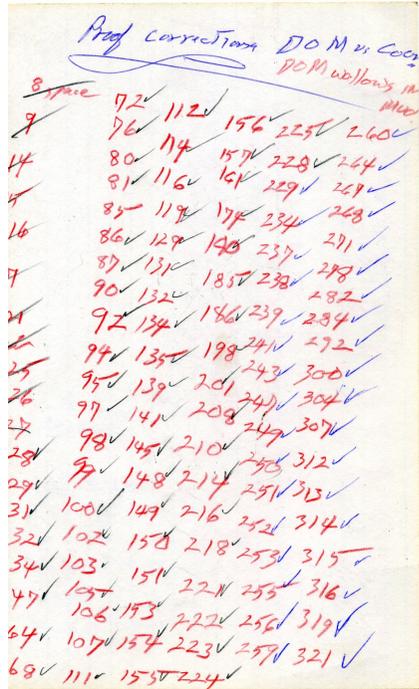
Please be kind, and don't tell me about it.

**Friday, March 11, 2011
Post Deleted**

Earlier this morning I wrote a five-page diary entry—a masterpiece of Christian criticism. It contained references to Holy Scripture, quotations from the mayor, a vivid description of grape arbors and bathroom fixtures, observations about sexy women, a reference to C.S. Lewis, records of current events in Jacksonville, one of my famous hilarious jokes, several personal illustrations—and much bitterness and resentment I harbor in my heart..

Reading it over, I realized that my words would hurt someone else. I erased the whole thing.

It's less important for me to write Christian than to live Christian. No posting today.



Saturday, March 12, 2011
A Note For The Kid In The Attic

I jotted a note to myself in my diary to write about how at 1 p.m., on March 12, 1862, barbarian invaders under the command of Lt. Thomas Holdup Stevens captured Jacksonville unopposed. It was the first of four yankee invasions devastating my hometown.

Hard to admit it, but there have been more important devastations in recent news reports from around the world.

While I hardly ever mention world events in my diary, I'm too self-centered to pay much attention to the world around me. The most I note is that the world keeps doing what the world does.

However, 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. So, recently—

Last month a devastating earthquake hit Christchurch, New Zealand. Many killed and over a hundred thousand homes destroyed. Just before that, massive floods covered huge areas of Australia.

Rioting in the middle east almost daily. Some newscasters think this is a good thing for democracy as one batch batters another for control of Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Iran, and other places in the area. I'd wait to see who comes out on top before declaring all this as a victory for democracy.

Yesterday I glued myself to news broadcasts, like most other people in the world, as conflicting news reports poured in about a massive 8.9 earthquake which hit Japan about 3 o'clock Friday afternoon.



I jotted down notes on the coverage as news came in via tv pictures, phone reports from people in the affected areas, twitter and facebook reports. These social networks gave minute by minute accounts in real time according to eyewitnesses on the spot. Of course these eyewitnesses were themselves often victims of the disaster and could only see the walls of the elevator they were trapped in, so many did not know the extent of the damage around them.

Here are my own disjointed notes as I tracked wars and rumors of wars in piecemeal fashion:



The earthquake generated a Tsunami wave that swept over large city with almost a million residents. Wave up to 33 feet high and moving at about 500 miles per hour, traveled miles inland sweeping away people, buildings, cars, boats. Early reports say three nuclear plants were damaged and safety procedures failed.



Tsunami warnings issued for Hawaii, and on main land from Alaska to South America.

Massive whirlpool formed off Japan coast—tv showed a boat trapped in whirlpool.

Police found over 300 bodies immediately after quake. Death toll expected to reach thousands.

The news shook markets around the world. Currency values fluctuated wildly, as did oil and stock prices.

Many nations including China are marshaling aid teams.

At Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, the U.S. Aircraft Carrier, *USS George Washington*, 1,092 feet long and over 60,000 tons, over a thousand feet long, was moved from its moorings by waves.

Even some folks in Washington and Oregon urged to evacuate. Schools closed.

10:29 a.m.—Over 70 aftershocks reported (so far) in Japan.

Airports flooded out. Telephones, public transportation, electricity all cut off.

Channel 4 tv contacted former Jax residents in Hawaii, Japan and Washington State via phone, facebook, etc.



10:37 a.m.—Japanese officials ordered the evacuation of 6,000 people from within two miles of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant which is 210 miles north of Tokyo. The plant suffered a LOCA. Authorities say there is no radiation leakage. But the Nuclear Emergency Evacuation is only a precaution. "The emergency

shutdown has been conducted but the process of cooling down the reaction is currently not going as planned," Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano said at a news conference.

The city of Kesenuma, a town of 70,000 people, is on fire "with no apparent hope of the flames being extinguished".

More than 20 countries affected by fear and warnings.

10:58 a.m.—Hundreds of fires. Three nuclear plants damaged but possibly contained.

12:30 p.m.—President Obama's news conference told of U.S. aid, contained threats of military involvement in Libya, spoke of opening America's strategic oil reserve if gas companies keep gouging people, mentioned the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, and—God Help Us—mentioned building more nuclear power plants on U.S. soil. Lord, give him wisdom.

About 6 p.m. MSNBC reported:

3 nuclear reactors in trouble after Japan quake: Cooling systems fail; radiation seeps outside one; thousands evacuated

TOKYO — Coolant systems failed at three quake-stricken Japanese nuclear reactors Saturday, sending radiation seeping outside one and temperatures rising out of control at two others.

Radiation surged to around 1,000 times the normal level in the control room of the No. 1 reactor of the Fukushima Daichi plant, Japan's Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency said. Radiation — it was not clear how much — had also seeped outside, prompting widening of an evacuation area to a six-mile radius from a two-mile radius around the plant. Earlier, 3,000 people had been urged to leave their homes.

About 4 a.m. Saturday morning (Florida time) , CNN reported an **Explosion At Japanese Nuclear Plant:**

An explosion sent white smoke rising above at a nuclear plant where a massive earthquake and tsunami crippled cooling systems in northeastern Japan's Fukushima prefecture, Japanese public broadcaster NHK

said Saturday, citing the country's nuclear and industrial safety agency.

The Tokyo Electric Company said four workers on the ground were injured, NHK reported.

It was not immediately clear where the blast occurred at the Fukushima Daiichi plant, or what caused it.

One expert said the explosion was "clearly a serious situation," but may not be related to problems inside the plant's nuclear reactor.

Earlier Saturday Japan's nuclear agency said workers were continuing efforts to cool fuel rods at the plant after a small amount of radioactive material escaped into the air.

The agency said there was a strong possibility that the radioactive cesium monitors detected was caused by the melting of a fuel rod at the plant, adding that engineers were continuing to cool the fuel rods by pumping water around them.

A spokesman for Japan's Nuclear and Industrial Agency earlier said atomic material had seeped out of one of the five nuclear reactors at the Daiichi plant, located about 160 miles (260 kilometers) north of Tokyo.

Authorities evacuated people living near the reactor after an earthquake and tsunami crippled cooling systems there, as well as at another of the Tokyo Electric Power Company's nuclear plants.

The evacuations notwithstanding, the nuclear safety agency asserted Saturday that the radiation at the plants did not pose an immediate threat to nearby residents' health, the Kyodo News Agency said.

The International Atomic Energy Agency said Friday on its website that the quake and tsunami knocked out a Daiichi reactor's off-site power source, which is used to cool down the radioactive material inside. Then, the tsunami waves disabled the backup source -- diesel generators -- and authorities were working to get these operating.

On Saturday Japanese nuclear authorities said the cooling system had also failed at three of the four

reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi plant -- located in another town in northeastern Japan's Fukushima prefecture.

At 5 a.m. Saturday (Florida time) The *Los Angeles Times* reported:

SENDAI, Japan — An explosion at a nuclear power station tore down the walls of one building Saturday as smoke poured out and Japanese officials said they feared the reactor could melt down following the failure of its cooling system in a powerful earthquake and tsunami.

It was not clear if the damaged building housed the reactor. Tokyo Power Electric Co., the utility that runs the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant, said four workers were injured but details were not immediately available.

Footage on Japanese TV showed that the walls of one building had crumbled, leaving only a skeletal metal frame standing. Puffs of smoke were spewing out of the plant.

Japan has declared states of emergency for five nuclear reactors at two power plants after the units lost cooling ability.

The most troubled one is facing meltdown, officials have said.

Pressure has been building up in the reactor -- it's now twice the normal level -- and Japan's Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency told reporters Saturday that the plant was venting "radioactive vapors." Officials said they were measuring radiation levels in the area.

The reactor in trouble has already leaked some radiation: Operators have detected eight times the normal radiation levels outside the facility and 1,000 times normal inside Unit 1's control room.

Wind in the region is weak and headed northeast, out to sea, according to the Meteorological Agency.

So, Kid In The Attic, all this disaster in Japan today and the threat of a nuclear meltdown makes Godzilla seem like Barney The Dinosaur... Do you still have those creatures in your world?

At least the poor Japanese do not have to contend with Lt. Thomas Holdup Stevens and his elk.

So Kid, my diary may keep you posted about the externals of my world, or you can read about such stuff in your history textbook at school—if the world's doings today have significance enough to be mentioned in future textbooks.

Or my diary may stick to important things, like God's dealings with this one sinner.

But, just in case, from the way things look this morning, maybe you'll want to just stay up there in the attic.

Sunday, March 13, 2011
Looking At The Helpers

While the tsunami inundated Japan, the news media inundated my senses with images of disaster. I stand in danger of sensory overload. I can't walk by my computer without seeking the latest news or images or warnings or oddities.

Looking at and hearing the barrage of information numbs me yet attracts me to look and hear more.

I keep expecting to see Godzilla at the edge of the tv screen—but instead all I see is devastation without the dinosaur.

And as I see the trouble there, I fear for trouble here.

You know something? Were it not for the tv, radio and computer coverage of this tragedy, here in Florida I would never have known it happened.

I'm suffering second-hand anxiety.

I marvel at the whirlpool in the Japanese waters and I watched the tv and listened as commentators speculated about how many people might be on a boat being sucked down the drain.



I marvel at the power of an ocean wave starting in Japan, traveling across the Pacific, and destroying 300 homes in Peru, way down in South America. I marvel at the herds of fish that sensed the tsunami and crowded close to beaches in Mexico where people scoop them up in buckets.



I need to look at something else.

And I recall the words of Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help
in trouble.

Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be
removed, and
though the mountains be carried into the midst of
the sea;

Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled,
though the mountains shake with the swelling
thereof.

The Lord, a very present Help.

I thought, *Look at the help. Look at the helpers.*

In all the tv images, look for people who are helping others. Look at the guy wading against the current to carry another victim on his back. Look at strangers comforting strangers.

Over 60 nations are marshaling help—search and rescue teams, nuclear scientists, food delivery teams, dogs trained in finding living people trapped under debris.

News was hardly out about the disaster Friday when American sailors in Asia began mounting relief operations. In this photo taken Friday, an officer briefs one Navy rescue team amid supplies aboard the *USS Blue Ridge*

already on the way to aid Earthquake/Tsunami/Nuclear victims.

Yes, within minutes of the earthquake, helpers appeared on the scene.



In his speech that same afternoon President Obama promised additional aid and the resources of America.

Within 24 hours CNN reported:

Rescuers dug through mud and rubble to find the buried, both alive and dead. Japan's Prime Minister Naoto Kan said more than 3,000 people have been rescued, according to the nation's Kyodo News Agency, some of them plucked from collapsed homes, muddy water and burning debris....

In other affected areas, military choppers plucked people from rooftops. In some cases, rescuers trudged in muddy water, carrying survivors on their backs. Weary, mud-spattered residents wandered through streets filled with crumpled cars and other debris....

Japan plans to dispatch 100,000 members of its Self-Defense Forces to the quake-ravaged region -- double the previous number -- Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa said Sunday, according to the Kyodo News Agency.

Japan's government also has made a formal request for U.S. aid, including military support, and full planning for deployment is in effect, with the U.S. military in Japan taking the lead, according to Sgt. Maj. Stephen Valley with U.S. Forces Japan.

The nuclear-powered aircraft carrier *USS Ronald Reagan*, along with a guided-missile cruiser and destroyer ship, arrived off Japan's coast Sunday morning to support Japanese forces in disaster relief operations, the U.S. Department of Defense said in a statement.

The U.S. Agency for International Development has sent two search and rescue teams, from Virginia and California. Those teams, of about 150 people and 12 rescue dogs trained to find survivors, were expected to arrive Sunday morning and immediately begin working alongside Japanese and international teams.

At least 48 other countries and the European Union also have offered relief to Japan, and supplies and personnel are already on the way.

A Reuters headline Saturday read: **World sends disaster relief teams to Japan.** The article listed nation after nation sending helpers to aid the victims.

One troubling thing about the quake is that it happened in the early afternoon while kids were in school, Dad downtown at his office, Mom uptown at hers—after the quake struck and the wave flooded, they have not been able to find each other or even know if the others are still alive.

Not being a computer person, I don't understand how it works or how to get involved, but I've read that individuals all around the world have set up internet computer message boards and contact thingies so people in one part of the disaster area can locate loved ones in another part of the hundreds of miles of affected territory.

And this grassroots community of computer people are trying to help—not by going to Japan, but by helping from their own living rooms. These ordinary geeks are doing what they can, where they are, with what they have.

That impresses me.

Yes there's one hell of a lot of disaster, but there's one hell of a lot of help too.

For peace of mind in all the disturbing images and conflicting reports, I look for helpers.

And, in the ordinary vicissitudes of life, the thing the Bible encourages me to do is look for The Helper.

The fourth chapter of Hebrews says, "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need".

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help
in trouble.

Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be
removed, and
though the mountains be carried into the midst of
the sea;

Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled,
though the mountains shake with the swelling
thereof.

Monday, March 14, 2011 Arms Open—Hands Off

I consider myself the world's foremost authority on how other people ought to live their lives. And, though I am a Christian, my attitude is not an exclusively Christian trait—it's a dad thing.

What brought this to mind yesterday is that Ginny and I tore ourselves away from news about our Japan obsession to watch a video biography of John Adams, second President of the United States.

In the mini-series, after the Revolutionary War, John Adams served as America's ambassador to various European governments. He was away from his farm and family for several years.

While he was away, his wife managed the farm and his children grew up. Then he came home. He began bossing everybody around.

He was a dad.

He thought he could take up authority about what to plant where in the fields. He dictated what subjects his one son should study at Harvard. He demanded that another son dump one girl and marry another. He

disapproved of his daughter's choice of a husband. He picked on his wife's friends. He bossed his own friends.

In the movie, he comes across as an ass.

Struck a cord with me.

In his own eyes, no man is an asshole.

Jesus said we are to cast the log out of our own eye before trying to remove a speck of sawdust from another person's eye. There's a reason He said that.

But Lord, their faults are so much easier to see than mine!

I'm one of the good guys. Like John Adams, I want the best for my grown children and if they just listened to me, they'd live happy, productive, meaningful lives—like I do???

Oh. That's the rub.

Observed objectively, all six of my grown children lead more successful lives than I ever did. I can't hold a candle to them. They are great people and manage somehow to move ahead in the world and in the Spirit—without always obeying Dad's input.

My two eldest sons plan to move from up north to Jacksonville about the middle of next month.

Now, Fred and John are both grown men, near 50 years old.

I have not been much a part of their lives since they were little when their mother and I divorced.

Sure, I've seen them during various vacation times over the years. In fact, both visited us over this past Christmas.

But I do not really know my own sons. Nor do they really know me—it's like I've been ambassador to France for many years.

We will be reestablishing a relationship.

In planning for their move to Jacksonville we exchange e-mails and phone calls. And they talk and plan more with their siblings down here than they do with me.

But, here's the kicker—I'm falling into the John Adams mode of dadding. I express strong opinions about where

they should find apartments, what kind of jobs they should seek, how to pick a moving van, what route to drive from up north—by and large stuff that is none of my business.

These men are not four-year-olds.

Yet, considering my vast experience in telling other people how to live, I continually urge unsolicited advice on them.

I do not want to be an asshole busybody, butting in where it's none of my business.

Yet, I want the best for Fred and John.

I want to welcome them with loving open arms—but I also need to keep my hands off.

I am going to need a lot of divine guidance.

Ok. I've got that off my chest—

Now let me tell you what you ought to do with your life....

Tuesday, March 15, 2011

Praying For Japs

Do I want to be nice, or to be honest?

OK. I admit that I have a hard time praying for Japs.

Poor bastards.

Overnight news comes of yet another nuclear power plant explosion. This morning's *Los Angeles Times* reports:

Fast-moving developments at the Fukushima No. 1 (Daiichi) plant, 150 miles north of Tokyo, catapulted the 4-day-old nuclear crisis to an entirely new level, threatening to overshadow even the massive damage and loss of life spawned by a devastating earthquake and tsunami.

Prime Minister Naoko Kan, in a nationwide address to the Japanese people, called for calm even as he acknowledged the radiation peril. Dressed in industrial-style blue coveralls, he offered solemn assurances that authorities were doing "everything we can" to contain the leakage.

"There is a danger of even higher radiation levels," he said — chilling words to a nation where the atomic

bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the waning days of World War II are known to every schoolchild. Slightly elevated radiation was detected in Tokyo, but not at health-affecting levels, officials said.

I see the photos of the earthquake aftermath. I listen to reports of 150,000 people evacuated from around nuclear power plants. I read accounts of people swept away to sea in an instant. I watch tv pictures of rescuers pulling bleeding victims from beneath rubble—yet I have a hard time praying for Japs.

Am I hard-hearted, or conditioned?

As a Christian, I think I ought to feel something beyond mere interest. This is not a movie. I ought to feel compassion, or sympathy or something. I feel I ought to pray for God to minimize the scope of this natural and man-made disaster, to deliver the Japanese people, to move Christians everywhere to come to their aid—yet, I have a hard time praying for Japs.

Why?

My mother slapped me when my daddy was drafted into the Army. Toward the end of World War II, the Draft Board scraped the bottom of the barrel, calling up even married men with children.

When daddy's induction letter arrived, I cheered and danced around happy. A kid down the block's daddy fought in the Pacific and he sent his boy neat stuff taken off Japs he killed—a Jap battle flag, a sword, a dagger, a Luger (no, it couldn't have been a Luger, those were German pistols), and, tops among the souvenirs, was a Jap helmet with a bullet hole straight through it.

Wow!

If my daddy went to war and killed Japs, he would send me neat stuff like that. So I happily cheered, and mama beat me. She was so scared. I was too young and stupid to be scared, so she took out her fear of Japs, her fear of losing daddy, by hitting me.

Then the United States dropped an A-Bomb on those Japs.

Daddy did not have to go the Pacific.

When the radio announced that we had A-Bombed the enemy, daddy walked me to a corner store on Evergreen Avenue, a store crowded with men and women cheering and clapping. Exuberant joy and rejoicing that the war could not last much longer made for a party atmosphere in that store. Everyone huddled around the radio listening to war news, and the store owner gave me a free Pepsi and my dad a free beer. He let me play an illegal punchboard, and I won a quarter—big bucks in those days when the Pepsi would have cost a nickel if we had to pay for it.

Everybody thought the A-Bomb was a great thing.

Now Japs could not kill my daddy.

Let's drop another one!

The only regret was that America had not dropped A-Bombs on Japan sooner, and lots more of them. It wasn't till many years later that I ever heard anybody say anything against A-Bombing Japan; I thought they were crazy.

When I went to school, industrial motivational posters asking **Have You Killed A Jap Today?** still decorated the halls.

In one class our teacher showed an educational film. We kids saw movies of Jap soldiers playing a game in China: they snatched a baby from its mother's arms, tossed it high in the air, and a circle of them vied to catch it on the points of their bayonets before it hit the ground.

Any doubt that elementary education has gone down hill since my day?

For the rest of his life, my father refuse to ever buy any product made in Japan.

Whenever any tool broke or didn't work right he cursed it saying, "Cheap Jap Crap"!

When I grew up I studied karate and felt proud of my skill. But daddy disapproved vociferously—even when I explained that my teacher was Korean.

A few years ago, when Ginny and I bought a Honda, I felt guilty, as though I'd betrayed my country.

Any wonder that I have trouble praying for Japs?

But I must.

If you can't pray for your enemies, you can't pray for anybody.

Jesus said to pray for your enemies, thereby acknowledging that you will have enemies. He said that if my enemy's ox falls in a ditch, I am to help him get it out. He said that if I go to the altar to pray and happen to think about the guy who did me dirt, I'm supposed to leave the altar of God and go be reconciled to my—hate to use this word—brother.

Yes, Jesus said, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust".

Them's hard words.

No warm fuzzy feelings to this kind of prayer. Can Jesus be serious? Does He really mean I'm to pray God's blessings on Japs?

Sure.

Why not?

If you can't pray for your enemies, you can't pray for anybody.

If I can't pray for the Japs, how can I pray for my wife? Every once in a while she opposes and bugs me. If I can't pray for Japs, how can I pray for my children? Their rooms often looked like rubble their whole teenage years. If I can't pray for Japs, how can I pray for the neighbor who lets her dog crap in my yard?

And here's the kicker—If I can not pray for the enemies, how can I pray for me, my own worst enemy? Yes, the whole Jap army, even if backed by Godzilla, Mothra and Pokemon, can never do me half the harm I have done to my own self!

I can not honestly pray for John Cowart, if I can't honestly pray for Japan. I am to ask the Lord to relieve, benefit, comfort, bless, and save the Japanese.

Now, I understand from better Christians that I'm supposed to pray fervently, joyously, with a pure heart and good intentions—that's beyond me even in normal times.

And I understand that just mouthing prayer words, without meaning them, offends the Lord God Almighty. He deserves better than rote.

So how can I pray an honest prayer?

Lord, bless those squinty-eyed yellow bastards! Will that do?

Not exactly.

Transacting serious business with the King of the universe sometimes involves a solemn contract; it is not always warm fuzzys.

I need to take up the cross of my own background. I need to forsake my own roots of bitterness, racism, bigotry, envy, and fear.

I need to forgive the Japs for scaring my mother so bad she hit me. I need to regard the fallen with compassion. I need to pray mercy upon them just as I pray for mercy for myself.

I need to pray for those separated from their loved one without knowing where they are or even if they were swept away in the tsunami. I need to pray rescuers will reach the trapped in time. I need to pray that the trapped will seek the Lord in their enforced and painful solitude beneath the concrete slabs. I need to pray the reactors will not become silent killers for generations.

Those are things I need to do.

Nevertheless, I have a hard time praying for Japs.

This following Christ thing is harder than I realized when I signed on.

It is real.

Friday, March 18, 2011

A Conversation Overheard By The River

Yesterday Jennifer, my eldest daughter, accompanied me on a business trip up to Kingsland, Georgia. I go up there about once a month and usually make five stops at various businesses—the most important one is at a place

that sells my brand of pipe tobacco, which is not available here in Jacksonville.

After spending money here and there, Jennifer and I enjoyed lunch at the Riverview Café. As the name implies, this restaurant overlooks the expanse of the St Marys River, the river which marks the state line between Florida and Georgia.

When we drive up there, Jennifer and I always stop at the Riverview. Our favorite table on the open-air balcony gives us a view of the ferry landing where the boat takes visitors out to the Cumberland Island National Seashore. We see all sorts of waterbirds soaring above the expanse of tidal marshes or fishing in the river or preening on old pilings left from long-abandoned docks.

Here's a photo I snapped on another trip of a schooner at anchor just off shore from the restaurant:



Jennifer and I talked for close to two hours as we lingered over our lunch, sipping iced tea for me and lemonade for her.

A family of three, obvious tourists from the north, took a table close to ours. In the midst of our own conversation, we overheard snatches of theirs.

I think I detected some tension between parents and teenager; nothing heavy, but the tension when you drag a teenager who wants to be elsewhere to historical sites in the company of those embarrassing parents!

For a while, they talked about the Submarine Museum down the block, and the ferry ride to Cumberland Island—tourist stuff.

Then the three began talking about the date—March 17th, St. Patrick’s Day.

Soon their conversation deepened and the teen-age boy gave his parents more and more information about St. Patrick—Jennifer and I immediately recognized the words.

The young man held one of those telephones with a screen that gives internet access—he had found an article I wrote about St. Patrick, a chapter from my book *Strangers On The Earth*. The family discussed various aspects of the article as they enjoyed crab cakes for lunch.

That stuck Jennifer and me as so funny—to hear my words quoted as authoritative by complete strangers in a town 30 miles away from my hometown.

For one moment, I considered turning around and introducing myself. Glad I didn’t. I realized that this family had found a neutral subject to talk about. Heads together, they discussed a mutually agreeable subject, one about which there was no conflict.

And the boy talked to the parents. And the parents listened to the kid.

I was not about to interrupt that.

Their communication was much more important than the ego boost I’d get by intruding to introduce myself as the author.

Nevertheless, overhearing that exchange puffed me up a bit.

And I think my daughter felt proud of me.

It was a good day.

For that family of strangers.

For my daughter and me.

Tuesday, March 22, 2011
Unworthy Thoughts On Number Ten

Soon after my father died, my mother had me drive her and her sister to an attorney's office to make out her own will.

They told me to wait outside.

After the lawyer drew up the will, they called me inside to witness it.

Mama's will left all her positions to her sister.

Fine.

Her will also stipulated that as her eldest son, I was to be responsible for paying all her debts when she died. Out of my own pocket.

Not fine.

That same afternoon, she and my aunt drove themselves to various stores to buy on credit a new stove, washer, dryer, refrigerator, and a recent model car. All of which I was to pay for in the event of her death.

Mama had lung cancer at the time.

But, Mama foiled her own plan to ruin me by living too long. In the many months that followed, she paid for all the new goodies she'd bought as the bills came due. At her death, all I had left to pay for were her funeral expenses.

Nevertheless, that scary experience makes me leery whenever wills are mentioned.

I'll come back to that in a moment, but first I want to record a few of this past weekend's events:

Last Thursday, my daughter Jennifer accompanied me on a trip up to Kingsland Georgia.

Friday morning, Terry, my daughter-in-love, came over and mowed my lawn for me and cleaned my yard—Thank God for her kindness.

Friday night at Salty's Seafood restaurant, I dropped a spoon full of tartar sauce. My fingers just turned to spaghetti. Embarrassing. It dismayed me. White sauce splashed on the table, on my shirt, on my pants, on the seat, on the floor, on my shoes... I have no idea what happened to me.

On Saturday, Mark and Eve came over to take Ginny's lovebird, Fancy, to the vet. Mark, whose profession make him especially knowledgeable about such things, told me a lot about nuclear power plant structures and radiation.

At the same time, Donald also came over and hooked up Ginny's new lap-top computer, which he gave her last week, to the internet. He also repaired some features of my machine and gave me several helpful computer tips.

Saturday night Ginny and I walked down to a park to watch the moon rise over the river with the city's skyline in the far background.

We carried folding chairs and relaxed while watching other people fight with cameras and settings and low batteries. Poor souls. It would take more than Saturday's Supermoon to draw them away from their gadgets.

Ginny and I just relaxed, and smoked and talked and held hands--not a single snapshot did we take. We enjoyed a wonderful loving time.

Barbara White called. Early Saturday morning she had a physical episode related to her cancer. An ambulance transported her to a hospice facility. She said she's not sure, but this looks like the beginning of the end for her. Sunday, they transferred her to another hospice—the place she has chosen to end her days.

That brings me back to the matter of wills—and Number Ten.

Ok. Barbara is one of my best friends. We've been friends for over 30 years. She's practically a member of my family. We've worked together on writing projects and charitable endeavors. She helped Ginny and me buy our home, and we've helped her move from house to condo, and helped her adopted children move households a number of times. During a bad time, when Barbara feared for her life, she hid out at our house thinking that her persecutors would never think of looking for her sleeping on the sofa in a poor family's living room. For years, every week or so the three of us enjoyed a Chinese lunch and conversations about books, movies and Christ.

So, when Barbara called to tell me an ambulance took her to hospice, what was my first thought of Christian compassion for my friend?

I wonder if she's leaving me anything in her will—that's what I thought.

Immediately after that I thought, *John, that thought is unworthy of you.*

But, there it is.

In the face of my friend's disaster, I wanted to know, *What's in it for me?*

No, there is no reason on earth for Barbara to will me anything. She has many relatives and hosts of other friends. Yet, that was my first thought.

In recent weeks as her cancer spread, Barbara often talked with me about the disposal of her possessions. A valuable heirloom diamond ring particularly concerned her. She once intended to pass it on to her daughter, but Mary died of lung cancer just a few years back. Barbara asked my advice about what to do with that ring. I suggested she drop it in the offering plate at her church, or sell it and use the money for a vacation cruise. In the end she decided to give it to a young man to use as an engagement ring in hopes the ring would spur him into marrying the girl he was living with and with whom he has several children.

Good choice, I said.

We talked about her setting up an ongoing fund to support a missionary family in Kenya, a family she admires and has supported for years.

Barbara also worried about some stocks and bonds and such. She told me she'd made arrangements with her accountant for a Transfer On Death—which means ownership of those securities just changes ownership to another person when the stockholder dies.

None of that concerns me. My experience with Mama's will makes me uncomfortable discussing such things and I told Barbara that she should concentrate on eternal matters, that property would sort itself out without her being unduly worried about setting up trust funds and such. I just have no experience in such financial matters and she should talk with her attorney, accountant, and property managers before making any decisions.

But, I do covet.

Once when I helped Barbara move, I admired a picture of a Florida cypress swamp and asked her for it. But Barbara chose to give it to someone else—and that person, in a drunken fit, punched holes in the picture and threw it in the trash.

Pearls before swine, I thought.

Maybe so.

But I am the hog who covets a mention in Barbara's will.

Yes. Thou Shalt Not Covet—the last of the Ten Commandments.

Not talked about much nowadays.

But, Number Ten is a biggy.

Coveting lies in good company, When asked what food defiles a man, Jesus replied that nothing we take in can defile us. He said, "That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man".

Why is coveting bracketed by murder, theft, wickedness and deceit on that list?

Isn't coveting just wanting something that belongs to somebody else?

It's not like banging them on the head and taking it by force; it's just hankering after something that somebody else owns.

Isn't that relatively harmless?

Maybe not.

John the Baptist told a group of soldiers, "Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages".

Be content with what's yours. If it's not yours, leave it alone.

When I covet, I value things above people.

And Jesus died on the cross to save people, not property.

And, in the matter of wills and inheritance, whole cans of worms pop open.

Once a man in the crowd asked Jesus, "Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me". And He said unto him, "Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you"? And He said unto them, "Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth".

Now, when Barbara called to indicate she is in the Home stretch, I wondered if I would be given something in her will.

Where did that thought come from?

It sprang up internally. Not from the outside, but from within me.

Guess what my second thought was?

That thought is unworthy of me; I'm better than that sort of thing!

See, I compound coveting with spiritual pride.

And the last state of the man is worse than the first.

So, what is my final word on the vile nasty sin of coveting?

Oink. Oink.

Friday, March 25, 2011 Cats And Kittens Everywhere...

Our garden flourishes with the first signs of Spring; here are a few photos I snapped in the yard yesterday:

Let's start with wildflowers which grow so profusely in our yard that I have to run the mower over clumps of them:



Then a bed of snapdragons flank the cement alligator:



I know the name of these things, but I can't spell
CHOLANCHIAS



I can spell little-white-flowers-around-the-sundial:



Impatiens fill the trough behind the schoolbus:



And about thirty of these amaryllis grow in a cluster right at our front door:



Yesterday I worked transcribing more of Barbara White's Prayer Diary—up to February, 1995, now. I'd hoped to finish this task before Barbara dies, but that looks doubtful at the moment.

I phoned her in her hospice unit and she says far-flung family members are flocking to her bedside and taking on practical matters I thought my children might need to handle. Thank God for these new folks I've never met.

I've done all Barbara asked me to do, so we are quits on good terms, if I do not get to see her again. I regret that she lost some of her diaries, but I'm doing the best I can with what I have. I'd hoped she would be able to proof the text, but, even after three year's work, I'm nowhere near finished transcribing. I hope to have her next book ready to publish this Fall.

Here's an odd, sad thing: A headline in yesterday's newspaper read:

170 cats taken from couple

The article by *Florida Times-Union* reporter Dana Treen said,

A Jacksonville woman who said she and her husband spent \$700 weekly caring for about 170 feral cats at their properties in Jacksonville and Middleburg wanted to control the animals but became overwhelmed by the task.

"We just couldn't keep up with them," said Linda Weinberger, who along with her husband, Henry, turned the cats over to animal control authorities after complaints in one of the neighborhoods...

Linda Weinberger said Wednesday the fault falls partly on her shoulders but she is not convinced she fits the profile of a hoarder.

"This all started with a wonderful feral cat named Benny" in the 1990s, she said. Then came other cats the couple also fed and soon there were more and more.

She said the cats were not malnourished and she did not believe they were sick. In addition to food and other supplies, the Weinbergers spent thousands on veterinary visits, she said.

Weinberger, 71, and her husband, 69, hoped to find someone who could help manage the cats.

"Our plan was to have them all spayed and neutered and inside where they would be safe," said Weinberger, who works as a tax preparer.

An animal control official said, No horrible health issues were found in a veterinarian's preliminary examination but suspected some of the cats would have to be destroyed.

Does that make sense? For the city to confiscate cats to protect them by killing them?

One neighbor complained about the cats, "They were all over the neighborhood," he said.

Another man said he has known the Weinbergers for close to 20 years... "Those cats were their babies... Those cats were pampered".

No criminal charges were expected in Jacksonville, said prosecutor Cyrus Zomorodian, whose division oversees animal cruelty cases. The Weinbergers have no record of animal abuse, he said, but added that hoarding is recognized as a form of cruelty, even though that may not be the intent.

"The perpetrator in these situations always or almost always thinks they are doing a great act when instead they are harming the animal," he said...

Good to know our local government protects us from dangerous cat hoarders. Shame the police can't do anything about the drug pushers in my neighborhood.

Say, I wonder???

Jacksonville Sheriff's Office has a hot line number which pays cash money to tipsters who report dangerous criminals.

Is there a reward for turning in cat hoarders?

I know some people, family members even, who hoard cats. They even let them inside the house...

Hummm, just how much is that reward?

Monday, March 28, 2011
My Hunger For The River God

A book I read over the weekend triggered in me an intense longing for God.

That hunger doesn't strike me often. Most of the time God is just background noise in the activities of my daily life. I'm hardly aware of Him. I live in His presence the

same way farmers till fields on the side of a volcano; sure there's smoke and fire hovering in the air, but mostly there are hogs to be slopped here on my farm.

Hogs demand more of my attention than the volcano.

Daily chores and pleasures attract more of my attention than the living God.

But, on rare occasions something triggers a hunger for God. It's a yearning, a longing in my soul for Something more. It's a hunger that can on feed on this land's bread.

A couple of years back I wrote a newspaper column, *Hearthunger*, in which I tried to describe my rare yearning for the living God. If you're interested, the link is at <http://www.cowart.info/Rabid%20Fun%20columns/Hearthunger/Hearthunger.htm>

Maybe I'm weird, but I have seldom felt God-touched in any sort of religious service. The things that stir me to worship and awe have been more prosaic: dissecting a pig's kidney in a biology lab, seeing a fox at sunrise—and, this past weekend, reading a book about the St Johns River.

The book that touched me so deeply was not a theology book at all. Not even religious in the conventional sense. It was Kevin McCarthy's *St. Johns River Guidebook* (Sarasota, Florida. Pineapple Press. ©2004).

McCarthy, a professor of English and Florida Studies at University of Florida, Gainesville, boated with two friends from the headwaters of the St Johns west of Vero Beach to Mayport. Along the 314-mile route he observed the natural beauty, the wild life and the historical sites. Then he drove over the same route along both banks of the river, again taking note of everything from where to find public toilets to where to see exotic birds, BBQ restaurants, and Indian mounds. A Heaven of a trip. I envy him.

Doesn't sound to be a likely source of religious inspiration, does it?

Yet, as I recognized many places I'd visited as a Boy Scout, as I recalled visions of vapor wisps dancing over sluggish water, as I remembered an otter playing with a

trout, as I thought of clear spring water funneling into the tannin-dark river flow—a sense of worship arose within me.

Now, I'm no pantheist. The Force is rinky-dink compared to the majesty of Jesus Christ dying for my sin on the Cross then overcoming death by rising from the tomb. Yet, nature is in God. He numbers every hair on your head and at the same time calls the name of every star in all galaxies. He holds all creation in the palm of His nail-scared hand. He contains creation; it is too small to contain Him.

Professor McCarthy's book quotes poet Sidney Lanier who described the river as, "The sweetest water-lane in the world... as if a tropical woods-stroll had taken shape and as if God had turned into water and trees the recollection of some meditative ramble through the lonely seclusions of His own soul".

That's about the only religious reference in the guidebook; yet the description of the river that flows through my hometown, the river of my boyhood, triggered thoughts worship. Thoughts of soul-yearning. Thoughts of majesty. Thoughts of God.

Then real life intervened.

It does that.

Sunday morning I talked with Ginny about us lingering over brunch at a favorite restaurant on the deck overlooking the river. I envisioned sailboats cruising past our table, gulls soaring overhead, sun sparking on the water, romance in the air.

She reminded me we had to take the car to the garage and sit waiting for the mechanic to do whatever he claims to do under the hood.

So we sat in the garage waiting room all morning.

Then Ginny drove us back home.

This puzzled me.

When I reminded her about the romantic lunch on the river,

She said she'd forgotten.

Forgotten.

Here I had been so looking forward to this outing. I built it up to a romantic interlude in my mind. It tied in with the things I was feeling having read the River Guidebook. To me this was enormously important.

To Ginny it was no big deal.

An idea of no importance.

She opened and warmed a can of Chinese food for our lunch. And we spent the afternoon watching video movies we neither one much cared about.

Sometimes in marriage you cruise on the moonlit river.

Sometimes you're just up Cob's Creek.

Thursday, March 31, 2011

My Daughter Saved A Life—I Just Lived One

Yesterday Jennifer, my eldest daughter and a nurse, saved the life of a lady who was at Jennifer's house helping with a project for next weekend. The lady had a heart attack—stopped breathing, no pulse. Jennifer administered CPR, called rescue, then rode with the lady in the ambulance to the hospital. The lady is scheduled for heart surgery this morning.

I'm proud of my daughter's accomplishment, quick response and training.

While Jennifer saved a life; I just lived one.

My day involved hospitals too.

Started out simple enough. I drove Ginny to work so I could keep the car to go visit Barbara White in hospice. I planned to take Barbara a bowl of soup from her favorite Chinese restaurant; and Ginny sent her a large-print book about cats.

So, I drove Ginny to work and started home to pick up the cat book and as I neared our house, R, a neighbor lady of our acquaintance, flagged me down crying. She needed a ride to a hospital to visit someone.

She had a boyfriend—an EX-boyfriend. She and the guy, lets call him D, lived together for over ten years. He habitually beat her severely. They split up about five years ago and she got a restraining order from the police

department to protect herself from being battered any more.

But, yesterday morning he called her from the hospital. Seems he's been pissing blood and had been admitted the day before. Tests revealed D. has cancer of kidneys and bladder. Doesn't look good for him. He called R to break the news. This upset her so much that she flagged me down in tears begging that I driver her over to see him in the hospital.

I did.

Back at my house picking up that cat book and a box of toxic waste materials for the hazardous waste center, I saw R's father at her house down the street looking for her. He'd been to the hospital looking for her there already. It seems that, cursing and raging, D had called him to come pick up R from the hospital. D said he resented her arriving at his hospital room unannounced and that he had chased her out of his room.

The father and I commented on that.

"She still loves him," R's dad said.

"Love can bring a lot of joy—or a lot of misery, in this world," I said.

So, I delivered the hazardous stuff to the center, drove to the Chinese restaurant, drove across the river, got lost. Did a U-turn. Got lost again. Did another U-turn. Missed my turnoff and got lost again. Did yet another U-turn. Got lost yet another time—all this at 40 miles per hour on a six-lane-wide highway while other drivers zipped by doing 80 miles-per-hour!

Got to the hospice and smoked a pipe in the parking lot. I'd been lost in heavy traffic for 45 minutes and my nerves were shot.

Found Barbara's new room and found her in delightful good spirit. The soup and cat book pleased her and she showed off some flowers my daughter Eve had sent her.

Then we talked about life and the Lord and how she wanted me to handle her future book sales. Barbara told me about a good report she'd heard from a lady who is reading my book *Strangers On The Earth*; that gave me a lift.

I told her that I'm only up to 1996 in transcribing her prayer dairies; and she gave me some additional material to include. I teased her that if the Lord wants her to keep more diaries after she dies, then she's to request a computer because I'm sick of transcribing notebook after notebook of hand-written text!

As we talked, a gentleman named Ken came in with a dog named Barney. Ken volunteers with a group called Therapy Dogs International; he and Barney visit seriously ill patients so they can pet Barney. Barney is the same kind of dog as Toto in the *Wizard Of Oz* movie. It was fun to see them in action with Barbara as Barney climbed on her bed to have his ears scratched.

After Ken and Barney left, hospice staff brought in her lunch stuff. We joked about Barbara being an astronaut in training because she has to eat squished food from a plastic squeeze tube like the guys on the Space Station do.

While on that side of the river, I ran another errand, a one-legged man helped me with a chore, and a tottering, white-haired old lady helped me move boxes. I also got soaking wet from a passing storm, got lost in traffic again, watched firemen wield cutting torches to extract a driver from a car turned upside-down in the road, and I finally arrived early to pick up Ginny from her office.

That's what I call living!

I'd missed breakfast and lunch in my running around. I felt exhausted. I fell asleep slumped over the car's steering wheel for an hour till Ginny got off work.

As we ate an Italian meal at Kosta's and shared our daily news, Ginny reminded me that the call of God always comes at the most inconvenient moment—when you're mending dirty nets and cleaning fish, when you're up to your elbows in tax forms, when you'd intended to relax under your fig tree—that's when Jesus calls.

He's Lord.

And He's unpredictable.

Ginny says you can know you're doing the will of God in direct proportion to how much doing it inconveniences your own plans.

On the way home we checked on R, the lady in love. She excused her EX-boyfriend's churlish behavior. She apologized for him. She said he only yelled at her and chased her out of the hospital because he was upset over the news of his cancer.

She cried while she apologized.

Black mascara ran down her cheeks.

Love is blind. And sometimes downright stupid.

As I reflect on how I lived my day, a typical one by the way, I realize that if I had not had to pick up that cat book, none of this would have happened. Yes, it was all the cat's fault.

APRIL

Monday, April 4, 2011
Wild Things!



We don't know how we got it, but Ginny and I think everybody in the world seems to be looking for what we have.

It's not our fault, or to our credit, but we just seem to have stumbled into love; yes, romantic love. Crazy love, fun love, religious love, happy love, 43-years-married love

—and most of the time we even managed to tolerate each other.

We are a couple of wild things!

Yet, sometimes we need to nourish that love, and that means time.

Ginny took a couple of days off from her office just so we could spend time together in a long weekend getting reacquainted. It was another happy time in a series. I have no idea why the Lord God blesses us so. We have no marriage tips for other couples. We are not aware of what it is we do that makes us happy but we are.

Maybe it's because we thrive on simplicity.

For instance, it rained heavily on the first day of our mini-vacation. We carried our different books to a restaurant, sat in front of a huge plate glass window to watch the rain fall, ordered French fries and milkshakes (chocolate for her; strawberry for me) and we read, ignoring each other while outside it stormed and inside we loved in companionable silence, more or less ignoring each other (except to snatch fries off the other one's plate).

Occasionally we exchanged comments about our books—She read something about Wall Street brokerage houses, while I read transcripts from the 1648 Massachusetts witchcraft trials. My wife reads weird stuff, incomprehensible to me.

Rain did not dampen our spirits.

We had a blast!

A quiet blast, but a blast nevertheless.

One day we worked on our garden—by worked I mean we sat outside and talked for hours about what we might do if we choose to get up. During that time we watched birds flock to our feeders: bluejays, cardinals, chickadees, russet sparrows, titmice, purple finches, doves—and, rare to our yard, an Indigo Bunting.

We stalked that shy bird for hours trying to get close enough to snap its photo; and after many failed attempts, we finally got this one:

One day, feeling ambitious, I watched Ginny tend her flowerbeds. I love to watch her. In the garden I do donkey work, chopping, mowing, edging, raking; Ginny tends the flower beds.



Yes, Ginny plants:



Ginny waters:



But, God gives the increase:



One day, for an exciting outing, we visited the Jacksonville Zoo. Ginny had read they sponsor a new exhibit of penguins and that a baby giraffe was born last month.

She wanted to see the creatures.

Now the zoo lies only ten miles from our home, but we drove almost a hundred to get there. That's because on a whim we decided we wanted breakfast at Ann's Diner up in Callahan, about 20 miles out of our way. We found the name has changed since we last ate there four or five years ago. Ann's daughter now runs the place—and I can't think for the life of me what the new name is, but the food is the same.

Naturally we visited a thrift store across the street and browsed for two hours. We bought a book, two coffee

mugs, and a tee shirt; our spending spree cost about three dollars.

We decided to drive to the zoo by way of Fernandina Beach, see the ocean, talk about places we remember that aren't there anymore, then drove along Highway A1A over salt marshes and tidal estuaries of the barrier islands as we observed water fowl and talked about history and progress.

Finally we arrived at the zoo shortly before closing time

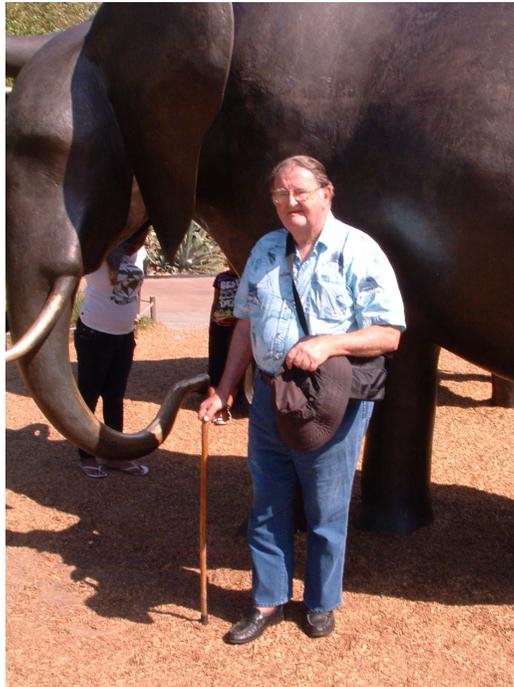
Here's a photo of Ginny with a penguin:



Her straw hat with white flowers on it shaded her face so I asked her to remove it for the next shot of her pointing to a penguin swimming underwater:



She snapped a photo of me and a fat bronze elephant (I'm the one on the right):



Next we visited the giraffe enclosure with swarms of other people wanting to see the new baby giraffe:



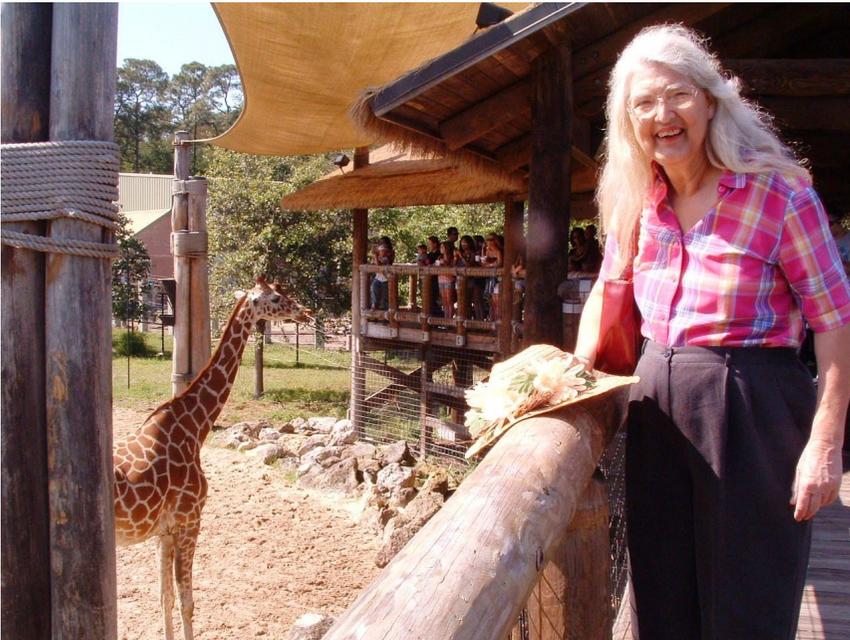
Again, her straw hat with white flowers on it shaded Ginny's beautiful features, so I ask her to remove it for my next photo:



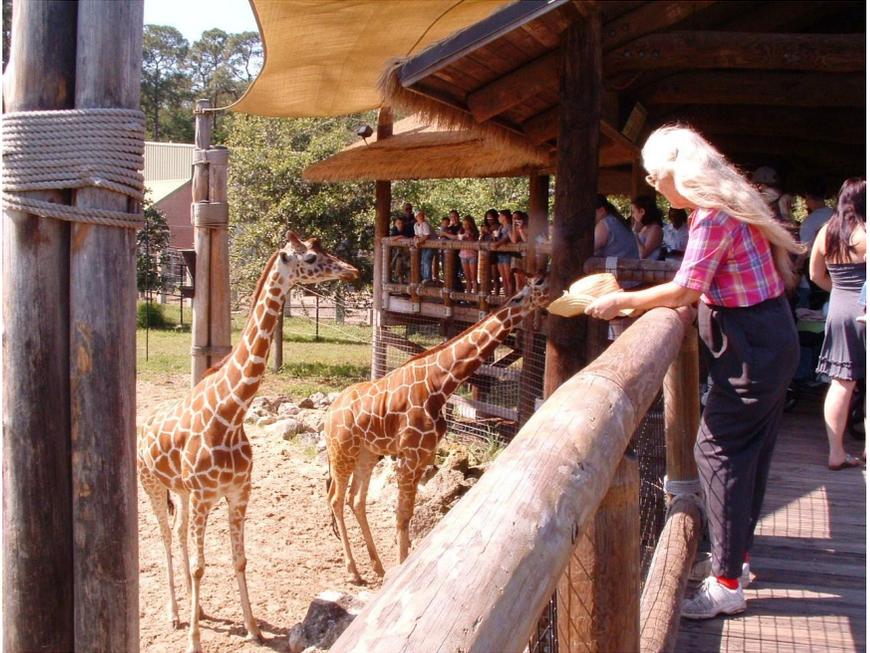
While Ginny admired the new baby (out between the two center palm trees), Mama and Daddy Giraffe noticed something interesting in the crowd:



Here's what the giraffes spotted:



Having a long neck gives giraffe's an advantage when they want to eat a lady's hat:



Yes, while she admired the baby unaware, the adults tried to grab Ginny's hat!

Did I confront the wild animals to rescue Beauty? No! Those things are big. They have teeth. They may bite. What I did was laugh myself silly at Ginny's surprise when two giraffes stretched for her hat—almost got it too.

OK. We had no big adventures during our vacation. Spent hardly anything. Doesn't take much to make us Christians happy and content.

Thanks be to God.

(He created really cool varmints—us included).

Wednesday, April 6, 2011
There Ain't Here. This Ain't That. And Vice Versa

Long ago I knew Prince Albert Strickland, a—shall we say Crusty—old man who lived nearby. Prince had been raised on a tobacco farm and his father named him after the farm's best customer, the Prince Albert Pipe Tobacco Company.

Old and full of days (as well as piss and vinegar) Prince lay dying in a local hospital. When I visited my friend I asked, "Prince, how are you doing"?

"Well, John," he said, "I'm down to the last few sheets on the roll".

Yesterday, I could not help but contrast Prince's attitude toward dying with the attitude of my friend Barbara White.

My friend Wes came over Monday morning to treat me to breakfast and drive me over to visit Barbara in the hospice where she expects soon to die. Barbara graciously received us into her room and the three of us talked about books with a modicum of conversation about faith and Heaven. Barbara is weary and ready to die, slightly impatient for it if anything.

I wondered why I was there.

Ginny and I had said our goodbyes to Barbara a couple of weeks ago and further visits are redundant. I had not intended to visit Barbara again on this earth. I went at Wes' suggestion.

In a way, visiting a dying person is a bit like driving someone to the airport or to the bus station. You've settled all business between you. Everything has been packed. All good-byes said. Then you get to the bus station to find that the bus will not leave for another two hours! Or you read on the board that the flight has been delayed.

What do you do?

What more can you say?

All you can do is wait.

All that remains is to endure in that uncomfortable, even hostile, place and make small talk until final departure time.

Then both you and the person leaving feel relieved!

So, I wondered why I was there visiting Barbara again—definitely a bus station experience for me—but maybe she and Wes still had things to talk over.

So I waited.

And waited.

And wondered why I was there.

Afterward, Wes and I sat in rockers beneath a gazebo in a Hospice rose garden smoking our pipes and chatting when a beautiful young woman and her two-year-old joined us. The attractive young woman—let's call her Amy (although, being a trifle deaf, I'm not sure I caught her name)—had taken a break from visiting her step-mother, a patient in the facility.

The situation bothered Amy because her step-mother has no insurance. When she dies all funeral expenses will fall upon Amy and her husband. They can't afford a funeral and Amy has heard horror stories about a state burial. She feels trapped and distressed, smothered and numb. "I don't know what I feel," she said, "It's just not real to me yet. It hasn't hit me".

I know how she feels; I too have no insurance (long story) and it distresses me that Ginny will be left in the same boat as that young woman if I die first.

Wes comforted her while I clipped a rose off a bush to amuse her two-year-old. OK, I stole a rose; don't report me to Hospice Security—their patrol wagon came by just after I cut the bush and I hid the rose behind my back till they passed.

Amy, Wes and I talked a bit about prayer and devotions. No big thing, just a general, generic mention.

I wondered why I was there.

I felt I contributed little to the conversation.

Besides, I had had other plans for my day.

Breakfast with Wes and a visit to Barbara, I figured would take about three hours—as things worked out, I spent about 11 hours with Wes before the day played out.

He had a family meeting to attend at noon; and because of a traffic jam due to an accident, and a longer visit than we expected, and our conversation with the young mother, if Wes drove me home first, he would miss this meeting. He called his hostess and asked if he could bring an uninvited guest—me.

We met in the home of Susan Brandenburg, a biographer who is writing a book about Wes' father, Joe, a retired Air Force officer who took part in the Berlin Airlift.

Susan's website, Susan The Scribe, is at www.susanthescribe.vpweb.com .

Also at the luncheon was Suzanne, an artist whose paintings hang at the Air Force Academy and in several German museums. I'm so sorry I did not catch her last name. She is designing the cover for Joe's biography. As a little girl, she had been on the receiving end of food drops in Berlin.

I also met Reece, Wes' brother, who was helping Susan with some home repairs.

I wondered why I was there?

I'd had had plans for my day. These were not them. I wondered if God, who orders all our days, wished for me to learn something from all the people I was meeting? Was I supposed to be of some use to them?

During a lunch of delicious stir fry, cheese bread, tangerines, ginger cookies and a table full of other goodies, Reese told the curious story about how he and Wes had introduced their father to their mother—as the boys tried to derail a train.

Their mother had taken them on an outing to the zoo. The teenaged boys found a length of angle iron and were placing it across the railroad track when Joe spotted them and demanded they stop. "Somebody could get killed," he said. Then he escorted the malefactors to the picnic area to turn them over to their mother—Joe and she fell in love and were married for over 40 years—all because Reese and Wes tried, just for the fun of it, to wreck a train!

After lunch, Susan, Joe, Reese and Wes began to sing the great hymns of the Christian church—*My Father Knew Lloyd Gorge*, *Pine Trees*, the *Gandydancer's Chant* (complete with Joe and Susan demonstrating how to shift railroad tracks), *To Keep My Love Alive* (a song about a lady who killed nine husbands), and, to top off the entertainment, Wes sang *Lydia The Tattooed Lady*.

Again, Why was I there?

I tried to redeem the time. I asked Susan The Scribe how I could solve a writing problem that has plagued me for years? Her handy tip: let somebody else do it!.

Years ago I tried to write a book about divine guidance, about following the will of God. I gave up on

writing that book because the subject is too deep for me. I can't get my small brain around such a weighty topic.

But I do believe God guides us. I do believe that in day to day life, He directs us. And I think you really have to try really, really hard to avoid doing God's will—the problem is that His will is seldom what I expect.

That bugs me.

I want to see a direct correlation between what I am doing and what God is doing.

He owes me an explanation.

Why had God, through traffic accidents, a dying friend, a stacked young woman (Oh, you mean I had not mentioned that?), circumstances of timing, and nice people, thwarted the plans I had for myself to day?

At daybreak, no way had I envisioned myself listen to Wes singing *Lydia The Tattooed Lady*.

Does God guide us at all?

Is everything just a matter of time and circumstance?

The Lord is my Shepherd... He leadeth me...

King David said we are always in His presence, that we can't avoid it if we try:

Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it. Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?

If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

That's pretty comprehensive, but what does it mean to me and my plans?

After we left Susan's home, Wes had to stop at his office a bit, then buy \$75 worth of gas for his truck. Then drive me home and stay for dinner with Ginny and me, and we all told jokes and laughed and exchanged cooking recipes and prayed and had a good time.

And, my day was shot.

I had been active all day running to and fro over the surface of the earth -now get this—for no discernable reason!

That's right: For no discernable reason.

Is it ever God's will that I just hang out with friends and goof off?

A thought occurred to me.

Maybe God had me do this for no other reason than to keep me from doing that.

Maybe God had me be here for no other reason that to keep me from being there.

There is no reason for me to discern why I get to do this or that. My duty is to obey, to fit in with the Lord's desires, to enjoy the happy moments He gives me with my friends and my wife. Go with the flow.

I get so hung up on doing Christian stuff. I like the sense of accomplishment that brings. I need to concentrate more on simply being Christian—for me that's a whole lot harder. And, also, maybe I need to take a course in music appreciation.

Thursday, April 7, 2011 **The Key To It All**

As I recall the angel told the Virgin Mary that nothing is too hard for God—a lot Gabriel knew!

It seems to me that the Lord has a hard time teaching me anything. After all, He has to do it again and again repeating the same lesson; and I still don't get it.

But God is patient. He does not get frustrated. Again and again He takes me back to square one—I once had a geometry teacher like that. "Johnny, go to the blackboard and do problem one again," she said again and again.

And I am an expert in First Semester Greek—took it five times. I almost know the squiggly alphabet. At least I recognize Alpha and Omega.

Apparently the lesson God reinforces to me this week is the lesson about waiting and being flexible about my plans and intentions. Tuesday, I wrote about how my breakfast with Wes turned into an all day affair when I'd

intended to work on a project important to me—I forget just what it was.

Then, yesterday, my daughter-in-love Terry had told me she was coming over to mow the lawn for me, being as I'm too old, weak, feeble and demented to cut grass.

So, as soon as Ginny left for work, I went out in the yard to rake leaves away from the flower beds, pick up sticks that might hit the mower blades, edge a brick walkway, cart off some tree limbs blown down in Tuesday's storm—get everything ready for mowing.

Terry did not come.

I waited and waited and waited. Waiting frustrates me. I grew antsy. I fumed over the Scripture that says, "Boast not thyself of tomorrow, for thou knoweth not what a day may bring forth".

About noon Terry called to let me know she had lost her keys. She was locked out of car, truck, riding mower, camper (fortunately she'd left the door to the house open). But she was stranded. She could not come over to our house to mow.

What happened to her keys?

The other night when she got home, she put them on an ottoman in the tv room—a favorite place for the cat to sleep.

Later, she heard something fall. She checked around but could find nothing amiss. Nothing in there but a sleeping cat curled up in its favorite spot.

Yesterday morning she collected the plastic trashcan liners and emptied the trash cans—including one beneath the ottoman. She threw the plastic bags into the garbage can at the curb. And a while later she heard the garbage men put it all in their truck and drive away.

But when she started to drive over to my house—no keys.

Notice that smirk on the cat's face?

That ottoman is My Place; don't you dare dump metal keys on My Cushion!

When she called me to tell me I'd wasted a day waiting for her to arrive, Terry said, "John, I think God did

not mean for me to do this today. Maybe He kept me off the road to save me from getting in an accident or something”.

She was not frustrated nor angry nor put out one bit.

She accepted that her own plans had been overruled and she had no problem with that. She has learned a lesson that God has been trying to teach me for decades.

Is anything too hard for the Lord?

No, but depending on the material He has to work with, some things, with some hard-headed people, take a little longer than others. The Red Sea parts in a snap. Teaching John Cowart trust and patience... that takes a bit longer.

So, I have learned my lesson—It’s all the cat’s fault!

Monday, April 11, 2011

Fancy

August 11, 2006--April 10, 2011

Fancy, my wife’s peach-faced lovebird, died yesterday.

Ginny loved that bird.



Back on August 11, 2006, my daughter Jennifer noticed a commotion in her backyard. She looked out and saw a flock of bluejays attacking a small yellow bird.

Jennifer ran out, chased off the jays and rescued the lovebird.

Obviously the lovebird had escaped from a cage somewhere and Jennifer tried to locate the owner with no avail. She owned cats so she called me to see if Ginny and I wanted the bird—which I named Fancy (after Fancy Feast cat food).

Here is an excerpt from my August 12, 2006, diary entry:

Ginny woke at 6:15 as usual and she spent the first hours of her day coddling Fancy. That is one pampered bird. Ginny made kissy sounds and tried to teach the bird to talk. She wants it to say wimpy stuff like “Pretty Bird” and nonsense like that.

I hold higher aspirations for Fancy. I figure that a bird living in a writer’s living room should say something literary. I want Fancy to say:

Once upon a midnight dreary,
While I pondered weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of
forgotten lore...”

If that bird is half as clever as Ginny thinks it is, then it should soon be able to recite all 18 stanzas of Poe’s Raven.

When I explained my idea to Ginny she laughed till she about fell out of her chair.

Of course the silly bird never says a word; it just chirps.

For years Ginny continued to pamper Fancy. She talked to it. Strung up strands of millet seed, gave it vitamins, covered it’s cage at night, played music on the radio—that bird made more trips to the vet than I’ve made to the doctor’s office.

A couple of weeks ago, Fancy, began to act listless. I would not even bite at my finger. Eve and Mark took it to the vet, but Fancy continued in slow decline until it died yesterday.

Ginny cried.

I could think of no words to comfort her so I just held her in my arms silently.

Years ago a friend gave us a decorative garden statue of Saint Francis of Assisi; it sits in a corner of our garden. We buried Fancy in a matchbox coffin at the foot of that statue because, according to one legend, Francis once preached a sermon to a flock of birds.

Here's what he said:

My little bird sisters, you owe much to God your Creator, and you must always and everywhere praise Him, because He has given you freedom to fly anywhere—also He has given you a double and triple covering, and your colorful and pretty clothing, and your food is ready without your working for it, and your singing that was taught to you by the Creator, and your numbers that have been multiplied by the blessing of God—and because He preserved your species in Noah's ark so that your race should not disappear from the earth.

And you are also indebted to Him for the realm of the air which He assigned to you. Moreover, you neither sow nor reap, yet God nourishes you, and He gives you the rivers and springs to drink from. He gives you high mountains and hills, rocks and crags as refuges, and lofty trees in which to make your nests.

And although you do not know how to spin or sew, God gives you and your little ones the clothing which you need. So the Creator loves you very much, since He gives you so many good things. Therefore, my little bird sisters, be careful not to be ungrateful, but strive always to praise God.

Amen!

Wednesday, April 13, 2011
The Flower Of The Grass

It bothers me when the grass and weeds in my yard gets out of control; for Ginny and me, our garden is our sanctuary, a place of peace, a place to pray and talk and watch birds at the feeders, a spot to watch spiders spin morning dew-silvered webs, and to watch lizards puff red neck pouches in the sun.

But with the ravages of winter past and the growth spurts of this Florida's early spring... You could film a Tarzan movie in our backyard!

But on Monday, Terry, my daughter-in-law, came over pulling a big red tractor on the trailer behind her pickup truck and in 45 minutes and a cloud of dust, she mowed my grass—a job that would have taken me hours!



That got me to thinking about life.

Saint Peter said, “All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever”.

That thought helps me view many of my problems from a different perspective. The things that bother me at the moment are not permanent fixtures in my life. They—and me—are grass. Tall grass, but grass nonetheless.

For instance, I'm concerned about my two elder sons moving down this coming weekend—where will they stay? Can they find jobs? What can I do to help without being intrusive? ... Hey, I don't even own a fatted calf to barbeque!

Yesterday, my friend Barbara called from her hospice room. I'm surprised she lived through the weekend. She

wants me to visit today to pick up some more manuscript diaries her relatives found in cleaning out her apartment.

For months and months and months now, I've been transcribing her prayer diaries, which date back into the 1970s, for publication by next Fall.

I really hoped to have them finished for her to proof before she dies but that doesn't seem likely; I've only transcribed up to 1997 where there is a gap. I hope the notebooks they found in her apartment cover the years I am missing.

Yes, this is just clerical work, not creative writing of my own, but I promised to do it, so I am.

Oh yes, one other thing: after Terry packed up her tractor and left having cut my grass, I cut my hair. Yes, I was getting shaggy and I want to look decent for when Fred and John arrive. And yes, I have such an aversion to being touched, that I cut my own hair using this comb and razor thingy. I've done that for over 40 years, just to keep from having a barber touch me.

Kinky... crazy... eccentric... goofy...or just being me.

But I'm in good company in thinking about grass and hair needing cutting.

That's biblical.

Consider King Nebuchadnezzar:

The Prophet Daniel said of him, " Nebuchadnezzar was driven from men, and did eat **grass** as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws".

That reminds me, I need to clip my nails too.

Thursday, April 14, 2011
Dying Words = Living Word

First thing Wednesday morning I stole a spray of roses.

Tuesday my friend Barbara White had phoned me from her hospice room. She asked me to come pick up some final copies of her diaries, notes, books and papers which had turned up as relatives and friends had cleaned out her apartment.

A few years ago Barbara entrusted her prayer diaries to me to publish. Beginning with her entry on May 9, 1976, I have (with the help of two of my daughters) transcribed as far as June 12, 1999—a tedious task but well worth the effort.

Recently someone asked if I were getting paid for this work. No. I'm doing it because I believe Barbara's writings contribute greatly to the body of Christian literature. I think her books and diaries will come to be spiritual classics as they portray a Christian life lived out in real time.

For about 15 years Barbara was the editor in charge of the local newspaper's religion magazine. And as part of her duty in covering varied faith communities of all sorts in Jacksonville, she also wrote a column called *Along The Way*, in which she revealed her own joys, trials, struggles, and awareness of God's love.

One time, management deemed that such a record of personal Christian faith was inappropriate in a daily newspaper and dropped her column; public outcry from every segment of the community, Christian and non-Christian alike, influenced management to reinstate Barbara's column within a week.

Anyhow, yesterday morning I clipped a couple of roses from a neighbor's bush, drove Ginny to work, and kept the car to visit Barbara. At hospice, she looked as well as any terminal cancer patient can look. She is much weaker now. Can hardly sip from a straw or sit up comfortably. Her voice sounds weak but her thoughts strong as she gasps for breath between words.

She said her days must be numbered because she can no longer even tolerate solid foods. "John, when you can't eat chocolate, you know the end is near," she joked.

We talked about the papers she wanted me to have. She feels she will not be able to post any more diary entries—although she continues to pray for and minister to others.

For instance, when they cleaned out her apartment they brought her a few music and Bible study CDs. Over the weekend a young woman visited telling Barbara about a crisis situation in her life. Barbara said, "John, I can hardly move my head but I noticed that pile of CDs out of

the corner of my eye and I knew in my spirit that the top one was just what she needed to hear. So I gave it to her to take home and listen to”

The next day the young woman called Barbara saying in tears how much that CD had meant to her, how it helped her cope with her problem and know that God loves her.

Barbara and I talked about ministry.

Often we minister to others without being aware of it ourselves. We don’t need to be aware of it. Barbara said, “Ministry is being available whenever God chooses to use you for something”.

I told her that the roses were my ministry to her —“With all these Christian friends you have, who else would steal a rose for you? Besides, my neighbor shouldn’t plant his so close to the fence”.

Many people have visited Barbara in Hospice, including a number of reporters and editors from the *Florida Times-Union*. One teased her that they were gathering information to write her obit as soon as it’s needed.

Good friends all!

Barbara dictated a final *Along The Way* column to one of these newspaper friends, who printed it out from her laptop. Barbara gave me the copy asked me to post it online (she complained that her copy needed editing!)

So here (with the byline photo from one of her earliest columns) is Barbara White’s concluding column:

Along The Way



I was 14 when I heard God tell me that He loved me. After I got over the awe of knowing God loved me, I had no idea what to do about it.

That was on a Saturday afternoon at Bartram Girl’s School, where I was a boarding student. I was alone in

the library. It was quiet. I asked myself, "What do you do when God says He loves you?"

I had no answer.

The next day they packed us all on the school bus and hauled us off to an Episcopal church on Hendricks Avenue where we sat glumly in a pew and waited for church to be over. (Years later a woman my age said she had been in the congregation and thought we were from an orphanage because we looked so sad).

That morning the minister announced that confirmation classes would begin soon for those who wanted to join the church. I said, "OK, that's what you do. You join God's church".

A week ago, I am now 81, a young woman asked me what I would like to say to Christians. There are so many different possible answers, but the one that came to my lips was:

Try to find out as much as you can about the God who says He loves you.

She asked how would you go about that?

I said, read the Bible with that as your intention. Not to analyze, or figure out what it means to you, or the history of it. Just see what it tells you about this God who declares to me, to His Chosen People, and to all who would come, that He loves them.

Start out with a favorite passage, something that you are familiar with that is meaningful to you. Ask, "What does this tell me about the God who loves me?"

If you are the kind of person who takes notes, make a note of what it was.

Look at everything in the world that God created and see what it says about Him as a lover of all mankind, of individuals, of yourself. Look at your life, your joys and sorrows, your pains and passions, and ask the Lord, "How can You love me with all of this"?

Ask, "What Do You want me to do with them"?

This is not a quick study. So while you're doing other things, ponder. Ponder, Who is this God who loves me"?

Make it personal, keep it personal. When I have been able to journal, which is sporadically, it's one of the things I try to note. What am I thinking about God right now? What do I understand about Him now that I didn't understand before?

During crises in my life, I've learned a lot about myself. I have learned things that made me wonder how God could possibly love me. Whether I can answer that question or not, He still loves me despite the awful things I found out about myself.

Need transition: Saint Paul noted, "The love of God is commended toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us".

I had a kitten poster that showed a darling kitten, and the words: God loves you just the way you are, but too much to leave you that way!

It's been the most pleasure-giving study. How can it not be a pleasure to examine the love Someone has for you? When you can trust it, rely on it, know that it's true, know that it's deeper than you can understand, and that it will always, always, always be there.

As I approach the time, in days or weeks, to go to be with Him, I am at rest and at peace in this knowledge. I don't know anything else that can give you this rest and this peace.

You say *bon voyage* when someone sets out on a long journey.

I don't know what to say to you when you set out on this task of knowing the God who loves you, but, have a wonderful time along the way.

Barbara White

Wednesday, April 20, 2011
Upgraded?

They upgraded my program.

They hate me.

For years I have used a computer program that worked fine; sometime within the last month they

updated, improved, tweaked, destroyed—the program so now things I used to do, I can no longer do.

And to top it off, in order to do the stuff I've done in the past for free, now they want me to pay \$39 in order to do the same thing.

I'd tell the name of the company, but my religion frowns on calling them the names I want to call them.

Someone ought to invent an immutable computer program.

Yes, I know that immutable is a word used to describe an attribute of God—what it means is changeless.

In ancient days, He told Moses, "I am the Lord; I change not".

And the New Testament proclaims, "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever".

God is immutable. He does not change for the better; how could you improve God? And He does not get any worse than He already is.... That does not sound right, does it? What I mean to say is that there is no change in God. He is consistent. Dependable. Reliable. Unchanging.

I wish my computer program were more like Him.

Thing is, over the past few days I went to afterburners to prepare a book manuscript at the request of my dying friend, Barbara White. She wrote a booklet back in 1978 and, since it has long been out-of-print, and since a number of people asked her for copies, and since she only had two copies herself, she called me asking if I'd prepare a reprint of her book.

"Sure, no problem," I said like an idiot.

There was a problem. A bunch of problems, in fact.

I contacted Lyn Lazarus, the artist who originally illustrated the book—no problem there; she happily gave me permission to use her work.

But, I had not realized Barbara's fancy booklet had been printed on parchment paper. When I scanned in pages, the cream-colored background threw off the images.

Then the old paper size proved different from the new, and I had to adjust illustrations and text to fit the new format.

Then, to create a pdf document, first I had to change the booklet from Word to Open Office (which changed the margins) then from Open Office to PDF (which changed the margins again) so that I had virtually no control over the end result.

I called in experts. My youngest son Donald changed thingies inside my computer so I can print on my wife's computer in another room. My daughter-in-love, Helen, a graphic artist, did stuff to make the illustrations clearer. She also designed a cover for Barbara's book.

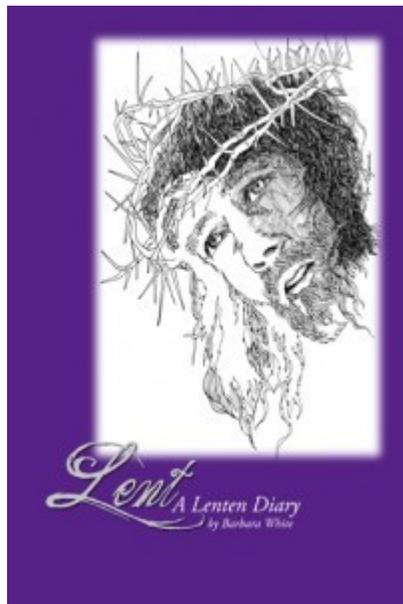
Then, after they left, I tweaked the manuscript—and threw everything whopajaw.

Even so, after trying six or eight times to do what used to take two uploads with my old, unimproved, system, and after several all-night sessions fighting the computer programs, at 5:30 this morning, I finally sent the copy to the printer for proofs.

Maybe they will get here before Barbara dies.

We'll see.

Nonetheless, From last Wednesday to this Wednesday, one week, this was the quickest I've ever turned out a book. A short book, less than 60 pages, but a book anyhow. I'll post it with Bluefish Books after making corrections.



Here's a photo of the cover Helen designed:

I wish my computer were immutable. I wish it would not upgrade automatically without me telling it to. I wish it would stay the same... Like God is.

You know, God's immutability is a rock we all crash against. We want Him to change. We do not admit that He can not be improved on. That He is perfect. In fact, I doubt if there's a person in the world who has not thought, "If I were God, I could run things better than He does. He does not measure up to the way I'd do things. He leaves a lot of room for improvement".

These are the same thoughts the devil had when he tried to usurp the throne of God and take over. And I think the same thing.

Thus lucifer fell from Heaven and man falls from earth.

For the same reason.

The same mind set.

The same sin.

But the Lord God is immutable. He needs no upgrade.

But here's the rub... He wants to upgrade me.

Thursday, April 21, 2011
Barbara White Died Yesterday.

"Great heaviness. Greater rejoicing," Ginny said when we received the news about ten minutes after our friend Barbara White had died yesterday afternoon.

Mrs. Ray, wife of a newspaper photographer who worked with Barbara for a long time, was with Barbara when she died.

My middle son Johnny had visited her in hospice that afternoon. My youngest son, Donald, and my daughter-in-love Helen had visited Barbara Monday; then Donald and Helen spend much of Tuesday helping me prepare the manuscript on Lent which Barbara had asked me to publish.

Since Barbara gave me the copy last week, I've put in extra-long hours scanning, editing, formatting and working on lay-out of that manuscript, rushing to get a proof copy in Barbara's hands before she died. I ordered

rush copies shipped from the printer yesterday morning—but alas, they have not arrived yet.

This project gives me a new appreciation for the journalistic term DEADLINE.

Barbara would have laughed at that joke.

Or maybe just groaned—like she did at most of my jokes.

Incidentally, Barbara White's *Along The Way* columns are published in a series of four books at www.bluefishbooks.info. I have posted a link to a free pdf e-book edition to one of those books in my sidebar. And, I posted the last *Along The Way* column she wrote in my blog last Thursday.

My daughter Eve has been transcribing a notebook filled with poems Barbara wrote years ago. I plan to include those when I publish her diaries (by next Fall, I hope).

In her blog posting this morning, Eve, wrote her tribute to Barbara and prints one of Barbara's poems. Eve's blog is at <http://www.eveyq.blogspot.com/>.

After Mrs. Ray called me with the news, I called other folks who care, and many others called me to talk about what this unique lady meant to them.

Funny thing—According to Google Analytics, the one search term keyword that brings people from more than 50 countries to read my blog site each week are the words **Musk Ox**.

I suppose when they Google those words, readers arrive at my posting for June 14, 2009 (see the blog archives in my right-hand sidebar). It's a posting about my family and Barbara White. Or, maybe readers arrive at my May 25, 2010 posting which relates to the same thing.

So... Barbara is finally Home. Safe and sound.

She crossed the finish line.

And we all, in great heaviness and greater rejoicing, as Ginny coined the phrase, weep and cheer and clap for her achievements.

I doubt that Barbara pays any attention to the mini goings-on back here, but if she glances back, I'll bet she'll laugh at my missing the deadline with her Lenten meditations. We writers take such stuff as missing a deadline so seriously.

And, I suspect she'll be pleased, or at least amused, that on the internet her name will forever be linked to the search term **Musk Ox**.

**Good Friday, April 22, 2011
Barbara White's Newspaper Obit:**

Longtime Times-Union Religion Writer Dies—'She Saw The Work Really As A Ministry,' A Colleague Recalls

Posted: April 22, 2011 - 12:00am



Barbara White 1929-2011

By Dan Scanlan

For 15 years, her "Along the Way" column in The Florida Times-Union talked of her spiritual journey as it inspired its readers.

That inspiration continued after religion writer Barbara White retired in 1994, as she wrote, assembled her columns in books and became an active volunteer at her retirement community.

Mrs. White died Wednesday at Community Hospice of Northeast Florida after a battle with cancer. She was 81.

Mary Kress, a former Times-Union managing editor, called Mrs. White an "incredibly gentle person" devoted to her religion beat.

"She saw the work really as a ministry, yet she was able to do that in a way that resonated with people of many different faiths," Kress said. "She had a lot of inner strength and was really committed to her convictions, and she stood by those convictions with vigor, but also with a lot of grace."

Mrs. White continued that vigorous life at Westminster Woods of Julington Creek over the past 10 years, helping all around her, said Mike Sweeney, executive director.

"She was a dynamic person," he said. "She was involved in everything, a force around campus in many different areas, a major contributor to our council, arts program and wellness committee. If it needed to be done, she stepped up with love and thoughtfulness."

Born in St. Augustine, she went to Bartram Girls School, then on to Duke University, where she was a Phi Beta Kappa. She taught school, then married Raymond White, although they were later divorced. Her reporting career started at the Jacksonville Journal, the city's former afternoon paper, overseeing its new teen section. She became religion writer, continuing that for the Times-Union when the Journal closed its doors in 1988 and winning several national awards for her work until her retirement.

More recently, Bluefish Books collected her columns in a four-book series called "Along the Way," and a fifth, "Barbara White's Prayer Diary," is scheduled for publication this fall (www.bluefishbooks.info). Mrs. White said those columns came from the heart.

"I write about trying to live the Christian life and failing and trying again," she said in a 2009 interview. "God loves us just as we are - and too much to let us stay that way."

Mrs. White was named Volunteer of the Year at Westminster Woods for her work with numerous committees and the community's newspaper. The plaque

she received will now hang in Westminster's arts and crafts room, said residential activity director Elaine Smith.

"There is currently a display of her artwork in our museum," Smith said. "She made sure that the special ones she did all went to special people."

Mrs. White's daughter, Mary White, died a few years ago, as did her sister, Jane Curtan. She is survived by a son, Nathan White; a brother, David White; and a grandson. A memorial will be held at Christ the Redeemer Church, 190 S. Roscoe Blvd. in Ponte Vedra Beach. The time and date have not been set.

Monday, April 25, 2011 **Did You See That?**

What Happened?

How Did I Get Here?

Where Am I Going?

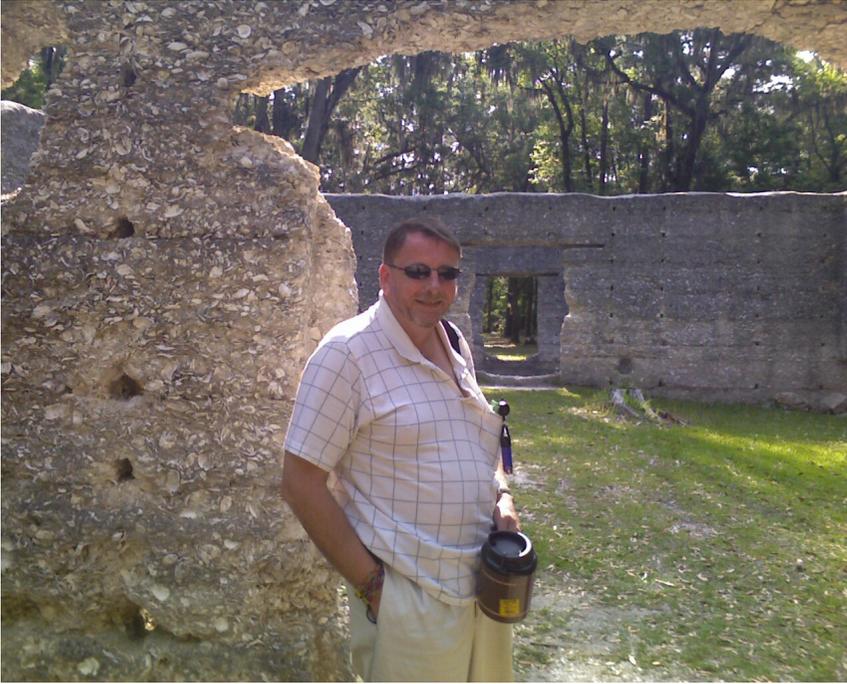
And Why Am I In This Handbasket?

Although last week I worked full steam to finish, before she died last Wednesday, a project Barbara White had asked me to do, many other happy things also occupied my life. But I haven't had time to record any of them until now:

For one thing, last week my middle son, Johnny, moved from Maryland into Jacksonville and all the family here helped him get settled into his new apartment.

My eldest son, Fred, planned to move here at the same time, but apparently on moving day a tiff developed between the boys, and Fred has not been heard from since. He may have been caught up in those tornados in North Carolina as he was driving or he may be enjoying a silent sulk. Worrisome either way.

I took Johnny with me on a trip to St. Marys, Georgia, last Thursday. We caught up on much conversation during the drive. We explored some sugar mill ruins from the 1790s (photo of Johnny beside tabby walls below). We watched a pod of manatees swimming in the St. Marys River. And we drove past the entrance to the King's Bay Submarine Base where an obsolete nuclear submarine surfaces from a grassy sea at the main gate.



All day long I regaled Johnny with tales of my exciting boyhood (exciting to me anyhow) about how I spent most of my youth exploring such area archaeological ruins as the sugar mill. He endured my long reminiscing. "When I was a boy...."

I enjoyed delivering that monologue to my son as a captive audience during the drive.

It amazes me that there can possibly be such a thing as an “obsolete” nuclear submarine—or an obsolete nuclear anything for that matter.

Although last week I concentrated on finishing that chore for Barbara before she died, I also fielded phone calls and e-mails from dozens of people—many of whom I’d never talked with before.

One cool thing: the Jacksonville Aviation Authority plans to set up a history exhibit at Jacksonville International Airport and they asked to use an article I wrote back in 1987 about the history of flight in Jacksonville in their display. That pleases me.

My son-in-love, Mark, and my middle daughter, Eve, consulted me about props for a puppet show advertising one of my books on You-Tube. They shot the film yesterday; I’ll post a link when they’ve finished editing.

For the past week my personal reading schedule collapsed. I’ve started a number of books but I’ve been unable to finish reading any of them. Four books sit open on my desk right now: a handbook on martial arts, an archaeology book about mummified Bronze Age bodies uncovered in English bogs, a collection of Christmas short stories, and A.W. Tozer’s *Knowledge Of The Holy*, a book about the attributes of God and how those facets of the Divine Being relate to my everyday life. The Tozer book is one of the most important I’ve ever read; it speaks to my condition.

I did finally finish reading those trial transcripts of the 1648 witchcraft trials—lots of tiny fine print with even dimmer footnotes. Difficult reading.

Also, two enormous raccoons appeared foraging in our backyard every night this week. We’re talking Godzillacoons here. I thought I’d won my battle with the coons last summer and I wrote all about the conflict in my book *A Dirty Old Man Vs The Coons*, but, alas, they have returned with a vengeance. I need to borrow the live-trap again before they gnaw down the house.

Let’s see... what else has been going on in the maelstrom around me?

Oh Yes, one day last week, I went out to breakfast with my friend Wes and we talked for several hours about

the transmission of God's Word from the autograph texts through to the 1611 King James Version and beyond. Although we don't see eye to eye on details, we agree on the trustworthiness of the Bible.

Speaking of seeing eye to eye... Friday, I had my head examined.

Er, let me re-word that: I had the eyes in my head examined.

A few years ago when I went to get new glasses, the doctor told me there was something wrong and sent me to an eye surgeon who told me I have macular degeneration and that if I lived long enough, I'd go blind.

Last year when I went to get new glasses, a different eye doctor told me there is no sign of macular degeneration. Friday, a different eye surgeon examined my eyes and found no sign of macular degeneration, glaucoma, cataracts, or any other vision problem.

Did one set of doctors read the test results wrong?

Did I have it once, but God cured it?

Did my clean-living, pure-hearted lifestyle deliver me from the disease?

I don't know.

I just thank God that that is one less worry in my world at the moment.

When Ginny and I went up to the counter to pay the bill, three ladies of the eye doctor's nurses and office staff were there.

I handed over my paperwork and explained that I have no degeneration, no glaucoma, no cataracts... "But Dr. Adam said I need to exercise my eyes by looking at more pictures of bikini girls on the internet".

Stunned silence for a moment.

Then Ginny and those three women cracked up laughing till tears came to their eyes.

They didn't believe me!

That's me. John Cowart, spreading light and joy everywhere I go.

Wednesday, April 27, 2011
When Paint Dries

If overhearing my conversations about theology with my friend Wes thrills you, then just wait as I record our conversation yesterday about paint.

Yes.

Paint.

Specifically, tints of paint.

We talked about that as we drove to a Chinese restaurant for lunch. Wes needed to go to a paint store and I wanted to take a copy of Barbara White's obituary to the staff at her favorite restaurant, so we combined our trips with a visit to a cigar store.

Wes is painting walls inside his house. He bought a gallon of paint.

Not enough.

He bought another galleon of paint.

He says Gallon Two's tint does not match Gallon One's tint.

Wes, a former master printer, knows all about color tints; the paint-mixer guy at the hardware store doesn't. He argued with Wes. Wes brought out the big guns and requested (demanded) a spectrographic analysis of the paint tint. When put through a—I think Wes called it a microdynamichydrometric chronometer—the paint in Can Two proved to be over .05 micron-zeta-milliseconds different from the paint in Can One.

Wes proved that the base paint in Can One was Pure White before they added the tint; the base paint in Can Two was Ultra Pure White!

Just imagine!

Wes says that when the paint dries the difference might be detectable to the human eye!

Of course, detailed analysis proved Wes right, the clerk wrong, and the store exchanged the faulty gallon for one mixed and tinted to Wes' exact specifications.

Surprise. Surprise.

Storeowners love to see Wes walk in the door.

And he told me all about it.

Now, you should understand that I sometimes wear one black sock and one navy blue sock. When Ginny calls my attention to the difference, I assure her that I have another pair just like this one rolled up in the drawer.

So, to me, the obvious way to solve the paint tint problem is to tape a poster of Farrah Fawcett in her red swimsuit on the wall. Who'd notice the paint?

To me, it is a little thing; to Wes, it is a big thing.

So we talked (he talked) interminably about paint tints.

Don't you wish you were there?

Later, I realized that I do have a hard time distinguishing big things from little things in life. In certain areas, that is.

What seems a little thing to me, can loom large in Ginny's vision. Things I consider important, mean little to most other people.

Earlier this morning, I corrected the proof pages for Barbara White's book *Lent: A Lenten Diary*. (www.bluefishbooks.info) She gave me the manuscript just days before she died and I rush-worked to get the proof pages to her before she crossed the finish line. But Barbara made it Home before I got the printer proofs back.

Naturally, I found some BIG mistakes in the proofs.

For instance, on one page I discovered two n-dashes where there should have been a single m-dash. And there was one comma in the place of a period. And the kerning on one drop cap obscured the following letter. That had to be corrected. Then on another page I discovered the cryptic word mgh???

On investigating I found that the m should have been the letters ni— so the word was *nigh* meaning *near*: as we say here in the South, "It's nigh on impossible to get that kid to clean his room".

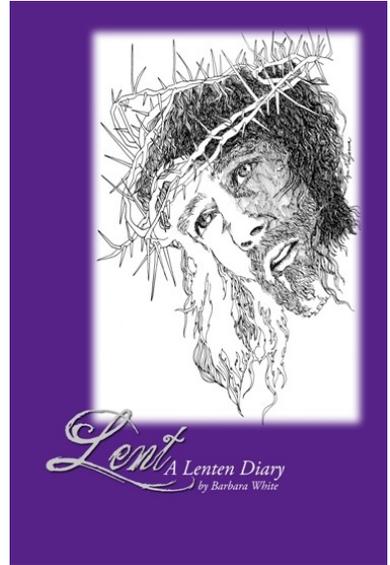
But in the Lent book, I was seeing "Draw mgh to God, and He will draw mgh to you".

That makes no sense.

It should read, “Draw neigh to God, and He will draw neigh to you”.

Before I could finally publish Barbara’s book, I had to construct five PDF editions before I got it right. Lots of work to correct little things.

Now, I could just paste a poster of Farrah Fawcett on the book cover, but instead I’ll use the cover designed by Helen of Elemental Design Studio; she incorporated one of the nine illustrations supplied for Barbara’s book by noted artist Lyn Lazarus:



Yes, I know Lent is past for this year and Easter was last weekend, but Barbara’s meditations are worth having anyhow, they pertain to big things and little things in every day life.

You know something? Only the grace of God can show me what are the big things and the little things in my own life. I’m too dense to notice most things.

But I doubt if the Lord minds my socks.

That’s one of those things the Bible says He winks at.

The most import thing is to live mgh to God.

Friday, April 29, 2011
One Hell Of A Book!

As a writer I have long suspected that editors are possessed.

Well, yesterday I finished reading a book about one who actually is.

The book is Tosca Lee’s *Demon: A Memoir* (©2010. B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, Tennessee).

I checked it out of the library last week thinking I was getting something on the order of *The Exorcist* or one of Stephen King’s happy tales.

Not so.

It was the book cover that fooled me:

Demons are deceptive; so are book covers.

This book isn't what it first appears to be.

I had never read anything by Tosca Lee before. Her writing astounds me. Excellent style as she tells of a book editor, Clayton, who is haunted by a demon, Lucian, who wants to tell his side of the story—and what a tale that is. Ms Lee's

demon captures the sweeping grandeur of creation in a way that reminds me of C.S. Lewis' Narnia tale, *The Magician's Nephew*.

I loved the chapter where Clayton and Lucian—who is this time in the guise of a beautiful woman—visit a museum's Egyptian exhibition and the demon reminisces about an ivory comb once owned by a princess he/she/it knew.

Oh yes, this demon's been around for a long time.

In fact, another element of this book's which struck me was the demon's concepts of time and reality—vastly different from the way I think of time and reality.

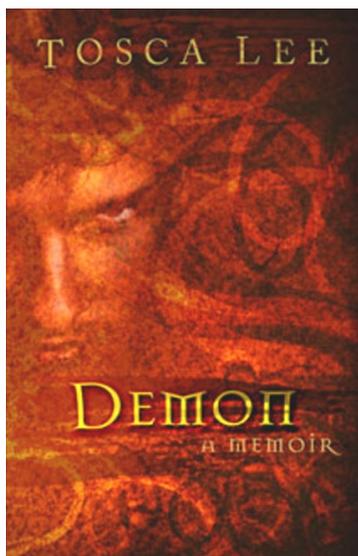
So, do all these beautiful words add up to a charming fairy tale?

Not exactly.

There is deep horror in this book. Horrible horror. And it ain't no fairy tale. No Hollywood special effects. No gore (or darn little). No opening a door to find a cat. No gothic castle. No cheating—this stuff is real and beautiful and haunting in the best possible way.

And I kept thinking as I read, *Ah, so that the way things really are. I never suspected.*

When I return *Demon: A Memoir* to the library, I plan to buy my own copy. It's something I'll want to read again.



P.S.: I have not investigated this website myself, but I understand that you can download a free e-book copy of Tosca Lee's *Demon: A Memoir* at an Alabama newspaper's website: http://blog.al.com/bargain-mom/2010/09/lifeway_christian_offering_fre.html

MAY

**Sunday, May 1, 2011
I Missed The Funeral**

If I had a basket, yesterday I'd have qualified as a basket case.

Over the past few days my normal physical problems intensified. Between the shakes and arthritis flare up, I've been a mess.

I intended to attend Barbara White's memorial service yesterday, but I just couldn't make it.

I did get ready to go: called the church beforehand for details, gassed up the car, printed a Google map, shaved, dressed, etc.. But my limitations prevailed and a few minutes before I'd have had to start driving, I decided to skip it.

Just as well.

At breakfast, my hands wobbled so bad that I poured syrup in my lap instead of on the pancakes.

Maybe I'm getting old—sweet, but old.

Beyond that, all week long, I've questioned my motives about attending. Sure I wanted to honor Barbara's memory and to maybe show support for the few members of her family that I know, but darker thoughts also seethed below the surface of my mind.

I think the Lord God may have prevented me from attending to keep me from doing something unseemly.

Because, I kept seeing this service, attended by many of Barbara's reader fans, as an opportunity to promote the sale of her books. Then piggyback my own book sales on hers.

When I called the church I'd asked about the possibility of my speaking at the service. I had outlined a three-minute talk extolling Barbara's devotion to Christ, to

her family, to her fellow man, and to her writing—yes, four quick points and a joke.

I did have some valid information to share; for instance, I doubt if many at the service would know that last year a radio station broadcast some of Barbara's essays into communist China.

I rehearsed this talk, got it down to under four minutes. But the thought nagged at me that I wanted to do this primarily as a promotional stunt to sell—tastefully and low key—my own books.

I think I must be kin to those money changers in the temple.

You know, nothing in my mind remains holy very long. I can twist everything, even a friend's funeral, to my own selfish advantage.

There's a reason Christ died.

So, with such lowly thoughts afloat, all week long I mulled my motives and my devotion to God in my mind until I'd reached a place where I would have been content to sit through the service without saying one word to anybody about anything. That's hard for me; I love to be center stage in the spotlight.

Yet, ambition persisted.

So, anyhow, the Lord stepped in with a better idea for me.

The flare up of the physical prohibited my attending the service at all. I had to spend the day sitting absolutely motionless in silence, couldn't even read or watch tv. Could hardly talk on the phone. I did enjoy watching Ginny as she puttered around in our garden tending flowers, but I could move to do nothing myself.

So, I called people who expected to carpool with me to the service and cancelled going myself.

I'm pleased that the Lord stopped me from attending... He does know my heart to the roots, and He does know best.

But couldn't He just have said, "No, John" out of a burning bush or something?

Did He really have to pour syrup in my lap?

Wednesday, May 4, 2011
And The Winner Is.... Eve!

A giant bronze owl roosting on a stack of books adorns the main entrance of Jacksonville's Main Library. The Library Owl symbolizes mankind's eternal quest for wisdom, knowledge, enlightenment, and free videos. Here is a photo of Ginny standing near that wise owl:



Naturally, when the library administration wants to award outstanding accomplishments by employees, they find that presenting the award winner with a stuffed Hoot Owl, instead of a cash prize, comes out much cheaper.

In keeping with the library's wise owl theme, the awards are called the Hooties. Last week our librarian daughter Eve won a Hootie; here's a photo:



The tag on Eve's Hootie Owl acknowledges that among all Librarians in the system, she is the one most likely to talk to puppets. The administration so honored our daughter because she produced a library promotional film utilizing hand puppets.

In addition to that that, this past weekend, Eve and Mark, her husband, produced a puppet show advertising my books. Their film, *Beat The Dudes*, is almost based on the opening words of Christ's *Sermon From The Mount*, "Blessed are they..." etc.

Jim Henson got his start this same way.

I'm pleased that the puppet show Mark and Eve produced advertises my contribution to great literature. You can find the *Beat The Dudes Show: Stage Puppetry At It's Most Average* on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pgjtOuKzHI>

I'm so pleased with Mark and Eve's YouTube film and with Eve's library Hootie award.

It's great to have a Hooters Girl in the family.

Thursday, May 5, 2011 What's Happening Here?

Someday in the far distant future, some kid prowling in a dusty attic will stumble across a copy of my diary. He is the person I write for; everybody else just reads over his shoulder. I want the Kid In The Attic to glimpse how a Christian life is lived out for one ordinary guy, me, in this present age.

Therefore, every once in a while, I mention current events as a peg for the Kid In The Attic to use as background. Recently a lot has been going on, and while it's significant to us today, I doubt that any of this stuff will warrant a paragraph in the Kid's history textbook. The scope of history overshadows minor happenings such as:

Last Friday, Miss Kate Middleton married Prince William, the apparent future king of England. So far, more people watched the royal wedding on line and via tv than any other event in history. I was busy with my own little life and missed the show.

Saturday, in Pakistan, , a team of U.S. Navy SEALs shot terrorist leader Osama bin Laden. He is reputed to have engineered the attack on the World Trade Center Towers. Reports conflict about how he was tracked down and killed.

Some accounts say American high-tech devices discovered his hideout.

Other accounts say a member of his own organization, which is called Al Qaeda, revealed his location to United States intelligence services. At any rate, with the top man gone, everybody in Al Qaeda's command structure moves up a notch.

I found Mr. bin Laden a hard man to pray for.

I hope that in the last seconds of his life as he faced the SEALs breaking into his stronghold, he repented of his sins and turned to the Lord Christ for salvation. It would be great at the end of days to meet him before the throne, both of us saved and sanctified by the Risen Christ.

I think the reason I find it difficult to pray for bad guys, evil people, low-lives, bottom-feeders, is that I don't really realize what a low-life I am myself. Jesus died to save sinners. Yet, in my deep heart, I think He really prefers nice people, refined people, decent people—people like me.

Yet the thief on the cross beside Him, the only person I know of who was promised Paradise, may well have been a mugger who shoved down old ladies to snatch their purses, sold crack to schoolyard kids, culled my credit card identity off the internet, been CEO of an oil

company, or a leader in Al Qaeda—in other words a sinner.

When I think myself too good to fit in that class of men, I find it hard to pray for them. Well, maybe I pray, “Lord, make them nice like me”. But those prayers disgust Jesus. “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner” is the prayer that counts.

Does my wishing Osama bin Ladin was saved and makes it into Heaven mean he should not have been put down?

Certainly not.

Some folks just need killing.

Binocular vision makes bad men hard to pray for. When I look at other men’s sin, I see them through one end of my spiritual binoculars and they appear huge, evil and ugly; but when I look at my own sins, I peer through the other end of my spiritual binoculars and my sins appear far away and tiny and insignificant.

That makes me better than them... Right?

Maybe not.

Same sort of sin; different view points.

The Scripture says that, Some men's sins are open and evident to everyone beforehand, going before them to judgment; but, with other men, their secret sins follow after, only to get revealed later.

It’s like that with good works too.

Anyhow, in local news the most exciting thing is that Saturday down in Gainesville, near where two of my children attended college, an alligator attacked a police car:



The officer wisely stayed in his patrol car until a licensed trapper caught the gator. I'm not sure if the gator was released in Payne's Prairie Wildlife Area or made into belts.

Notable happenings in my immediate neighborhood over the past two days include:

Sunday, a man called to talk with me because he felt horribly distraught over having to kill his cat.

Monday, three of my children, Jennifer, Terry, and Johnny, came over. Terry mowed my grass; Jennifer washed dishes; and Johnny advised me about computer stuff.

Monday evening, three neighbors we have not seen in a couple of years knocked on our door and visited for five minutes.

They had walked over a block to give me four eggs.

Then they left.

Tuesday, my friend Wes treated me to breakfast and we talked theology.

Later Tuesday afternoon, as I worked on *Barbara White's Prayer Diary*—I'm up to 612 pages now—an unknown woman knocked at the door. She asked me to walk to the curb to talk with another woman who sat in a motorized wheelchair.

First, the lady in the wheelchair told me not to touch her because she has a very contagious disease. She could not come into our house because her chair could not make it up the steps. She told the other woman to go out of earshot while she talked with me privately.

She had driven her motorized wheelchair about eight blocks to deliver a message to me: about three years ago a woman in her upper eighties moved out of our neighborhood. This old lady now wanted to talk with me about something but did not have my phone number. She thought it was so important that she had sent the wheelchair lady around to ask me to call her.

I promised to call last night, but when I did, the old lady's daughter said she was asleep, but she took my number for her mother to call...

I have no idea what any of this stuff is about.

I suspect that the risen Lord Christ is doing something or another in my vicinity, but I have no idea what.

I do not need to know.

We are physical beings moving through a spiritual world.

My job is to, here and now, in the place I am, with the time I have—my job is to be accessible to Him in whatever activity He sees fit for me.

Let's see, what else?

Oh, this is interesting, Kid—by my extraordinary spiritual strength and pure-hearted virtue, recently I have weaned myself away from browsing internet porno sites with naked women; now I only view women who are actually wearing their bikinis!

Won't God be tickled pink at my progress?

And here is one last thing going on in my little world:

Monday night I had a dream. Earlier in the evening, Ginny and I had watched an episode of the *Sopranos*, a movie about gangsters, and that movie bled over into my dream:

In my dream a gang of mafia bosses sat around a card table in the back room of the BaBa Bing strip club. As they

plotted some evil strategy, one rough mobster stopped the discussion.

“What you guys gotta to remember,” he said, “Is that while we are in this world, we are not of this world”!

Monday, May 9, 2011
I'm Almost Ready For Superbowl 2012!

Yes, I am all set to buy the entire half-time slot for Superbowl commercials this year.

I have the commercials.

Now, all I need is \$36,000,000 to pay for the air time.

So, if you'd care to contribute \$36,000,000...

If not, then being a magnanimous Christian, I'll let you watch my commercials for free. I'm nice like that.

Yes, my grown children have come through again in their relentless efforts to keep Dad off the streets by helping me produce and publish my books at www.bluefishbooks.info.

Last week, Mark and Eve produced a puppet show featuring my writing. Mark and Eve's puppet show is on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pgjtOuKzHI>

Over this past weekend, Donald produced a computer rendering which makes a selection my books spin through the air, dancing to the tune of heavenly music. My daughter-in-love, Helen, owner of Elemental Designs Gallery at Jacksonville Landing, designed many of my book covers.

One of the books featured in the computer rendering is *Strangers On The Earth*, which contains a chapter about Dr. Robert Bateman, founder of a Jacksonville rescue mission, who died aboard the Titanic.

I appreciate all the support my family gives me in my writing. I could not have produced over 20 books without their constant talent, aid and support.

I stand on the shoulders of giants.

Anyhow, please watch the latest creation in computer rendered Bluefish Books constructed by my youngest son, Donald, at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgzbuEN0uYM&feature=player_embedded. After

you've watched the ad, mail me \$36,000,000.00 and I'll buy time to run the ad during Superbowl halftime.

Of course, if you think we should buy longer spots before and after the game... well, I'm sure we can negotiate the price for that. Superbowl commercials only cost \$3,500,000 for every 30 seconds they are on the air. So, as soon as your check arrives, I'm ready to go.

Or, if you just want to buy one of my books, that would help too.

Wednesday, May 11, 2011

My Exciting Life

The biggest news in my world is that for two whole days I have not hurt!

That may seem pathetic news, but believe me, even an hour without pain is noteworthy to me. For the past two days I've even been able to walk without needing a cane!

If Jackie Chan needs a stuntman to fill in for him, tell him I'm available.

Two other great news items:

Last week I finally finished transcribing *Barbara White's Prayer Diaries*! Thanks be to God!

A couple of years ago my friend, newspaper columnist Barbara White, entrusted me with 19 spiral-bound, hand-written notebooks containing notes and thoughts about her prayer life. Periodically until the week before she died last month, she added other notebooks and loose papers.

For me to publish this body of work, which I think ranks high in Christian literature and stands to become a classic of devotion, I first had to transcribe all these hand-written pages into type. Where lacunae appeared in her diary from volumes being lost in moving, etc, I filled the gaps using my own diaries to supply entries related to conversations with Barbara about her devotion to Jesus.

When I finished this first step last week, the typed diary came to 639 pages.

Too long.

So my next step is to format, fill in lacunae, cull duplicate entries, crop, insert photos, edit, and do the

thousand other little steps needed to prepare the book for publication.

That's what I sit at my desk doing recently.

Did God call me to do this task?

I doubt it.

Just seemed like a good idea at the time.

Another great thing going on in my exciting life is that Spring has arrived in our garden! My beautiful Ginny and I spent the whole weekend just relishing our garden.

From lawn chairs sheltered in the gazebo, we watched the Spring migration of birds returning to our yard. In addition to the perennial crop of bluejays, doves, cardinals, and sparrows, we saw titmice, chickadees, purple finches, bunting, cow birds, and red-bellied woodpeckers. Our first redstart of the season arrived and our first red-winged blackbird. And, two robin gather twigs and moss from around the pool and fly up to the spot in the oak where they build a nest every year.

We do not know if these are the same two robin that return year after year, or if they are a different pair hardwired to return to this spot.

Three baby bluejays tried to drink water from our fountain but the moving water scared them, even though Mama Jay tried to show them how to come to the water to drink.

Our flowers abound. Both red and yellow hibiscus flourish, Ginny's trough of moss roses overflows with flowers. Impatiens, shrimp plants, flamingo plants, snapdragons, and those white things I can't spell grow in abundance.

Overhead drapes of wisteria hang in lavender clusters. Our mimosa trees now begin to flower. Fragrant jasmine vines cover the swing set. Royal blue morning glories climb the structure I made for them. The neighbor's magnolia reveals its flowers high up where only God can see them.

I haven't snapped any photos this year, but my son posted some a while back at <http://www.cowart.info/July4thgarden.htm>

One funny, happy thing happened the other day. Ginny and I bought two of those inflatable lounge chairs for the pool. Huffed and puffed and blew them up.

Climbed in the pool. Lounged in the chairs. Held hands. Talked about books, garden chores, birds, the love of God, our children...

And we both dozed off.

Woke up freezing our asses off!

Colder than the mammaries of a sorceress!

Laughed ourselves silly trying to climb off those plastic things which had fused to crucial portions of our anatomies.

Lots of folks drown in Florida every summer; we came close to being the first of the season to freeze.

Heck with red-bellied woodpeckers, two blue-bottomed Cowarts emerged from our pool!

And that's my exciting world.

I love it.

God's blessing of prostate cancer wakes me early, so dawn often finds me sitting in our garden sipping coffee and reading the Gospel of Matthew and being thankful. You know, I find it much easier to be a Christian in my garden alone than when I contact other people—is that common?

A beautiful woman passionately loves me still after our 43 years together; our children more or less appear to thrive; I have work I think worthwhile; my arthritis is not hurting at the moment. I live in a beautiful place. And Ginny bought chocolate donuts at a two for the price of one sale—What is more exciting than peace?

Oh, by the way, if you have not mailed me your check for \$36,000,000.00 yet, don't bother. I'll have all the money I need tomorrow.

Yesterday, this general's widow in Nigeria saw my appeal for \$36,000,000 and she e-mailed me saying she would direct deposit the cash in my bank account as soon as I send her my bank account number and tracking information.

I'm going to log off now so I can send her the bank numbers she needs.

Isn't the internet wonderful?

Friday, May 13, 2011 Eliminating Widows

I spend most of yesterday killing widows and orphans.

The transcribed text of *Barbara White's Prayer Diary* that I've been working on for months fleshed out to 639 pages. To make it manageable in book format, I'm condensing text in order to reduce it closer to the neighborhood of 500 pages.

I could have used an 11 point font, but I have trouble reading print that small and I think Barbara's book is worth reading; so I chose to stick with a 12 point font. Heck, if the print is too small for me to read myself, why should I expect someone else to squint through 600+ pages?

The devil loves small-print Bibles.

Of course I turned the manuscript over to my Department Of Redundancy Department to scan for duplicate or repeated passages which are used over again more than once. That cut a few pages.

Then, I used my computer's FIND function to check all 600+ pages for the word "out".

Why?

Because my t-finger is quicker than my r-finger and I often type the word "out" when I mean the word "our".

My spell-checker doesn't work good to catch that sort of mistake. And the phrase *Jesus our Lord*, makes Him sound like a criminal, as in the phrase *Jessie James, outlaw*.

Next, I scrolled through the text checking for inconsistent formatting. Do I always use bold-face for headings? Are all dates cited in the same manner? Things like that.

I cheated when it came to headers and footers—those demon-controlled page elements defeat me every time. So, being smarter than your average demon, I simply copied the page set-up from a previous book, erased the

text of that book, and pasted in the text of Barbara's Prayer Diary.

"Get thee behind me, headers!"

Yesterday's dawn, I usually start work at 3 a.m., found me killing widows and orphans.

In edit-speak widows and orphans are words or short lines at the beginning or end of a paragraph which dangle alone. They hang separate from the other lines of the paragraph. They make a page look shabby and they can frustrate a reader.

For instance if you're reading a romance and come to the line saying, "George loved her because of her big..."

And the page ends there.

You have to turn a leaf to see if he loved her because of her big inheritance, because of her big-screen television, or because of some large anatomical feature which springs to mind.

An editor must adjust the paragraph to kill the widow left behind or the raggedy orphan who appears on a page by himself with his paragraph dragging on another page.

Sometimes a whole page needs rewriting to make such spacing work.

Sometimes a line can be shortened to make room for a widow. Possessives are one thing to look for. The "children of Abraham" can become "Abraham's children" or even simply "Jews". The meaning has not changed, the amount of space it takes to state that meaning has.

But, like when sailors rigged those sailing ships of yesteryear, if you change the tension on one rope, you have to change the tension on them all. Thus so in line editing, a change on page 53 shows up on page 513 so you bounce back and forth between the two insuring tension and balance.

Incidentally,
Barbara's diary



mentions the time she attended a bottle party at our house where family and friends gathered to watch me put a ship in a bottle:

Anyhow, I spent yesterday playing King Herod to the prayer diary. I eliminated widows and orphans.

It's exhausting, detailed work, which nobody in the world would notice, unless it isn't done... Besides, I feel my work follows a great biblical tradition. Say what you will about King Herod, you must admit, he had a way with children.

Tuesday, May 17, 2011 Covered, In Germany

With a few minutes to kill before Ginny came home from work yesterday afternoon, I browsed the Internet for pictures of a fascinating subject—me.

Yes, doing a Bing Image search for my own name uncovered this photo of a book cover which I did not know existed:

It is a German translation of a book I wrote on prayer back in the late 1980s. I'd heard that it had been translated but I've never seen a copy. No reason for me to actually. The cartoon of me on the cover does capture my essence, but aside from that, I would not be able to read the book if I did own a copy.

However, just as a matter of vanity, I asked my son Donald to order one for me; I'll keep it on my trophy shelf to remind myself that the work I do is not worthless.



It's a funny thing, but I live on a deadend street in a town few people in the world have heard of. I write books which are pretty obscure the day they are printed, yet my voice seems to be heard in far places.

As far as I know, nobody on Antarctica's ice sheet has ever read one of my books, but people on all six other continents have. I have seen only a few copies, but I understand that bits and pieces of my writing have been translated into more than a dozen foreign languages.

That seems so odd to me.

But, maybe it isn't.

On one level I write to honor Jesus Christ and tell of His resurrection. That message does seem to get around a lot.

For instance, on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy spirit touched the apostles, a bunch of people from all over the then-known world had gathered in Jerusalem for a convention. The Book Of Acts says when the Spirit fell, the apostles began to speak,

And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language.

And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galillaeans?

And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?

Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.

And they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, What meaneth this?

Others mocking said, These men are full of new wine.

Through one means or another, the Lord manages to get His word out to anyone anywhere who will listen.

Now, don't get me wrong, I hardly think my writing is on a par with the Acts Of The Holy Spirit; I don't even

qualify as a voice crying in the wilderness. But my soft voice joins with a multitude of others praising Jesus. I'm just one guy in a backwater town who now and then tells what Christ has done for me.

Nothing special about me. I am just a victim of grace. A survivor stumbling around in the rubble of life, saying thanks to my Rescuer.

And a lot of people in a lot of places hear what I have to say sometimes, even when I am not aware of it myself. It makes me feel good when I realize that somebody has heard my voice.

So, it surprised me to see my book, written 20 years ago, now in the German language. I located this book through the Bookfinder website at http://www.bookfinder.com/search/?ac=sl&st=sl&q=E7Hmajh9W4EjpxQp139,Rid1Z0M_2439658987_1:30:345&bq=author%3Djohn%2520cowart%26title%3Dwarum%2520bekomme%2520ich%2520nicht%2520um%2520was%2520ich%2520bete

English-speaking folks can buy my book, *I'm Confused About Prayer* at www.bluefishbooks.info for cash money which can make me rich.

HOWEVER, if you check out the right-hand sidebar under the picture of the librarian getting stuck by lightening, you can download a free pdf E-book edition of this same book without having to buy anything at all.

Sorry, I only have e-book copies in English.

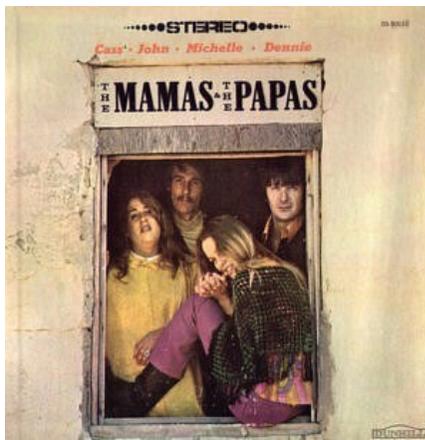
I wonder if I can get that cartoon portrait of me framed?

Thursday, May 19, 2011

The Mamas And The Papas And Ginny And Me

At the library the other night Ginny picked up a music CD and popped it in the car player as we drove to a restaurant for dinner.

The very first bar of music transported us back to the 1960s, to when we first met and



fell in love with each other and a group of people we knew then.

The CD collected songs by The Mamas And The Papas, a vocal group who won top Grammy Awards in 1967. Our car player started with "You Gotta Make Your Own Kind of Music" followed by "California Dreamin".

The sound swept us back in time to when we were young, to the Kennedy and King assassinations, to the first space flights, to VietNam, to Peace Marches, to bellbottoms, to riots, to Love-Ins, to Happenings, and to church.

Music from the Mamas And The Papas, from the Beachboys, and such bands, provided background for our youth in Washington, D.C. And hearing that sound again brought up immediate memories of people we knew and loved.

For hours Ginny and I talked about people we remembered from those days.

Those people formed a cohesive unit which I think of when I think of the word Church in its universal sense. A band of people joined in love for Jesus Christ and each other in a common group which exists for no other reason that we wanted it to.

Yes, there was an official organized church with a building, The building stood for generations in what had been an affluent neighborhood, but in our day was a depressed, violent slum.

So much of what happened with our group took place on the church steps. It was not at all unusual to say, "Lets go up to the church and see what's happening" and you'd go and, although there was no scheduled meeting of any kind, yet there'd be some young folks sitting on the church steps waiting for whoever else happened to show up.

We'd talk for hours. Sometimes all night. We'd play games or teach Bible lessons at all hours to neighborhood slum kids who happened to gather because they saw us gather. Sometimes we'd eat out together, or pile in cars and drive to see Mount Vernon in the moonlight, or attend a recital one person was giving somewhere, or paint

Sunday School rooms that needed painting, or collect food and clothing for some poor family, or play touch football. We hiked and camped and explored caves and — whatever the Spirit moved us to do.

No program. No schedule. No agenda. Just love.

And individualism!

Boy did our group have individualism. In bucket loads. In a diversity of gifts.

Back then Ginny worked as a mid-level supervisor at the General Accounting Office. I was a postman delivering mail, yet somehow, by consensus, the group acknowledged me as straw boss leader.

Oddly enough, neither one of us can ever remember our first meeting; as part of the group, we gradually became aware of each other. We slowly grew together and fell in love.

I recall once seeing her in an A-line skirt and purple turtle-neck sweater that showed off her... Well, that's something I remember well.

Over dinner at Kosta's Italian Restaurant, influenced by The Mamas And The Papas' tunes, Ginny and I remembered people from those days who meant so much to us:

There was Court, then my best friend. Once an insurance company executive, then a drugged-out, mind-blown hippy, then saved by Jesus, Court felt the Lord wanted him to wear a sandwich board sign and walk the streets of Washington, D.C. slums proclaiming the Gospel.

Then there was KK, a beautiful young woman and an outrageously free spirit who thought it fun to fill out subscription cards in his name and order *Playboy* magazines to be delivered to the pastor at church.

There were Nancy and Jim, both FBI agents; and Mitch and MaryAnn, the first interracial couple I'd ever met, and they taught me so much about love and caring and accepting physical deformity.

There was Sara, who had earned her doctorate at an age when the rest of us were still in high school. She spoke a dozen languages and translated for the United Nations—yet her intelligence isolated her. Made her

lonely. She found acceptance in our group where neither intelligence nor race nor wealth mattered nothing.

I remember Trish, a dead-ringer for the actress Marilyn Monroe! She taught violin and I loved to watch her play "Flight Of The Bumblebee". Her music sounded fine, but with her figure, that piece of violin instrumental was a sight to behold!

Foster, the gentle giant; Joyce, who aspired to be a nightclub singer; Dolorous, a lovely, lonely organist filled with angst; Annika, a runway fashion model; Bob, who almost had his doctorate in psychology; Ron, a sleazy, no-good, sorry wolf who attempted to win Ginny's heart; Scotty, a bus driver; Mr. & Mrs. G, millionaires and fine art collectors; Frank and Sarah, he was a pilot and they died together in a plane crash when lightening hit their plane.

At the time, and still today, I think that the Holy Spirit brought this diverse group, a mix of educational background, race, finances, interests, talents—together for His own divine purpose as a witness to the slums of D.C., as an encouragement to us, and to honor Christ. We had nothing in common except the love of Christ. I think those times were the closest I've ever come to seeing a true spontaneous revival.

Or, maybe we just hung out together because we were young.

When I committed a sin, although many supported me, the group as a whole rightly isolated and ostracized me.

I took a job as an over-the-road truck driver and lost contact with them. Been a loner without regrets ever since.

Over dinner at the restaurant, Ginny talked about all these people and a host of others I have not mentioned, bitter-sweet memories of people who filled our past...

What an odd thing to think, all these young, vibrant people, if any of them are still living, would be as old as we are today. We can't conceive of that.

In our minds they will always remain young, energetic, full of promise—each making their own kind of music.

But on a current note, yesterday Ginny bought us two wide-seat rocking chairs for our garden patio—Now, in our old age, we will sit and rock, in a different way, to our own kind of music!

Thanks be to God!

Sunday, May 22, 2011
Thin Jesus/Fat Jesus. Yesterday. Today. And Tomorrow.

Some of my fellow fundamentalist Christians expected Jesus to appear at 6 a.m. yesterday in New Zealand.

News outlets, talk shows and cartoonists enjoyed a field day making fun of us Christians and mocking those who thought Christ would appear at that time.

I did not expect Him to return yesterday anymore than I expect Him any day, but that's neither here nor there.

Those believers who did hope for His appearance in New Zealand yesterday have been disappointed. They calculated the precise time and place from a formula factoring in Noah's Flood, the international dateline, and—can this be right?—a Mayan stone calendar.

According to the newspaper, "Some proponents predict it will all begin around 6 p.m. local time with a devastating earthquake in New Zealand and move time zone to time zone until it goes around the world".

Jesus did promise to return, but He stipulated no one would know when.

If you're interested, one place Jesus talked about such things is in the 24th and 25th chapters of Matthew's Gospel.

He said, *"If any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not...Behold, I have told you before. Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not. For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. But of*

that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only....Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come”.

Now, I do not know what happened in New Zealand.

But I do know that Jesus Christ appeared here in my hometown of Jacksonville, Florida, yesterday.

In fact Ginny and I saw Him appear a couple of times.

As we ate breakfast at a fast food place talking about the media stir over the anticipated return, Jesus appeared at the garbage can near the door. He was effectively disguised as a bum. He rummaged through the trash hunting leftover food scraps. He was rail thin in a way that made me think of why they call AIDS, the Slim Disease. He wore clothes several sizes too large for him. His pants bunched at his waist.

A Christian who sat near Ginny overheard our conversation about New Zealand. As this man left the restaurant, he gave Jesus a couple of dollars and told Him to buy some breakfast. Then the guy got in his car and drove away.

For I was hungry and you gave me food...

Ginny and I saw Jesus appear again when we stopped to gas up our own car—we drove to Georgia to buy my brand of pipe tobacco. This time Jesus appeared as a fat guy wearing a soiled sleeveless undershirt. He drove a beat-up gray car with New Jersey tags. Imagine that! Jesus disguised as a yankee! Unthinkable!

When Jesus puts on a disguise, He really puts on a disguise. Sometimes, He's really hard to recognize

Anyhow, Jesus explained that He needed a dollar to get gas enough to get home and a Christian at a nearby pump gave him enough to buy a couple of gallons. Jesus put gas in His tank and drove away.

I was a stranger and ye took Me in...

Ginny and I saw Jesus appear again just before we got home. Some people had been cleaning out their yard and put at the curb some old lawn chairs we could use. We stopped to pick them out of the trash heap and Jesus appeared calling from behind the screen door of the house next door.

This time Jesus appeared as a feeble old lady wearing a thin cotton housecoat. She ask if I could move two cement flower pots up onto her porch for her. I tried to lift one but it was too heavy for me, so Ginny had to grab one side and me the other to move those pots for old lady Jesus.

I was sick and ye visited me...

We got home, exhausted after a long day's driving. We kicked out shoes off. We threw sweaty clothes in the laundry hamper and put on swimsuits ready for a cool dip in our pool. Ready to soothe away the rigors of the hottest day of the season. And...

You guessed it.

Jesus appeared again. Right there on our back porch.

This time He wore His helpless, little animal costume.

Now, not to be disrespectful, when Jesus puts on His animal disguise, He's not the smartest possum in the woods.

Yes, Jesus appeared on our deck as a possum that had blundered into an animal trap that was not even baited! And He'd been trapped in the hot sun all day without water.

Now there was no way for me to slip a water bowl into the cage. I was afraid He would bite me if I put my hand in.

Did you know that Jesus can have a nasty bite?

Immediately I filled a bucket with water and from outside the cage, I poured water over poor Jesus. He lapped it up eagerly.

But, nothing for it, we had to let Jesus out of the cage.

Tired as we were, we had to dress again. Put on hurting shoes. Unlock the gate, fold up the car seats, put the cage with Jesus in the back seat (on a plastic sheet. Jesus in His possum disguise is not housebroken), drive to a wooded area by the river to let Him go.

I was thirsty and ye gave Me drink... In prison and ye came unto Me...In as much as ye did it unto the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me.

Yes, I don't know what happened in New Zealand on the other side of the world. But Jesus appeared here in Jacksonville yesterday.

Same as He does everyday.

Friday, May 27, 2011
Searching For You

For the past three days I've been searching for you.

Actually, I've been searching for You.

Is that clear?

Let me explain—

My friend Barbara White died last month.

A couple of years ago Barbara, a retired newspaper editor, gave me 19, hand-written spiral notebooks containing records of her prayers, meditations, and Bible studies since 1976.

I've been transcribing these spiritual treasures for publication. Most of the notebooks I re-typed myself. A few I scanned into the computer. My daughters, Jennifer and Eve, also typed pages and poetry from *Barbara White's Prayer Diary*.

Each of us typed in a slightly different style.

That's where You came in.

In the finished copy I wanted the pronouns to read consistently throughout the book. I worked for uniformity because improperly used pronouns and antecedents cloud the flow of the text and create confusion.

According to my lights, all pronoun references to the deity deserve to be capitalized; references to humans are typed in lower-case letters. This saves confusion.

For instance if I say, "God told Joe he broke his toe".

Who broke whose toe?

Did Joe break God's toe? Or did God break Joe's toe.

But with proper pronoun usage the situation becomes clear: "God told Joe He broke his toe". Poor Joe, obviously a miserable offender.

So, in recording Barbara's prayers I often ran across passages that said something like, "Lord, you rule the

universe; you cause rain to fall on your green earth and you show love toward us in that your son died on the cross for your lost children”.

Using capitalized pronouns of respect—which used to be called pronouns of majesty—that passage reads: “Lord, You rule the universe; You cause rain to fall on Your green earth and You show love toward us in that Your Son died on the cross for Your lost children”.

I had to make six changes—manually.

The first typed draft of Barbara White’s Prayer Diary ran to 639 pages.

I got sick of changing you to You.

Bright idea!

My computer has a find-and-replace function. All I have to do is hit Control-F and a window pops up asking me what I want changed to what. I typed in change you to You, and the machine did its thing. Click. Click. Click. Click...

The computer changed 6,823 yous to Yous.

Slight problem—Barbara taught at many seminars, Bible studies, and church retreats. She kept notes on her talks in her diaries. So I’d come across a discussion with teens about finding the will of God and the passage would read something like:

“You can read your Bible; you can pray, you can talk with your parents, or your teachers or your youth pastor, who is a fine young man”.

However, when I utilized my Global Search-and-Destroy computer function those words became: “You can read Your Bible; You can pray, You can talk with Your parents, or Your teachers, or Your Youth pastor, who is a fine Young man”.

Yes, every *you* became a *You*.

Couldn’t I just change it back—listen to Bill Gates chuckle. Sure you can. But you have to change every single one back to a Y or a y—manually!

I had to examine each line of text to determine from the context if the you referred to the Lord God Almighty or to some lesser person. We common, ordinary humans

don't get to use pronouns of majesty—Well, Queen Victoria did when she said, “WE are not amused”—which, being interpreted, means, “His joke stinks; off with his head”.

When the Bible uses such a grammatical construction, scholars argue whether it is a statement of fact, or a pronoun of majesty. For instance in Genesis 1:26 where God says, “Let us make man in our image”. Are the words *us* and *our* an early indication of the Triune God's nature, or pronouns of majesty?

Books have been written about that question.

Anyhow, for the past few days I've been searching for you—searching for You—to make sure the correct pronoun links to the right antecedent. Yes, I physically, manually checked all 6,823 references to find *you* or *You*.

Ever notice that the first thing God said after Adam sinned was, “Adam, where are you”? God searching for you, beating the bushes for you, the lost sheep.

The Good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep.

He leaves the ninety and nine in the fold and searches for the single lost one.

For my next writing project I plan to tackle and edit all 150 Psalms and also all the passages in the New Testament related to the Good Shepherd.

Problem is—in working that text for pronouns—How do I distinguish between the Shepherd and the ewe?

Monday, June 6, 2011

The Florida Skunk Ape?

The past few days I have dozed with a boring book open in my lap—a book about spooky things here in Florida, my home state.

The book is poorly written, poorly edited, poorly laid out, not worth giving the author or title, but it did spark three memories from my childhood: two memories about tales my grandmothers told me, and one memory about something in the water.

My scoutmaster was driving a staketruck with a load of us boys in the open back on our way to hike to a place called Jenk's Landing on the Intercoastal Waterway. This was in 1951 or thereabouts. I was 11 and this was one of

my first Boy Scout hikes. As we crossed a bridge, we heard screaming and saw a commotion on the far bank—a woman and a little girl hysterical by a boat half out of the water.

Mr. Prothero, my Scoutmaster, pulled off the road. He and Anthony, the senior patrol leader, jumped out, ordered us boys to stay in the truck and they rushed to help. They dragged a man out of the water. He was missing a leg.

Bit off at the hip.

Blood pumped from the stump.

The family had put their small boat in the narrow tidal run. The bow stuck on the bank. The man waded in waist-deep to tug it off.

Something in the water bit off his leg right at the hip. He bled out and died on the muddy bank.

Waist-deep, murky water. Shallow. Brackish. Narrow tidal run. Maybe eight or ten feet from land. Something in the shallow water big enough to bite off a grown man's leg with one bite.

What kind of creature could do that?

Gator? Shark? Barracuda? Something else? Something unknown living beneath the dark brown water.

Grownups speculated that it was a big shark brought in on the tide from the ocean.

Maybe so.

I've always wondered.

My father's mother—her name was Laura but we all called her Mam—told me that in about 1910, when she was a young woman, some workmen digging road-building material out of an Indian mound on St. Johns Bluff at the mouth of the St. Johns River near Mayport—those workmen dug up the thighbone of a man.

A thighbone five feet long!

Were there giants in northeast Florida? Or had they uncovered the remains of a Florida skunk ape?

From the times of the Indians, Florida pioneers have told of a giant ape-like creature prowling the salt marshes and cypress swamps of Florida. Those who have seen the

creature say it stands between seven and nine feet tall, has glowing yellow eyes, is covered with shaggy black hair, has foul breath, and smells like rotting cabbage.

In the old days, this Florida native was called the Wildman Of The Woods. In modern times, people call it a skunk ape and try to tie it into the bigfoot legends of the northwest or even the yeti of Tibet.

Even in Florida legend, the shy creature has never hurt or killed anyone.

Many say that no such creature exists, that folks who claim to have seen one have actually been scared by a common black bear standing on its hind legs.

But, my father's mother claimed to have seen the giant thighbone herself.

Now, my mother's mother, Grandma Willie (I suppose her actual name was Wilhelmina) said she once saw a Wildman Of The Woods.

This grandmother lived in Bradford County. The closest town was Graham, Florida, and my grandparent's farm lay "seven-miles off the hard road". That's way out in the pine woods across a creek called Samson River.

Grandma Willie cooked every meal for her family and the farm hands on a sofa-sized cast-iron wood-burning stove. Just beyond her flower garden lay a wood lot where the menfolk dragged up logs and sawed them into stove-lengths. Grandma Willie split pine lighter for stove kindling every day.

She said once as she walked from the house to the woodlot, she saw something crouched down behind a stack of logs. "I reckoned it were a turpentine-nigger in the woodpile," she said. She yelled at it and it stood up tall.

"It were a man... but it weren't no man," she said.

Human-shaped. Big. "All a-covered with black hair," she said.

When she brandished her kindling-splitting hatchet at it, the thing ran away into the woods toward the creek.

She never saw the like again.

According to the book on spooky things, the Florida Skunk Ape, “Stands about eight feet tall, with dark fur all around it, and white rings around its eyes”. One man said it had “A huge frame and a head like that of a man but completely covered with shaggy brown hair... at least eight feet tall and piercing eyes... that stared at him as if confrontational”.

The Florida Skunk Ape, The Wildman Of The Woods....

Husky. Shaggy. Bad breath. Bad body odor. Smells like stale cabbage. Native to Florida. Shy around people.

...

That reminds me. I need to cut my hair, clean my nails, brush my teeth and shower before Ginny gets home...

Wednesday, June 8, 2011

The Family Swirls Around Me

Eve, my middle daughter, dreams of smashing porcelain toilets. Strange girl, Eve. Sweet but strange. Jung would have a field day with her dreams. She comes by her sweet strangeness honestly—it’s a family trait.

Over the past few days my arthritis pain has returned limiting my activities. For about two weeks I lived pain-free. I could even walk without my cane. But then it returned as suddenly as it had disappeared. Without rhyme nor reason.

But while I have been down, my wonderful family has not. Here’s a recap of family activities:

When my beautiful bride Ginny was a little girl, she collected dolls. Last Saturday she loaned some of her collection for a display at Jacksonville’s Southside Branch Library. Here is a photo of the display which Eve set up:



Ginny has also volunteered to correct the proof pages of *Barbara White's Prayer Diary*, an enormous task. Ginny is the best thing that ever happened to me and her taking on this job frees me to write some original stuff, something I have not been able to do for months. That prospect scares me. I don't know if I'm up to it.

Our daughter-in-love, Helen, owner of Elemental Design Art Gallery in Jacksonville Landing, has embarked on a new venture in melting glass to make art objects. To raise funds, this week she enrolled in a Kickback Program... No. That's not the right word—it's a Kickstart Program. Kickstarter is an organization that helps artist raise money for creative projects.

Her husband, our youngest son, Donald, has been voluntarily painting rooms at Jacksonville's City Rescue Mission. He's helping prepare living space for homeless people who turn to the mission for help. According to an

article in yesterday's *Times-Union* newspaper, in the past year the number of homeless in Jacksonville has risen 18 percent, many of these new homeless are families with children so the mission has revamped and expanded facilities to help them.

Although Donald works as—I think his job title is associate assistant vice-president—at a bank, he has helped at various mission projects since he was a kid. When he was a boy, I'd sometimes take him with me to serve meals at a homeless shelter soup kitchen and that aspect of Christian life struck Donald's fancy; he's been doing it ever since—over 20 years now.

Jennifer, our eldest daughter, and her partner Terry held a massive yard sale over the weekend. I hear they survived. I wonder if the sale even made a dent in the pile of stuff in their garage?

Eve and her husband, Mark, are involved in producing puppet shows promoting Jacksonville's Library System. Mark also produces and writes scripts for puppet shows promoting my books.

I have not heard from my eldest son, Fred, or my youngest daughter, Patricia, or her husband, Clint, since Christmas. The silence either means they are thriving and doing fine—or that they are in some kind of hash they don't want the old man to know about.

My middle son, Johnny, had two job interviews last week and another one Monday; Jennifer and Terry worked him ragged at that yard sale. He'll be glad to land a real job so he can rest.

Johnny joined my friend Wes and me for breakfast yesterday. Afterwards we three sat around our backyard clouding out mosquitoes with pipe, cigar and cigarette smoke. Our conversation touched on faith and God's role in natural disasters like the Tsunami and radiation release in Japan, Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, the volcanic eruption in Chile and in really big calamities like my arthritis pain.

Where do God and faith come into such things?

I offered Mark Twain's definition of faith: "Faith is trying real hard to believe something that you know damn good and well is not true".

Johnny mentioned faith as being the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Wes said that faith is confidence based on evidence.

I countered with my observation that faith is trusting that God is good in spite of all evidence to the contrary.

“Ah,” Wes said, “We do not have all the evidence”. He said that the Lord has only revealed to us little of His plans and less of His nature. Wes quoted Job saying, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him”.

While we do not have all the evidence, we have enough to make a deliberate choice to live for Christ or someone else.

In the introduction to his Gospel, St. Luke said, “I have investigated all the reports in close detail, starting from the story's beginning, I decided to write it all out for you, most honorable Theophilus, so you can know beyond the shadow of a doubt the reliability of what you were taught”.

John says the same sort of thing at the end of his Gospel, “Many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name”.

Boy, do the mosquitoes in my yard catch an earful when we guys meet to talk about the Lord!

Speaking of life, that quote from John's Gospel reminds me of this cartoon clipping Ginny brought home to me Monday; it came off her office bulletin board:



Wednesday, June 15, 2011
Ants and Ashes

Yesterday afternoon, though the temperature pushed 100 degrees here in Jacksonville, Florida, when Ginny and I went to the library, the helpful young man at the desk said it looked like snow.

He'd stepped outside an hour before we got there and saw a steady fall of tiny white ashes drifting down from a murky gray sky and those ashes did look like snowflakes.

More than 80 forest fires burn in the woods around the city. An atmospheric inversion causes the smoke to cling close to the ground shrouding the tops of tall downtown buildings to disappear into the haze.

A fine film of ash covers everything in the city.

As we'd driven to the library the passage of our car made swirls of gray ash rise from roadway and windshield.

I assured the library clerk that I had it on good authority that the ash poses no danger for our city. "Yes," I said, "Pliny The Elder says that that it's nothing but ash and it's sure to clear up by tomorrow".

He got a good laugh out of my joke.

The drifting ash reminds me of two things:

On May 3, 1901, the city of Jacksonville burned to the ground. Virtually all homes and businesses caught fire when a lunchtime cook fire at a mattress factory caught fire and wind swept drifts ash and embers from burning Spanish moss onto the roofs of surrounding buildings.

Here are two photos taken on that day a hundred years ago:



The ash falling on my hometown yesterday was nowhere near that bad, but it was impressive—*Note to self: get on the roof and clean dry leaves from rain gutters.*

Those photos illustrate my book, *Heroes All: A History Of Firefighting In Jacksonville Florida*. My book is available at www.bluefishbooks.info Here is a photo of my book's cover:

Please consider this note as a subtle, tasteful hint to buy a copy of my book.

I'll get to the ants in a minute.



But first I want to mention the other thing the falling ash reminded me about—two verses of Scripture.

Genesis 19 tells about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. “Abraham gat up early in the morning to the place where he stood before the Lord: and he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah ... and lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace”.

Nothing like that is happening in Jacksonville.

In fact, as Ginny and I drove by the gay bar around the corner from our home, cars filled the parking lot, neon lights flashed, music played, female impersonators danced, everything carried on as normal—except for a light coating of ash on the cars.

Yep, nothing went on in Sodom back in the days of Abraham that does not go on here in Jacksonville today.

Everybody’s got their own taste in sin. Hardly any of the guys at the club sin the same way I do. I’m glad that God is merciful to them and me. We’ve all sinned and fall short of the glory God has for us.

The other Scripture the ash reminds me of comes from Revelation, chapter 18, where the Apostle John envisions the destruction of a great mercantile city—a seaport like Jacksonville:

“In one hour so great riches is come to nought. And ... sailors, and as many as trade by sea stood afar off and cried when they saw the smoke of her burning saying, “What city is like unto this great city”! And they cast dust on their heads and cried, weeping and wailing, saying, “Alas, alas that great city! Alas, alas that great city!”.

What about that?

Well, the apostle is well known as a drama queen.

We’re safe here in Jacksonville even though I can hardly see across the street through the smoke this morning. Pliny The Elder says so.

Of course Pliny The Elder was not here for my 3 a.m. ant encounter.

When I awoke to work on my next book, I peeked out the kitchen door to see the moon through the smoke—bugs covered the door glass between the kitchen and the

mud room, a tiny foyer/laundry room between our kitchen and the back deck.

Thousands and thousands of bugs—ants of all sizes, beetles, roaches, creepy-crawlers—covered the doors, walls and ceiling.

I suppose smoke drove them to seek refuge inside the mud room.

Thank God the weather seals on the kitchen door kept them out of the house.

My can of bug spray was out in the shed so I had to tip-toe through the bugs to get outside to find it. The can was near empty, but I sprayed the door frame to discourage insect entry. I only dispersed a tiny fraction of the bugs but here are two photos of the ones I killed:



Isn't it great to live in semitropical Florida?

At dawn, I checked on our garden where I found ash-covered flowers:



By the time Ginny woke up, the radio announced that the Health Department warned all children, the elderly and those with respiratory problems to stay inside today.

She drove to work anyhow.

I tried to convince her to stay home. She ignored my warning.

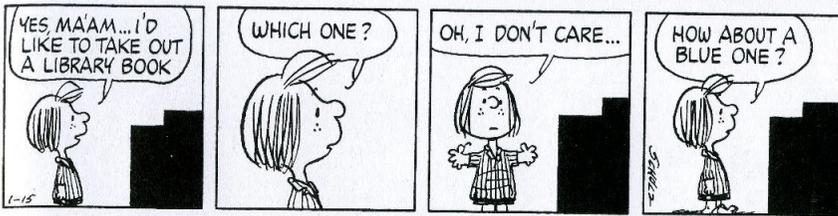
She didn't believe me when I told her the mayor said everyone should stay home today to get their ashes hauled.

Thursday, June 16, 2011 Time To Change Arms

Often when I finish a writing project, I suffer a bout of depression questioning the value of what I have done and what I want to do next—if anything. Having finally finished transcribing and editing the 600+ pages of *Barbara White's Prayer Diary* last month, I'm depleted, dejected and depressed.

Yard work helps; so recently I have done a lot of raking, mowing, weeding and planting—still depressed as usual.

I wonder why readers don't buy more of my books:



I ponder how I can attract more readers:



I worry over the next step in my writing career.



I browse news stories on-line reading about how marine archaeologists in North Carolina are salvaging anchor and artifacts from Blackbeard's pirate ship, *Queen Anne's Revenge*, and I feel anxious about the future role of e-books and the internet on book publishing.



Sometimes reading helps my depression.

So recently I have read the Alba House translation of the *Four Gospels*. Then I read a novel about the axeman who beheaded England's King Charles The First. Also I read an academic treatise on Homeland Security and counter-terrorism, a mystery involving the Salvation Army in Norway, a biography of U.S. President Grover Cleveland, a collection of Christmas stories, a book on cognitive therapy, a book about oddities in Florida, two books about fishing...

Yes, two books about fishing—what can you say about fishing? The fish bites the hook and you reel him in, or he breaks the line and gets away—how can a writer make that into a whole book? Into two whole books?

Beats me.

But I read them both.

And I read *The Complete Peanuts: 1979-1980*. The four cartoon samples above come from that book.

Yes, of all my recent readings, the one to lift my spirits most—you guessed it—*The Complete Peanuts: 1979-1980*. Here's the bibliographic information:

Schulz, Charles M. *The Complete Peanuts: 1979-1980*. Seattle, Washington. Fantagraphics Books. ©2011. 323 pages. Indexed.

The Complete Peanuts: 1979-1980 contains an introduction by Al Roker and a brief biographical profile of cartoonist Charles Schultz by Gary Groth. The book jacket says there are 14 other volumes in this series—and more scheduled to come. Library call number is 741.5973S. The cover price inside the jacket is \$28.99.

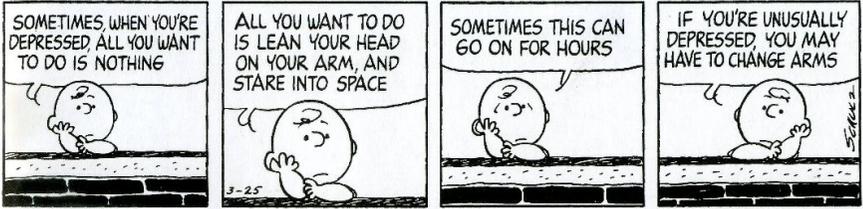
This is the latest in a Fantagraphics Books series projected to contain all Peanuts Cartoons—Schultz drew 17,897 of them over a 50 year period from 1950 to 2000.

The Fantagraphics Books projects intends to publish them all. What a great idea! —I need to trash all those other books to clear more shelf space.

The 323 pages in *The Complete Peanuts: 1979-1980* are laid out with three *Peanuts* strips per weekday page with a longer strip for Sundays. Al Roker said that as a boy, he clipped *Peanuts* cartoons and pasted them into a loose-leaf notebook in this same format and that subsequent publishers stole his idea!

Talk about a page-turner. Be sure to visit the bathroom before you open this book. Once you turn the first page you're hooked harder than any monster big fish in the Amazon.

And as always Charles Schultz's work is therapeutic for bouts of depression... well, maybe a little bit. Sometimes.



Thank you, Mr. Schultz. I feel much better now.

Monday, June 20, 2011
Surrounded By Beautiful Women

If I could pick only one to obey out of all the commandments, instructions and rules in the Bible, I know the one I'd chose.

I'd pick the teaching of King Solomon in Proverbs Chapter Five:

Rejoice with the wife of thy youth... Let her breasts satisfy thee at all times. Yes, be thou ravished always with her love.

I think that's the happiest commandment in the Bible.

What brought that to mind?

Yesterday, for Fathers' Day, some of our kids treated Ginny and me to dinner at Hooters. Hooters is a restaurant featuring beautiful young women in adequate uniforms which appear to be skimpy but are actually... well, skimpy. I'm told the restaurant also serves food.

Here is a photo of me with Brianna and Jessica, two of the waitresses. (I'm the one in the middle):



These ladies are young and beautiful and kind.

Brianna laughed and hugged me when I offered to shake hands, I'm sure she's skillful at dealing with all sorts of offers from customers, but apparently she doesn't get too many offers to shake hands. I think I shocked her.

The kids tease Ginny and me about being in love after 43, almost 44, years of marriage. Yet, through the grace of God we still find happy romance. I'm nuts about her and she tolerates me and laughs at my jokes. We fit. I know of no one anywhere happier than we are. I think that struggling through great hardship during our early years has a lot to do with that.



An odd, funny, embarrassing thing I remembered as Ginny and I talked about going to Hooters was something involving a brassiere back in 2002; here's a link to my diary entry for then: <http://www.cowart.info/Journal%20extracts/brassierhunt/My%20brassier%20hunt.htm>

Sunday morning, before we went to Hooters, Ginny and I joked about being surrounded by beautiful young women. She approaches retirement age this Fall.

Forty years ago Ginny rivaled in beauty any young woman anywhere. In my eyes, she still does.

I teased her that on Antique Roadshow, anything over 50 years old is considered an antique... but the thing that makes it valuable is the patina, the signs of rust and wear and aging.

“You have great patina,” I said.

I treasure her.

As we floated on air mattresses in the pool talking for about four hours about her retirement plans and about the book I’m writing at the moment, I realized anew that Ginny is the only person in the world who truly understands me.

(Hey, that sounds like a great pickup line in a bar —“My wife understands me”).



By the way, in that photo we’re standing on the deck just outside Hooters and across the river behind us is Friendship Fountain, a Jacksonville landmark which opened again Saturday after months of being shut down for reconditioning. The waters dance in different jets at

different, ever-changing heights and at night underwater lights rotate in colorful patterns. Here's a closer photo:



Of all my grown kids, Fred, Patricia, Clint, Mark, and Donald & Helen did not make the dinner. However here's a photo which Terry snapped of Johnny, Jennifer, Ginny, me, and Eve outside Hooters:



Terry saw something to her taste—on the menu.



What's she smiling about?

Terry lost her dad recently and I appreciate her sharing a tough day for her with me. She and Jennifer say that Friday a woman only a few houses away from them was raped and murdered. They've taken extra security precautions.

I feel greatly privileged to be a part of such a fun and wonderful family.

Of course being a dad has been tough, but I almost survived it.

The words of King David in Psalm 127 spring to my mind

Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them:

Know who that verse reminds me of?

The legendary Saint Sebastian. He's got a quiver full. He must have been a dad too!



That's one of my famous religious jokes which nobody seems to get but me, so let me explain that according to legend, pagan Roman archers used Sebastian, a Christian, for target practice. (Of all the family gathered at the Hooters table, only one knew who Pliny The Elder, from yesterday's posting, was! I wouldn't tell. They can look him up.)

Ginny and I did get our kids raised and grown and we take great pleasure in them. They have grown to become our best friends. They all show us such great respect and support. I've done nothing to deserve such honor.

The family teased me about ogling the lovely Hooters ladies and I told them in an (almost) Scriptural quote, "Unto the pure, all things are pure... Everybody else thinks like I do".

Here's a photo of Brianna and Jessica accepting my cards showing this blog address so they can see their pictures:



Johnny wanted to give them his card too, but he didn't have any excuse to.

I was in pain throughout our meal but I enjoyed myself anyhow, even though Ginny and Johnny had to help me stand... Speaking of which...

Got a call from my neighbor Carol about a problem she and Warren, her husband, face next week. She is confined to a wheelchair and he has a serious heart condition that drains his strength.

The other day, Friday I think it was, he fell and could not lift himself up. Neither he nor Carol wanted to call Rescue or anyone. They'd feel too embarrassed.

But the two are so clever they figured it out.

They have one of these electric, adjustable hospital-type beds. So Warren crawled on the floor to the head of the bed; Carol went to the foot of the bed where the electric control buttons are. Carol lowered the bed flat. Warren grabbed hold of the mattress at the head.

Then she pushed the buttons to raise the head of the bed with him clinging to it till he could get his feet under him.

What a cool couple!

Takes more than a touch of disease to hold back the brave.

Anyhow, that was my Fathers' Day, spent surrounded by life, joy, and beauty.

I am old, toothless, weak, ugly, and aching but I love and I am loved.

Doesn't get any better than that.

As Saint Paul once said, "The love of God is shown towards us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us".

Thanks be to God.



Tuesday, June 21, 2011
After Fathers' Day Tragedies

Last night I received word of two family tragedies that happened on Fathers' Day:

While the rest of us celebrated at Hooters, our granddaughter Maggie's car was totaled in a traffic accident. The collision shook her up but the car's air bags inflated protecting her from serious injury.

Nevertheless, the accident became one of life's sudden moments which makes you say, "Well, this changes everything".

The loss of the family car disrupts a planned family vacation, Maggie's college classes, her mother's business at the art gallery, Donald's work, and the whole family's finances.

The car is not the only thing shattered in a moment.

The other solemn tragedy is that Basil, my daughter Eve's cat died.

Basil brought Eve and Mark, her husband, comfort, joy and amusement for eight years. The cat played a major role in their family.

Yesterday morning Eve found Basil laying by the water bowl unable to move. Eve and Mark took Basil to their vet who said the blood work showed severe liver damage.

No medical treatment could help

Mark and Eve loved that cat. They find his death devastating.

I am distressed when people I care about are touched by tragedy and I can do virtually nothing to help.

In the grand scheme of things, a fender-bender and the loss of a beloved pet do not equal a tsunami, but all pain is individual. Hurt is hurt. The impact is personal.

But no hurt is too small to escape the Father's attention.

The Bible says that God's eye is on every sparrow...

Come to think of it, so was Basil's.

Wednesday, June 22, 2011
Wild Things On The Road

I noticed more roadkill than usual as I drove up to St. Marys, Georgia, on Monday, to do some chores . Panicked creatures seeking safety from the forest fires run onto the interstate and get killed by speeding cars.

Sometimes there's no safe place to run.

Bears driven out of the swamps forage in peoples' backyards and get shot at for their trouble.

And life is rough on bunnies.

Tuesday's *Florida Times-Union* newspaper said, "Tuesday morning, 242 wildfires were burning within a 50-mile radius of Jacksonville, covering 280,595 acres and promising more smoke today in areas mainly north and south of the city". Fire officials say lightning strikes, accidents and, in some cases, arson set the fires.

Smoke from the forest fires covers Jacksonville.



The smoke hung so thick around St Marys that the radio said there was minimal visibility. Everyone needed to drive with headlights burning. Of course I was 30 miles closer to the Okefenokee Swamp fire there than in Jacksonville.

That fire is called the Honey Prairie Fire and covers 261,663 acres of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge where the newspapers say 580 firefighters, 78 fire engines, 10 bulldozers, and 8 helicopters fight the blaze.

Camden County officials are considering the wisdom of using prison inmates to relieve exhausted personnel.

In Florida, two park rangers have died in another one of the forest fires and others have been injuries. "The wildfires have ravaged our state, burning more than 200,000 acres, and now, they have taken the lives of two of our very own men," said Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam. "My thoughts and prayers go out to the families and loved ones of Josh Burch and Brett Fulton, two courageous heroes who sacrificed their lives for the safety of others."

While I noticed the smoke and the dead animals as I drove, my thoughts ranged back and forth between scenes I'm plotting for my next book. God willing, I plan to write a pioneer adventure set in Cow Ford, the early name for Jacksonville, during the 1830s.

The book will start with a description of a public hanging and move on a riverboat's sinking, Indian

attacks, camp meetings, and skullduggery in the local politics of the day.

I envision my main characters as revolving around a boy raised in a Ashley Street whorehouse and as he grows up he encounters typical Florida frontier adventures and characters from cracker poachers to Methodist circuit riders.

Maybe he needs to get caught in a forest fire???

All this bounces around in my mind as I drive, oblivious to smoke, animals, and yankee tourist traffic.

And as I drive I pray for guidance about how to handle historic anachronisms. I've written a couple of local history books and, though I know better, I'm tempted to juggle events for dramatic effect. Is it dishonest to do this? After all this is a novel. Fiction. A shoot-em-up-bang-bang adventure, not a history text.

This is what I think about as I drive.

When I'm driving, praying, plotting, and thinking at the same time, bears just better stay out of my way.

Monday, June 27, 2011
Damned Figs

The Prophet Micah foretold a coming day of bliss, peace and joy.

He said, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the LORD of hosts hath spoken it".

Ginny and I got a foretaste of that prophecy this weekend.

Yes, the fig tree in our backyard has set on fruit and we sat out there in our redneck gazebo to read novels and watch birds forage among the figs.

As the figs ripen, birds flock to our tree to feast. This weekend we watched bluejays, cardinals, cowbirds, phoebies, chickadees, purple finches, titmice—even birds which usually prey on insects came: woodpeckers, mockingbirds, thrush and even a friendly robin—all flocked and squawked and gobbled figs.

We enjoyed watching them.



I used to foil marauding birds with this fish in our fig tree:



The fish was a gag gift from one of our children (sorry, I forgot which one). The fish contains a motion sensor. When a bird lands on a branch, the fish flaps his tail, snaps his jaws, and sings *Down By The Riverside*. Terrified the birds. What a laugh to see them squawk!

Yes, in years past we have protected our figs from the birds, But I am the only person in the family who likes figs, so this year we just let the birds feast—although I do miss the fun of hanging the singing fish in the tree.

In assuring us of the Father's love, Jesus once said, "Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?"

Looks like the Lord is using our backyard fig tree as a giant birdfeeder.

But, what about that time Jesus cursed a fig tree?

What was going on there?

My friend Wes, my son Johnny, and I were sitting by the fig tree after breakfast at Ayres one morning last week, smoking our pipes and talking when that question arose.

The Scripture says: In the morning as Jesus returned into the city, he hungered. And when he saw a fig tree in the way, he came to it, and found nothing thereon, but leaves only, and said unto it, "Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever". And presently the fig tree withered away. And when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How soon is the fig tree withered away"!

I suggested Jesus felt antsy that morning just days before His crucifixion.

Johnny said that He withered the fig tree because it was not doing its job. It missed its purpose and fell under condemnation.

Wes said that this incident is a sign revealing the divine nature of Jesus. He revealed kindness all the time but He also has power to call a halt to things. Jesus revealed this destructive power in His hands, but by focusing on a tree instead of any particular one of us at that time. In other words, Jesus demonstrated that aspect

of His strength without scaring the utter crap out of the disciples.

Our conversation moved on to Johnny's job prospects; he had three job interview last week and waits to hear from those prospective employers--Hear our prayer, O Lord.

Johnny said his situation borders on urgent, that if he does not land a job soon his savings will give out and he will end up living in a cardboard box on a street corner.

I assured him that if his situation falls to that level, he can trust the God who feeds the fowls of the air. I told him that if he becomes desperate he can count on me for support because I know where there's an appliance store that throws out really big cardboard boxes, even refrigerator cartons. I can show him where that store is.

After all, that's the Christian thing to do. Isn't it?

Sunday, July 3, 2011
Weeble No More

I used to boast of being a Weeble.

Alas, last Friday, to my shame, I lost my certification.

Back on February 4, 2011, I wrote about my pride in resembling an adult Weeble—you know the little egg-shaped toys that proclaim, "Weebles Wobble But They Don't Fall Down".

Well, Friday, I fell down.

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid.

How did I fall down?

Was I climbing on my neighbor's roof to clear away a large fallen branch? No; though I'd offered to do that for him earlier in the afternoon (He's had a heart attack and can't do such things himself).

Was I bouncing down the pool steps? No; although I'd done just that earlier in the day.

So, How did I fall on my ass?

You guessed it. I returned a book back to the shelf.

Dangerous things, books.

I walked out to the foyer bookcase to put away Geoffrey Bocca's *Guide To Writing A Novel*. when ... when... when...I don't know what happened.

I tripped or stumbled, or got dizzy, or lost my balance and found myself falling.

And I was falling straight towards the fragile glass case that contains a rare Japanese doll which Ginny's brother, Jack, gave her over 50 years ago.

My one thought as I toppled over was, *She'd gonna murder me if I break her doll!*

I twisted to the left as I fell so I'd miss Ginny's doll.

Fortunately, I did not pull a bookcase over on myself as I grabbed for something to steady me. Missed the bookcase. Missed the Jap doll. Hit the corner of an antique oak stand where we store office supplies.

A real Weeble would not have done that.

The oak corner gouged my ribs but a protective layer of fat cushioned the blow.

(And Dr. Woody wants me to lose that bellyroll. A lot he knows!).

My fall upset me more than injured me.

I'm perfectly ok.

No harm done.

We ex-Weebles hang tough.

But in addition to worrying about smashing the Japanese doll, as I went down, another thought flitted across my mind—a phrase from Psalm 137:

“The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and He delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with His hand”.

I'd find that Scripture a lot more comforting were I a good man.

But, on the bright side, maybe I can sell a new motto to the toy manufacturer:

Weebles Wobble But Are Not Utterly Cast Down.

Wednesday, July 6, 2011
The iceman Cusseth

I planned to start writing my latest novel, a Florida cowboy and Indian adventure, yesterday but... Well, we have (make that had) this refrigerator.

Yes, I researched and plotted my novel. I envisioned characters. I chuckled over clever bits of dialogue. I outlined scenes. I developed a timeline. I was ready to write.... But, there was this refrigerator in our kitchen.

It stopped working.

Ice cream melted.

Food spoiled.

The dead refrigerator features (make that featured) an icemaker.

Fate, the Lord, or the devil (take your pick) forced Ginny and me to buy a new refrigerator, a cheap one that does not feature an automatic icemaker; the new freezer contains primitive trays with little rectangular compartments in which you pour water and wait till it freezes and makes ice cubes.

That's the way Neanderthals did it and we can too.

Yes, our 17-year-old refrigerator died suddenly, without warning, last week just after Ginny had bought groceries (of course) and filled the thing with perishables.

Following our standard hurricane protocol for power outages, we first ate all the ice cream we could. Then I called my son Johnny to come pick up all frozen things to feast on in his apartment. This proved a God-send for him because he's short of groceries and cash as he searches for a new job.

All I know about refrigerators is that they are heavy.

So, Ginny comparison shopped online and in real live stores to pick the best replacement refrigerator for us. We have no need of one as large as old one now that all our kids are grown and gone. And we have no need of an automatic ice maker.

At lunch between one store and another, on the restaurant's paper placemat, I drew a lovely picture of an

Eskimo harpooning a polar bear which was eating a refrigerator.

I signed my art as Rim Brant.

Ginny, noted for her lack of taste in fine art, said the animal looked more like a beaver than a bear.

So, I drew leaves, branches and roots on the refrigerator.

When she asked, I explained that it was a wooden refrigerator because beaver eat wood.

She sighed that sigh that all long-married men the world over recognize.

Anyhow, we bought a new refrigerator... but, Company policy, the store deliverymen will not disconnect the pipes to an icemaker when they remove the old refrigerator.

Deliverymen are smarter than I am.

To disconnect the icemaker, all you have to do is turn this little valve under the sink to shut off the water then unscrew the copper line going to the back of the refrigerator.

I decided to do that job before settling in to write my great novel about pioneer and Indian days in Florida. After all I am a professional writer and once I start on a book, I loath distractions.

So, I crawled under the kitchen sink and turned the little valve.

This job's a snap, I thought.

Yes it was.

It snapped.

That little valve under the sink had not been turned in over 20 years. Corroded. Unlike the old refrigerator, it was frozen solid.

It snapped off.

Fearing that if I twisted too hard with vice grips, I'd snap off a pipe inside the wall, I crawled from under the sink and tackled the job from the refrigerator end.

I lifted (well, not lifted, slid) the weighty refrigerator out from the wall.

A kitchen floor tile broke off and came up with it.

I realized that the only way to disconnect the refrigerator's ice maker is to cut the rubber tube.

I did that.

Water spewed.

I said some things--The Iceman Cusseth!

You know, I'd find it easier to be a Christian if Jesus had ever had to repair some mechanical thing, an old car, a pool pump, a broken refrigerator.

Alas, the only thing Jesus repairs is people.

However, as a skilled mechanic, plumber, home owner, and writer, I brought my household tools into play. Hammer. Pliers. Crescent wrench. Screwdrivers, Phillips and flathead. Sockets and ratchet. Box cutter. Scissors. Duct tape. And those curvy doodads with a twist.

Still water spewed.

I said more things.

More water spewed.

But, I am a professional writer.

I can master this.

I brought to bear a tool of my own trade to defeat the evil icemaker.

As Bulwer-Lytton once said, "The pencil is mightier than the pipe wrench".

I'm sure this is the way Stephen King fixes his icemaker too.



**Thursday, July 7, 2011
Looks Like A Plan**

God has a wonderful plan for my life.

So does my wife.

So do my children.

So do our neighbors.

So do people I meet on the street.

So do strangers e-mailing me on the internet.

And so do I.

My own wonderful plan for my life includes winning the 18 million dollar jackpot in tonight's Florida Lotto drawing and then becoming resident poolside Christian chaplain at the Playboy Mansion.

My wife's wonderful plan for my life involves my being home tomorrow to unlock for the deliverymen bringing the new refrigerator.

I'm likely to live according to Plan B.

Every time our phone rings, Ginny and I always say, "Oh goody, there's somebody with plans for our life this morning".

Yes, there are a lot of plans for my life out there. Which ones do I follow?

An utter worldling might say, "Do what you will; and pay the price".

That makes sense.

On the other hand, when I read the diaries left by great Christians of the past, many advocate squelching my own will so that only the will of God remains. They want me to kill self-will and be absorbed in the divine will.

They may have a point.

But I balk.

Why would God create me with a will of my own, then require that I abrogate it? Didn't He know what He was doing in the first place?

Or is my will so twisted that it can never be trusted? Should I renounce my own will in favor of what I perceive to be God's will?

I have known a handful of people who said that they have done that very thing. "Not I, but Christ," they say...

That statement may be true about some things. But I have noticed that these same people have a strong will in other things. Some are picky eaters. Some adamant in political opinions.

Self-will resembles a water balloon—push it in one place, it bulges out another.

The dangerous thing is: when a person claims to have no will but God's will, then whatever will they do have, they insist must be God's will. And if they are living examples of God's will, then if you oppose them, you are opposing God.

They are saying, My will and God's will—same thing. I will ascend up to the throne of the Most High.

Where have I heard that before?

And, these things being so, how is John Cowart to live?

Can I assume that God's will is always opposite my will, or Ginny's will, or the E-mail Guy's will? Are all wills in conflict? Does it have to be one or the other?

Not necessarily.

I think of a length of rope—many individual fiber strands twisted together in strength. When the rope is pulled one way, all those strands move together in the same direction. God's will, Ginny's will, my will, the stranger's will—strands, all blended together.

But in that picture doesn't God's will get pushed to the background?

What's wrong with that?

The Scripture says that in Him we live and move and have our very being.

He is a Giant playing with four-year-olds (known as the children of God) but He's no bully on the playground.

He makes allowances for our wills too. Want to play Hide & Seek or Duck- Duck-Goose? He lets us choose and He's satisfied as long as we play by the rules, don't throw sand, and take our naps when we're suppose to.

But doesn't God Almighty's Inexorable Will prevail.

Sure. Why not?

I think it's like me playing chess with a Grand Master, no matter if I move my rook, my knight or a pawn—He plays a winning game. He knows all the winning moves and makes allowances for every piece on the board. Mine and His.

I need not worry overmuch about God's will for my life. He's capable.

But what if I miss God's will?

Won't that ruin me for ever and ever and I'll pick the wrong roommate and marry the wrong girl and apply for the wrong job and end up without hope as a Republican?

Again, not necessarily.

So what if I made a wrong choice? If I missed doing the will of God?

Big deal. Who doesn't?

Jesus never says, "Tough tit. Too late now. You missed it. What you ought to have done was..."

The evil one torments Christians with thoughts of having missed God's will five or ten years ago. He lies that we can never get on track again so we might as well give up altogether.

Bull!

Jesus bears the title of The Deliverer.

What does a deliveryman do?

He takes something from where it is, to where it ought to be.

UPS can't hold a candle to Jesus when it comes to delivering.

He always picks us up right where we are right this minute. No use worrying about where I should have been way back when.

My friend Wes and I talked a bit about all this over breakfast yesterday because someone e-mailed me requesting my help with a project that would tie up my life for months. I do believe that God brings people across my path and that I should help them as often and as much as I can.

But I remember that when Nehemiah was building the wall around Jerusalem, Sanballat asked him to come down for a Middle-East peace conference—important stuff. Yet Nehemiah refused to leave the work he was doing. So, I said no to the stranger's e-mail request for help. And I feel bad about that.

Wes observed that once he prayed saying, "Lord, why did You send this woman to me? There's no way I can help. I can't do a thing for her".

"Then, In my imagination, the Lord replied, "She wouldn't let me help her either. I couldn't do a thing for her. That's why I sent her your way".

So, my plan for tomorrow? Unless my number hits Lotto tonight, I'll unlock the door for the refrigerator guys.

However, if I ever do land that job as chaplain to the poolside Bunnies at the Playboy Mansion, I promise I'll do my breast.

Friday, July 8, 2011

My Refrigerator Of Shame

Once when I was a boy about 10, I peed in my pants in the drug store at the wire magazine rack while leafing through a Superman comic.

My tennis shoes squished as I walked to the counter mortified to pay the man for the dime comic. I handed him a quarter and had to stand there stinking while he made change. Then I fled home running to sneak in the bathroom to clean up and change.

I had tasted shame.

Once when I was a young man about 30, I participated in a dishonest deal involving chains.

When someone suggested the fraud, I blithely went along. When I wondered why we needed to meet in a dark corner of an underground garage to complete the transaction, a Scripture verse flitted through my mind - Men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

I say the verse flitted because it did not bother me enough to keep me from pocketing my stolen \$200 cut, getting in my car, and driving away... feeling smug and clever. Proud at having pulled off this deal.

I felt no shame.

Those two incidents (and a bunch of others I have no intention of writing about) came into my mind yesterday as my daughter Jennifer helped me clean our old refrigerator—the one that died last week.

I had called Jennifer and Terry for help because the deliverymen scheduled today to bring our new store-bought refrigerator to our house and haul away the old one.

When Jennifer and I removed a bottom tray...

Well, if the Environmental Protection Agency knew about what was under there gumming up the bottom, they would alert a HazMat Team to come in hooded moonsuits.

Jennifer asked, “Dad, why are we cleaning all this when they are going to haul this old frig straight to the dump”?

“Because I’m ashamed for the delivery guys to see how filthy I let the icebox get,” I said.

She laughed at my foolishness.

Why would I want to impress deliverymen I’ve never seen before and am unlikely to ever see again? Why would I feel shame about a burned-out appliance destined for the dump?

This is the story of my life: I feel shame for the wrong things.

Peeing, while embarrassing, is a biological event; it happens. Stealing \$200 is an affront to an Almighty God; it shouldn't happen. Why did I feel shame for the one thing and feel smug about the other?

Jennifer is smarter than I am. After giving the bottom fester of glop a swish with a bleach rag, she stopped trying to remove it. Instead, she unrolled some white paper towels and lined the bottom underneath that drawer as if with shelf-paper.

"Think that will pass the trashmen's inspection, Dad?" she said.

What a great idea.

Why feel ashamed of the mess, why clean it up when you can just cover it with white tissue paper?

Don't clean it up. Don't take responsibility. Don't confess. Hide it instead.

Like I do with sin.

Yet, the Scripture tells me, "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy".

But I'm ashamed to confess. I don't want anyone to know about that.

And, deep down, I have no intention of forsaking any favorite sin.

Double-barreled sin!

And, it gets worst.

Not only do I hide shameful things from view, I also hide that I'm a Christian because I am ashamed of that.

Yes, I'll go into a new group and be accepted as one of the guys. Then some little something will come up, maybe just a phrase of conversation or a joke or a newspaper item, and I'm suddenly confronted with a choice. If I speak up, I will no longer be just one of the guys, I'll be labeled as the token Christian. They may tease me, and even call me a rabid fundamentalist.

So I feel ashamed.

And sometimes I'll speak, but more often I don't.

And I remember that Jesus once said, “Whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he shall come in his own glory, and in his Father's, and of the holy angels”.

Believe me, that's not a Scripture that flits. That one sticks in your mind.

So, let's add up the score so far: I'm ashamed of biological function, proud of stealing, ashamed of the trashmen seeing my grimy refrigerator, proud of covering up the messes I make, and ashamed of Jesus Christ.

Know of anybody around here who needs a Savior?

Is there any hope for guys like me?

Sure.

About this very subject, St. Paul said, “Hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly”.

Ungodly.

That's a word that fits.

Ungodly.

How can John W. Cowart possibly be ungodly? We're talking about me here!

I'm a Christian. If you can't tell by my behavior, I've got a baptismal certificate, a cross on the office wall, and a bumper sticker to prove it.

This shame thing is too complex for me to comprehend.

But I don't need to... It's that hope thing that St. Paul mentions, that's the thing I hang onto. Hope that maketh not ashamed.

In time, Jesus endured the shame of naked crucifixion on the cross so we don't need to endure shame in eternity.

That hope maketh not ashamed.

Not ashamed of biology. Not ashamed of faux pas. Not ashamed of confessed, uncovered sin. Not ashamed of Jesus. Not ashamed—Period.

We are accepted in the Beloved.

That's hope.

Unfortunately, there's a flip side.

The Prophet Daniel mentions both sides of that coin: he said, "Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt".

How about that?

Tuesday, July 12, 2011
If God Were A Pirate

In 1818 Mary Shelly wrote her novel *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus* about how medical student Victor Frankenstein tried to create a living human being but only succeeded in making a monster.

At the end of the book the monster, conscience-stricken over the troubles he caused, steps onto an ice flow in the Artic and drifts alone into the icy mists.

I can identify with that.

Pretty good portrait of my spiritual and emotional life at the moment.

Big blundering creature, who doesn't necessarily mean anyone harm, spoiling things then drifting off in cold, desolate, isolation.

Ok. So I'm a whining drama queen—I am not of the living dead, no tubes in my neck, not in the frozen Artic (It's 98 degrees outside my window here in Florida this afternoon). But I feel as spiritually marooned as Frankenstein's monster on the ice flow.

Saw a picture of him once when I was a kid in a Classics Illustrated comic book and that picture stuck with me all these years.

Maybe I should seek an illustration of my condition closer to home—Got it.

If God were a pirate, I'd understand what has been going on in my life—I've been marooned.

Yes, when pirates in the Florida Straights wanted to dispose of a guy in a particularly nasty way, to teach him a lesson they would land him on a sandbar in the ocean

and leave him there naked to stew without water, food, or hope in the scorching sun.

The 19th Century illustrator Howard Pyle collected stories in one of my boyhood's favorite books, *Howard Pyle's Book of Pirates*; in it he portrayed a renegade pirate marooned by peeved fellow buccaneers:



Yes, one of the joys of my childhood was happy reading. The images imprinted on my tender, but blood-thirsty, mind back then, stick with me today.

Recently I've felt like that poor monstercicle or that parched pirate.

And in my mind, it's connected to the nature and will of God.

Of course if I were really abandoned by God and marooned, I doubt if I'd even realize it. Among other things the damned are dense.

But as a Christian I've been aware of the fellowship and presence of Christ in my life. I've caught tiny glimpses of the majesty and grandeur of the Almighty who stoops to save. I have walked with Him in the garden and felt the glow of His being there. I have tasted religious ecstasy...

But not recently.

One aspect of living the will of God troubles me is this matter of feeling marooned at times. It seems as though God guides you to take certain steps, to make a stand, to go out on a limb... And when you get out there, He's nowhere to be found.

It feels like I'm in a rowboat being towed behind God's yacht out into mid-ocean, then He cuts the tow rope, leaving me adrift without oars, sail, rudder, compass, or map.

And here I sit.

Where do I go from here?

What do I do now?

Why is God silent?

That's the way I'm feeling about this book I've started writing.

It seemed like a good idea when I started. I thought the Lord was with me in this... But where is He now?

Is this some kind of pop quiz? A test?

You know, the only faith we have is the faith we have on the open ocean. If the big white yacht is still in sight, if we hear the barking of the sled-dogs across the ice, we are exercising sight. Faith kicks in when all visible evidence of God is gone from the universe. So long as we see even one spiritual manifestation of God's presence, so long as we feel one warm fuzzy of fellowship, then we are clinging to something less than God Himself.

Frankenstein's monster did not die on the ice—I know because I saw the movie where *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*. And the *Son Of Frankenstein*. And the *Return of Frankenstein*. And *The Bride Of Frankenstein*, And...

Frankenstein's monster endured.

Wouldn't Mary Shelly have been proud of what happened to her book?

And when it comes to pirates, sometimes, if the mood struck them, after two or three days, they'd circle back to the sandbar to see if that guy had learned his lesson yet and if he had not completely crazy from stewing in the

shadeless sand, they might take him back onboard their pirate ship.

And God...

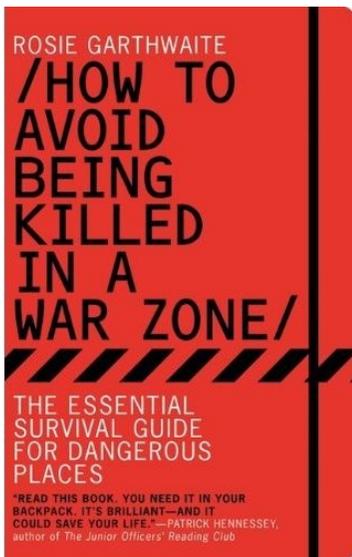
Where is He during my time of isolation and abandonment and testing? After having gotten me into this predicament, why is He silent?

Well, the teacher does not talk during the test.

Thursday, July 14, 2011

War Zone Watchers

Yesterday, instead of working on my own book, I finished reading a handbook for journalists covering news in the world's most dangerous places. Tips in the book include everything from how to choose body armor and what to do when trapped in a minefield to how to deliver a baby and how to amputate the leg of a person trapped beneath a concrete slab in a burning building.



Here is the bibliographic information:

Garthwaite, Rosie. *How To Avoid Being Killed In A War Zone: The Essential Survival Guide For Dangerous Places*. London. Bloomsbury Publishing. ©2011. 304 pages. Indexed. Illustrated. Library catalog number 613.69G.

My neighbor and his wife serve in the military somewhere in the world. I do not know where they are deployed.

Their house sits vacant while they are away.

Last night I saw three thieves breaking into that house through a back window.

I called the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office and reported the break-in in progress. Within minutes five police cars arrived. Officers entered the dark house with guns at the ready. They led away the villains in handcuffs.

No less than ten neighbors came out in the street to watch what was happening; at least five of these neighbors are associated with our area's Neighborhood Watch.

The thieves apparently thought they were unobserved, their actions hidden in twilight darkness. One neighbor pointed out that they had been broken open the home's central heat and air conditioning unit and stripped it of copper.

Last time I checked, it costs over \$5,000 to fix such a unit.

The vandals ripped it open for a few dollars worth of copper.

Another neighbor said they'd broken into the vacant house to do drugs and have sex. Maybe so; I don't know what they were doing in there. Doesn't matter.

All I know is that while the homeowners are away, probably in a war zone, their home has been attacked.

The war zone is here on our block also.

The other thing I thought about is that while the thieves thought nobody knew what they were doing, a bunch of people saw them. They were being watched. They were seen. We all live under observation.

Father Abraham, of biblical fame, knocked up Hagar, his wife's maid. Sarah, his wife, demanded he dismiss the girl and he turned her out into the desert. She almost died from thirst until God showed her an oasis well and saved her life.

God was watching her.

Genesis 16 says, "Hagar called the name of the LORD that spake unto her, *Thou God seest me*: for she said, Have I also here looked after him that seeth me? Wherefore the well was called Beerlahairoi; behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered".

On my block last night eight or ten neighbors and their children turned out to watch the police lock the three thieves into cages in back of the patrol cars.

Lots of eyes watching.

On one level, I felt indignant that while the home owners are off fighting bad guys to keep our nation safe, bad guys damaged their home. *Lock 'em under the jail*, I thought.

On another level, I felt regret that I have not told these three thieves about the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus who was crucified between thieves just like these bad guys. And He died for bad guys just like me. The three thieves are no worse than me; they just have different tastes in sin.

I also do things I don't want anybody to see.

But the omnipresent, omniscient God sees every thing, doesn't He?

Yes. I used to think that God watching me meant that He stood posed in the heaven with a lightening bolt raised to zap me when I screwed up...

But, there's another picture of God's watching—as He watched Hagar.

Think of a nurse in an intensive care unit. She watches my vital signs ready to leap to my aid at the slightest sign of trouble. Like that nurse, the Lord Christ watches me all the time. Never taking His eye off the monitor.

Why does He always watch?

The Scripture says, "The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward Him"

To show Himself strong in behalf.

Yes, He watches my actions here in this world's war zone.

Yes, He sees things done in the dark.

Yes, He sees my sin.

But, that's not all He sees.

Sunday, July 17, 2011
I Feel Heroic



Saturday, my CERT training kicked in.

Back in 2008 Ginny and I took a course in Civilian Emergency Response Training to learn how to help our neighborhood in case of a mass casualty event when police and firemen would be overwhelmed and unable to respond in our area. Saturday an element I learned in that course came into play.

Ginny and I ran errands all morning—six stops: three for us, two for charities, one for environmental protection. As we approached our home anticipating sitting down with our shoes off sipping coffee, we noticed a smoking car at the curb.

A frantic young lady stood beside it with a cell-phone to her ear as flames flashed beneath her car and smoke billowed upward.

The car was fully engaged and had stopped beneath some low-hanging branches which could have caught fire had the flames flared higher.

Ginny parked and I hobbled fast (hip bothering me) into our house for the kitchen fire extinguisher which has gathered dust in its bracket beneath the counter for 16 years.

Now, before I took that CERT class, I had never touched a fire extinguisher in my life. But, because of the training I knew just what to do.

I had the young woman crack the hood of her car—not lift it—so I could play foam on the engine without letting in more oxygen at first. Then I had her open the hood fully so I could spray the battery, firewall, wiring and insulation.

I played foam at the base of the fire first then worked up to the burning insulation. I also aimed foam at the front shock absorbers because the fluid inside those can expand and explode.

I asked the young lady if she had called the fire department... No. In her panic she had grabbed her cell phone to call her boyfriend on Emerson Street in Southside 20 miles away to ask him what to do!

I urged her to call Fire/Rescue so they could make sure all was safe and so they could give her an official report for her insurance company. To me, her car appears totaled.

Turns out that she had, thank God, just paid her car insurance last week. And earlier Saturday morning she had just bought a new battery from Wal-Mart. That new battery appeared to have melted in the fire.

By this time neighbors from up and down the street had appeared on the scene of the smoldering car...

I slipped away unnoticed back into our house as the fire trucks flashed down the block. As a Christian, Do Good Then Go Away, is my motto.

No sense cluttering up a person's life with useless advice about what she should have done, after you have helped in the immediate crisis.

However, once home, I did preen. I feel proud of me. I feel competent. I feel good about seeing a potentially disasters situation, knowing what to do, and doing it. I felt good that my training worked.

John Cowart, Geriatric Hero—that's me.

Geriatric? Yep. Turned 72 last week. On my birthday I celebrated by going in for a prostate exam.

Met a new oncologist, Dr. Felicia Snead, a knowledgeable and kind young woman who explained what may be in store for me with my prostate cancer. And she questioned me concerning my decision about not having treatment. She listened.



In celebration of my birthday Dr. Snead passed on examining my tonsils via the anal probe technique made popular in alien abduction movies.

Best birthday present ever!

My PSA reading topped out at 19.8—an all time high for me.

I'm doing fine—all things considered.

John Cowart, Geriatric Hero—that has a nice ring to it.

Know where I can buy a cape?

Friday, July 22, 2011 **Oyster Life**

This past week I lived a life as exciting as an oyster's.

Like an oyster affixed to a rock in the sea letting life flow past, I remained glued to my chair reading this and that. Sometimes in a fit of energy I move to a different chair to change how the light falls on my page.



I have done little, thought less.

Jesus loves oysters; He created us to live content.

Two other noteworthy bits:

Thanks be to God, yesterday my middle son, Johnny, landed a job. That's an accomplishment in Jacksonville's depressed job market of wide-spread unemployment. His new job is not the one he targeted and it pays less than he earned previously and it does not challenge his abilities, but it enables him to be self-supporting and affluent.

And also, yesterday my E-Buddy Vanilla, in his blog, A String Too Short To Tie, reveals that outlaw Jesse James is one of his ancestors.

Vanilla's posting reminded me of a column I wrote long ago and forgotten. It shows how the famous bank robber and I are kindred spirits; my piece is at <http://www.cowart.info/Rabid%20Fun%20columns/Jesse%20James/Jesse%20James.htm>

Reading about slinging six-shooters and robbing banks and derailing trains excites me... but not enough to get me out of my chair. We oysters enjoy the sedentary life.

Sunday, July 24, 2011
Friday On The Far Side Of The Sea

On Friday, July 22, 2011, a man in a police uniform parked a Volkswagen Crafter loaded with explosives near government buildings in Oslo, Norway. About 3:30 in the afternoon, the car bomb exploded killing seven people outright and injuring at least 17 others.

Little more than an hour a man wearing a police uniform arrived at a youth camp on Utoeya island, about 25 miles northwest of Oslo; he began shooting teenagers at the camp killing over 90.

When I heard news of the attack, I assumed it was the actions of al Qaeda Muslims. So did a lot of other people. According to Reuters, Oslo resident Marit Saxeide said, "'It's a double shock. Ninety-nine percent of Norwegians immediately believed this was a Muslim terror attack. When it turned out not to be, that was the second shock."

When captured the man wearing the police uniform turned out to be 32-year-old Anders Behring Breivik. Reports from Reuters News identify him as a fundamentalist Christian.

The killer's actions proved him to be neither a police officer nor a Christian.

For several years now I have maintained an e-friendship with a Norwegian lady who posts her *Far Side Of The Sea* blog as Felisol at <http://felisol.blogspot.com/>

When I heard of the tragedy, my first thought was concern about the safety of Felisol; her husband, Gunnar; her daughter, Serina; and her elderly mother. I even wondered about Queen Amidala, the family cat. This distant family are important people in my world.

I learned so much about Norway's beauty, history, and culture. Felisol revealed the beauty of stave churches, skies smoky from Iceland's volcanoes, her mother's lavender garden, Gunnar's kindness, and the exploits of the Hiker Girls.

Yet, even though I have followed Felisol's blog for years, my knowledge of Norwegian geography remains hazy and I am not sure where the family lives in relation to the murders.

So, first thing, I checked on their safety. They are fine.

The second thing I thought of on hearing the news was the designation of the murderer as a fundamentalist Christian. Apparently the killer gunned down the teens and folks at that camp out of some desire to... What the hell was this asshole trying to prove?

Ok, I'm being a tad judgmental there.

But I can't help wondering how and why the Lord would let such an awful thing happen?

And I have no answer.

Yet, as a Christian myself, one who believes the fundamentals of our faith, the actions of Mr. Breivik confuse and distress me. I feel there ought to be answers and I ought to know them.

I don't.

Yet, I affirm that God is in control.

There's a reason they call it faith.

However, I should not be either surprised nor upset when evil people assume the guise of peace officers or even religious men.

Jesus once told his disciples, "Yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me".

The deluded will think he does God a service.

How tragic.

How can we tell who is a follower of Christ and who is a mass murderer dressed up a peace officer?

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

What else counts?

Wednesday, July 27, 2011
Top To Bottom

Yesterday I did little but talked much.

My friend Wes treated me to breakfast and a long conversation in the morning. Among many other things, we discussed the section of Scripture where Jesus said,

“Then shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory”.

While on trial for His life, Jesus said that to the high priest.

Great power and glory.

Sublime.

Wes told me that my own take on the return of Christ is what theologians call Partial Preterism.

I did not know that.

I’d never heard the term before.

I just think that when Jesus does come back, I’ll be glad to see Him—more or less.

Wes and I also discussed whether or not the behavior of Christians confirms or invalidates the truth of the Gospel. It’s easy to point to hypocrisy of other people as an excuse to write Jesus off as no account. However, if something is true, then it’s true whether anyone believes it and lives by it or not.

Later in the day I had a brief conversation with the two young men at the library I see every week. (While yesterday the arthritis in my hip did not hinder me, my mind remains befuddled because I can’t remember these great guys names and I’ve asked them both a number of times. My brain has trouble remembering recent things. A sign of short-term memory loss???).

Anyhow, we talked about a life-narrative written in 1810 by George White. I read Mr. White’s book two weeks ago and I’m reading it again because it so profound and so helpful. The man knew first-hand some of the same things I experience.

“The enemy of my soul, by whom I had so long been enslaved, unwilling to lose his prey, beset me on every side, and brought me into a new scene of distress,” White wrote. “Had not the Lord sustained my feeble mind under the sore conflicts I endured, I must have fallen a victim to the rage of the infernal foe.

“But thanks be to God, His grace was sufficient for me; and I may truly say His strength was made perfect in my weakness; and by the light of His Spirit, shining upon

my disconsolate soul, He cheered my heart with His love, and revived my languid hope”.

Mr. White had been an uneducated field slave until earning his freedom and, at age 30, been taught to read and write by his daughter. By educating himself, he became one of the most noteworthy Methodist preachers in post-colonial America and his observations and testimony lift my heart here 200 years after he published his book.

Here’s the bibliographic information:

Graham Russell Hodges (editor). *Black Itinerates Of The Gospel: The Narratives of John Jea And George White*. N.Y. Palgrave Press, An Imprint Of St. Martin’s Press. ©1993. 200 pages. Indexed. ISBN 0-312-29445-X. Library Call Number: 287.80922 White 1993a.

Yesterday I also talked with an elderly man (older than I am) who is undergoing chemotherapy and radiation treatments for colon cancer. My own father died of colon cancer years ago.

The old man seemed glad to see me and we talked at length about his difficulty in taking a dump.

The cancer clogs up his bowels and, though he constantly feels he needs to go urgently, nothing would come out. An operation a few months ago failed to get all the cancer. The chemo/radiation raises blisters. His oncologist is trying a lower dosage.

And the thing that seems to loom largest in the old man’s universe is the ability to take a shit.

So that’s what we talked about.

Later, as I thought over my day and the conversations with my friends, I felt thankful.

Clouds of great power and glory.

Freedom from things that enslave.

Praying to take a shit.

I laughed as I worshiped and prayed. This is what the Christian life is all about—Jesus is Lord from top to bottom!

AUGUST

Monday, August 1, 2011
On Call

A Christian must be ready to preach, pray, or die at a moment's notice.

That's what I've heard.

What a drag.

Such a state of on-call readiness interrupts my plans for my own life.

For instance, recently Ginny and I have talked about going off on a mini-vacation sometime this month, maybe just a long romantic weekend. Then financial reality kicked in. We missed a car payment, first ever, and scurried to catch up. Cutting things so short eliminated our going off anywhere for any length of time.

Being resourceful, I attempted to plan a long romantic weekend right here at home. I asked Terry and Johnny to mow and edge our backyard. I vacuumed and cleaned the pool. I checked my Viagra prescription. I brought in breakfast buns. I envisioned a romantic weekend of peace, love and harmony alone with my beautiful wife...

Then Friday evening the phone rang...

The phone call reminded me of a Christian duty I'd promised to do for someone months ago. The caller said it had to be this weekend—but he was not sure which day or what time of which day. He'd call to let me know—but I needed to stand ready to get in the car and drive within minutes of getting his next call.

This involved a personal thing that only I could do.

The actual duty only took 20 or 30 minutes of my time. Waiting for the call summoning me to do it, took all weekend.

I had to stay ready to move at a moment's notice. No soaking in the pool. No lounging in bed. No going out to a restaurant for lunch. ...

No nothing.

Stay ready to jump and run when the call came.

Ginny says that the call of God inevitably comes at the most inconvenient moment.

I realize that there are folks who live On-Call every day. Parents of small children. Nurses. Firemen. Police officers... I suppose I should add Christians to that list.

But being on call threw me off balance to not be able to pursue my own plans and activities. To be bound by a promise, a mind set, a duty.

Alas, the best plans of mice and men to get laid off-times go awry.

However, our weekend contained two funny (to us) incidents:

Sunday night at a seafood restaurant, I noticed that the batter on my fried fish formed little swirls. I told Ginny that I'd been served fried fisheyes and I held two of them up to my face to show her how a fish sees underwater.

Embarrassed, Ginny got to laughing hard.

The restaurant manger thought the tears streamed down her face because this dirty old man was molesting her somehow and he ran over to rescue her from me.

She assured him it was only her crazy husband but that got us both laughing all the harder. A happy marriage is one where she still laughs at my jokes after 44 years.

The other thing that set us laughing involved the old video we put in the DVD machine for Sunday evening viewing.

Ginny and I are both on the deaf side and a prime criteria for any movie we watch must be closed captioning. Without that feature, we can't understand what actors say.

Well, the DVD we chose to watch was a *Godzilla* movie made in Japan during the 1970s.

Ginny carefully set the player to show closed captioning and we choked laughing when the only subtitle to scroll along the bottom of the screen was...

RARRR! RARRR! RARRR!

**Tuesday, August 2, 2011
At The Same Time**

When I was younger, more mature Christians guilted me into a devotional regime called a Quiet Time—that is a

period set aside each day when I was supposed to read my Bible and pray without interruption.

According to that mind set, the more time I spent alone with Jesus, the more holy I could consider myself. But, the less time I spent in devotion, the sorrier I was as a Christian. Have you spent 30 minutes with the Christ Who died for you? Great prayer warriors stayed on their knees for four hours every morning. John Cowart, did you spend even ten minutes with God? Five minutes? Anytime at all?

I used to try that discipline.

It may not have done me too much harm.

But, I don't do that any more.

I came to realize that the Lord is omnipresent, that He is there when I'm driving, swimming, or changing a printer ribbon, as much as He is present when I kneel at the altar or engaged in focused Quiet Time devotions.

For me, one problem with having a Quiet Time was that once I'd put in my required ten minutes with God, I felt thru with Him for the day. Now, I can get on with my real life. I felt I'd paid my dues, given the Almighty a nod of recognition, then I was free of Him for the rest of the day while I did important stuff.

Now, I try to live as though I am always in His presence. One time is the same as another. No division between God's time and my time. And, when I happen to forget all about Him for a couple of hours, inadvertently or deliberately, it's no big deal.

He is, on some level, my life. Not just a part of it.

But if Jesus is present at the same time I chose to browse porno sites on the internet or when I seethe in bitterness and curse AT&T's highhanded service (which sorely deserves it), where is Jesus then?

Well, at such times, I tell Him to go back in the teapot. This omnipresent thing of His cramps my style. And, if by now He does not know me right to the core of my soul, then He ought to go back to Omniscience School for a refresher course.

Didn't He know my sins when He first called me? I think He knew what He was getting. The Lord is known for

scrapping the bottom of the barrel to dredge up sinners to save. Nothing I do shocks Him.

Not even that.

Yet, for God only knows what reason, He loves me.

“The love of God is shown towards us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly”.

My friend Wes and I talked about these things at lunch yesterday. We appear to be on the same wave length about such matters.

I did not expect to see Wes till next week, but needing some computer stuff brought him into town and he called inviting me to lunch at a new Italian place. (Good Stuff!).

At the same time, my friend Carol called needing my help getting from her wheelchair to her car. She needed to go to the hospital to consult with her husband’s doctor (Warren is hospitalized with life-threatening heart and kidney problems).

At the same time, my arthritis kicked in causing me great pain and I could hardly hobble over to Warren and Carol’s house to help her. Talk about the blind leading the blind! She wanted to control her wheelchair while I tried to maneuver the thing up makeshift ramps while maintaining my own balance with my cane. I worried that I might drop her in the driveway. But we managed.

At the same time, my neighbor Phil came over and asked me to visit his dad, who started more radiation today.

At the same time, I’m testing the pool chemicals to get them balanced.

At the same time, I’m trying to solve computer problems and awaited a phone call from my youngest son, Donald, about how to handle them.

At the same time, I’m correcting the 600+ pages of *Barbara White’s Prayer Diary* and following suggestions Ginny made about that text.

At the same time, I’m tracking weather radar, concerned about lightening strikes and my computer as well as information on Tropical Storm Emily which may develop into a hurricane threatening Florida.

At the same time, I'm deciding whether or not my teeth hurt bad enough to go to a dentist or if I can put it off.

And at the same time, I'm praying, worshiping, and walking quietly with the Lord.

I do recognize that Jesus is Lord in church.

And in focused Quiet Times.

But, He is Lord of other things too.

All other things.

Wednesday, August 3, 2011 What A Dork!

Yesterday I phoned my wife at her downtown office.

I don't usually call Ginny at work but I wanted to tell her how pleased I am about the corrections she made in my transcriptions of *Barbara White's Prayer Diary*.

Several years ago Barbara, former religion editor at the *Florida Times-Union* newspaper, gave me 19 hand-written spiral notebooks containing her prayer diaries.

Barbara died earlier this Spring.

As I transcribed these notebooks for publication the text ran to over 600 pages and I got sick of fooling with it.

I am not a typist.

But eventually I got the job done.

My thoughtful wife volunteered to correct the proof pages for me.

Ginny has certainly made my life easier. Her sharp eye and attention to detail caught a multitude of both large and tiny mistakes I made transcribing that manuscript.

Ginny's accountant background enables her to see things that I just gloss over in ignorance. She marked each thing to be corrected with red pencil then made a separate note suggesting changes in wording, spacing, spelling, punctuation, and even redundant passages to omit.

Some of my mistakes make for funny wording.

For instance, I had not noticed it myself, but look for the D, which should have been a W, in the following excerpt from one of Barbara's April, 1989, prayers:

"Father, I have come to You in prayer and opened my heart to You. I have not heard Your voice in reply, but I know You have heard me and will answer me. And the fact that I do not know how does not matter.

"Lord, some bond, not of You, has come up around my job and at church. You set me free of responsibility for the mission, but I did not leave. More for appearance sake and habit than from conviction or desire. And this is producing bad fruit. There is now also—a strong desire to leave the newspaper too, and I do not know Your will in this.

"Lord, show me the bonds I have woven or allowed the enemy to weave for me that I may ask that they be severed. Give me guidance and the grace of Your Holy Spirit to walk in the truth that You show me, Lord. Where do You want me to go to church and what dork do You want me to do?"

Monday, August 8, 2011 Not An LGB

Yesterday, as Ginny and I sat outback in the garden sipping our morning coffee by the fountain, a flight of varied birds flew into the surrounding trees and hedges.

"Look, John, a flutter of cardinals," Ginny said.

She pointed to eight or ten bright red cardinals flitting around the fig tree and birdfeeders.

Soon bluejays, doves, titmice, purple finches, and chickadees joined the cardinals. The rush of wings filled our yard.

And besides all the birds we could identify, a host of other birds joined the feeding frenzy. We call these LGBs, meaning Little Gray Birds—a generic name for all birds we are too lazy to look up in the birdbook.

One LGB acted different as he approached the fountain. He hovered a few inches away from the water flow hesitating to get too close yet wanting a drink. A shaft of sunlight struck his back and we realized he was a hummingbird.

Usually hummingbirds streak past so fast that I only catch a glimpse of movement and I write them off as just another LGB.

But this one hovered in a sun ray right before my eyes and I could see the colors on his back. In the different light he glowed an iridescent green, a shimmering purple, a flash of ruby.

Same bird, different light.

I thought of that place in Scripture which says, "He was transfigured before them. And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them".

Another Gospel says, "As he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistening".

Shining. Exceeding white. Glistening.

Same Jesus, seen in a different light.

You know, I hardly thought about Jesus last week. He just did not enter my mind much; other things preoccupied my thoughts.

I was tempted to feel guilty about not thinking of Him. After all the First and Great Commandment says I am to love the Lord with all my heart and soul and mind.

But then I thought, you know there are times I hardly give Ginny a thought. Pressing business of the day pushes her into the background...

But we're still married.

No less love. No less caring. No less anticipating.

Our relationship does not depend on straining to think of her constantly; it just is.

I think I need not feel guilty about "neglecting Jesus". He is there constantly present. Always hovering nearby. Always before my eyes.

He is not an LGB; it's just that sometimes I see Him in that different light.

Wednesday, August 10, 2011
Old Home Movies

Yesterday as my son Johnny and I enjoyed breakfast at our favorite hole-in-the-wall restaurant, the waitress approached him with a problem.

It seems that long ago her grandfather had shot some home movies. These movies contain the only pictures of several relatives who are no longer living.

When her grandfather died, the home movies came to her.

Problem is, these movies are on eight millimeter film. Her grandfather also left her an old 8-mm projector. But when she tries to view the film, the bulb in the projector heats up so that the film will crinkle, melt, and even catch fire.

She asked Johnny, a computer tech, if he knew anyone who could transfer her old home movies onto digital video discs—cheap. Her only income is from tips.

Johnny and I made a couple of suggestions, but we really don't know anyone who has the equipment or expertise to do this task.

If anyone reading this posting does know, please e-mail me and I'll pass your e-mail address along to the lady.

Her problem reminded me of two things:

First, it reminded me of that scene in *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* where Sparky Griswald gets stuck in the freezing attic and watches old home movies of his family in Christmases past.

The other thing it reminded me of is that place in the Gospels where Jesus said, "Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."

And all the time, the Lord is trying to do new things in my old life.

That's like trying to make digital video out of 8-mm home movies.

Something's gonna crinkle, melt and pop.

That thing you smell overheating is me.

I don't want God to do a new thing in me. I hardly cope with the old things He's done. I'm quite comfortable in this old wineskin. It fits.

And new scares me.

I don't want to be upgraded.

It was to Christians the epistle writer said, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God".

I know. I know. I'm supposed to welcome the new stuff God brings into my life. I'm supposed to trust Him to make all things work together for good. But God's idea of good and my idea of good differ.

Ginny and I often pray, "Lord, please do a good thing ***that we recognize as good***".

Yes, the Lord is good.

Nevertheless, His new thing scares old me.

But ain't I converted?

Yes, I've undergone that glorious transformation mentioned by Saint Paul when he 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..."

Old passed away. New creature. All things new. All things of God.

Scary stuff.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Skin will burst. Wine run out. Wineskins ruined.

Can Jesus run that projector?

Has He been trained?

I think He's feeding me through the sprockets now.

The show is about to start.

New Heavens. New earth. New me.

Makes me nervous.

Yes, Jesus is wonderful.

But He is also terrible.

Quite terrible.

Thursday, August 11, 2011
Censored By The Taste Police

A writing project I'm working on called for some jokes, so I told some of my favorites—jokes geared to whet the elegant appetites of gracious readers with a refined sense of humor.

My wife read over my first draft.

Ginny groaned. She objected to several of my stories on the grounds that they are in poor taste. She insisted that I cull perfectly good jokes from my collection.

Who is she to talk about good taste?

Just look who she married!

Anyhow, since the Taste Police censor my work, I hereby include a sampling of my jokes to amuse my blog readers, readers who certainly would recognize good taste if they ever saw on my site:

The dumb blond has a fall while skiing at Aspen. She tells the doctor, "I've broken every bone in my body! Let me show you".

She points her forefinger at her knee and winces in pain.

She touches her collarbone and shudders in pain.

Same with her ribs and her elbow.

The doctor takes x-rays and says, "Good news and bad: First, you have not broken every bone in your body. You have broken your forefinger".

Grandma rocks in her chair when Jimmy crawls up in her lap and asks her to croak like a frog.

"What?" the old lady says.

"Please. Please. Please croak like a frog for me".

Well, she makes the best frog sound that she can and the little boy jumps off her lap excited and happy.

"Now, young man, why did you want me to croak like a frog"?

Jumping up and down the boy says, "I heard Daddy tell Mama that when you croak, we will all go to Disneyland".

Death with black cowl and scythe knocks on a door.

A tottering old lady answers.

The grim reaper announces, "I am Death".

She shouts, "THAT'S OK, SONNY. I'LL TALK REAL LOUD".

Do you know what you get when you cross a termite and a mantis? A bug that prays before it eats your house.

This old man and old woman decided to get married and talked over the logistical arrangements.

"Will you move into my place or do I move in with you" he asked.

"I'll move in with you because your place is bigger," she said.

"What about our children?"

"We can spent Thanksgiving with yours and Christmas with mine," she said.

"How do you feel about sex?" he asked.

"I like it infrequently," she said.

He pondered that answer for a moment then asked, "Is that one word, or two"?

Three healthcare professionals, an ophthalmologist, a cardiologist, and the chief executive officer of a health maintenance organization, a died in an accident and appeared at the Pearly Gates.

The Admitting Angel greeted them saying, "Welcome, gentlemen. Welcome! I'm glad to see you here. But before I can admit you, each must give an account of his life and reasons you should get into Heaven. Who wants to start?"

The first man spoke up. "I was an ophthalmologist. I helped people better see the glories of God's creation."

"That's wonderful," exclaimed the Angel. "That's really something. you go right on inside".

The second man said, "In life I was a cardiologist. I repaired weak hearts, extended people's lives, I even did a few heart transplants greatly improving my patients' quality of life".

"That's wonderful. How impressive," said the Angel. "you go right on inside. Now, what about you?"

"I was the CEO of an HMO. In my executive capacity I helped provide low-cost health care for thousands of clients who might not have otherwise had access to hospital care. At the same time I provided optimum profits for our shareholders".

"That's wonderful," exclaimed the Angel. "you go right on inside... But..."

"BUT! What do you mean But?" demanded the CEO.

"Well, you are admitted to Heaven, but you're only allowed to stay for three days".

Anthropologists found this tribe in the Amazon who worship the numeral Zero... That answers the age-old question, "Is nothing sacred"?

Heard about the dyslexic agnostic who suffers from insomnia?

He stays awake all night wondering whether or not there really is a dog.

In 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. What I don't believe is that a 15-year-old in our educational system knows what a semicolon looks like".

I do not get to run the train,
The whistle I can't blow.
I have no say in which a-way,
Or how fast the train will go.
I can not stoke the boiler.
I can not ring the bell.
But let the damn thing jump the track,
And guess who catches Hell!

Know what the snail said when he rode on the turtle's back?

Wheee!

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.

Before the Good Samaritan came along, 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".

Friday, August 12, 2011

Stargazing, Bugs, Books, & Prayer

Here I am at 2 a.m. in my swimming trunks all set to go out lay on an air mattress in the pool to pray and watch the stars.

Yes, tonight comes the annual Perseid Meteor shower. And I want to see the stars fall.

Astronomers say the Perseids are grains of dust shed from the tail of Comet Swift-Tuttle burning up in the atmosphere. Every year in August the Earth ploughs through a cloud of the dust as it orbits the sun and from our pool it looks like the stars are falling.

Cool.

God just may have a hand in this display

On the other hand, stars are not the only thing in the sky tonight. Mosquitoes also swarm in the damp Florida air and yesterday two people phoned me to warn me about getting exposed.

This week the eight confirmed Jacksonville cases of the West Nile encephalitis meningitis virus — including a 64-year-old woman with pre-existing health conditions who died — are all from the Westside of Duval County.

Guess which side of town I live on.

In other news, last night Donald and Helen came over to adjust my Bluefish Books site; that's my on-line book catalog where over 20 books I wrote or edited are available for sale. Now, instead of all my books being listed on a single page which took a long time to download, the Bluefish Books Catalog ranges over eight pages.

My books are listed as printed paperbacks, downloads, and as E-books in PDF format; a few are

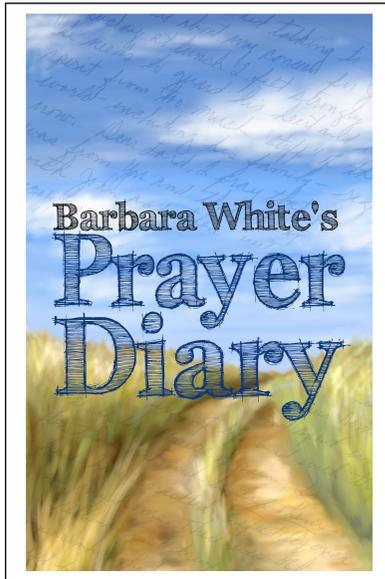
offered in e-pub format. So readers can chose from a variety.

Lot of tweaking ahead.

The new catalog layout confuses me.

But my son, his wife, and the Lord God Almighty may understand enough about computers to straighten it all out.

The kids responded to my cries for help because yesterday, after several years of work, I finally added *Barbara White's Prayer Diary* to my catalog. Helen designed this book cover for it:



In about 500 pages the diary covers Barbara's prayers and meditations from 1976 to her death a couple of months ago.

"I hardly have time to pray for all the people I know and want to pray for," Barbara said. "When a request comes to pray for somebody I don't know, I just say to the Lord, 'Lord, I don't know this person or the details of the situation they're in, but You do. Please do whatever is best for them.' Then I forget it and move on unless the Lord brings them to mind again".

Here is the description I wrote for the book's blurb:

Newspaper editor Barbara White won awards for her inspirational religious columns which have been collected in five

devotional books. She also recorded her private prayers and meditations for 35 years in her diaries.

Looking at Barbara you think of a white-haired, shy, little old lady sipping tea in the bishop's garden.

And you're right. That's what she looked like.

Yet her diary entries, and those of her friend and book editor John Cowart, reveal her hellacious family situation which involved alcoholism, drug abuse, prison sentences, broken bones, extortion, armed robbery, church squabbles, and a Coast Guard helicopter search. Yet in the midst of such intense tragedy, family trouble, and heartache, Barbara's diaries show her daily secrets of walking with God in peace.

You know, when I sat down at my computer to write this post before going out to look at falling stars, I intended to lambaste Lulu Press for forcing me to revamp my website.

But, before I started to write my rage and rant, I happened to read an essay, Measuring God's Approval Rating, by Leslie on her Compost Blog over at <http://blogs.icta.net/mom/>

She wrote about the sin of complaining.

Leslie is a busybody!

Her wisdom spoiled my intended rant.

How dare I write Christian if I don't live Christian?

I'd like to think there must be a loophole in God's desires when it comes to things that bug me. But Leslie shows there isn't.

Therefore, I will not rant. I will not complain. I will not grumble.

I'll go out now to float in the pool, worship the Lord, and look at shooting stars...

And I'll just think about imprecatory prayers.

Added this note later: Stargazing proved not all it's cracked up to be.

Not everyone knew about the meteor shower.

A neighbor a block over spotted my flashlight moving around our back yard at 4 a.m. He thought it was a burglar trying to break into our house so he called the

cops to report me. I had to explain that I was only in my own backyard watching stars, swimming, and praying.

Good to know our neighborhood watch is effective.

For a guy who doesn't do anything, I lead an interesting life.

Tuesday, August 16, 2011

Lord Of Ducks

Ginny or I drive past Riverside Park, near our home, twice a day and recently we've noticed a commotion there.

Riverside Park ranks among Jacksonville's oldest. Around 1900 five lakes spotted the park where picnickers fed scraps to alligators. The city landscaped the five small lakes into one larger one with a central island and now picnickers feed birds around that pond.

The park lies along a major flyway and for hundreds of years migrating birds pause there. In winter months so many roost on the central island, that their white feathers hide trees and bushes so the island appears as a fluttering white mountain caused by egrets, cranes, herons, wood storks—and ducks.

Ginny and I investigated the recent commotion and found the city has drained the pond to refurbish it. That meant temporarily chasing the birds out of the way.

The ducks did not want to go.

Environmentalists waded into the pond muck to capture them and transport them to BEAKS, the Bird Emergency Aid and Kare Sanctuary on Big Talbot Island, where they will be cared for till construction finishes and they can be returned to Riverside Park.

"It turns out that when ducks become domesticated and are used to being fed and living in one place, they're not leaving," One of the duck rescue crew said.

"We had to chase them back and forth across the pond and into the more mucky parts to wear them out. It was insane," said another.



Naturally all the local newspaper stories about the great duck chase reminded me of Matilda. I wrote about her back in 2006. Here is that story from page 197 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 had a duck I liked to hold.
And now my story is all told.

These words of that great American poet Theodor Seuss Geisel, Dr. Seuss, (1904-1991) sum up my day Tuesday.

Yes, Matilda the duck is no longer with us.

Beginning on May 13th, (2006) my blog has periodically chronicled how this wild duck came to stay in our back yard after being attacked by a raccoon.

We have fed the duck. We bought a pool for the duck. We protected the duck from neighborhood cats.

And we learned from the duck.

Ginny and I enjoyed a perfect day together yesterday. We lingered over coffee talking. We lounged in our swimming pool. We read our books. We napped. We enjoyed a two-hour lunch at a favorite restaurant talking about raising children, Indonesia, computers, and a host of other topics.

We decided that Matilda the duck no longer needs the refuge and safety of our yard. We decided that we should take her to a local park with a lake sprinkled with other ducks. We feared that as her wings became stronger she might fly over our fence and land in a neighbor's yard among dogs. We decided that the best thing to do for her was to set her free.

It may sound dumb but we prayed about our decision.

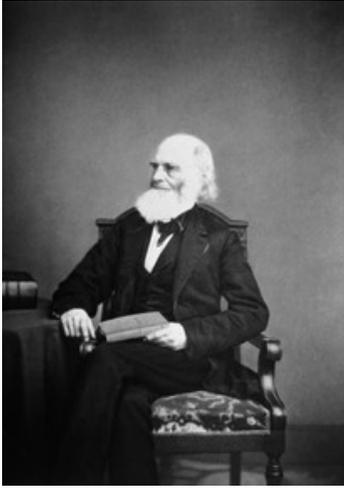
Yes, we prayed for a duck.

The Scripture says that God knows every sparrow that falls.

Maybe so, but are ducks included in God's care?

One of my favorite hymns is *All Creatures Of Our God And King*, written by St. Francis of Assisi. In his poem, Francis calls upon all nature, clouds, winds, birds, animals, men to praise our Creator.

When I looked at Matilda the duck, I'd remember the words of the poet William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878).



Bryant watched a waterfowl flying across a marsh and thought about how the good Lord God guides us through life:

He who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain
flight,
In the long way that I must tread alone,
Will lead my steps aright.

Sounds lovely, doesn't it?

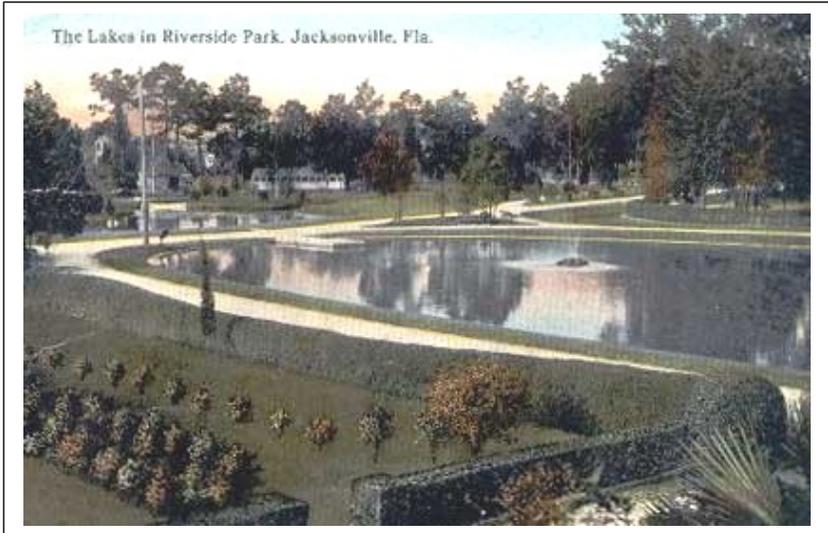
Ginny and I tossed a wet beach towel over a protesting Matilda.

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 Riverside Park lake as possible.

Here's an old postcard showing where we released Matilda:



We carried a bag of bread scraps. Ginny scattered the crumbs in one place to attract the other ducks away while I unwrapped Matilda at the far side of the pond.

Oh, she was happy to be free.

In her own element, she flapped and dove and preened...

Then three male mallards saw her and attacked. They chased her around the edge of the pond. They chased her out of the water, pecking and grabbing her neck and fighting over her.

Were they killing her?

Were they mating?

I ran over and kicked the three males away.

Matilda ran quacking up under a hedge with the three males charging in hot pursuit. Great squawking and shaking of bushes.

Soon the three mallards emerged—Alone.

They began chasing another female across the grass.

We searched the undergrowth, but saw no further sign of Matilda.

We think they killed her.

As a Christian I believe (barely) that Scripture which says, "We know that all things work together for good to

them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose”.

That’s a tenant of my faith. But why does it so often seem otherwise in my day to day experience? Why do so many of our efforts seem so futile?

Why would God allow us the nurse this duck back to health only to have her raped or killed by her own kind?

That makes no sense to me in my limited human experience. Maybe it does make sense in some vast eternal plan, but it doesn’t seem right to me in the here and now where I live.

My faith says “Good”. My experience says “Crap”.

I can not deny my personal observation of life; neither can I deny the love of God.

It’s hard for me but I try to move beyond my own observations and experiences to a place where I can say with Paul, the quintessential realist, “I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

I believe that.

On a shallow level I really do believe that..

But sometimes, even when you do what is reasonable,

Even when you act with the best intentions,

Even when you plan ahead,

Even when you do what is right,

Even when you do what is logical,

Even when you pray —

Even then, your duck gets screwed.

Or worse.

Wednesday, August 17, 2011
Almost A Blog Posting

When Ginny and I drove to the library last night, we approached the railroad crossing on Post Street.

Alarm bells rang.

Red lights flashed.

Four orange-stripped crossing arms swung down across the road.

The oncoming Amtrak train blew its mighty air horn.

Ginny stopped our car well back.

And a teen-aged kid on his bike peddled hell-for-leather past us racing to get across the tracks just before the train.

The Amtrak engine blasted another warning horn at him.

The kid skidded to a sideways halt just inches in front of the speeding engine.

I turned to my pale wife and said, "Darn! I thought I was going to have something to blog about tomorrow".

Sunday, August 21, 2011
One Person. Two Parts.

My one post today contains two parts. They have nothing to do with each other except that each came to my attention on the same day. This single posting contains the two elements of religion and mutilation murder.

If reading about either of the two is likely to upset you—this will get gross—you may want to skip my writing for today and look at internet photos of cute kittens.

First, last Wednesday my middle son, Johnny, my friend Wes, and I enjoyed breakfast at Ayres then returned to my house to talk about guy things.

We wild and crazy guys enjoy interesting bull-sessions at my house.

So, naturally our conversation turned to the Council of Chalcedon, a meeting of leading Christian leaders held in Chalcedon, Turkey, in the year 451.

Of course neither Johnny nor I had ever heard of the Council of Chalcedon before, but Wes gave us the low down.

The meeting held in 451 revolved around the question of the nature of Jesus Christ: was His nature human nature, or was it divine?

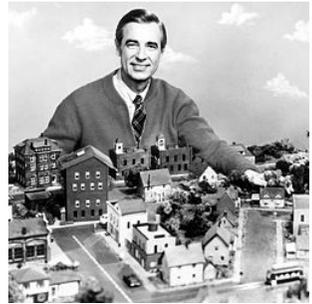
Here's the problem—Remember that time Jesus felt so tired that He fell asleep in the boat? He was so human He could get worn out and doze off.

But a storm came up and threatened to swamp the boat and drown everybody. Panicked disciples woke Jesus. He said, "Peace! Be Still!" and the sea calmed mirror smooth.

Scared the crap out of the disciples who said, "What manner of man is this that even the wind and waves obey him"?

Well, that's the question the Council of Chalcedon debated.

Some argued that Jesus was only human. A great teacher, a good guy, as nice as Buddha, Mohamed, or Mr. Rogers. Fully human. A human who ran afoul of religious leaders and paid the price for having advanced insights. But that ignorant people ascribed god-like powers to Him.



Others said that Jesus was like a super-big angel. Glowed in the dark. An emanation of the divine spirit. A May-the-Force-be-with-you kind of guy. Ethereal. Not human at all. After all Jesus said, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth". And once His own disciples, when they saw Him walk on water, didn't they think they were seeing a ghost?

So, what manner of man is this?

On one hand, nailed to the cross, He cried, "I thirst!". On the other hand, three days later He rose from the tomb. Human? Divine?

The Scripture says that in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, yet He could be tortured to death. Human. Yet, after being dead for three days, He rose from the tomb. The Scripture says Jesus is, "declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead".

What manner of man is this?

The council in 451 formulated a statement called the Chalcedonian Definition; in part their statement reads:

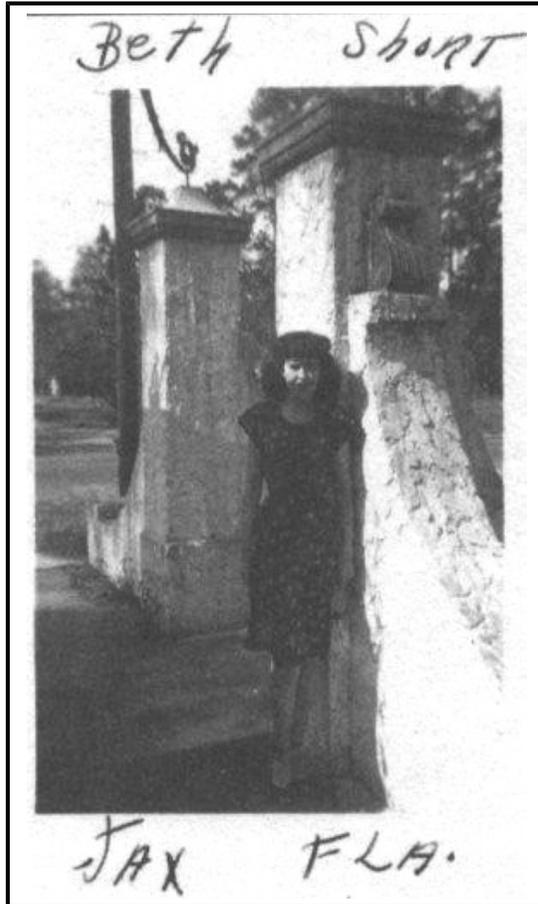
We unite in teaching all men to confess the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This selfsame one is perfect both in deity and in humanness; this selfsame one is also actually God and actually man, with a rational soul {meaning human soul} and a body. He is of the same reality as God as far as his deity is concerned and of the same reality as we ourselves as far as his humanness is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted. Before time began he was begotten of the Father, in respect of his deity, and now in these "last days," for us and behalf of our salvation, this selfsame one was born of Mary the virgin, who is God-bearer in respect of his humanness...

There's lots more saying essentially that Jesus is Lord God Almighty who loved us enough to show up in our world as a baby and grow up human to sacrifice Himself for our sin. The Chalcedonian Creed "established the orthodox view that Christ has two natures (human and divine) that are unified in one person".

Now the ball is in our court.

That was what Wes, Johnny and I talked about Wednesday morning.

Wednesday afternoon Louise, a young lady in North Carolina, sent me an e-mail asking my help identifying the background in a snapshot taken here in Jacksonville in the 1940s. Here is a copy of her old photograph:



Where in Jacksonville could that photograph have been taken?

Notice the gateway in the background.

Back during the Florida Land Boom of the 1920s, area speculators constructed a number of these Spanish-looking gateways at the entrances of proposed subdivision developments. Often nothing else was actually built as the proposed development never happened, and investors lost their money in the crash of '28 and the Great Depression began.

Over the years many of these gateway constructions (I don't know what to call the things) were torn down to make way for newer building projects, but several still stand. So Wednesday night Ginny and I drove around looking for one that would match the photo's background.

The closest match we could find lies at the entrance to Jacksonville's Lake Shore subdivision. At the intersection of Bayview and Appleton streets an elaborate gateway consisting of about six arches and pillars still stands. One of these, modified by repairs over the years, may be the one in the photo.

But I'm not satisfied that this is the right spot.

So, with Lousie's permission, I'm posting the snapshot of Elizabeth Short.

Because I often write about Jacksonville history, I'm asking all you readers who are local history buffs, if any of you recognize the gateway in the picture and can pinpoint the location—please e-mail me or make a note in the comment box. I'd appreciate it.

Although Louise has read extensively about Beth Short, as you may have guessed, I'd never heard of her before. As I looked up information, I discovered Elizabeth Short was the victim in the Black Dahlia Murder Case.

One person in two parts.

The 22-year-old woman aspired to become a movie star. She placed herself in places and among people who might further that ambition.

On January 15, 1947, her nude body was discovered in a vacant lot in Los Angeles. Her killer mutilated her—slashed her mouth open ear to ear, battered her face, cut off her right breast and sliced open the left, stuffed broken glass up her, and cut her in half.

Here is one photo taken at the crime scene in Los Angeles:



One person in two parts.

The *Los Angeles Examiner* sensationalized the case as the “Black Dahlia Murder”. Someone mailed the newspaper a packet containing articles which had belonged to Elizabeth Short, her birth certificate, photos, etc.

Over the course of the investigation more than 50 men and women called the police confessing to be the murder.

The case has never been solved.

If any reader can identify the background of the photo of taken here in Jacksonville, I'd appreciate knowing about it.

Tuesday, August 23, 2011
A Happy Trip With Eve



Years ago I taught my middle daughter, Eve, how to drive.

A good investment of daddy time.

Last week Eve chauffeured me on a long trip up into Georgia as we spent a day together for the first time in ages.

We talked over old times from when she was a child, and future plans as she told me about names she and her husband, Mark, have picked out for when and if they have a child. And we talked about books—since Eve is a librarian and I'm a writer, what else?

At Kings Bay we visited the decommissioned nuclear submarine at the base entrance:



I still have trouble thinking of any nuclear sub as obsolete.



We also wandered down a short woods road to visit the ruins of a sugar mill built in 1825:





As a gentle rain fell, we enjoyed lunch on the balcony at the Riverview Café overlooking the St. Mary's River:



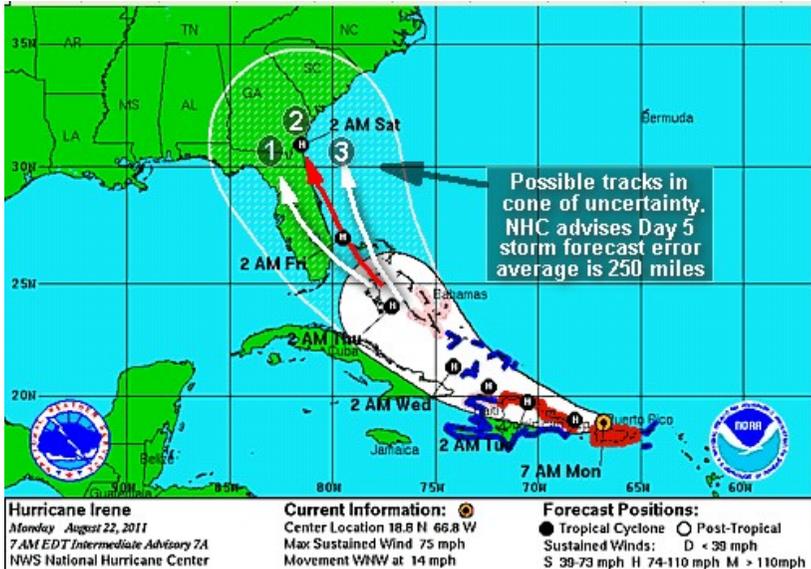
Old age and decrepitude caught up with me so I rested for a couple of hours beside the fountain in St. Mary's Park while Eve explored book stores and antique shops.



Little did I dream back when I taught Eve to drive that she would turn into such a competent driver with quick reactions, confidence, and perceptions. The pleasant day being chauffeured around to pleasant spots by my daughter proves that a kid can turn out better than her dad.

Wednesday, August 24, 2011 Living In The Cone

If you look close at the red arrow on this map of Hurricane Irene's projected path, if you notice the point of the red arrow right there where the H sits in the black circle, if you enlarge the point of that arrow a thousand times, you will see a picture of me sitting at my computer this morning. See me smile?



Yes, I live right in the center of the Cone of Uncertainty.

Not just in hurricane season, I live there all the time. I never know what's coming next. I get inklings now and then, things like the storm warnings and hurricane track projections and I prepare as best I can (sometimes. Other times I ignore all warnings) but still most things catch me by surprise. I never know what's coming.



A couple of times every year we Floridians face decisions about approaching hurricanes: will it hit here? Or south of us? Or north of us? Is this one close enough that I should take all the pictures off the walls? Sink lawn chairs in the pool? Run for the hills?

The tv weathermen update us with various probabilities and graphic maps showing percentages of possibility. A neat site called Hurricane City at <http://www.hurricanecity.com/> .contains everything you'd possibly want to know about hurricanes past and present.

Sunday's projection by the National Weather Service predicts that our home lies right on the centerline in the Cone Of Uncertainty. This morning's projections put the storm a little to the east, but allows for a 250-mile wobble either way.

Ginny and I reviewed our normal hurricane preparations:

Year round we keep a cupboard of water, canned goods and tools we may need; we also have a Grab & Go box containing insurance policies, social security papers, medical records, etc. That's always packed and by the door.

But as always last minute storm things keep us busy:

We checked the status of all our prescriptions and renewed the one that are low. We bought some extra mosquito repellent, some comfort foods and two 9-volt batteries missing from our kit. We washed all the laundry because when the electricity goes out, who knows when we'll be able to again?

Yesterday when Johnny and Terry came over to mow our yard, they helped me prune some branches which might tangle in electric lines or threaten house windows.

I recall that in preparing for a previous hurricane, Ginny made a memorable statement of Christian faith: "If the hurricane passes, we're ok," she said. "If we lose the house and car, we're ok. And even if we die in the storm, we're still ok. Nothing to worry about".

As Christians we do lie in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. I believe that. Yet, being a worrywart, I also live in my own little daily Cone Of Uncertainty. Should we dine at Burger King or Chez Michael? Should I work on

the Cracker manuscript or scan the Brooks' history pages?
Pay the electric bill or buy printer cartridges?

So, I arrive at a solid decision... Ha!

Then something happens.

I was certain I was going to do this, then that intervenes.

The Bible says, "Boast not thyself of tomorrow, for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth".

Any second something can happen which makes us say, "Well, this changes everything"!

For instance, yesterday afternoon about 2 o'clock, millions of people around our nations capitol were coming back from lunch, driving the highways, planning to get to work, sign that contract, finish that report, see tourist sights...

The Associated Press reports:

It wasn't a disaster but it was ... different. Unnerving is the word that comes to mind.

A rare, powerful 5.8-magnitude earthquake rattled the eastern third of the United States on Tuesday afternoon, damaging older buildings, shutting down much of the nation's capital and unnerving tens of millions of people from New England to the Carolinas.

A fault near the small town of Mineral, Va., suddenly ruptured. In Boston or Charleston or Detroit it might have felt like a sudden case of vertigo. Closer to the epicenter it was not so subtle. It began with a shudder, as if a helicopter were landing nearby or perhaps someone had turned on a large piece of machinery. Within a couple of seconds, it grew into a heaving, bucking, no-doubt-about-it earthquake.

Even those who knew what was happening had braced for worse, some remembering the Indian Ocean quake that triggered a tsunami and a nuclear disaster in Japan.

"I knew it was an earthquake, but my first thought was, 'Oh my God, something's going to happen to the power plant," said 21-year-old Whitney Thacker in Mineral, Va., a town near the epicenter where the

sidewalks were littered with fallen stones, masonry and broken glass. "It was scary."

Virginia Dominion Power shut down its two-reactor nuclear power plant within 10 miles of the quake's epicenter, but said there was no evidence of any damage to the decades-old North Anna Power Station.

Cracks appeared in the Washington Monument and the National Cathedral, which had three capstones break off its tower. Windows shattered and grocery stores were wrecked in Virginia, where the quake was centered. The White House and Capitol were evacuated.

The certain plans of over 12 million people changed in seconds.

We all live in a cone of uncertainty.

Any second something can happen which makes us say, "Well, this changes everything"!

A girl smiles at a guy, and that smile disrupts his plan for the day and possibly his idea of what his whole life was going to be.

A letter from the IRS. A missed period. A winning lotto ticket. A notice from the Draft Board. A CAT Scan report. A sudden awareness of God's love for you. An earthquake. A hurricane. A car crash. A book. A tv show. A prayer—any of these things can change the course of your life forever, for now and for eternity.

It can happen anywhere.

Yesterday a couple of security guards here in Jacksonville passed a normal, quiet, boring, routine day until a raging man with a knife slashed them both—where did this happen? In the library at Florida Community College At Jacksonville!

(I can't remember the newly changed name of the college; it's still FCCJ to me.)

Some disasters and some happy occasions we can plan for and look forward to; others catch us unawares. We all live in a Cone Of Uncertainty.

The only sure and certain hope we can possibly rely on is the character of Jesus Christ.

Anything less than Jesus is... uncertain.

Thursday, August 25, 2011

Miss. Marple, Eat Your Heart Out!

Last Sunday (August 21st) I mentioned a photograph of Beth Short who was tortured, murdered, and mutilated in Los Angles in 1947. Elizabeth Short was the victim in the [Black Dahlia Murder Case](#). Here murder was never solved.



Earlier in the 1940s, she had lived a while in Jacksonville, my hometown.

JAX FLA.

The young lady in North Carolina who sent me the photograph, Louise, asked for help in identifying exactly where in Jacksonville it was taken

While I am not an expert on local history, the subject interests me, and I've written a couple of books about Jacksonville's history. So it is not too unusual for folks to e-mail questions.

But I did not know an answer for Louise..

I made a couple of guesses based on those Spanish-flavored pillars in the gateway in the photo background..

I guessed wrong.

Back during the Florida Land Boom of the 1920s, area speculators constructed a number of these Spanish-looking gateways at the entrances of proposed subdivision developments. Often nothing else was actually built as the proposed development never happened, and investors lost their money in the crash of '28 as the Great Depression began.

I visited several of the remaining gateways but none quite matched the photo.

So I appealed to blog readers for their help in pinpointing the location.

Tuesday night at the library a young man named Joseph called me over.

Joseph is an avid kayak fan. He dreams of paddling his kayak up the Intra-Coastal Waterway from Jacksonville to Charleston, S.C. He has given me numerous tips about books and research; he has a keen interest in Florida history and oddities. He is really helpful.



He also proves himself to be a man of discriminating taste and refinement in that he reads my blog postings frequently,

And Joseph rides his bike all over town.

Being a sharp observer of the city while riding a bike gives him the advantage of really seeing things from ground level.

He told me that I'd find the Beth Short Gateway on Ortega Boulevard in the midst of streets with Indian names; he thought it was near Apache Street.

Now, the Ortega section of Jacksonville reeks of Old Money.

In 1886, the Clyde Steamboat Line on the St. Johns River began naming its riverboats after Indian tribes. The *Algonquin*, the *Comanche*, the *Apache*, the *Arapahoe*, the *Delaware*, the *Iroquois*, the *Yemassee*, the *Huron*, the *Mohawk*, the *Cherokee*—all these river boats plied the St. Johns River. As the prosperity of ship owners increased, the streets in Ortega, Jacksonville's wealthiest section where ship owners lived on the local millionaire row, area streets came to be named after the money-making steamboats. Thus many street names in Ortega refer not

directly to the Indian tribe, but to the steamboat which had been named for the Indians.

Following Joe's tip, yesterday I drove among the Indian Streets in Ortega until I found the gateway where Beth Short had posed while her photo taken in the 1940s. It's at the intersection of Ortega Boulevard and Yacht club Road:



A cluster of these gateway pillars decorate four street corners in this prestigious spot.

They have been refurbished and whitewashed again and again over the years. Plants landscape the bases. Also, I wonder if a car may not bumped over the curb to hit one at sometime in the distant past. And today lovely homes flank the approach to the Florida Yacht Club, but everything fits the 1940s photograph of the murder victim.

Many thanks, Joe; I think you solved the mystery of the photo location..

Friday, August 26, 2011
I Think I Saw A Demon

My beautiful Ginny stayed home from work today. Although Hurricane Irene hangs out to sea far to the east as it passes Jacksonville, heavy rain may come and the day prove miserable. So we intend to hunker down with murder mysteries, hot tea and a big pot of chili for the whole weekend.

Heavenly prospect!

But before I log out, one thing troubles me—the other night I think I may have seen a demon.

After visiting the library for an armload of books and videos to entertain us this weekend, Ginny and I went out for dinner at a favorite restaurant. She ordered liver; I ordered braised steak tips with onions and mushrooms over rice.

As we talked about books, work, plans, children, life, I barely noticed some people move past our booth to a circular table in the corner.

Ginny was telling me about reading *Mrs. Beesom's Book Of Household Management*. I'd heard of that 1850s best-seller but I pictured the author as a matronly lady; Ginny told me that Isabella Beesom died in childbirth before reaching 30 years of age. I was telling her about a skeleton excavated in a Neolithic cairn in Scotland where...

You get the idea. So many things interest us that we've enjoyed the same ongoing conversation for over 40 years now

It hardly registered on me that people moving into that circular corner table were a woman with two boys, ages about ten and eight. Nothing remarkable there.

I paid them scant attention.

About ten minutes later a man came in to join them. A belligerent man. An angry man. An aggressive man. His military bearing and brisk manner caught my attention. He stood over his family's table demanding that they stand and rearrange their seating, which was not to his liking for some reason.

He beckoned the waitress and stood over her while complaining that something was wrong about the drink order. I was concentrating on Ginny's conversation and the family was too far away for me to overhear what was going on but I noticed that the man called the manager and stood over her while demanding something or another—all this before he even sat down at the table.

Then, every few minutes, something compelled him to stand, to walk around that end of the restaurant. To radiate aggressiveness. He got up at least six times that I noticed. When he spoke to his wife, he leaned forward till six inched away her face and spoke emphatically.

His little boys sat not moving, ramrod straight at the table like cadets at West Point.

Now the first word that would normally pop into my head when seeing a guy act this way is "asshole"—but this guy's behavior sparked another word— Hagridden.

Where did that come from?

I know that in olden times people said a man was hagridden when they felt he was being compelled to act by a witch, when he was being driven from place to place, from thing to thing without reason, when he was being cast about like the mire stirred up by crashing waves. As though he were saddled, whipped, spurred, and driven by a demon hag.

This 16th Century engraving from the British Museum gives the idea:



Hagridden—driven wild by biting flies, worked into a lather by demon forces, pushed beyond endurance, driven into frenzied activity—like biting gnats attacking your ears and eyes.

I can never remember in my whole life having ever before heard, spoken or written the word Hagridden—but that it the word that came into my mind as I watched that man slam into the men's room and dash right back out before the door eves swung shut.

Hagridden. Could it have been drugs? I doubt it. Years ago I did volunteer counseling among drug addicts and I did not witness such compulsion in a man before. Hagridden.

Now, being a Christian does not mean I see demons behind every tree. Hollywood conditions us to expect special effects of shrieks and flashing lights as signs of

demon activity. In reality, I see nothing special about demons. I suspect they are so common that we don't notice them. They are more likely to be in commonplace executive board rooms and political rallies than in green projectile vomiting.

But something was wrong with this man. Something was very wrong. Something tormented that man.

His anguish bothered me and I cast about in my mind about how to engage him in some conversation so I could speak to him about peace and the Prince of Peace. But nothing came to mind as appropriate. I saw not chance to witness.

I felt relieved. This guy scared me. He intimidated me. This is none of my business, I thought.

I thought maybe he is not hagridden, maybe he's just a yankee.

Nevertheless, listening to Ginny's conversation with one ear, I prayed silently for this stranger.

I recalled that once right after His transfiguration, Jesus cast out an unclean spirit which the disciples had tried to remove, but couldn't. Jesus told them, "This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting".

I'd already prayed. But fasting? Who me?

Lord, my steak tips, mushrooms and onions might get cold. And this meal is expensive. Fasting? Ha. I'm a concerned Christian up to a point. Then I balk.

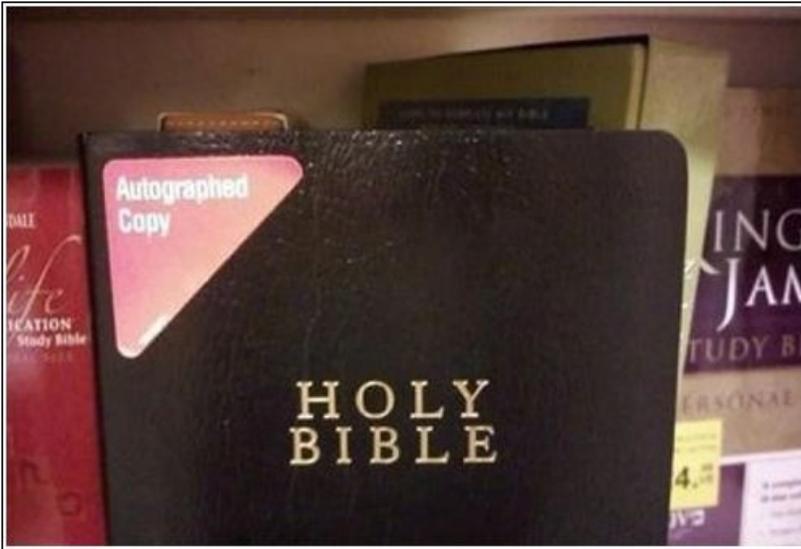
The family stood up to leave. The man had occupied my attention... but now I noticed his wife.

Her left arm was broken.

In a cast.

In a sling.

Tuesday, August 30, 2011
Bible Verses In Conflict



Sometimes I hate to read the Bible.

When I turn to the holy Scripture for comfort and consolation, I end up condemned. It ought not to be like that.

Isaiah had the ticket! He said, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned".

And John wrote, "For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved".

That's the way it's supposed to work.

Maybe it does for other people, but generally Bible reading kicks me.

Oh, I can handle the historical books just fine. I have no problem with Noah building an ark, or with David hitting the giant in the head with a rock or with Samuel snatching up King Agag's sword and hewing him in pieces before the Lord.

Those bits of Scripture are easy for me to believe.

Creation? Sure. If God almighty can save me, then He'd have no problem speaking a universe into existence.

Virgin Birth? Sure. If God enlivens every sperm and every egg for every frog that swims in the pond, then surely He can quicken an egg without a sperm.

Massacre of the Innocents? Sure. Kind Herod just did what Suetonius says a lot of other kings in his day did to protect a royal bloodline.

Resurrection? I have no problem believing that the Prince of Life has life in Himself and conquered death after dying on the cross for us. What else would you expect Him to do?

So I have no problem believing the Bible's historical portions. Those portions make no demands on me. But, when it comes to practice, to living a Christian life, to being a godly person, the Scripture kicks my ass.

Case in point—Saturday I got a phone call from a person in need. To help would cost me untold amounts of emotional stress, time, energy and money. Being Christian often does cost.

That's ok. As King David said, "Shall I offer the Lord that which costs me nothing"?

But David's keyword there is ME.

What about when my offering costs other people, my family especially?

Jesus condemned the practice of *Corban*, in Mark 7:11. The term Corban meant that when you owe someone a duty or a debt, you weasel out of it by giving a gift to the temple. Then you say, "What I owed to you, I gave to God, therefore I don't owe you anything anymore—so tough tit".

For ages I have done free Christian service busywork that cost me emotional stress, time, energy and money—stuff I took from my wife and children while I chased around doing goody-goody activities in the name of God.

I designed evangelistic parade floats. I used paints and poster paper to present Gospel messages in city parks. I taught Bible lessons at a rescue mission. I sorted clothes at a mission. I counseled addicts at a drug rehab ministry. I delivered food baskets to the poor...

In fact one of the neatest compliments ever paid to me was when I was unloading a truck full of canned goods for a Thanksgiving giveaway to 500 poor families. The project director happened by to watch me work alone unloading that truck and he said, "John Cowart, I think you

must be the only Christian in Jacksonville who does not have a bad back”.

What a laugh!

That made me feel good.

Doing all this stuff made me feel good

I felt important. Useful. Pious. Christian.

Meanwhile Ginny and the kids suffered because I spent all my time enhancing my reputation through the name of Jesus instead of being gainfully employed in providing for them. They lived in John-generated privation. Second-hand dresses. Worn out shoes. Food stamps. HUD housing. No money to buy the kids’ school photos.

Here comes the Scripture with the words of Paul to Timothy:

“If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel”.

So I’d feel guilty and decide to stop volunteering and work for pay at a real job.

Here comes the Scripture to mind where Jesus said:

“No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God”.

Worse than an infidel, on one hand / Unfit for the kingdom of God, on the other.

And that’s where I have lived most of my adult life.

As a person who believe the Bible is God’s word, how do I reconcile things when one Scripture indicates one thing and another Scripture indicates another?

I don’t.

Essentially I view this as a paradox.

I serve my family best by following Jesus; I follow Jesus best by serving my family.

An ancient rabbi said that every man should carry in his pouch two stones. On one is written, “I am a worm and no man”; on the other stone is written, “For my sake the universe was created”.

Which stone should you use?

The rabbi said, “The one you need most at the moment”.

Yesterday I sought the wise counsel of my best advisors, my grown children, the one immediately available. Thank God for them.

I outlined the situation from Saturday’s phone call, then listened.

One pointed out that I am the weakest link in this family’s defenses. I’m the impractical soft-touch. That’s why the caller requested my help before approaching anyone else in the family.

Another said that I am aged and depleted. I no longer have the energy to cope with a problem of this magnitude. I should concentrate on minding my own business.

Another pointed out that I now have one primary duty—and that’s to Ginny. My household no longer consists of a bunch of people, but of two people, me and Ginny. Therefore my duty to God is caring for her.

I’m glad my grown kids are so much smarter than me—if you don’t believe that, just ask them.

Not only did they advise me, but they plan to step in with hands-on help, tough-love help. In essence, they told me to shut up and stand aside. They’ll take care of the situation.

To them, the will of God seems clear and practical in this situation and they are prepared to move ahead with only my minimal involvement in a background supportive role.

While I ponder this and that aspects of the situation, they seem to know just what to do. Some people struggle with the Christian life; others have immediate clear insight.

For instance:

Once upon a time there was this preacher at a small, poor church which hardly ever met his salary. A call came from a large church which could pay his family’s expenses.

A deacon from the poor church went to the pastor's house to see what he'd decided.

A little girl answered the door.

"Is your daddy home"?

"He's locked in his den all day praying for God's will about if we should be going to the big church," she said.

"Well, is your mama home"?

"Yes, Sir. She's upstairs packing for our move".

Friday, September 2, 2011 My Missionary Position

Yesterday at dawn a bunch of us met my eldest son, Fred, at the Amtrak station. I had not heard a word from him since Christmas.

I hear that in the past couple of years through a series of circumstances, poor choices, and alcohol, Fred lost his job, his home to foreclosure, and his car and all his possessions save the clothes on his back to thieves in a carjacking.

Yesterday he arrived sober, clean, well-groomed, and with a positive attitude about starting a new life here in Jacksonville. I am the father of six grown children and I must admit it's really strange to see I have a son who has white hair. Makes me feel old.

Since three days ago when we first learned of Fred's planned arrival, the rest of the family has wracked our brains over how to help him without enabling him in suffering further loss. Financial and practical considerations for each segment of the family dictate that none of us wants him living in our homes. We just can't handle it.

So Terry, Jennifer, Johnny and I welcomed him at the train station. Work tied up the others. We grabbed a take-out breakfast to enjoy at a park overlooking Trout River and introduced him to some options available for him here in Jacksonville.

Anticipating that conversation has been a brain-eater for me. I could think of little else than the well-being of my son and the rest of my family.

Fred tells us he's been staying at a church rescue mission in North Carolina before Hurricane Irene and some personality conflicts made that situation too difficult for him to stay. In the three days we've known he was coming, Ginny, Helen and Terry investigated the residential rescue missions here in Jacksonville.

Fortunately, our family knows the ropes in many local missions because we have volunteered help in various ones for years.

Over the years we have been on the receiving end of mission help too. In fact, guys from a local rescue mission catered my eldest daughter's wedding reception.

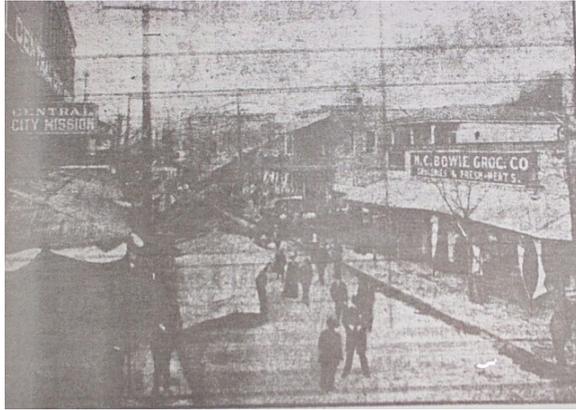
I suppose Ginny and I've helped out in missions as an expression of our faith off and on for 40 years. All my six children have kept up this tradition of charitable volunteering at soup kitchens, clothing centers, counseling facilities, women's shelters, medical clinics, walks for breast cancer, feeding programs, and missions. They also do a lot of hands-on charitable stuff I don't even know about.

But, trying to place a homeless person in a mission, from the other side of the counter so to speak, is a different ballgame.

Ginny made printouts and maps of Jacksonville's missions. Terry called each one about openings and requirements. Back in December, Donald and Helen made arrangements and replaced Fred's broken glasses with a new pair. This week Jennifer and Terry looked up information on labor pools. Johnny coordinated phone calls. I napped and made suggestions.

Jacksonville's history abounds with tales of heroic Christian self-sacrifice in rescue missions. In Spanish days Franciscan missionaries relieved shipwrecked sailors along the coast and ministered to Indian tribes during the small pox epidemics. In the 1880s, so many destitute tuberculosis patients came to Jacksonville for their health that various churches set up "Pest Houses" to care for the dying poor.

About 1898,
Dr. Robert
Bateman,
founded
Jacksonville's
Central City
Mission.



Dr. Bateman
died aboard the
Titanic as a hero;
he'd been to
England to study
George Mueller's methodology for establishing an
orphanage and a home for "fallen women" in Jacksonville.
A few years ago I wrote an article about Jacksonville's
titanic Hero at

<http://www.cowart.info/Monthly%20Features/Titanic%204%20web/Bateman%204%20web.htm> .



Today, over a dozen rescue missions work to relieve the poor who pour into Jacksonville from the bleak, frozen north as well as our home-grown poor.

So yesterday, Jennifer, Johnny, Terry and I showed Fred the maps and printouts and drove him to three different missions so he could make choices among the programs available.

He enrolled in a cooking school offered by the 100-year-old Clara White Mission. He is supposed to start today. I anticipate good things from this. We'll see what happens.

Because I've been involved in mission stuff for years, a bunch of them still send me e-mails and news letters soliciting support. Here's a great joke I'll retell from the Circle of Love newsletter that came in Monday:

At an international seminar for preachers, pastor Joe heard a guest speaker begin his talk saying, "The best years of my life were spent in the arms of a woman who is not my wife".

The audience of preachers was shocked.

The international speaker continued, "That woman, of blessed memory, was Bella Kopynskypolis, my mother".

The crowd burst into laughter.

Pastor Joe thought he'd steal the guest speaker's opening to use on his own congregation. So the next Sunday back home, he mounted the pulpit and said, "The best years of my life were spent in the arms of a woman who is not my wife".

His announcement stunned his congregation.

He continued, "Her name was Bella... Bella... I can't remember that blessed woman's name"!

Tuesday, September 6, 2011

Labor Day Reading Earns Me A Dazzling Smile

Yesterday, a sexy young mother gave me a dazzling smile.

That's because she did not know what I was thinking.

What was I thinking?

I was thinking about books and reading.

Here's a bit of background: Ginny was off work for this past long weekend. Anticipating a peaceful time at home, we'd checked an armload of books out of the library. We both love to read and to tell each other about the books we enjoy. Our conversation never ends. Each of us usually has three or four books going at a time.

Over the weekend lounging by the pool and watching birds at our garden feeders, Ginny has been reading one of Dorothy Gilman's *Mrs. Pollifax* mysteries.

For years I've intended to read Suetonius' *Lives Of The Caesars* and I've finally gotten around to it. Suetonius wrote about the year 120 A.D. He was one of the earliest pagan writers to possibly mention Jesus Christ; he said that the Emperor Claudius, "Expelled the Jews from Rome since they were constantly in rebellion over the instigation about one Chrestus". He also says that during

Nero's reign, "Punishments were imposed on the Christians—adherents of a new and dangerous superstition".

Suetonius' *Lives* covers the emperors Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus and Domitian—fascinating reading all!

Suetonius tells about the family background, the career, the reign, the government, the virtues, the vices and the death of each emperor. He tells about feasts and orgies and gladiator fights and wars and executions and the fall of Jerusalem and omens and baths, and ... and ... And he writes so well. His book is a pleasure to read.

Here's the bibliographic information:

Suetonius. *Lives Of The Caesars*. Translated by Catharine Edwards. Oxford World Classics. Oxford University Press. ©2000. ISBN: 0-19-283271-9. Library call number: 920.0375.

One section I found particularly interesting was—I know, I'll get back to the sexy young mother's dazzling smile in a moment—Suetonius wrote a description of the Emperor Nero's Golden House, one of history's most lavish mansions. Years ago I wrote a piece called *The Ugliest Picture In The World*. It tells about a feature in the Golden House. I think it's one of the most important things I ever wrote.

Anyhow, back to the girl's smile...

Yesterday Ginny and I ate lunch at a Five Guys hamburger restaurant, a place where you serve yourself soda. The soda/condiment counter was at the other side of the restaurant from our table.

I walk with the aid of a cane.

I poured my soda. Ketchup gets dispensed from an industrial-strength vat with a pump on top. I nested two large drink lids and pumped ketchup for our french fries. I started walking toward our table. My hip gave out. I tottered. Drink in one hand, lid full of ketchup in the other, cane draped over my arm, I staggered. I could not balance myself.

Ginny had walked ahead of me to our table. She realized I was in trouble. She rushed back and took drink

and lid full of ketchup from my hands. Using my cane, I staggered to our table laughing.

In my mind's eye I envisioned what would have happened if I fell... All that ketchup would have splattered all over me. The manager would call rescue saying, "An old guy fell on the floor. Hurry. He's horribly mutilated. Blood all over".

Ginny and I laughed at that image and it reminded me of ... a book.

So I told her about one of Donald Westlake's Dortmunder books about an inept gang of thieves in Manhattan. They want to rob this midtown bank or something. John Dortmunder tells Joe to create a diversion to lure the guards away. The gang stands in the busy street ready to go into the bank. Joe comes strolling along pushing a baby carriage.

As Joe gets to the intersection, he shoves the baby carriage in front of a passing bus.

Brakes squeal.

Red glop gushes from the mangled baby carriage under the bus wheels.

Women faint.

Men vomit.

Guards rush from the bank.

The Dortmunder gang also rushes to the curb also aghast at what Joe had done.

Joe melts in the crowd.

Diverted by the diversion, the gang misses robbing the bank.

Turns out Joe had placed a watermelon in that baby carriage!

When Dortmunder raged at him, Joe said, "Well, you told me to create a diversion. It worked".

So... as Ginny and I left Five Guys and walked to our car, this sexy young mother comes across the Publix parking lot pushing a baby carriage. She weaves in and out of traffic on busy Oak Street.

I watch fascinated.

She watches me watch her.

I grin.

She throws me a dazzling smile.

She thinks I'm ogling her or admiring her baby.

I'm thinking about the watermelon in Westlake's Dortmund book.

Ginny notices the interplay between me, a card-carrying dirty old man, and the sweet young thing pushing the baby carriage.

I say, "Should I call her over and tell her what I'm thinking".

Ginny did not give me a dazzling smile.

She dared me to say a word.

Damn. Being well-read can get you into trouble.

Thursday, September 8, 2011 A Cat and No White Powder

The thing I remember most vividly about September 11, 2001, is putting a cat in a cardboard box.

If you don't believe that cats are terrorists, try putting one in a box when he does not want to go!

As the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks approaches the *Florida Times-Union*, my local newspaper, is publishing a series of first-person accounts by Jacksonville residents about their memories of the event.

The T-U series is online at <http://news.jacksonville.com/since911/?/content/how-have-you-changed-911-tell-your-story>



Looking back on the event myself, I remember thinking that as the world appeared to be falling apart, my own clear-cut Christian duty was taking an old lady's cat to the vet because I'd promised her that I'd do it.

I felt my promise, which I could do something about, outranked the disaster which I could not do anything about at that moment.

God's will often lies in little, insignificant things.

Here are two entries from my 2001 diary:

Tuesday, September 11, 2001: I spent the day driving my friend Barbara here and there; grocery shopping, library, bank, etc.

About 1 o'clock a friend of hers told us that several air planes have crashed into buildings in New York and Washington, D.C. The car radio said that four air liners were hijacked by terrorists and deliberately rammed into the World Trade Center and into the Pentagon. The Whitehouse and Capital have been evacuated.

President Bush is running the country from a command center aboard Air Force One. The attack is deliberate. but we are not sure which bunch of assholes, there are so many in the world, set it off.

I got Barbara back home, phoned Ginny, put gas in the car (prices in some areas have jumped from \$1.49 to over \$5 per galleon (see what I mean about assholes), and I drove home.

Ginny's building, a telecommunications center, had been evacuated and Gale gave her a ride home earlier in the day.

We watched coverage on tv all evening.

We expected the Red Cross to call us up but have not heard from them so far. Jennifer and Eve called to check on us. Gin called her parents; I called Fred and John in D.C. — all are ok.

Newscasters estimate that 266 people died aboard the airplanes; several hundred more inside the Pentagon, and as many as 50,000 people work in the World Trade Center's three buildings that collapsed.

The terrorists timed the attack so that police and firemen who responded to rescue victims of the first crash, were caught in the second explosion (a common terrorist practice in other countries); over 300 firemen died just after they arrived on the scene.

The President gave three short speeches today and Congressmen who were still in D.C. stood on the Capital steps while leaders voiced their support of the President.

The most extraordinary thing was that at the end of the speeches, someone started singing "God Bless America" and more and more senators and representatives joined in until the whole congress were rag-tag singing with tears in their eyes. That was one of the most amazing things I've ever seen on tv.

Somebody somewhere is going to catch hell for this outrage. If we don't use nuclear bombs for this, what would we use them for?

White Powder Days--Seven days after the World Trade Center attack, two United States Senators, Tom Daschle of South Dakota and Patrick Leahy of Vermont, received mail contaminated with anthrax spores.

At the same time five more anthrax letters were received by *ABC News*, *CBS News*, *NBC News* television stations and by the *New York Post* newspaper in New York City, and by the *National Enquirer* at American Media Inc. in Boca Raton, Florida.

At least 22 people developed life-threatening anthrax infections. Five of them died of inhalation anthrax.

Stations filled the nation's tv screens with images of workers in full-body Tyvek HAZAT suits cautiously decontaminating mail and buildings. Reports on the deadly nature of anthrax spore were broadcast constantly. News anchors hourly explained what it meant to weaponize anthrax.



Scary stuff.

During this time anyone who watched the news felt as though we were walking on eggs.

"It was so scary at first, I immediately thought: I live near the Mayport Naval Station, President Bush was just in town, there's a nuclear submarine base nearby—all these reasons we could be a target," said Wanda Wynn, of the Heckscher Drive Community Club.

Eight-year-old Sean Boucher, a third-grader at Chimney Lakes Elementary School, feared terrorists would attack any minute. He said, "Those crazy guys stole planes from the most secure airports in America. If they could do that, then they could strike Florida, Jacksonville, and Argyle".

Rumor spread that anything in your mail box—even your Publishing Clearing House Entry—might be contaminated if it had been handled by post office machinery that had also handled an anthrax terrorist letter targeting someone else.

Two days after news of the anthrax attack on the senators, white powder calls flooded 911 call center. "Monday and Tuesday, dispatchers fielded 86 calls from people concerned about contact with hazardous biological agents. By yesterday morning, 103 calls had been logged".

To respond to the swarm of calls, the HAZMAT team split into three groups. Chief Alford said the department had over a hundred technicians trained to deal with hazardous materials; and that each department is equipped to identify biological agents at the scene.

Jacksonville Sheriff Nat Glover said in 35 years of law enforcement, he had never before seen a bomb squad with a backed up of calls!

But, he said, "We need to be very vigilant. Things that were routine are no longer routine".

Mayor John Delaney said city residents should not be fearful and that emergency workers have trained to respond to a bioterrorism threat.

Not a single sample of suspect material collected in Jacksonville and examined by the Florida Department of Health tested positive for anthrax.

Even with all these official assurances some Nervous Nellies still worried ... For instance... ME.

Here's another note from my September 2001 diary:

I went outside to find a brown paper package tied up with strings in my mail box. Heavy strapping tape sealed the package.

Foreign postage stamps showed that it had been mailed in Indonesia—the most populous Moslem nation on earth.

Whoa! What is this? Who do I know in Indonesia?

My first thought was that I keep a daily blog, an online diary of sorts.. According to Webalizer statistics, an average of 522 people from 89 counties visit my site every day.

Not everyone loves what I write and on rare occasions I've found hate mail in my e-mail inbox.

Could it be that Moslem terrorists have targeted me? What should I do? Call a JFRD Hazmat unit? The Sheriff's Office? The FBI?

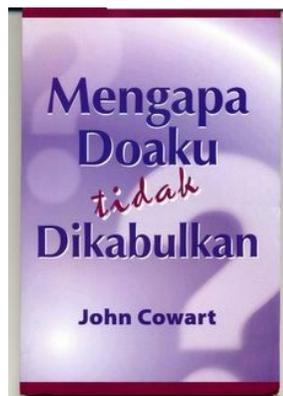
I certainly did not want to take this thing into our house and risk exposing Ginny to whatever the strange package contained.

Girding my loins with courage, I carried the package to the far corner of the backyard. I carefully cut the strings and tape so as to not disturb any white powder that might be inside.

The package contained a book—Some Christians in Indonesia have translated a book I wrote on prayer a couple of years ago into their national language and they've mailed me this copy.

It is not poison.

My book may bore readers to death—but it's not poison.



English title = *I'm Confused About Prayer* -
www.bluefishbooks.info .

Saturday, September 10, 2011
Godsends

Again and again my grown children prove themselves Godsends.

They always stand ready for interesting conversations but this past week they provided Ginny and me so much hands-on help.

Last weekend Eve treated me to lunch. She came over to pick up her copy of *Barbara White's Prayer Diary*, a book Eve helped me transcribe for publication last year.

Also last weekend Donald and Helen treated Ginny and me to dinner at Georgie's.

Between them, Eve, Donald and Helen gave us so much barbequed chicken that we have not had to cook for the whole week.

Tuesday Johnny drove over and we talked about faith, the love of Jesus, and our problems in following the will of God in day to day life. I described some of the methods I use in research as related to my hunt for Harry Mason (I'll write about that tomorrow, God willing). I questioned my own motives regarding the books I write and Johnny said, "Dad, this is what you do. This is what you are".

On Thursday, Johnny, Jennifer and Terry came over to clean house and yard. Johnny nailed down loose boards in the pool deck and edged the flowerbeds. Jennifer fixed breakfast then cleaned inside even taking down curtains, washing them and putting them up again. Terry brought the tractor and mowed the lawn then blew off the brick pathways in the garden.

I starred in the role of decrepit old dad, toothless, arthritic, crippled, going blind, helpless, senile—in other words I sat, smoked my pipe and watched them work.

They all treat me with more respect than I can ever deserve.

Friday at the library as I researched Harry Mason—I'll write about that tomorrow, God willing—I bumped into my eldest son, Fred (I wrote about his coming to Jacksonville last week).

When he was a kid the school tested him and he ranked in the genius level; he is now 52-years-old and all his life he has marched to a different oboe player. While on vacation last December, Fred, a computer geek, guided me through the process of turning over 20 of my real books into e-book format.

All my kids are smarter than me—just ask them.

Fred is now homeless living underneath a downtown bridge. The homeless shelters we introduced him to last week did not suit him—no air conditioning, he said. And something about pills.

As we sat on a bench talking amenably, his voice grew so loud a library guard appeared to ask him to tone it down.

All Fred asked of me is that when weather turns cold, if we can lend him a blanket. I assured him we would find a sleeping bag for him.

Then he saw a homeless buddy from Hemming Park and went off to talk.

God bless him.

I returned to my microfilm research.

I feel so God-blessed in my sons and daughters. Sometimes I grump about not having riches, then the Lord reminds me that He has not enriched me with things but with people, with my family.

Thanks, Kids. You are God-sent.

Love, Dad

Sunday, September 11, 2011

Hunting Harry Mason

At Jacksonville, Florida's Moncrief Park, on January 25, 1894, Gentleman Jim Corbett, boxing champion of America fought Charles Mitchell, champion of England. In only 12 minutes of boxing, Corbett knocked out Mitchell thus becoming Heavyweight Champion of the World.



Back about 1986 I wrote an article about the Big Fight. That article mentions that a promoter of the fight was Harry Mason, president of the Duval Athletic Club.

Last week I received an e-mail from Roger, a descendent of Mason's, asking if I could locate a photograph of Harry Mason or locate additional information.

Since I often write about local history—in fact *The Big Fight* article is a chapter from my book *Crackers & Carpetbaggers* (www.bluefishbooks.info) -it is not unusual for readers to question me. Most often, I have no idea of how to answer; I'm not an historian, just an amateur. But sometimes the quest sparks my interest and I try to track information down.

Using Roger's lead, I first tried the Florida State Archives.

Harry Mason was elected to serve in the Florida House of representatives in 1902; in 1903, House members posed for a group photo on the Capitol steps:

The caption reveals that Mason stands in the second row, fifth man from the left!



Ah yes, I'd know him anywhere.

I searched Bing and Google images. Turned up a photo that may possibly be his wife Bessie—or maybe not. This pretty girl is just identified as Bessie Mason, no date, no location:

I tried the Library Of Congress Prints And Photographs Division.

No Luck.

I though, maybe if I searched using Harry's middle initial, L, I'd find him. Repeated my search terms. Still no luck. Maybe instead of Harry L., I should try just H.A. Mason...

No photo.

I checked the Union Library Catalog of all university library in Florida at <http://union.catalog.fcla.edu/ux.jsp> without success. I made arrangements for a trip to Jacksonville's main library where old local newspapers are archived on microfilm.

Trouble is, neither the *Metropolis* nor the *Times-Union* newspapers have a reliable index back into the 1890s. Local papers were indexed during the Depression by starving writers in the Federal Writers' Project. There seems to be no standard rule these guys worked by; Some years are alphabetical, others by topic, others by date summaries.

Here's a tip for researchers. If a local event has national significance, it may be recorded in the *New York Times Index*. By checking the *Times* to spot a date, then going to the local newspaper for that same date, sometimes you can locate the records you want.... Sometimes.

I did that with the Championship Boxing Match and worked from there.

Harry Mason served on the Jacksonville City Council for 22 years—without ever having a newspaper photo taken of him that I could find. In 1902, the city elected him to the state House of Representatives. There's a clue. I checked the 1902 election results to see if there was a photo of the winner.

The *Times-Union* gives election results about three lines of print that year. It says less than 3,000 voters turned out and that all candidates on the Democratic slate won. It does not name or picture the winners. And it does not even mention Republicans.

However, on the same page as the election results, the newspaper lists the names of 35 young people who attended a Trolley Party and rode from downtown to Phoenix Park to attend the ostrich races.



That's a research trap I fall into all the time—looking for one thing but getting sidetracked by something more interesting... For instance did you know that one Jacksonville car dealer offered a brand new Hudson 6 motorcar for only \$650!

And I noticed that the stunningly beautiful actress Anita Stewart was starring in the play *The Virtuous Wife* at the Arcade Theatre.

Made me forget about Harry.

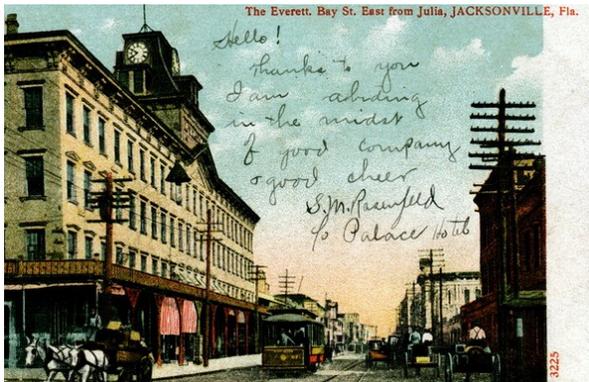
I did find photos of the three local hotels which Harry Mason owned:



The Mason Hotel:



The Everett Hotel:



And the Hotel Aragon



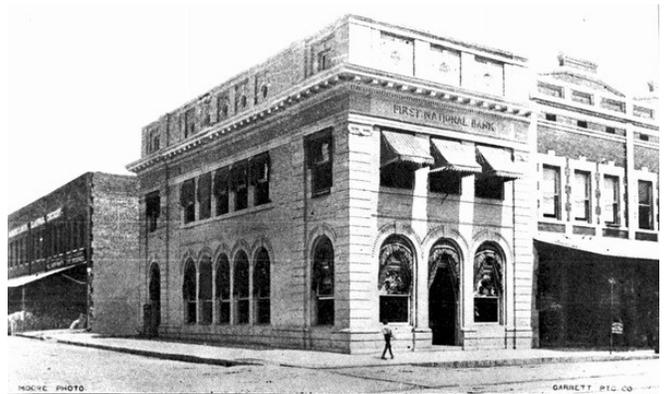
Plaza of Aragon Hotel Jacksonville, Fla.

I also found a picture, from the state archives, of Mason's own home, Villa Alexandria:



VILLA ALEXANDRIA.

I learned that Harry Mason was born in England and had served in the British Navy where he won recognition as the best swimmer in Her Majesty's Navy. In Jacksonville, he became president of the Jacksonville's First National Bank:



THE FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF FLORIDA

Now, where should I look to find a photo of a bank president?

I checked the newspaper business sections for banking news. I found that Mason made a number of speeches at different civic events—without being photographed.

Ok. Fight promoter. Hotel owner. City Councilman. State Legislature. Banker... Where would he be photographed?

I know!

The society pages.

I looked for party pictures.

I discovered that in August of 1902, Harry Mason, as a British immigrant, attended a lavish social function for Britishers celebrating the Coronation of King Edward VII. ... Drat! Newspaper photos of the king only.

Mason hosted numerous business conventions and civic meetings at his various hotels—but I could not find a photo of the man himself.

I looked up Harry Mason's obituary. He died on November 5, 1919. His obit featured this photo:



Alas, the family already has a copy of that one.

Ok. Next step. I called around to Jacksonville cemeteries which were active in 1919 and located the one where Harry and Bessie Mason are buried.

I drove out to Evergreen Cemetery, St. Mary's Section One, Block Two, Plot 38.

Here I found the Mason family's central memorial stone:



Eight or ten (not all have stones) Mason graves surround this memorial. Three of these people died within a year of each other.

Here is Harry's marker:



Here is Bessie Mason's marker:



I see a lot of 1919 dates on these stones and on others nearby in Evergreen... I wonder....I just wonder.

I wonder if the Spanish Lady killed them. Yes, the influenza epidemic of 1918-1920 decimated Jacksonville's population, over 300 hundred residents died in the epidemic's first month.; after that, so many died here that officials lost count.

The State Health Department website says, "The influenza pandemic of 1918-1919 killed more people, somewhere between 20 and 40 million worldwide, than the total number of fatalities in World War I. It has been cited as the most devastating epidemic in recorded world history. More people died of influenza in a single year than in four years of the bubonic plague, also known as "Black Death,"... the influenza of 1918-1919 was a global disaster".

World-wide, original death-toll estimates of between 20 to 40 million are considered inaccurate by modern epidemiologists, who calculate the actual numbers somewhere between 50 and 100 million. The under-reportage is blamed on poor record keeping at the time and the strategic silence imposed during World War I. More people died from the flu that circulated at the time than from fighting in the war.

Other than the death dates on the gravestones in Evergreen Cemetery, I have no other reason to think Harry Mason may have died in the epidemic; that's pure speculation on my part.

Anyhow, I failed to turn up any photograph of the man which his family does not already have. I could have browsed the Main Library much, much longer searching, but my parking meter expired.

My, but I have more fun than anybody!

Thanks be to God.

Wednesday, September 14, 2011
Will It Hold Water?

My grandfather listened to a radio speech by President Truman about the Korean War. He disagreed with something the president said. Grandpa summed up saying, "That just don't hold water".

He meant there were holes in the argument.

He used a similar expression when we boys danced about anxious to go fishing at Sampson Lake. We were all ready and raring to go, and he'd say, "You boys just hold your water. I want to finish my coffee first".

We knew that the adult expression "finish my coffee" entailed another 45 minutes sitting at the table sipping, smoking and talking with other adults—but we wanted to leave for the lake NOW!

To hold your water meant to be patient, to wait forever and ever for the right time.

I remembered these expressions of my grandfather's last week when I noticed a leak in our above-ground swimming pool.

It would not hold its water.

It began as an almost imperceptible seepage lowering of the water level a half inch. I noticed but I did not wish to admit what was wrong. I wrote the problem off to evaporation in the hot Florida August sun. I dropped the garden hose over the side and added a bit of water. That'll fix it.

No. It didn't.

I walked around the pool looking for a spot of wet ground which might indicate a minor problem. Didn't see anything. Added more water.

The water level dropped.

I checked the hoses for drips. No drips.

By last weekend, the water level dropped two feet. I'd lost about 3,000 gallons!

Something had to be done.

Our pool would not hold water.

And I couldn't fix it from the outside. I had to get inside and go to the bottom.

Realizing this reminded me of two things: of my own spiritual state, and of Mr. Bean and the cistern beneath Fort Matanzas.

Back in 17-whatever, the Spanish built an outpost on Rattlesnake Island south of St. Augustine to guard the city's backdoor waterway against invasion by British marauders and pirates.



Although miles of saltmarsh stretch in every direction, there is no fresh water on Rattlesnake Island.

To supply drinking water to the garrison, the Spanish made the area under the gundeck hollow. Groves in the floor channeled rainwater into the giant cistern.



Spanish soldiers were slobs.

Beer bottles, buttons, pipe stems, broken pots, loose musket balls, chicken bones—anything that fell on the floor, they kicked into the cistern. And there it stayed for centuries. Out of sight, out of mind.

When I was a Boy Scout, our troop visited Fort Matanzas and we bummed a ride across the inlet in a rowboat belonging to an ancient fisherman named Mr. Bean. He told us that when he was a boy (this must have been in the 1890s) he and some buddies carried a ladder and torches over to the fort and went down into the then-dry cistern where they found all sorts of neat stuff that had been buried in muck for years.

Wow! I'd love to have been with them!

Fort Matanzas is now a national monument and the National Park Service frowns on looting artifacts and neat stuff. Killjoys.

I was born too late.

Anyhow, as I remembered all this stuff, I also remembered the words of the Prophet Jeremiah:

My people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit.

Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate, saith the LORD.

For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.

For me, that kind of leakage of spirit starts the same way as the leakage from my swimming pool, a slow seepage I attribute to natural evaporation, to a drip from a hose, to a pinhole puncture somewhere—nothing to get excited about.

Until I've drained away 3,000 gallons of Spirit.

Then I notice and wonder what happened!

Where is God? What happened to Jesus? He was here just a couple of weeks ago!

Anyhow, when things got drastic with our pool. I put on my facemask and crawled to the bottom of the pool

prepared to battle Kraken, octopus, sharks and Jacques-Yves Cousteau himself.

No need.

I examined every inch of bottom till I found two punctures in the lining—apparently falling tree branches hit the seam and what had begun as a tiny hole had expanded from water pressure pushing through and enlarging them.

A couple of simple patches solved the huge problem—which would have hardly been a problem at all if I had taken care of it in the first place.

This is a spiritual lesson I should have learned long ago but I keep repeating my denial and evasion again and again till I'm damn near drained.

Will I ever learn?

I doubt it.

Reminds me of another thing Grandpa said, "You can lead a boy to drink, but you can't make him water".

Monday, September 19, 2011 Frying Fish and Football

I talked with a dying man about the best way to fry fish.

One day last week I kept the car to run errands and while I was mobile, I visited two friends who've been diagnosed with terminal illnesses. I've not been able to visit them for a while because my own arthritis pain limits my getting around much.

With one guy I talked about the best way to fry fish; with the other I talked about the new quarterback on the local football team. I had not planned to discuss either subject.

Since my friends face eternity soon or late, I intended to talk about the status of their souls. But I had nothing to say. It felt as though there were some block hindering my talking about serious things. And I fell back on small talk. Mostly, I listened.

Once I enrolled in a course on personal evangelism. Supposedly I learned about how to win people to Christ in individual conversations. In talking with my friends last

week, that training disappeared. Talk of eternity seemed inappropriate.

One thing I noticed about that personal evangelism course—it inclined me to view people as targets instead of as people. It seemed as though I could rack up points with Jesus by getting other people to affirm what I believe about Him.

Once I visited a church where we sang that toe-tapping hymn that goes “A hundred thousands souls a day are passing one by one away. They’re passing to their doom. They’re passing to their doom...”

The chorus ran, “Oh church of God what wilt thou say when in that awful judgment day, they charge thee with their doom?”

This congregation, as many other Christians, believed that failing to witness to the unsaved is shirking a vital responsibility. That no one should escape our witness. That unless they agree with our band of faith, they face Hell-fire and Damnation.

Now, Ginny and I support missionary endeavor; we have for years. But I recall that when William Carry, the father of modern missions, told his local church about his intention to evangelize the heathen in India, a deacon condemned him saying, “Mr. Carry, if God wants to convert the heathen, He can certainly do it without your help”.

That story is told in missionary circles to emphasize how wrong the deacon was because Carry was a great success in evangelism and spearheaded the movement inspiring thousands of young Christians to go to foreign lands spreading the Gospel, introducing modern medicine, and raising the standard of living in dozens of countries.

But... the deacon was right.

God is not helpless.

He allows us to participate in His work much as any father allows his four-year-old to “help” paint the fence. Our witnessing is for our benefit, not for His.

Maybe I’m just justifying my lack of boldness in talking about Christ with my dying friends. Or maybe not.

When I visit the sick and afflicted, am I to present them with what I think they need, or help them with what they think they need?

Whose benefit is the visit for anyhow?

Did I want to comfort them or to have them affirm me?

There is one dying man I should be concerned about and he ain't them. Poet John Donne said I should speak with others "as a dying man to dying men".

And novelist Terry Pratchett said, "The difference between the living and the dead is a matter of time".

Lots for me to think about as I drove home—fried fish, football, and faith.

Wednesday, September 21, 2011 A Happy, Satisfying, Rainy Day

I've often said that I write this diary to show The Kid In The Attic, a far-future reader who finds my papers in a dusty attic, what the Christian life is like for one guy here in the early days of the 21st Century.

Yesterday makes for a happy example.

After packing Ginny's lunch and kissing her off to work, I swam, then dressed for an outing with my friend Wes. He'd invited me to a brunch up in Kingsland, Georgia. On the drive up we discussed family matters: his father's recent heart problem; my youngest daughter's impending separation and possible divorce after less than two years of marriage.

At Aunt B's Country Cooking we gorged on fried chicken, smoked sausage, sweet potato soufflé, cabbage, butter beans, meatloaf, summer squash, okra, tomatoes, macaroni and cheese, green beans, rice and gravy, and more fried chicken—all you can eat.

And we did.

Then for dessert we drove to the Riverview Café for lemon meringue pie and black coffee as we watched the Cumberland Island Ferry and other boats docking on the St. Marys River.

We strolled to a nearby park overlooking the waterfront and sat in porch swings, smoking our pipes,

watching a girl sunbath on the pier (nicely) and a man cast a shrimp net (poorly). We talked about sex, shrimping, boyhood memories, church problems, sex, people we used to know, vacation plans, manatees, forest fires, oil pipelines, desire and sex.

As we puffed our pipes we watched two thunderheads build: one, to the east out over the Atlantic; the other, to the west above the salt marsh bordering the Okefenokee Swamp.

Driving back to Jacksonville we talked about our faith in Christ, sin, salvation and justification. Wes said each of us is like a chamber pot in a world full of chamber pots. I ranted about preachers using the word “You” instead of “We” so often—as though he is not one of us.

Wes quoted the 19th Century London minister, Charles Spurgeon about ministerial ordination not imparting anything of spiritual value to modern ministers; Spurgeon called it “laying empty hands on empty heads”.

When Ginny got home from work, we rushed off to the polls to vote in the Democratic primary, doing our bit to protect America from those politicians who deceive Christians, systematically oppress the poor, and strive to punish a young woman with an 18-year-to-life sentence for the crime of a half-hour’s indiscretion in the backseat of her boyfriend’s car.

I’m reminded of the words of Jesus when He said, “They bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers”.

After voting, we drove on the library for an armload of books and videos. I browsed new books—got a biography of Caligula—while she sought English drawing room mysteries. Then I sat and sat and sat at one end of a bookcase waiting for her to come back downstairs. Unbeknownst to me, Ginny sat and sat and sat at the other end of the same bookcase waiting for me.

What a laugh when we finally found each other.

Poor girl has spent her whole life looking for me, her Prince Charming. “Marry me and let me take you away from all this,” I said.

She was still exasperated and accused me of hiding behind the bookcase.

I am innocent—well, if not innocent, at least not guilty.

At the checkout desk, the computer balked at our having six videos; it only allows five on a card. I explained to the librarian that we could bypass that problem by taking home six videos but only returning five. My maneuver would satisfy the computer's software. He would not buy it.

We drove to Kosta's Italian where we both ordered large antipasto salads with blue cheese dressing and lounged talking about work and books and kids and life and love. We lingered in love enjoying ourselves until we were the last customers, the restaurant closed, and the manager locked the door behind us as we left.

Driving back home we paused in a park for the pure pleasure of watching a lightening storm flash in the distance.

Home, we kicked our shoes off, changed into our robes and sat reading all evening while listening to the rain splash outside in the dark.

There you have it, Kid In The Attic—that's the way this one guy's Christian life is lived today here in the early days of the 21st Century.

Monday, September 26, 2011

The Bird In My Hair

Last week I wrote a light posting about a happy, satisfying, rainy day. Then, wouldn't you know it, I immediately lapsed into a deep dark depression. Didn't even need rain for it.

The surface source of my depression rises from a conflict between what I believe, what I really believe, and what the facts are. These elements struggle in my mind; and their conflict has hardly any relationship to reality.

What I superficially believe is that God loves me.

What I really believe is that God stands indifferent to me.

What the facts are can support either of my internal belief systems.

I think the Prophet Habakkuk would understand my conflict. He said that God, “Makest men as the fishes of the sea”.

There’s an old saying that “The great sea cares not where the little fishes swim”.

Deep down I suspect that God stands indifferent to me. Habakkuk said, “O Lord, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! Even cry out unto Thee of violence and thou wilt not save!”

That’s how I feel.

I pray and the bedroom ceiling bounces my requests back on my head. Why bother? God is not listening, or if He does hear, He doesn’t care. Besides, if God really cared about me, why didn’t I win Lotto last week?

After all, all those guys in the Bible were successful, wealthy men.

Paul did not stay at a Motel 6 during his world-wide missionary journeys; somehow he could afford to travel the world. I have to scrape to buy gas to drive the thirty miles to Georgia.

Peter owned a home and a commercial fishing boat. Ever price a commercial fishing boat? Those things cost a bundle. He did not have to skimp.

Abraham owned massive herds, the emblem of wealth in his day. David and Solomon were kings sitting on ivory thrones. Even poor old Job ended up wealthy at the end of the story.

I feel as though God is indifferent to me—I’m one of the little fish in the great sea.

Maybe I’m just greedy.

John the Baptist told some listeners to “be content with your pay”.

Why should I grumble and gripe and feel sorry for myself?

Here are facts: I am not cold or naked or hungry or hurting (much) right this minute. So far this month my books have sold better than any previous month. The car runs. The roof does not leak. I do not live in Somalia—I

have nothing to despair about. That bad tooth is not even aching right this moment!

I feel like the Prophet Malachi who said, "I have loved you, saith the Lord. Yet, ye say, 'Wherein hast thou loved us?'"

The people in the Book of Malachi grumble, "It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of hosts?"

Vain... What profit... Walked mournfully.

Yes, regardless of the facts in my life, I too question the love of God.

So I look at some other Bible facts: What does the New Testament say about God's indifference?

Jesus said, "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? 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".

So, God keeps track of fallen sparrows and numbers the very hairs on my head.

That's nice.

A guy can build a faith on that fact.

The Gospel also says that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...

Paul said, "The love of God is shown toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us".

And the Apostle John said, "We love God because He first loved us".

Are all those statements generic? Did God so love the world except for John Cowart? Why do I feel unloved, unvalued, at odds with God?

The physical facts of my life don't jive with the way I feel. And Bible facts don't jive with the way I feel either.

Habakkuk said the just shall live by faith.

Not by my feeling of abandonment, not even by realistic evaluation of my life situation, but by faith.

That's hard.

The very last thing Habakkuk said was, "My belly trembled; my lips quivered at the voice: rottenness entered into my bones, and I trembled in myself... Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation".

That's what it means to live by faith.

The just may live by faith. But, not being just, I question all that.

Does my questioning mean I have renounced the faith and I'm not a Christian any more?.

Certainly not.

It just means I'm a downcast, depressed, wobbly Christian at the moment.

Am I the only one?

Lord, I believe; help Thou my unbelief.

So where do I stand on the question of God's indifference?

I suppose that my statement of faith has to be that I am confident that God cares deeply about every sparrow that lands on my head.

That's the best I can do today.

But all the returns aren't in yet.

Tuesday, September 27, 2011 Queens Of The Night

When I woke at 2:30 a.m. and walked out to the pool for a midnight swim I found
Ginny's
Nightblooming Cereus had opened.



Since Queen Of The Night flowers only last for a couple of hours and wilt to nothing at dawn, I called our grown children to drive over to sit in the dark watching the plant move. Only Jennifer, Terri, and Patricia

accepted my invitation; the others refused or let answering machines screen out crazy 3a.m. callers.

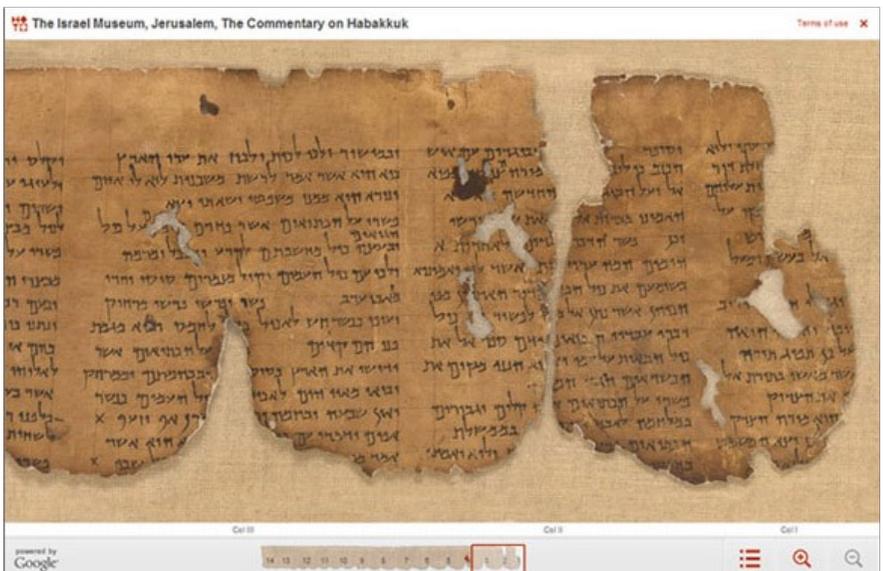
Here are two snapshots of the girls enjoying the flowers:



On a different subject altogether; yesterday I quoted the Prophet Habakkuk; this morning's news announced that Google has just put on line in digital format the available Dead Sea Scrolls, including the commentary on Habakkuk .

The site can be found at <http://dss.collections.imj.org.il/> .

Here's a photo of the Habakkuk Scroll:



Thursday, September 29, 2011
Searching For Yesteryear

The other day as my youngest daughter and I were talking about something that happened years ago, I showed her how to look in my diaries for past dates.

Patricia did not realize you can do this in two ways.

In the banner at the top of my digital yellow legal pad is a “Search this site” button. Just type in a topic or keyword, hit your enter key, and it will bring up postings mentioning that. For instance I just searched “Indian mound”, “Rat Skeleton”, “Treasure” and “Resurrection”.

I can search for the titles of different books I wrote and the “Search This Site” button will take me to listings detailing my agonies in writing that particular book.

The other way to read my past postings is to use my John’s Dusty Old Archives section in the right-hand sidebar.

Just click on the “Select Month” menu and scroll to any given month or season. Say you want to see our Halloween or Christmas decorations, just go to October or December of any year to see what we did.



Or, even better—each year I publish print editions of my diaries in my *Dirty Old Man Goes Bad* series at www.bluefishbooks.info. These books are suitable for reading on the bus or in your bathtub.

Anyhow, here is a sample of what you might find in John’s Dusty Old Archive. This is what I wrote on today’s date in 2005:

A Dying 90-Year-Old Man

My friend Liz, a nurse in a major area hospital, often tends to dying patients. After her shift this 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 Liz.

"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".

Liz 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.

Liz, 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.

Under dirt buried in a tomb for three days Christ, like a visitor in a 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 Liz. 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.

OCTOBER

Sunday, October 2, 2011 Theodicy With Two Dogs

Last week after years of silence my long-ago e-friend Jellyhead commented on one of my postings. I was so happy to hear from her again!

Once, back in 2006, Jellyhead inspired me to write a posting about theodicy.

As everyone who reads the comic pages knows theodicy is that branch of theology that studies the problem of how God's goodness and justice fit in the face of the existence of evil, pain and suffering in the world.

Yes, I did have to look the word *theodicy* up in the dictionary myself. Essentially it means if God is good, why do I hurt.

Using the Search-This-Site button for my own archives, I ran across this 2006 posting again. I think it worth repeating:

Once I got My Ass Kicked... And Once I Didn't

My e-friend Jellyhead (<http://jellyheadrambles.blogspot.com/>) is a physician in Australia. She and her husband have two children. He enjoys birdwatching and captures beautiful photographs; she studies karate and recently earned her blackbelt.

I wish she'd been walking beside me one morning about two years ago; as I strolled home through a nice residential area on a beautiful Spring day about 10 a.m., a man darted out of nowhere, knocked me down, beat me up, and stole my billfold. I never even saw him till he'd already hit me and knocked me to the sidewalk.

A karate champion would have been a great companion that morning.

Thursday Jellyhead asked me the following question:

Do you really believe in an interventionist God, John?

Because to me, the idea that God can help us if we only pray to him, or have faith in him, flies in the face of all those children who die from leukemia, or young people who have tragic accidents, or even older people who die awful lingering deaths. Surely if God could change these things, he would. Hence the concept of a loving God who can watch over us, but cannot save us from tragedy. What do you think?

(I understand if you don't want to answer - this is after all a very public forum)

When I read her question the first thing I thought of was two dogs.

About 15 years ago my car broke down and I had to walk to work through a very rough slum section of town. A block ahead of me I saw a six or eight tough really mean-looking guys standing in the street. They eyed me coming and spread out blocking the walkway. Really scary. One of them hefted a bat or pool cue.

I could either turn around and run, or keep going because this was the only way I could get to work.

I may have said a prayer but I really didn't know what to do.

Suddenly, out a narrow space between the brick walls of a laundry and a bar, two enormous dogs appeared. One black and one white. These two dogs came out like fighter jets in formation and took up station, one on either side of me.

These dogs, each the size of a desk, biggest dogs I've ever seen, looked to neither the left nor right but pressed in against my legs and matched me step for step as I walked straight ahead.

The gang of tough guys separated.

These dogs and I walked straight through the two columns of them.

The dogs walked like that with me for another block till we came to Springfield Park where both dogs peeled off and ran, disappearing into the distance.

They had never even glanced at me.

Do you really believe in an interventionist God, John?

I have to answer: Sometimes.

But I'll have to qualify that by saying that the Lord intervenes in human affairs at His pleasure, not mine.

He is, after all, sovereign.

So, I wonder why, or even if, God protected me by sending those big dogs that one time, but let me get my ass kicked that other time?

I mean in the light of the bad things that happen every day, how can we believe in a loving, all powerful God who lets, or causes, terrible things to happen to His children?

If God loves us, then why does He allow terrible things to befall us?

If God is all powerful, then why doesn't He stop bad things?

Is it a case of either God does not care about us --or, if He does, then is He too weak or too far removed to do anything about it?

I do not have an answer.

What I do have is a couple of thoughts that help me believe in Christ and trust Him even though I do not have a definitive answer.

Yes, children do die from leukemia, young people do have tragic accidents, older people do die awful lingering deaths. There are deformed babies, wars, cruelty, cheating, bullying, debt, abuse, liars, adulterers, frustration - Suffering in varying degrees touches every person's life.

And if we don't die first, we face Alzheimer's.

It's not a pretty picture.

Why doesn't God intervene?

How exactly would I want Him to do that?

Well, first of all I'd like to live in a garden. A beautiful place with flowing springs, singing birds, peaceful animals, fruitful trees, blooming flowers - no thorns. A place where my beautiful wife and I could romp naked in

the forest and roll happy in the grass. No thorns, no sickness. No troubles. A place where in the cool of the day God would come and walk with me and talk with me and listen to me and ...

Oh. Oh. Oh. — He's already done that.

That's the life He had in mind for us from the word go.

But we chose otherwise.

Our president decided he had a better idea; he decided that humanity could actually be like little gods. Instead of worshiping and obeying and enjoying the Creator, our first leader rebelled and changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator.

St. Paul said, "Even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient".

In other words, God let us do the things we choose to do.

And He let us deal with the consequences.

When Ginny and I were talking about such stuff yesterday, she asked if Jellyhead is a mother. "Then," Ginny said, " She'll understand about teaching them to walk. Sometimes, you have to let them fall so they can learn to stand".

She also compared God's treatment of us with a father who teaches his 16-year-old daughter to drive a car. He explains the rules of the road, the traffic laws, the safety tips - everything he can to protect her and keep her safe and help her get where she wants to go ...

But there comes a day when she turns the key and starts down the road alone.

The Father's heart is in his throat. He cringes when she shifts gears. He stays awake all night till she's safely home... But he lets her drive.

He lets her be responsible.

He lets her choose the road she drives on and the speed she goes.

He wants her to be free.

To cruise.

To get where she wants to go.

To come home safe.

But at that point he does not intervene.

How would she feel if he did?

And when she get a speeding ticket, does Dad intervene?

Sometimes.

Is he able to help? Of course. Hey, Dad can drive a stick-shift and back a trailer into the drive without running over the rose bushes. Besides, as all girls know, he's a soft touch made of money.

Is he willing to help?

Not necessarily.

Sometimes he'll say, "You got the ticket, you pay the fine".

Other times, he intervenes.

He pays the penalty for her.

It costs him.

"Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, *that he might bring us to God*, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit".

That's what St. Peter said in his first letter, the one that talks most about suffering, both that of Christ and that of people.

I think the phrase *that he might bring us to God* gives a reason for all suffering.

Yes, I know that most of our suffering, we cause ourselves — at least I think that most of my sufferings in life have been caused by me.

But there is a redemptive element in suffering.

Innocent suffering carries great power.

In one place Christ is referred to as the Lamb of God, slain before the foundation of the world.

Peter said, "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's suffering ... If ye be reproached for

the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you...But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters... Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf. For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God; and if it first begin with us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?... Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls unto him in well doing as unto a faithful Creator”.

In another place, Peter talks about common afflictions suffered by your brethren throughout the world. Some bad things happen to us just because we live in a fallen world; such things are the common lot of mankind. Nobody's fault in particular; just the way things are.

But the overall tone of Peter's thinking seems to be that at least some suffering links the afflicted person with Christ to bring somebody else to God. In other words, sometimes suffering is for the benefit of observers.

Once Jesus healed a man who had been born blind.

The disciples asked, “Master, who did sin, this man or his parents that he was born blind”?

Jesus said, “Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents; but that the works of God should be made manifest in him”.

That the works of God should be made manifest to those who observe his deformity.

I have this fantasy. I could not prove it by Scripture or even common sense, but I have this fantasy:

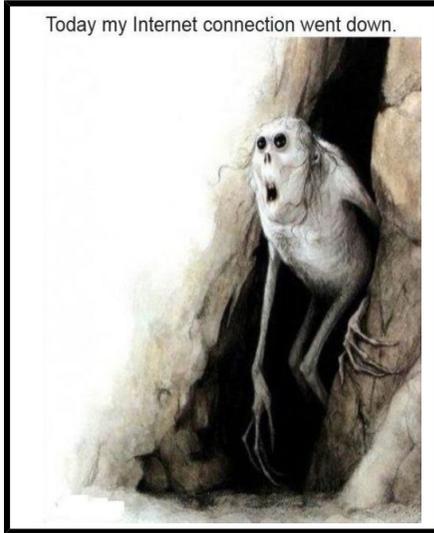
In my fantasy babies waiting to be born stand in a line before the throne and God asks for volunteers. God explains that on earth there are parents, doctors, nurses, brothers, sisters – people who will be nudged toward the Kingdom by being exposed to a suffering, cripple child, a child in pain, and God asks, “Who will go for me”? And some kids step forward saying, “I love those people I see down there. If it will help bring them Home to You, I'll go. I'll be born that way”.

That's just a fantasy but it rings true to me.

Suffering is rooted in love. “Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, *that he might bring us to God*”.

This post is getting awfully long and I know my thoughts don't really answer the questions but I hope they help.

Wednesday, October 5, 2011
Internet Ping Pong



Yesterday Johnny spent 45 minutes on the phone with AT&T's helpful service desk—We Put The Cuss in Customer Service. They said I have a DSL problem.

This morning, a DSL repairman came. And left. He says I have an AT&T problem and that a lineman will be here sometime tomorrow.

Meanwhile I'm having a ball... in fact, I am the ball.

Saturday, October 8, 2011
On Line—Out Of Line

Off and on, four telephone repair trucks parked outside my house over the past few days as repairmen strived to restore my internet access.

One told me the problem was caused because over the weekend some citizen sawed through a main cable over by Lee High School in order to steal copper wire. That aggravated a problem which I have been having since June 13th.

It had to do with speed.

My system should have been getting 3 mbps (I think that means three million) but only point 22 mbps were getting through to my computer.

After many calls to the phone company and much ado, the repairmen restored my internet!.

I am on line again.

When the repairmen left my house, I could have accessed the wisdom of the ages via my computer. I could examine the 2,000-year-old Dead Sea Scrolls, or look at NASA photos from outer space, or read classical books via Project Gutenberg, or learn of the latest advances in medicine, or spend the afternoon watching porno movies.

Care to guess which I did?

Ah yes, readers know me too well.

When Ginny got home from work we watched a dvd movie from the library, a science fiction classic from 1954, one I'd actually seen at the Arcade Theatre back then. It was about giant ants, mutations from the first atomic bomb tests. And they made this whirring noise. And got into tunnels beneath Los Angeles till the Army guys with flame throwers scorched them---But maybe a nine-foot-long Queen Ant flew away to establish a new colony in the dark somewhere at a theatre near you.

Do you hear whirring?

We also watched this 1940s chick flick about some woman who dressed like Beaver Cleaver's mother, wearing heels and pearls while she vacuums the floor. After 20 years of marriage to a loser, she realizes she married the wrong guy when her highschool sweetheart comes back to town as a millionaire. So she divorces Klutz and takes up with Success in his luxury hotel only to find he is a love 'em and leave 'em kind of guy so she goes back to her husband and finds true love in abject poverty.

Not a single ant in sight.

That movie needed ants!

However, it got me thinking about success.

I define success as what other men have but I don't.

American culture urges me to seek success, but leaves me empty when I try to recognize what success is. I recognize it in other people, I can't see a hint of it in my own life.

Part of that—and only a small part of it—is that I am a member of a strange religious cult founded by a Guy who defined success as getting crucified.

“If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.,” He said.

“For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it. For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away?”

He taught that to be greatest of all, we must be servants of all—and He demonstrated this by example.

He did not wash the disciples' feet as a quaint ceremonial gesture but because their feet were dirty. The donkeys and camels on the streets of ancient Jerusalem lacked emission controls.

No doubt about it. My idea of success and God's idea of success are two different things.

One of us is wrong.

One of the early church fathers, I forget which one, said the main duty of a Christian is to prepare for death.... And for resurrection to follow.

Reminds me of a cool joke Johnny told me last week while he worked on my computer:

Johnny said, “When it comes to dying, I want to doze off, just drift off and die peacefully in my sleep like Uncle George—not like those 32 passengers on his bus”.

Monday, October 10, 2011 **Big Things, Little Things**

I don't know if the universe is expanding, but my mind certainly is.

Last week, according to a New York Times article (at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/05/science/space/05nobel.html>) three astronomers won the Nobel Prize in Physics for discovering that the universe is apparently being blown apart by a mysterious force that cosmologists now

call dark energy, a finding that has thrown the fate of the universe and indeed the nature of physics into doubt.

The astronomers are Saul Perlmutter, 52, of the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and the University of California, Berkeley; Brian P. Schmidt, 44, of the Australian National University in Canberra; and Adam G. Riess, 41, of the Space Telescope Science Institute and Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

Yesterday Ginny and I enjoyed a late brunch with our son Donald and his wife Helen when they got out of church.

I amused Helen by folding my napkin into a rabbit and with table games I used to tease the kids with when they were little. Then she and Ginny chatted about something while I questioned Donald about physics. Donald majored in physics in college.

He explained quantum mechanics, string theory, dark energy, thermodynamics, chaos theory, and a bunch of similar stuff.

He illustrated how light can be both a wave and a particle by shining my pocket flashlight (which I'm never without) through a plastic napkin holder. We were going to remove all the napkins but the girls objected. Wives get embarrassed so easily in a restaurant. But Donald and I had fun anyhow.

As we left the table, almost as an aside, Donald and Helen told me that another young couple I knew last year, have separated and may be breaking up. Poor kids! I found news of their pain distressing.

Off and on for about five months last year, I helped them format and publish a book the wife had written. I worry that my helping with the book may have contributed to their splitting up. My May and June, 2010, journal postings begin to tell of some of my concerns, so it's distressing that in my zeal to get another book published, I may have damaged this dear couple.

Damn!

Oh well, God never wastes a hurt.

Tuesday, October 11, 2011
What We Need Is A Big Octopus

The big news around my house this past weekend was that Ginny and I sighted a Black-Throated Blue Warbler in our yard. We'd never seen one before but we confirmed identification via binoculars and bird book.



A native to the far frozen north, this warbler passed through our yard as it migrated further south.

Big thrill for us.

Doesn't take much to thrill us.

It delights me to know that the Lord created such a variety of creatures. I mean birds is birds, but each species is made with variations which make it distinct. Makes me suspect that God knows what He's doing.

The other big thing in my life was a successful phone call to the telephone company. Yes, a **successful** call to the phone company. That's rarer than a black-throated blue warbler in our fig tree.

Psyching up for the call, I gathered up paperwork and notes since last June. In previous contact with AT&T, I'd noted dates, names of person I spoke with, confirmation numbers, times, dates and names of each repairman who came to our house, internet speed test numbers, and all our billing information.

As soon as I negotiated the abominable phone tree and got the first live person, I requested to speak with a supervisor. That first customer service rep was not happy,

but I insisted because I did not want to go through explaining to different people. When the supervisor came on the line, I outlined our on-going problem and, lo and behold, he immediately agreed to reduce our next bill significantly. I hung up the phone satisfied.

That's a first.

Monday my friend Wes and I enjoyed breakfast and talked for six hours. I couldn't begin to summarize that conversation.

In other news—this is to catch up the kid in the attic—two Americans won the Nobel Prize for economics. Rumor has it that they invested their prize money in Lotto tickets.

Thousands of destitute protesters are camping out in front of the Wall Street stock market. They feel somebody inside the buildings stole their money. There is only a given amount of cash in the universe; if money is not in my pocket, it's in somebody else's pocket. How it got from here to there is the question.

Speaking of money, today underwater explorers announce their discovery of two sunken ships loaded with millions of pounds of silver ingots. Both ships were torpedoed by German U-boats.



But treasure ships are not all that's on the bottom of the sea. Mark McMenamin, a paleontologist at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, has discovered fossil remains of a giant octopus with tentacles over 30 yards long. He theorizes that it ate dinosaurs. Here's a photo of Leviathan's fossil:



On Land, by law in Afghanistan, when someone is convicted of murder, a member of the victim's family gets to shoot the killer in the head in the public square with bystanders cheering. A lovely old tradition that ought to be preserved. There are photos in my morning paper.



Here in Jacksonville, our city government is firing scads of people today in a reorganization of City Hall. I've heard that Jacksonville's unemployment rate nears 20 per cent. City Hall's idea seems to be that our government can stimulate the economy and create more jobs by firing people who already have jobs.

See why the Nobel economists bought Lotto tickets?

You know, it occurs to me that our City Hall lies just four blocks from the St. Johns River waterfront. I wonder if a block measures more than 30 yards?

Where is that giant octopus when we need him?

Wednesday, October 12, 2011
Sexual Preference Day

Often I write my entries for the day on the previous night.

I just erased the one I wrote last night.

I realized after I wrote it that I might be revealing information which could upset, even endanger, one of my children. And it might offend Third World readers—and yes, I do have a few readers in far corners of the earth.

My entry was a witty, clever essay that bordered on great literature. It displayed my great intellect and deep spiritual insights. But, no sense trying to write Christian if I don't live Christian. So I consigned my fine writing to the recycle bin.

Some things are more important than my writings. A shame, but true.

So, when you can't think of anything else to write about to entertain readers, write about sex. That catches attention. Here goes:

I forgot to mention it in my news summary yesterday for the Kid In The Attic, but Tuesday was National Coming Out Day, in which promoters encouraged everyone to publicly declare, talk about, and ask others about sexual preferences.

Hence, they call it Coming Out Day.

But somehow this celebration missed being listed on the Church Calendar. An oversight, I'm sure.

Stating sexual preferences has a long-standing tradition in biblical accounts, but it carries disadvantages and dangers.

For instance in Genesis, the Bible's first book, when Old Man Abraham, while talking with three angelic buddies, stated his sexual preference, his wife, Sarah, who overheard him while eavesdropping behind a tent flap, laughed at him. Laughed at the very idea. She thought he was silly, limp, dirty old man long past it. (Genesis 18:9-15)

She soon found out otherwise.

And nine months later... well, you know the story.

In the New Testament an unnamed woman mentioned in John 8, seems to have enthusiastically demonstrated

her sexual preferences. Some do-gooders caught her at it and wanted to throw rocks at her till she died.

Well, Jesus put a stop to that; He said, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her”.

The crowd of indignant, offended guys, “being convicted by their own conscience”, slunk away leaving the woman alone with Jesus.

Who accuses you, He asked.

Nobody. Not a single rock-holder in sight.

“Neither do I condemn thee,” Jesus said. “Go and sin no more. I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life”. (John 8:11-12).

So, we see two places in Scripture where publicly revealing sexual preferences brings on ridicule and the danger of getting a rock thrown at your head.

Nevertheless, modern promoters declared Tuesday as National Coming Out Day.

I missed out. It’s been years since anybody asked anything about my sexual preferences. In fact, the last time I mentioned my sexual preference, Ginny said, “You’ve got to be kidding! You mean tonight!”

Monday, October 17, 2011 **A Poetic Expression Of Sunrise**

God’s gracious gift of prostate cancer daily summons me to view the rosy dawning of the morn.

That’s a poetic expression.

It sounds so much better than saying:

Needing to piss like a racehorse wakes me up at some ungodly hour every morning and I can’t go back to sleep so I rattle around waiting for night to finally get it over with so I can brew coffee.

Both sentences describe the same event—waking up before daybreak—but the poetic expression makes it sound nicer.

Ginny and I ran across poetic expressions the other night during our devotions as we read Psalm 111 in the 1928 Psalter translation.

We customarily read a bit of the Bible and a short prayer each evening after supper. This is not an ironclad rule; sometimes we skip it, but that's what we normally do. And often the Holy Scripture portion we read makes no sense at all to me!

For instance Psalm 111 starts off saying, "I will give thanks unto the Lord with my whole heart (*I follow it that far*) secretly among the faithful, and in the congregation".

Say, what?

Isn't among the faithful and in the congregation the same bunch of people, so why secretly?

Further down the Psalm says, "The works of His hands are verity and judgment".

What does that mean?

Then the Psalm ends up declaring, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all they that do thereafter".

I puzzled over this Psalm; individual phrases make sense, but the over all theme of the thing eludes me. What the heck is the Psalm writer trying to say and why doesn't he just come right out and say it?

That's when Ginny brought up the term poetical expression—she says many Psalms are like watching dawn break in our backyard. You only see little bits of the landscape at a time.

First, night seems not quite as dark as it was.

Stars fade.

The silhouette of dark trees outline the horizon.

Shades of pink tinge the clouds.

Now I can see green leaves—different shades of green and yellow, red and brown.

Birds begin singing and I catch the red flash of a cardinal's wing.

And then it's dawn.

The world which has been right there all through my long dark night with my cancer becomes bright and clear and clean.

Splendor viewed in patches—some of which are immediately identifiable, some of which are only vague shapes until more light rises.

Little by little my own yard has been revealed to me—and the odd little phrases of the Psalm, viewed bit by bit as the light increases, say that earth, sky and sea declare the glory of the Lord.

But it doesn't say it all at once. Light brings shadows. Bushes lurk formless at first.

"The merciful and gracious LORD hath so done His marvelous works, that they ought to be had in remembrance," the Psalmist says.

Guess what dawn revealed in our backyard Sunday morning when Ginny and I went out to sip coffee by the garden fountain—Two beautiful birds of a type we'd never seen before.

One, we could not identify even with our bird books, binoculars, camera zoom lens...And then the dumb bird came and perched only three feet away from us! And we still could not tell what kind it was.

The other bird we'd never seen before was a hooded warbler:



The photo can't do justice to the bright yellow of his feathers.

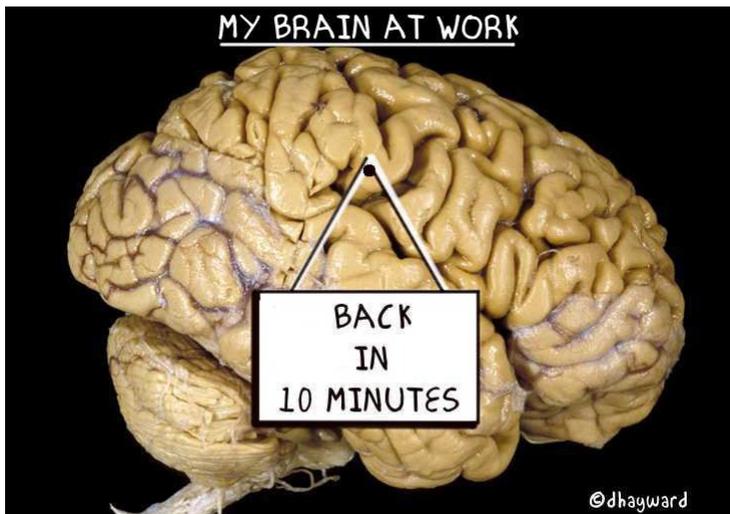
A native of the Appalachians, this warbler must be migrating through our garden to warmer climes further south.

Another visitor to our yard on Sunday was our middle-daughter, Eve. She is preparing a Fall-Halloween presentation/puppet show, called silly-scary, for children at her library.

Eve regaled us with this riddle:

What does a brain do when it sees a friend across the street?

It does a brain wave.



**Wednesday, October 19, 2011
Chicken For Two +**

Yesterday I exercised a bit of godly selfishness.

Yes, I declined to help someone in need when I realized that to help would be to my own disadvantage, cost me time, energy, spirit and money—none of which I have in excess at the moment.

Last year the preacher at a small church near us came to me with his wife for help with a project dear to them. I set aside my own plans to help them out. My good intentions turned into a can of worms.

Nevertheless, being a Christian sucker, when a few weeks ago, I heard the preacher was in trouble, I reached out offering to help. He politely avoided me. But knowing he is in pain, I reached out again. And again.

I care deeply, but my aggressive good will has boundaries.

I'd set it up to meet him this week but my own life intervened. For one thing, I underwent great emotional turmoil over the prospect of watching my youngest daughter's three cats for her till she settled in her new apartment. This prospect knocked me off balance but, thank God, that prospect came to naught.

Also, yesterday Ginny learned that next year when she retires, because of a mistake made 15 years ago by the personnel office where she works, she will receive no pension at all.

There is a class action law suit in the works among scores of employees trapped in this same personnel office screw up. But that may take years to settle.

We knew her retirement would cut our income drastically, but none at all!

Disconcerting. But we'll deal with that in time

Anyhow, yesterday I realized that while I feel compassion for the young preacher, I also have problems of my own to deal with so I cancelled our proposed meeting so I can drive to Georgia today to take care of some things for us. If he seeks me out, I'll do what I can to help. But he has access to other resources.

I'm in this Christian life for me.

The name of the Savior is not John.

Monday night, Ginny and I read the Gospel account of Jesus feeding the 4,000 people and one phrase started us both laughing.

Out in the wilderness with a crowd Jesus said to the disciples, "I have compassion on the multitude... you give them something to eat".

That broke us up laughing—I have compassion... You give.

Of course the disciples began to manipulate and scheme and engineer a way to solve the problem. Where can we find a store open out here in the desert to buy bread?

But Jesus took what they had, seven slices of pieta bread and a couple of fish, and He divided it into 4,000 portions and everyone had plenty.

A divine act—the same one on a small scale that He does on a large scale everyday; there's never been a grain of wheat or a fish in the sea that God does not multiply into food for all mankind.

Know what Jesus would have done if there had been 8,000 people there that day?

He'd simply double the recipe.

Once, I think that Ginny and I may have seen something of the sort:

The two of us sat down to dinner with a rotisserie chicken from the grocery store. Usually we'd eat half for one supper, then the other half the next day. It would prove just enough for two meals.

But the front door opens and here comes our then-teenaged daughter Patricia with four of her friends. They'd been out to a mall or something and burst into our house ravenous.

The pulled up chairs to our table and began to pass around the chicken meant for two. They passed the coleslaw, potato salad, chips and chicken. And they passed it and they passed it and they passed it again and again.

Me, Ginny, and five starving teenagers feasted off that one chicken dinner. And when Patricia and her friends left—we still had chicken enough left over for the next day's lunch.

I saw that happen. But I don't understand how it could have happened. A bit scary, actually.

Saturday, October 22, 2011

How To Pick A Confidential Counselor

I suppose I could name this entry How I Picked A Counselor, but I imagine everyone who hurts and seeks professional help must go through the same process, so here's how I went about it earlier this week.

First, I recognized I have a need.

In my case the thing that prompted me to seek help is that my work stymies me. I'm a professional writer but in the past seven months I have actually written only five pages of the novel I'm working on.

Sure, I've outlined and researched and dabbled and thought about my book—but it ain't writing until there are actually words on paper. All that other stuff is pipe dreaming.

I avoid work by reading—pretended research. I stare into space, into clouds of pipe smoke rehearsing scenes in my mind, but I write few of them down.

I jotted down a hundred or so pages of notes. I pondered for ages and settled down on the crucial opening words on page one:

I'd never seen a woman hang before. Plenty of men. They deserved it. But this was my first time seeing a woman. First public hanging of a woman in Duval County, Florida, it drew a big crowd to watch. Marshall Yeomans was not going to just hang her, but ratchet her. Some folk said she deserved it. Some folk said she didn't.

Then I planed to roar into a shoot-'em-up tale of pioneer days in my hometown's 1840s, a tale of Indian Wars, Yellow Jack attacks, slavery, knavery, sex, and heroism.

But, I've only written five pages in the past seven months.

I need help.

I'm bogged down and I can't shake it. I tried self-help books and I exercised the superficial knowledge I have of cognitive therapy—yet my work stymies me. I see no hope.

Used to be, when our car broke down, I fiddled with carburetor, universal joint, water pump, myself. Those days are gone forever. I could trust the repair work to a neighborhood shade-tree mechanic—and sometime he did great work. And sometimes not. But with today's computer-brain cars, we only trust our repairs to a factory authorized mechanic—that only makes sense.

Same way with counselors.

I can't fix what's wrong with me and local shade-tree counselors ring iffy. I wanted a professional counselor to fiddle with the inner workings of my brain.

I told Ginny of my decision to seek professional help.

Guess what—she had already noticed that I haven't been handling things well on my own. I can't imagine how she guessed I've wallowed in this slough of despondence. After all, I'm my usual happy, cheerful, easy-to-live-with, pure-hearted, handsome

That noise you hear in the background is Ginny laughing.

When we talked, she agreed that I need professional help. She called the insurance company to check our coverage and she made a printout of requirements, limitations, and contact numbers for me to call.

I took an on-line depression self-test which says anything above a score of five indicates professional help is needed. I scored a 21.

Thursday, when I arose at my usual 3:30, I read over the printouts and saw that the insurance number was good seven days a week, 24 hours a day.

So I called to make an appointment.

Poor lady who answered the phone thought mine must be a crisis call. I assured her that I am not in crisis, even though I was calling at 4 a.m. I have a pebble in my shoe, not an alligator biting off my leg.

She sent me a list of counselors in my area so I could pick one.

Through a Google search, I eliminated some on sight. Who needs the hassle of downtown parking? Or that long drive to Baymeadows in Southside?

Another person on the list specializes in substance abuse counseling. I don't need that.

One offered to lead me into peace and tranquility via oriental meditation techniques. But, let's face it, the only thing Buddha and I have in common is that we both have the same body shape.

Much religious imagery decorated one website. I felt alarm bells at that. Pay attention to alarm bells; they're

telling you something. I've met socially with counselors who impressed me as having a personal religious agenda. I felt they might say that I have problems because I'm not a "real" Christian and that if I were a "real" Christian I would have no problems because Jesus Is The Answer.

Well, before I started my search I did pray for divine guidance and my impression of the answer Jesus gave me was, "John, look for a counselor with common sense".

I chose to see Mr. Michael Swanhart, a licensed clinical social worker. I phoned him and asked questions from my list of concerns and as we talked I felt we were a good fit. I felt he is a wise young man. We met Friday.

One of the first things he discussed with me was his privacy, disclosure, and confidentiality policies. I felt comfortable with these and in turn asked him if he minded my mentioning him here in my diary. He consented.

His website address is
<http://www.michaelswanhart.com/>

During our introductory meeting I babbled about

Say, did I tell you that last night Ginny and I watched this early James Bond movie where Q invents all sorts of super sleuth master-spy gadgets for 007?

That's important.

I babbled about my work and woes. I bragged about how supportive my grown children are. How Fred generated e-book formats for my books; how Johnny helps with advice, yard work, and computer repair; how Jennifer helps with transcribing and even washing curtains; how Terry donates a tithe of her time to relieve me of yard work and how she encourages me to continue writing; how Donald sustains my computer server system and repairs my goofs; how Helen designs my book covers and tweaks art illustrations; how Eve researches materials for me and produces puppet shows advertising my books; how Mark give wise marketing advice when he's not behind the puppet stage; how Patricia photographed museum exhibits to illustrate my fire history book. How utterly blessed I am with such a family. They humble me in such a happy way.

Then Mr. Swanhart asked me about Ginny.

I'd hardly said a dozen words when he interrupted.

He said it surprised him to see that after 43 years of marriage, the mere thought of her brings such a smile to my face.

I wasn't aware of that.

Then, if I understood correctly, he made two observations:

I understood him to say that since so much of my past work and life focused on helping people, that this new book represents a change in focus from helping to entertaining. That goes along with other life changes over the past seven months.

I also understood him to say that in a way nowadays I have it so good that it's bad.

That is, so much of my earlier writing sprang out of hardship, poverty and pain, but now in a sense nobody is holding a gun to my head. Before, I had to write to insure food was on the table for breakfast tomorrow, now because of Ginny's successful work and home management, we are doing so well comparatively, that I've turned from worker bee to drone.

Great points to percolate through my brain.

Remember how concerned Mr. Swanhart was about privacy, disclosure and confidentiality? He's serious about that stuff.; he even developed entrance and exit protocols for his office so clients never see one another. Therefore, I intend in the future not to reveal everything we talk about.

Yes, I want my life to be transparent, but some things are best left translucent or even opaque. As Saint Paul once said, "Now we see through a glass darkly". So I won't blab incessantly about my counseling sessions every week.

Mr. Swanhart is serious about privacy issues. In fact, as I left his office, I noticed this strange device on the floor—a metal arch with LED lights and buttons and switches. I immediately thought of the stuff Q issued to James Bond in that movie.

I asked Mr. Swanhart about the odd machine.

He explained that this hi-tech thingy acts as a white-noise generator which masks conversations which take place in his office. Even if you stood with your ear pressed to that door, even if you held a water-glass to your ear, you still could not hear a word spoken in there. It's private.

Wow. I'd never heard of such a device before.

Q would be proud.

Alas, to no avail.

Yes, as soon as I walked to my parked car, leaned against the door to smoke my pipe and ponder things I learned today, no sooner had I blown out my match—"Hi Dad! What are you doing here? Where's Mom"?

Yes, two of my daughters had been driving past on their way back from the hospital when they saw me on the street. They parked, ran over to hug me, and bubbled over with questions about what I was doing there and why.

So much for privacy and confidentiality.

So much for the noise-masking machine.

Ask any dad, Q never invented a machine that will give a father even a minute's privacy anywhere.

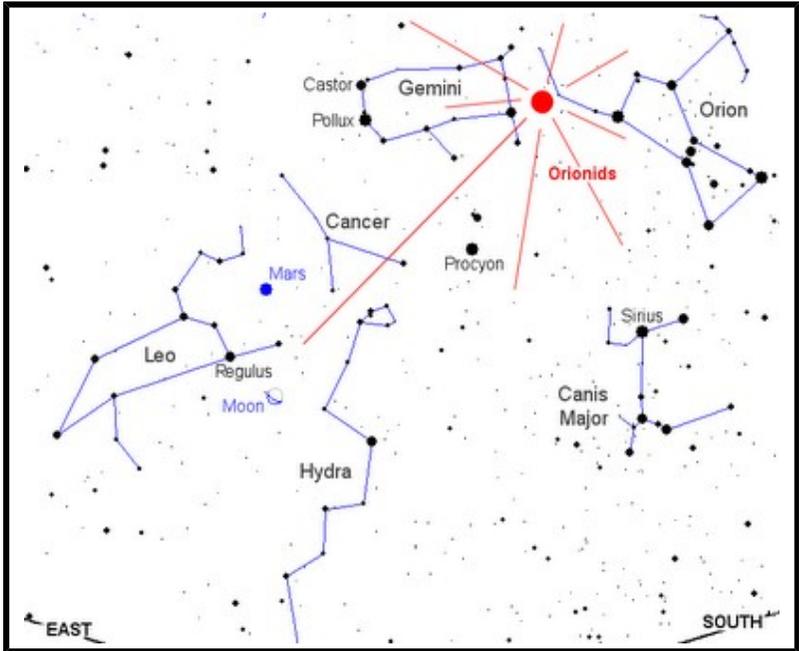
Sunday, October 23, 2011 Stars, Moon, and Birds Of The Air

In the late 1950s or early '60s, when I worked at the Library Of Congress, I heard Archibald MacLeish deliver a poetry reading of his own works. A few lines from the reading stuck in my mind all these years only to be unearthed in the wee hours of Friday morning.

About 4:30 a.m. I ventured into our backyard to watch shooting stars. (astronomers say they are only dist specks from Halley's Comet).

The Orionid meteor shower peaks in this week's pre-dawn hours.

Here's a NASA chart showing where to look:



So, I crept outside to watch stars fall.

No, for stargazing this time I did not lay on an air mattress in the pool as I usually do; the high temperature for the day was 72 degrees and for this Florida boy that means it's time to break out mukluks and parkas.

And this time nobody reported me to the cops like during the Perseids on August 12th (see Blog archives).

However, as I braved the frigid night, as I watched six to eight stars fall from the Heavens half-remembered lines from America's then Poet Laureate's reading sprang to mind:

The lights in the sky are stars.

We think they do not know.

We think they do not understand.

The birds too are ignorant.

I saw another magnificent sight in the sky this week and Ginny saw one at her work; during a smoke break outside, she saw a Gray Catbird, only one of this species either of us have ever seen.

And one day I heard a familiar honking while I sat by our garden fountain; three huge Vees of Canada Geese passed overhead right at tree-top level.

As these birds went about their appointed rounds on their migratory flyway, they paid no attention at all to the doings of mankind beneath them.

Archibald MacLeish, although Librarian of Congress, was wrong.

I think the stars do indeed understand nor are the birds ignorant—they do exactly what God intended them to do. But it has nothing to do with us. Some things I suspect the Lord does for His own will and good pleasure. We sometimes catch glimpses, but we are not the show, or even the intended audience.

Somewhere in Scripture, Saint Paul remarks that the whole creation groans waiting for the children of God to be restored. This world is wonderful, but this is not all there is. I am too dense to take all the wonders in; but I do look for them now and again.

So I watched stars blaze across the magnificence of Heaven.

And I worshiped their Creator Who hung them all in place and calls each one by name. And Who also knows our names.

However, that inspiration soon segued toward the ridiculous. My mind works that way. I remembered one time when I roused all our teen and pre-teen kids out of bed in the middle of the night to see a total eclipse of the moon.

Amid the sullen complaints of teenagers, I forced-marched them to walk two blocks down to the shrimp dock on the Ribault River. Using my cattle prod for educational experience, I drove my protesting family onto the end of the dock.

There, we encountered overcast skies—no moon in sight.

And there was weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth and under-the-breath comments about sanity and my qualifications to be the father of near-mature adults.

This called for action—Dad Action.

I made Ginny and our children stand at the end of the dock while I walked back to the land end. I called for them to look at the moon.

And when they looked back...

I dropped my pants and mooned them.

Shrieking with laughter, they chased me the two blocks back home.

And we had mugs of hot cocoa in the kitchen.

Monday, October 24, 2011
Martial Problems, A Dead Viking, and More MacLeish

My last posting mentioned my hearing Archibald MacLeish reading his own poems at the Library of Congress. I semi-quoted one poem from memory; I looked up another one I'll mention in a minute.

Sunday Ginny and I sipped coffee and smoked by our garden fountain for four hours as we discussed various problems and tensions in our marriage. We talked about sex and money and children and retirement plans and health insurance and menu planning and cooking and transplanting a tree next Spring—if God gives us life and health that long.

Ginny wants me to move the tree from where God planted it to where she wants it now, a big improvement, after all look what happened to that first garden He planted.

Ginny snapped this photo of me between her hibiscus and angel trumpets; she picked it for the book cover photograph for the next book in my *Dirty Old Man Goes Bad* series, scheduled for publication January, 2012:



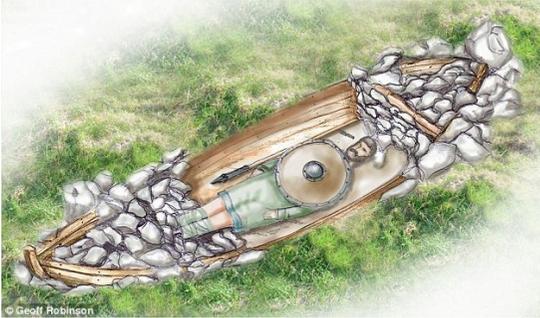
We decided that we can't take a vacation next month.

We also decided about Halloween. We're not going to do it this year.

In past years we constructed a yard display and prepared lavish treat packets filled with candy, toys, crayons and color books, gliders, and lots of candy. This year we feel too depleted in energy and cash to carry on that ministry. I feel a minor sense of loss but I'm sure the Lord can raise up others to fill the gap we leave.

Big news on my horizon was last week's announcement that archaeologists in Scotland uncovered a Viking Ship Burial. Ship burials have been discovered in

Scandinavia but this was the first found in Great Britain. Except for the warrior's teeth, most organic material decomposed. But the outline of the ship and the man's sword, battle ax, and portions of his shield remain.



The discovery reminds me of MacLeish's poem *Immortal Helix*:

HEREUNDER Jacob Schmidt who, man and bones,
Has been his hundred times around the sun.
His chronicle is endless, the great curve
Inscribed in nothing by a point upon
The spinning surface of a circling sphere.
Dead bones roll on.

"Inscribed in nothing"—sounds to me as though the poet did not see much joy in the hope of resurrection. But I like his poem anyhow.

Resurrection is the most important thing about Christianity—In fact, the only important thing.

Jesus rose or rotted. No other alternative. If He rotted in the ground, then we need pay Him no more attention than any other dead guy; if He indeed rose from the grave, He is declared to be the Son of God with power by

His resurrection. If Jesus is not true, then nothing matters; if Jesus is true, then nothing else matters.

Anyhow—back to the Viking—when our kids were little, we Cowarts would stage a Viking Ship Burial At Sea.

Archaeologists find that it was not unusual for Vikings to beach a longboat, place the dead warrior inside and cover him, ship and all, with rocks and loam to create a long barrow like the one found in Scotland. That's not the way we did it.

I don't remember which of us thought of this, sounds like a Donald idea—Maybe we'd seen a video of that 1958 movie *The Vikings* with Kirk Douglas and Tony Curtis.

Anyhow, when a small pet died—goldfish, pet bird, white mouse—we constructed a Viking Ship using one of my large kitchen matchboxes. Lined with cotton batting, the box formed the burial chamber. The kids erected mast, spars and bowsprit of bamboo sticks. Add a paper sail and a dash of cigarette lighter fluid, and she was ready to launch.

The family trooped down to the shrimp dock on the Ribault River and placed the Viking ship in the water. I'd strike a match to the cotton batting and push the burning craft out into the deep. Rigging caught fire as the ship floated away.

It burned to the waterline and disappeared from our sight as it voyaged to pet Valhalla. Our kids led an interesting childhood.

**Sunday, October 30, 2011
Valley Of The Shadow**



**Yes, even when I walk through
the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
because You, Lord, are with me.**

Monday, October 31, 2011 Stephen King Horrified

This entry marks my 1,500th blog posting.

To celebrate I'm repeating one of my favorite entries from the past:

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.

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*, *Lazarus Projects* and, most recently, *A Dirty 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?"

NOVEMBER

Tuesday, November 1, 2011

Much Ado About What You'd Expect

Last week a medical snow flurry enveloped me... and the end result was nothing happened and nothing changed.

Nevertheless, all week long I talked in person and by phone with scads of medical people of every stripe—physicians, nurses, social workers, medical receptionists, secretaries, insurance clerks and, for all I know, necromancers. No change resulted from that blizzard of medical information.

Wish I'd had a conch shell.

A shell would have come in handy as I sought divine guidance amid conflicting advice and information and pressures.

Oh, you do not know how God guides His children with seashells?

Let me explain. It's not just a Florida thing, but as a boy living near the shore, I learned from other kids to hold a seashell up to my ear, the air currents inside the shell sounded like breaking ocean waves. Kids said that shells maintained contact with the ocean no matter where they are, so you can always hear the ocean in a shell.

The more romantic among us claimed that sound inside a conch shell was the singing of mermaids.

As an adult, when writing a piece about learning the will of God, I found out that ancient Romans thought that by listening to a seashell, they would hear the voice of the

god Neptune who would reveal his will about sea voyages and such.

I don't know of anyone anywhere who believes that anymore.

But once I did meet a government employee who determined my benefits by holding a chunk of quartz to her forehead—and, no, I could not possibly make that up! She told me that the rock let her hear the voice of her Indian Medicine Man Spirit Guide who told her how to process government applications.

Unnerving.

But, for myself, I still would like to know a sure-fire way of learning the will of God in specific life situations.

Why?

Well, I have this cultural idea—cultural, not Christian—that if you do the will of God then you will be successful and He won't let you get hurt.

I have no idea how this pagan idea crept into Christian thinking.

I mean, look at Jesus. In Gethsemane He “fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt”.

He did the will of God. He lived in the will of God. He taught the will of God. Jesus said, “I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me”.

Yet, look what happened to Him.

He got hurt.

That same night He prayed, they caught Him. They beat Him. They spit on Him. They plucked out His beard. They pressed a crown of thorns into his scalp. They nailed down His right hand. They nailed down His left hand. They nailed his feet. They dropped the cross into a socket in the rock to stand it upright. They mocked. They teased. They offered vinegar to His thirst. And, when He died, out of sheer meanness, they gutted Him with a spear blade—left a hole big enough to put your hand in.

He did the will of God—for us.

He suffered in the will of God for us.

Yet death could not keep the Prince of Life entombed. He walked out of the grave under His own steam. He is declared to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead.

Yet, when He rose from the grave, He still bore the nail prints in His hands and that hole in His side.

So, where did we ever come up with the idea that doing the will of God will lead us to prosperity and keep us from getting hurt?

Is a servant better than his Master?

Even so, I still suspect that in all the decisions I had to make last week, I'd be better off if I followed the will of God than if I tried to go it alone.

But, I had no voice from a conch shell, no Indian in a rock, no voice from Heaven... so I gathered information and made the best choices in the light I had at the time. I try to think of what is best for me for now and go with that.

But, what if I screwed up?

Big deal.

Who doesn't?

Scripture says, "The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and He delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with his hand".

My job is to be a good man. And when I screw up, I shall not be utterly cast down—flat on my ass maybe, but not utterly cast down. (What the difference is, I'm not sure).

Anyhow, I spent the week enmeshed in medical stuff and it all came to naught in the end. No change. No new problems... well, one:

Being ping-ponged by doctors, I ended up in a medical office I'd never been to before. Two young ladies in scrubs acted as intake receptionists for new patients. One gave me a clipboard with a batch of forms to fill out; the other asked for my insurance card.

Nervous, I fumbled in the plastic sleeve where I keep such cards, spotted a bar code, and handed her that card.

She carried it to a card-scanning machine and swiped it. She waited while the machine whizzed and buzzed with flashing lights—only to spit out my card.

She looked the card over and said, “Mr. Cowart, we can’t take this. It’s your Zoo Membership Card”.

Flustered and embarrassed at my mistake, I dug in my cards and came up with my medical insurance card.

She fed it into the scanner. But again the machine rejected my card.

She explained that this medical office does not accept my insurance plan. She said I had to call a doctor on the insurance company’s approved list. (Which I later did).

She gave me back both useless cards.

As I slipped the two cards back into the protective sleeve, I couldn’t resist asking her, “Does this mean I can’t get in to see the monkeys”?

Friday, November 4, 2011 **My Binocular Trick**

Years ago I mastered the binocular trick.

Now, I’ve got that sucker down to perfection.

It’s proved one of the most destructive, hurtful things in my life.

Ginny and I use binoculars practically every weekend as we watch birds in our backyard. We have this pair of binoculars some wildlife organization sent us because we’d made a donation to save birds, seals, whales—some varmint, I forget just what.

Our binoculars were designed to be a sleek, precision tool to enable us to watch wildlife close up. One problem: Ginny is left handed; I am right handed. So when she looks at a bird through the viewfinder, she sees it enlarged. But, naturally as she passes the binoculars to me, they end up in my hands reversed. I slap them to my eyes and that bird looks tiny and a mile away. By the time I get them turned around, the bird has flown. Stupid bird.

You get the picture? Look through one end and things are magnified; look through the other end and things are smallified.

Yesterday, as I talked with Michael Swanhart, the counselor I've been seeing recently, our conversation touched on the binocular trick I use in my mental and spiritual life that causes me so much misery and frustration.

What I do is view my sins and faults and social blunders through one end of my brain's binoculars so that I magnify anything bad. Bad stuff appears huge and right on top of me. Then, when I think of anything good in my life, I reverse my brain binoculars to smallify and discount the good. Good stuff appears tiny, insignificant, and far away.

For instance, when I think of my experiences as a Boy Scout, the first thing that pops into my mind is that time by the campfire I insulted my Scoutmaster. Never mind that for five years he was my best friend and role-model, the one moment that looms large in my mind is that insult.

On the other hand, once as a Scout, I won a trophy, a silver loving cup about 18-inches tall with scrolled handles and the Scout emblem engraved and the words, **John Cowart, Most Outstanding Scout Of 1951**. I felt so proud of winning that trophy.

My parents had not attended the awards ceremony. When I walked in the house they were drinking coffee at the kitchen table. I placed my silver (real silver back in those days) cup on the table, my mother gasped and accused me of stealing it.

She would not believe I'd won it till I showed her my name engraved on the surface.

That's when I noticed my cup was empty.

Binocular vision. Ever since then, I view every award, every compliment, every good thing I've done as empty. Hollow. Of no account.

Thus my brain learned to belittle my accomplishments and to magnify my faults, flubs and sins.

Dr. David Burns, author of *Feeling Good*, a cognitive therapy handbook, speaks of this reverse vision saying, "A spectacular mental illusion is the persistent tendency of some depressed individuals to transform neutral or even positive experiences into negative ones... I call this

reverse alchemy, you can turn golden joy into emotional lead... When someone praises you, you mentally disqualify their compliment "Oh, it was really nothing," you say. If you constantly throw cold water on the good things that happen, no wonder life seems damp and chilly to you.

"Disqualifying the positive is one of the most destructive forms of cognitive distortion... The price you pay for this tendency is intense misery and an inability to appreciate the good things that happen... It can also form the basis for some of the most extreme and intractable forms of depression."

Wow, does he have me pegged.

And to make matters worse, I'm a Christian.

That can falsely exacerbate the befuddled mindset of a Reverse Alchemist—Being predisposed to binocular vision, I grind my own lenses.

There is a religious tradition which appeals to my distorted view of the Lord God, of other people, and of myself. It glories in binocular trick. And plenty of Scripture backs this mindset up. "I am a worm and no man... In sin was I conceived... There is none that doeth good, no, not one".

A bleak view through that magnifying end of my binoculars.

Then, looking through the other end, we see we are "Accepted in the Beloved... Now are we the children of God... We love Him because He first loved us... A peculiar people, a royal priesthood... I have called you friends... This day you shall be with me in Paradise".

And I have this mental tendency to discount, to smallify, those Bible verses and make the Word Of God less than it really is.

The thing I'm trying to realize is that looking through either end of my mental binoculars never gives me a true picture; one end makes things look big, the other makes everything look small.... Neither view shows the real size or quality of what I am looking at. Viewing the world through the binocular trick always gives a distorted vision.

Jesus realistically put down hypocrites big time, "You brood of snakes! Who told you to flee the wrath to come?"

One the other hand, He handed out realistic compliments to many people. Meeting Nathaniel for the first time, Jesus praised him saying, “Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!”

And when He cured people, Jesus never said, “Behold, I zap you with my divine super-power”. No. He gave the afflicted person praise, credit even, saying, “Your faith has made you whole, Go and sin no more”.

Jesus is nothing if not a realist.

He sees the thoughts and intents of the heart.

He sees reality.

He sees clearly.

Yet, He never held a pair of binoculars in His life.

Monday, November 7, 2011
Zoo Fun



While many Christians display a white dove as a symbol of their faith, my family teases that the sulking bird beside me in this photo could be the emblem of my spirit.

Yes, Saturday my youngest son, Donald, and his beautiful wife, Helen, treated Ginny and me to a day at the Jacksonville Zoological Park and Gardens with a catered lunch in the VIP lounge.

The kids had just last week paid for a plumber to install a new faucet in our kitchen and repair two leaks—which will save us a bunch of money. And to top off their

generosity, they took us to the zoo to see the animals and browse the landscaped gardens.

A jaguar, mascot of the local football team, tried to eat a left-over Halloween pumpkin.



Ginny and Helen gleaned seed pods from the ground by exotic plants.



They snapped photos of roosting duck-like birds:



As a great highpoint of our outing, we fed stingrays raw bits of shrimp. They will eat right out of your hand. I have seen them in the ocean before, but this was the first time I've actually touched one deliberately. Here's a photo of Donald and his mother enjoying the stingrays:



Here are Helen, Donald and Ginny beside a waterfall:



As we strolled amid lavish flowers and greenery, as we watched creatures of all sorts feed and frolic in the cool autumn air, I could not help but remember the lines of that old hymn:

All Things Bright and Beautiful



All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful,
The Lord God made them all.



Each little flower that opens,
Each little bird that sings,
He made their glowing colors,
He made their tiny wings.



The purple-headed mountain,
The river running by,
The sunset, and the morning,
That brightens up the sky,



The cold wind in the winter,
The pleasant summer sun,
The ripe fruits in the garden,
He made them every one.



He gave us eyes to see them,
And lips that we might tell,
How great is God Almighty,
Who has made all things well.

Tuesday, November 8, 2011
Now On Twitter

Yesterday my youngest son, Donald, spent the whole day processing my 20+ books (www.bluefishbooks.info) formats which can be read on e-book readers.

A monumental task!

We figure that since so many people plan to give e-book readers as Christmas gifts and will want books to

install in their libraries, it's a good idea to format my books so they can be added.

Donald is also using foundational material of Mobi formats transferred by my eldest son, Fred, to make my book available for Kindle readers before Christmas.

Donald studies everything. Here's him studying a bottle:



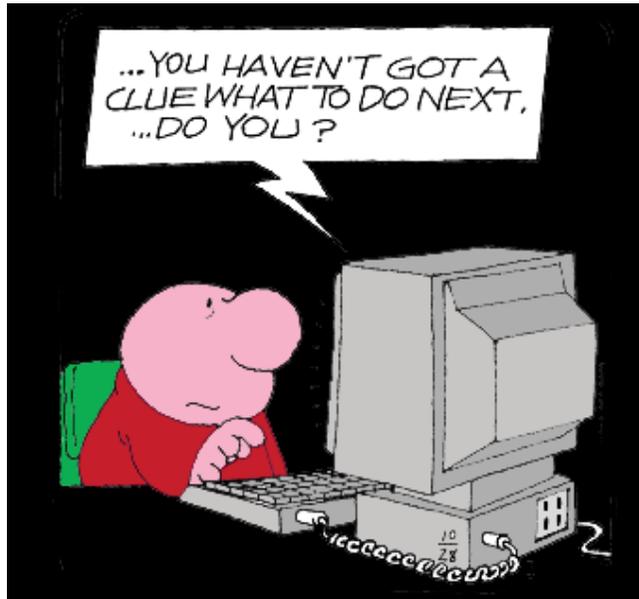
Here he is teaching Ginny the ins and outs of a new computer he and Helen bought her:



All my grown children help me in so many ways. Here's a photo of Donald and Johnny updating my computer:



Being a computer whiz myself—Hey, I can cut. I can paste—I have no idea what any of this hi-tech stuff means or does.



Anyhow, yesterday Donald introduced me to the art of tweeting. He added a button at the end of each of my blog posts for twittering. He added a feature on my blog sidebar which records my last six tweeters. He added a button to recruit followers.

Now, I can twitter.

Although, given my normal state of mind, I'm more likely to squawk that tweet.

Thursday, November 10, 2011
In A Virtuous Bikini

I think maybe, if I remember correctly, possibly, I might have, I'm not sure, but in high school, in art class, as I recall, a class where we sat on tall stools, I think once, maybe when she climbed on her stool, when she crossed her legs, I think, I'm not positive, but I think, I may have caught a glimpse of a girl's white cotton panties.

Back in the 1950's that was the extent of my sex education.

Well, that's not strictly true.

Once my friend Paul brought a book to school. He picked it from his Dad's shelf. It was a French book. Written in French. Paul claimed that it was about people "doing it".

Of course back then our backward educational system in Jacksonville offered foreign language classes only in Latin and Spanish. No one we knew knew a word of French. So a bunch of us guys clustered around Paul's Father's book and tried to puzzle out even one familiar word.

To this day, I think that was the most erotic book I have ever held in my hands.

Then, of course, there was the misinformation shared around the campfire by older Boy Scouts.

Thus, on those three elements, I base my present refined, sophisticated view of sexual matters.

I married a school teacher four months after I graduated from High School. Divorced her after eleven years. Remarried 43 years ago. And I'm the father of three daughters and three sons. All now grown.

This is going somewhere, believe me.

With my first wife and with my second, I remained 100% faithful. I never touched another woman inappropriately. Except...

One night, about 50 years ago, I drove a friend's wife home and she got the hots for me. The woman

was all over me; I was all over her. Things progressed to the point we were taking off her brassiere when her father interrupted us—thus preserving my manly virtue.

Damn!

To this day I don't know if I'm thankful for the old man, or pissed at him.

Then, again about 46 years ago, one night a young woman in my Sunday School class phoned me asking for spiritual counsel. Ever the alert witnessing Christian gentleman, I talked with her at length. As our conversation ended, she told me that she'd been masturbating with a glass Coke bottle the whole time we talked.

Never at a loss for words, I blurted, "I hope you took the metal bottle cap off first. You could hurt yourself".

What did Dr. Alfred Kinsey know that I don't?

And, yes I am going somewhere with all these reminiscences.

Perhaps I am the only Christian man like this, but I find naked woman fascinating. They are not like us. They beguile me.

And then, Welcome To The Internet!

Apparently somewhere in this world exist 8,000,000,000 naked ladies who posed to have their unclad photos posted on the Internet.

And lovely things they are too.

They intrigue me.

They don't speak French either! But real English!

I am so curious about them. Where have they been hiding all my life?

However, being a Christian, of sorts, cramps my style.

Jesus once said, "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart".

Jesus obviously never went online.

Online, all I have to do is Right Click and Save As to preserve beautiful naked ladies on my own computer (Incidentally, Ginny knows all about me; she says I am a geriatric adolescent boy).

However, in thinking about the words of Jesus, I try to split hairs.

I mean, do I lust after these ladies, which is a no-no, or am I just curious about them, which is only a, I think, harmless, questionable practice.

I justify myself saying I am just curious, not committing adultery in my heart. But the Scripture says the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, Who can know it?

Anyhow, yesterday, I deleted over 500 photos of stark naked ladies off my computer.

In their place, I have determined from now on to only download photos of ladies wearing, at the very least, a virtuous bikini.

Won't Jesus be just tickled pink with me?

Friday, November 11, 2011
Thirty, Twenty & Ten Years Ago Today

Off and on I've kept a more or less daily journal for over 40 years. Just for the fun of it, here are my entries for Thirty, Twenty and Ten years ago today. I could have dug in back closet for November 11, 1971, but that was too much trouble. So let's start with my fascinating life 30 years ago today:

Wednesday, November 11, 1981

No school for kids today.

I served Ginny breakfast in bed.

My Veteran's Day article, *America's First Veterans*, did not run in the newspaper.

Worked writing Christmas magazine articles. Wrote 1st and 2nd drafts of *Move Over, Paul Revere*.

Monday, November 11, 1991:

Ginny and I returned from Savannah. Kids were out of school for Veterans' Day. I slept almost ten hours.

Donald says while Ginny and I were away on our anniversary trip, there were several murders in Jacksonville. Young women killed and their bodies left in their bathtubs.

He said police are baffled because the bodies have been soaked in gallons of milk and covered with cut-up fruit.

Donald said, "Police officials think it's the work of a cereal killer."

Sunday, Nov. 11, 2001: On Vacation At Crooked River State Park, Ga.

Up at 3:30 a.m. and fooled around silently while Gin slept. At 5:30 I drove into St. Marys to locate Christ's Church, an Episcopal congregation founded in 1812. I walked along the waterfront to watch a beautiful sunrise over a fleet of shrimp boats.

I woke Ginny at 7 and we barely made the 8:45 service.

This being Veteran's Day, a Navy Commander in uniform, Captain of a nuclear submarine, delivered the sermon. He spoke from the question Sadducees asked Jesus about the seven brothers who married the same woman, "Whose property will she be in the resurrection?"

The Commander spoke about how warfare relates to religious revival as people realize that we can be killed in an instant; this brings us a more acute awareness of God and eternity.

He compared warfare in old and new testaments; "God played hardball in the Old Testament," he said. While the New Testament speaks of the quest for peace which Messiah brings.

He spoke about the history of warfare in this town, especially Civil War activities in the past and the King's Bay nuclear submarine base and the present war on terrorism.

Then he spoke about resurrection. Jesus did not give the Sadducees a satisfactory answer. Neither do we get a satisfactory answer when we question God about death and resurrection. But Jesus does assure the Sadducees, and us, that things will be all right!

The commander said the Bible teaches two ways for us to prepare for our own death: the first is to trust God altogether here and now; the second is to begin right now to practice giving up things, letting go of this world's materials, values and relationships.

“That's a start on good dying,” he said.

Then during the announcement period, he had the church ushers give out a brochure on *Five Wishes*, outlining the process for a making a living will and a hospice program.

WOW! Where has this kind of Episcopal church been all my life?

After service, Gin and I walked the waterfront ambling here and there as the spirit moved us. We drove to an A&W Drive-In, a revival of the drive-in restaurants of my boyhood in the '50s. It was the best burger and onion rings I've ever tasted! Gin is too young to have ever been to such a place—car-hop girls on roller skates brought the tray to our car—Ginny was impressed.

We returned to our cabin in the state park to watch football, relax, read, and cuddle all afternoon. A wonderful vacation day!

Monday, November 14, 2011 Marriage and A Digital Icebreaker

Last week Ginny and I celebrated 44 years of marriage.

Ginny, an accountant good with numbers, said, “John, it’s really only been 43 years; it just seems longer”.

For the first time in ages, we could not afford to go off on a vacation to celebrate our time together. In the past we’ve rented a cabin in the woods for our anniversary but this year we lacked money to do that so we mostly enjoyed time at home instead.

On Saturday we enjoyed a day-trip up to St. Marys, Georgia. I drive up there alone every month or so because that’s the only place around where I can buy my brand of pipe tobacco. But Saturday Ginny traveled with me and we browsed antique stores and dined at a restaurant overlooking the river.

Recently we've weathered a few ripples in our normal sea of marital tranquility, so we had lots of things to talk about as we enjoyed our time together. For a couple of hours we sat on a waterfront park bench watching pelicans, sea gulls and wood storks as we discussed our present and future together. Changes approach us which we view with apprehension or anticipation as we try to prepare ourselves for them.

"The chief end of all human endeavor is to be happy at home", Chesterton said.

Ginny and I focus on that.

I served God best by serving my wife best, and I serve Ginny best by serving the Lord. It's a closed loop. But recently I've felt a few kinks and we've devoted time this anniversary season to ironing those out.

Actually all the trouble in our marriage is Ginny's fault! If she had not married an idiot there wouldn't be any problem in our marriage.

At one point in our conversation Ginny walked into the ranger station for something leaving me alone on the bench smoking my pipe, looking out over the river, and pondering things she'd told me.

A pretty young woman with a camera interrupted my reverie asking, "Excuse me, Sir, may I take your picture"?

I said that with all the boats and birds and seascape around us, why would she want to photograph me? I'm extremely conscious of my facial deformity and I felt defensive at first.

"You are an interesting man," she said. "You have an interesting face".

Well, who am I to argue with that?

Maybe not a handsome face, but an interesting one. Maybe my needs-a-shave ugliness gives my face character like those pictures you see of a grizzly fisherman or the Marlborough Man or James Bond or Chuck Norris or some guy like that—character.

She raised her digital camera, snapped my picture, then walked over to shake hands and introduce herself as Che Cantrell, wife of the pastor of Abundant Harvest

Baptist Church. Their website is at <http://www.ahbaptistchurch.org/>

She and her husband, Curtis, were out on the waterfront using their digital camera as an icebreaker to meet strangers, invite them to a special church service, and tell about Jesus. Che snapped a couple of photos of me with her husband and with Ginny.

I realize how difficult it is to approach strangers cold turkey in street evangelism; and I admire this young couple's innovative approach in using the camera to break the ice.

I doubt if I would ever have thought of that.

I wish them good success in their ministry.

As they moved on to take photos of other people on the waterfront, Che asked me what is the secret to a happy marriage?

"Marry Ginny," I said.

You know, at times our kids ask that Ginny and I write a book about how to have a happy marriage. But we are not sure what we do that works so well for us.

One factor is that we've developed a siege mentality. It's us against the world. Us against any thing or anyone who threatens our relationship. Us against any given problem. We flood the moat, loose the sharks, raise the drawbridge and hunker down—We two against all comers in happy isolation.

That may not be for other couples.

Works for us.

For an anniversary present, I gave Ginny two ceramic cats from a thrift store. She gave me—well, never mind what she gave me. Suffice it to say, I got the better deal.

Wednesday, November 16, 2011 **Almost A Horse Thief**

Yesterday I almost stole a horse. I didn't, but I wanted to. I could have got away with it too. But, I didn't steal it. Today I almost wish I had.

I think I've mentioned before that one of my besetting sins is my often temptation for petty theft. I suppose I desire to steal little things because I don't have the guts

to rob an armored car. My temptation is the same one the bank robber has, but I lack the virtue of courage.

So I settle for petty theft.

Like the two guys crucified on either side of Jesus.

Not name criminals like Barabbas, just two nameless small-time crooks.

What happened yesterday was this:

My son Johnny treated me to a country sausage breakfast at Famous Amos and on our drive to my house we stopped at a huge salvage warehouse, the kind of place that bulk-buys goods from stores that have gone out of business because they couldn't sell those very same goods.

The cavernous warehouse covers a city block. A labyrinth of dark aisles stacked ceiling-high with stuff—Hospital beds, cuckoo clocks, printer ribbons, pocket knives, cotton swabs, cans of olives past their sell-by date, bicycle helmets, Indian artifacts, garden fountains, snow chains, dolls, telephone parts, tractor parts, bird seed, dog food, dental probes, wrist watches, female and male store manikins, all debris of the mercantile age—all discounted to sell to the person who stumbles on some treasure in the pile.

I even saw a—and I'm not making this up—I saw a Jesus Skateboard decorated with a picture of the Savior and a Bible verse. The store was too dark and dust too thick for me to read the verse, something out of Joshua, I think. If it were me picking an appropriate Bible verse for a skateboard, I think I'd go with "How the mighty are fallen".

Anyhow, in a far corner of the maze, I found a basket of filthy little broken metal pieces and one of those trinkets was a metal horse about as tall as a quarter stood on edge. No price on horse or basket. I figured it might be worth a dime.

I wanted it to add to a Christmas display of miniature figures Ginny sets up each year. It was just the right size...

The right size to go in the display, the right size to slip into my coat pocket.

I thought about it long and hard.

The basket I found it in contained broken bits of junk. Nothing of value. Who knows, who cares if I take one tiny horse, useless to anyone else in the world, from this massive warehouse of motorcycle parts, 50-gallon-fish-tanks, cases of industrial-strength soy sauce, and split garden hoses?

Why not slip it in my pocket?

It's such a little thing.

Yes, it would be a little thing to steal, but a big God I'd be stealing from.

What property does not ultimately belong to Him?

So I dutifully carried the tiny horse to the cashier a hundred yards away. I told her where I found the horse and asked the price.

She said the little horse was part of a set, but the store did not have the other pieces... but, just in case the missing pieces ever did turn up, she would charge me the astronomical price of a FULL, UNBROKEN SET WITH ALL THE PIECES! Just as though it were all complete .

I declined and left it on the checkout counter.

I did not buy any of the other treasures I'd picked up in browsing either. For want of a horse a sale was lost.

In the parking lot as we drove away, I muttered to Johnny, "I wish I'd stole the damn thing".

Guess what?

I felt guilty!

Why the Hell did I feel guilty?

I had not stolen anything. I'd just been tempted to. Are we supposed to feel guilty over things we wanted to do but never did?

But I felt condemned by my own heart about wanting that little horse.

As I've mulled over this non-incident, I begin to think that the devil wants me to feel overwhelming guilty and down and morose and dirty whether I did the sin or not. I imagine the enemy of our souls laughs when we don't sin

but regret it as much as when we go ahead and do the dirty deed.

As I pondered this, an obscure Scripture came into my mind: in his first letter St. John said, "If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things".

God is greater than my heart.

Isn't that something!

Isn't that just plain wonderful!

Humph, let me rethink this armored car thing...

Friday, November 18, 2011

In The King Of Florida's Pants and Palace

When I started to put on my pants this morning, I saw something move inside the left leg. Yes, when I started to put on my pants this morning, I saw something that brought to mind a Bible passage.

My, don't I feel pious to think of Holy Scripture while standing in my underwear and seeing one of these already inside my pants:



Naturally, I thought of the words of Agur, son of Jakeh:

There be four things which are little upon the earth,

but they are exceeding wise:

The ants are a people not strong,

yet they prepare their meat in the summer;

The conies are but a feeble folk,
yet make they their houses in the rocks;
The locusts have no king,
yet go they forth all of them by bands;
The spider taketh hold with her hands,
and is in kings' palaces.

Yeap, especially if that king's palace is in Florida, look in the corner at this time of year and you're sure to find a common Florida House Spider settling in for cool damp weather.

Over the years, I've seen such spiders in City Hall, in shacks, in stores, in high-rise office buildings, in mansions.

The Florida house spider is huge but harmless; nevertheless, I'm not crazy about sharing my pants with one.

Bible scholars say that Hebrew phrase from Proverbs, "taketh hold with her hands" appears to mean that spiders are so easy to catch that any housewife can hold one in her hand.

As a Bible believer I believe it wise for me to obey the dictate of Holy Scripture. Therefore, I called the nearest housewife, Ginny, to deal with the spider after I shook it out of my pants leg.

Neither Ginny nor I ever want to harm one of God's dear little creatures, even a house spider, so Ginny shooed it toward a corner, but it ran along the baseboard for the dark recesses of her bedroom slipper.

Can't have that. Spiders and slippers don't mix.

So Ginny moved her slipper out of the way and used it to encourage Mr. Spider to flee to safety behind our bedroom chest of drawers. There to dwell out of sight in safety till Spring.

You know, occasionally Ginny brings home outdated magazines from her office. Magazines that extol "Florida Living" and "Enjoying The Florida Lifestyle" and "Waterfront Elegance On Florida's First Coast"..

These publications gear up to sucker upscale strangers to come to Florida and live or vacation in a palace—never once do the magazines mention that you'll

share your mansion with our common household spiders. But you will. Can't avoid them. Common as air.

Reminds me of a Southern saying after the Civil War: "One yankee tourist is worth two bales of cotton—and they're a whole lot easier to pick".

Saturday, November 19, 2011
Oops, Bad Prayer

As I get ready for the Thanksgiving holiday, it occurs to me that I ought to have a Thanksgiving prayer on hand. I wracked my brain to come up with one that fits me.

Happily, I remembered a good solid biblical prayer right out of Luke's Gospel:

Come Thanksgiving Day I can pray, "God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men..."

Oops, Bad prayer. Let's not go there.

Make up your own prayer for Thanksgiving.

Just forget I even mentioned it.

Well, if you insist on knowing the whole prayer, here's Luke, Chapter 18, Verses 10 to 14:

Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican.

The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

Wednesday, November 23, 2011
War & Peace In Macclenny

All the Seminole Indian woman wanted was to pick blackberries.

Florida Pioneer James McCormick captured her and her children in a thicket, tied them in a chain, and herded them to his farm. He wanted to collect bounty money.

Seminole braves wanted to rescue the woman and children. They attacked the blockhouse on McCormick's farm. McCormick's grandson described the 1835 battle:

Grandpa quickly got inside, unscathed, and barred the door. His wife and daughters loaded the guns while he and his sons shot at the Indians through the port holes in the wall. The guns were muzzle-loaders with loose powder and shot, taking considerable time to load and prime. They were able to keep the Indians off.

Outraged, the Seminoles attacked the nearby farm of Berry Johns:

Mrs. Johns dragged (her husband's) body into the house and barred the door; but they battered it down and shot her, took off her scalp, set the house on fire, raised the war whoop and left. She was not dead, however, was just able to crawl out into a pond near the road, where she lay in the water all day.

The scalped Mrs. Johns survived, went on a lecture circuit, and became a national celebrity, traveling to Washington and having her portrait painted to hang in the Capital building.

Greed. Encroachment. Betrayal. Retaliation. Revenge. Death.

Such were the times.

This detail from an 1836 engraving illustrates the fierce days of Florida's Second Seminole War. According to the text accompanying the engraving, between December 1835 and April 1836, Florida Indians killed 400 pioneer settlers, "Including women and children".



Bright spots amid all this violence were the Methodist circuit riders, who rode hundreds of miles through Florida war zones and swamps to preach the gospel of peace to settlers and Indians alike.

In 1829, circuit rider Isaac Boring wrote in his diary:

“I go to them not knowing what will be the consequences. I hope it is of the Lord and the Lord will open the door for his Gospel to be preached to this nation of Indians”.

In one swamp hammock Boring gathered a congregation of 50. “At the close of the service, many came forward with tears in their eyes to bid me farewell,” he said.

Later, he conferred with three Seminole chiefs. One “observed that I was traveling alone among them. And that I was certainly trying to do them some good”. But, “He replied that he had been opposed to preaching and was determined to continue so. I then told him that persons who would not hear the Good Word and continued to do bad displeased the Almighty, and when they died would go to the bad world.

“To this he replied that many whites did not attend to the Good Talk and that they were as wicked as himself... What a lamentable truth!” Boring wrote.

As early as 1822 Andrew Jackson, governor of the Florida Territory, mandated that a string of blockhouses be built across the state. Only one of these wooden blockhouses remain today, the Burnsed Blockhouse was built in 1830 by James R. Burnsed.

I find no record of an attack on this blockhouse; over the years it was modified into a dwelling. It now stands in Heritage Park village, Macclenny, Florida.

Ginny and I visited there the weekend before Thanksgiving. I am working on a novel set in Florida’s pioneer days and I wanted to tour the blockhouse especially.

But the wooden fort is only part of Macclenny’s Heritage Park. Twenty-four historic structures (relocated from around Baker County) form a half-circle in the park grounds.

The Burnsed Blockhouse, the Darbyville Jail, a moonshine still, a blacksmith shop, and a gas station when the pumps read 15 cents a gallon—each structure, furnished with period furniture, acts as a mini-museum of Baker County history.



Here is one photo I snapped of the blockhouse:

Obviously the chimney, windows, porches, the dog-trot kitchen and extra bedrooms are later additions. The Library of Congress archives 15 architectural floor plans showing the development of the Burnsed Blockhouse at <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/FL0359/>

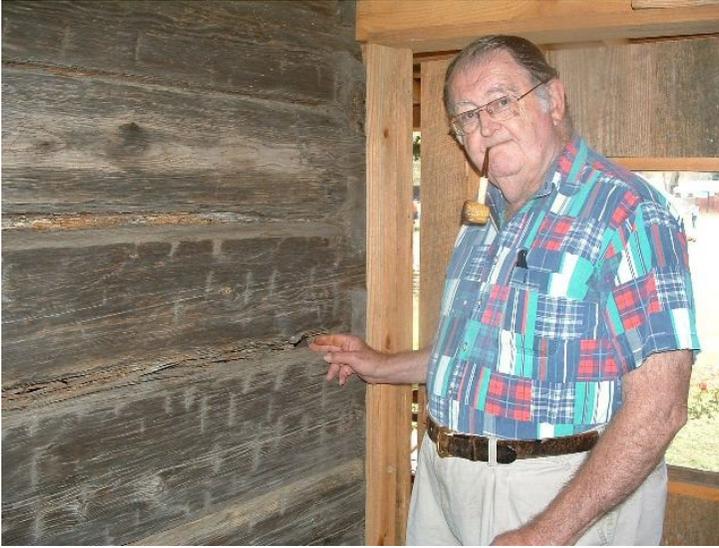
Corncob pipe in my mouth (Made me feel authentic) I examined features of the blockhouse:



Meanwhile, Ginny enjoyed the roses circling the yard:



While I looked at the log cabin's caulking:



Ginny chatted interminably with ladies in the millinery shop about cloth! How can they talk about cloth for half an hour? Here's a photo of Gin with an old cloth thing:



We both enjoyed the antique cars on display:



In the cookshed, volunteer chefs used a Civil War era cauldron to prepare a chicken 'n rice feast—best I've ever tasted. They cook in batches to feed 350 people at a time:



A mountain of sugar cane supplied squeezings to bottle cane syrup on the spot and kids used stalks of cane as light sabers, riding ponies, cheerleader batons, jousting

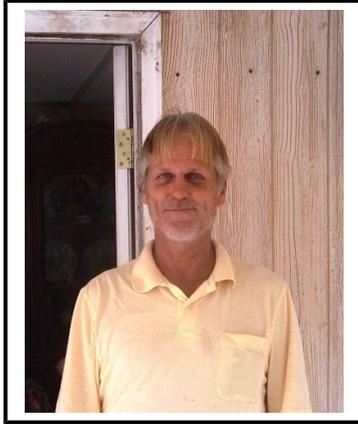
lances, javelins, etc.—what kid needs an X-Box for Christmas when he can lay hands on a stalk of sugar cane?



When I walked to the sugar cane pile to buy a stalk for Ginny (a dollar each), a little boy, about eight, rushed up and handed me his money thinking I was the man in charge. His mother, about 20 yards away on the cement walk, yelled, “No. No, Joey, you’re giving money to the wrong man! You’re giving money to the wrong man!”

I turned and, to the laughter of the crowd, yelled back to her, “No he isn’t, Lady. No he isn’t.. No he isn’t. I need the money”.

Monday, November 28, 2011
A Thanksgiving Second Helping



Of all the people I know, I admire my friend Rex the most.

In my mind he represents the best elements of North Florida's Cracker culture.

A skilled workman with a strong Southern work ethic, Rex also values intense family loyalty, pride, charity, and helpfulness.

While Ginny and I celebrated Thanksgiving with our own family on Thursday, logistics, work schedules and such dictated that Rex and his family gather yesterday (Sunday) to celebrate the feast.

So, Rex and Chris invited Ginny and me to enjoy a Second Thanksgiving with their extended family. What a privilege.



Chris and Rex used to live near us but they moved to a large property in the far western reaches of Duval County where they are building a new home with their own hands. Their acreage covers several lots and includes a mile-long go-cart track Rex cleared for their son, Syd and his friends.

Here is a photo of kids at play on the pool deck:



More kids at play under a tree house Rex helped them build:

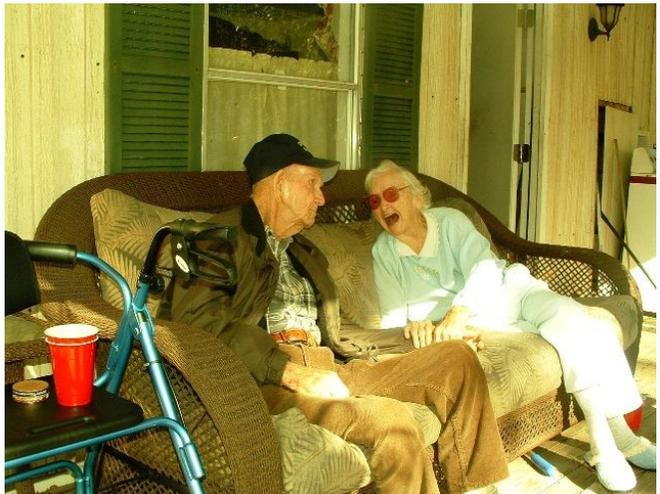


Herds of children ran in the yard swinging light sabers, spears, bows & arrows and just plain sticks in a game of Cowboys, Indians and Space Invaders.

Meanwhile, grownups gathered on the deck and in the kitchen talking and feasting. Here Chris perches on her sister's chair arm:



The family—and there are lots of them—ranged in age from a newborn infant to Aunt Marie, 86, and Uncle Merrill, 94. While the brother and sister had a hard time hearing anyone else, years of practice at tuning in to each other's voice let them share memories, gossip and jokes. No trouble hearing at all:



I roamed to the back of the property to snap photos of the stream and of a beautiful field of wild grass:



That's a neighbor's house in the distance across the field. The woods were so quiet that I heard pine needles singing in the breeze as I walked along the bank of the stream. Rex plans to deepen his woodland stream and restock it with fish.



I enjoyed my solitude but Rex drove a pickup truck down to the stream to herd me back to the group—

apparently one lady told Ginny that she thought I'd wandered off in a daze like an Alzheimer's patient! Do I look that decrepit? Am I too citified a Cracker to walk alone in the woods?

Ginny figured I'd turn up.

She consoled herself to my being lost in the swamp by petting the family cat—which is named Dog. The purring cat obviously was very concerned about my absence:



Tuesday, November 29, 2011
Ninja Giving and GAHOO

Monday my youngest son, Donald, drove over to pick me up for a Southern health food breakfast of fried eggs, fried sausage, home fries, grits, toast and coffee at Ayer's Café.

Hey, if it ain't fried, it ain't food.

Our conversation covered a variety of problems from how to help a friend in Norway place an order for books I've written to health care for Donald's beloved Father-in-law who is going through a bad patch at the moment. We talked about lawnmower repairs and retirement communities; about computer problems and building a wheelchair ramp if Ginny or I ever need one. We talked about a rendering script Donald wants me to write so he and Johnny can produce computer animated movies retelling Bible stories.

But mostly we talked about faith and about works.

Earlier this month Donald initiated a movement at his work which resulted in a hundred Thanksgiving food baskets being given to poor families here in Jacksonville. Incidentally, someone else told me about this project, not Donald himself.

A co-worker ask him why he was doing such a thing, and, if this sort of thing were important to God, how Donald could act so casual and laid back about doing it.

As Donald and I talked about this question over breakfast, I recalled how once at a Christmastide when he was seven or eight years old, I'd taken him with me on a sneak-giving-raid. In light of today's popular culture, I'd probably call it Ninja Giving, but back then Sneak Giving was the best name I could think of.

Knowing that Jesus encourages us to help the poor, and knowing that He said to give in secret so that not even your right hand knows what good your left hand is doing so that only God is glorified by your good deeds, we came up with the idea of sneak giving. Here's how it worked:

Ginny ran across a poor family—the father broke his back in an industrial accident. Christmas looked bleak for

the wife and children. Destitute. They lived across the street from a city park.

Ginny fixed up the small amount of cash she could give in an unsigned Christmas card and envelope. She gave it to Donald and me to deliver.

He and I waited till late at night, long past his bedtime, for our adventure. I parked the car a block away. Like commandos, we infiltrated the dark park. I hid in a stand of azalea bushes. Donald slipped bravely across the street, tucked the envelope in the poor family's screen door, banged on the door as loud as he could. Then he ran like Hell across the street to hide in the azaleas with me.

We watched from the bushes while the mother puzzled over who had banged at her door so late at night, noticed the envelope, and opened it... Donald and I slinked away to our car like thieves in the night. The adventure in the night thrilled my little boy—Wow. God's ninjas.

(Note: It now occurs to me that having your kid sneak up on a stranger's porch and rattle the door in the middle of the night might be a good way to get your kid shot. But I did not think of that at the time. Besides, Donald has always been lucky).

I suppose, in keeping good deeds secret, that even now 30+ years later, I should not reveal what we had done... because—and get this, it's important—because what we did does not matter.

That's right. Doing the will of God does not matter.

That's why Donald spearheaded the 100-basket food giveaway and why he did not care about it.

The just shall live by faith—that means that the just trust Jesus 100% for salvation and sustenance in this world and the next.

Jesus and nothing less.

St Paul wrote to Titus, "After that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

That being justified by His grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life”.

Paul goes on to say, “This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men”.

Yes, faith alone saves us.

And yes the Lord instructed us to do certain things simply because we are the children of God.

Therein lies a problem.

When we think of Children of God, the mental picture we form is that of stalwart grown-up sons and daughters taking care of the doddering Old Man because He’s too feeble to get things done on his own. Strong, brave and pure-hearted ,we are.

Not necessarily.

I suspect that what the Bible means when it talks about the children of God Almighty who created and can disintegrate galaxies with the flick of His finger—I think the Scriptural phrase may well be rendered “We are the four-year-olds of God”.

Yes, baby children. Little kids whom Daddy lets help Him paint the back fence.

I used to let my children “help” paint a wall. Brush and bucket in hand they painted with abandon. Spattered and smeared, they’d boast to Ginny, “We painted the wall. Daddy helped.”

(Note: always use water-soluble paint).

God lets us “work” for Him in that same way.

What happens if I do not obey and do the will of God?

Is the universe thrown out of kilter? Do stars fall? Cities crumble? Continents sink beneath the sea?

No. Nothing happens. I may not even know I’ve missed God’s will myself as I go blithely on my way. No one loses anything but me.

You see, like the folks at the Yahoo computer search engine, God Always Has Other Options—GAHOO.

At Jesus' Triumphal Entry as people cheered, the Gospel says, "Some of the Pharisees from among the multitude said unto him, 'Master, rebuke thy disciples'. And He answered and said unto them, 'I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out'".

When Queen Esther hesitated about delivering her people, her uncle said, "If thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

Yes, GAHOO—God Always Has Other Options.

Thus the paradox of faith and works. As Donald told his co-worker, "We should obey God because that's the right thing to do; we can relax about it because it does not matter. Everything depends on us, and nothing does".

I appreciate my son's wisdom.

There's much I can learn from him.

Yes, the way Christians get into trouble... Er... Let's reword that... The way I get into trouble is by considering myself indispensable to God.

Stand aside Lord. Stand aside and hand me that paint brush.

Wednesday, November 30, 2011 A Gift With No Strings

First: a bit of happy news:

Take a look at this news clipping which ran on Jacksonville's Channel 4 on November 23rd. It was relayed to me from my eldest son, Fred, who is enrolled at the Clara White Mission's Culinary School. Fred works in the background in several of this video's scenes. I'm proud of him:

<http://www.news4jax.com/news/The-Clara-White-Mission-offers-a-helping-hand/-/475880/4811236/-/bsxgxm/-/index.html>

Yesterday I wrote another four pages of a book I'm working on. Slow going but at least it's going.

Today I want to think about Ninja Giving as a carryover from yesterday's entry.

As Christmas approaches I recall how often I've disappointed others in my life. From my oldest son to my youngest daughter, I keenly feel how I've failed them, slighted them, and not lived up to their expectations. And around Christmas, my mind dwells on these things.

Like that time back in the early 1970s when we were poor and my teenaged son Johnny wanted a guitar so bad he could taste it. With a guitar he felt he could be such a hit with his high school crowd. He knew he would win girls and influence girls if he only had a guitar.

Well, times were hard back then. The winter was hard. My job was hard. Keeping the family afloat was hard.

Everything got hard but me.

But Johnny needed that guitar, so I prowled the pawn shops at Eight and Main till I found one I could afford. It cost ten dollars. Ten dollars was all I had in the world.

When the man took it down from the wall I found that it was a five-string guitar, but there were only three strings on it. The pawnshop man told me he could sell me a pack of guitar strings for an additional ten dollars.

But I didn't have another ten dollars.

I paid for the guitar thinking I'd be able to buy the strings after payday - but my next payday wouldn't be till after Christmas.

So I ended up giving my son a guitar with no strings.

I remember how his face lit up when he saw that guitar under the tree; and how his face fell when he realized he couldn't play it. Oh, he was thankful and appreciative and said it was alright and that he'd wait till payday came ...

But at one time or another I've seen that same expression on the faces of virtually every person whose path crossed mine in life. My parents, my children, my first wife, my teachers, my bosses, my friends - and, sometimes I imagine God Himself, has worn that expression.

Now, lest I sink into morose morbidity and self pity, while I remember that difficult time in life, I also remember an odd instance of Ninja Giving that occurred that very same Christmas.

My eldest son, Fred, lived with my first wife up north; my middle son, Johnny, lived here in Florida with Ginny and me; my youngest son, Donald, was a tiny tot at the time. My three daughters were home and thriving.

I worked like a dog but could barely make ends meet and Christmas added the problem of presents. I despaired of managing. My resources were just too meager.

We lived in HUD housing. Food Stamps helped us eat. We heated the house with firewood I scrounged along the road and toted home on my back. We had no car; I walked to work. How was I to provide Christmas presents?

On Christmas Eve, the same one when I bought that stringless guitar, the phone rang—Miller's Hardware (now long out of business) called to say Ginny had won their store drawing for a Giant Christmas Stocking—a 12-foot tall, three-foot wide, red-mesh display stocking filled with every sort of toy and goodie imaginable.

Johnny, Ginny and I walked to the store on Main Street. Got there just before they closed. The three of us hoisted that giant stocking and carried it home walking single file like a big red caterpillar.

Once home, we parceled it out—dolls, transistor radios, board games, toy trumpets, chocolates, toy cars and trucks—any kind of toy and goodie we could imagine.

Far too much.

All the kids agreed that the Christmas goodies overflowed our house. What to do? Then one of the kids remembered the DeeBee family down the block—father laid up drunk, eight kids, no income, no food, mother sick—Ginny ironed the DeeBee kids school clothes...

My family began wrapping presents. Sure, they kept a lot of goodies from that giant stocking but they wrapped slews of gifts from Santa—a couple of presents tagged for every person in the DeeBee family but with no identifying mark as to where the present came from. Ginny also packed a couple of grocery bags for Christmas dinner.

We all carried armloads of presents down to the DeeBee house.

Knocked on the door.

No Answer.

Knocked again.

The unlocked front door swung open. Nobody home. Not a soul in the house. A tiny scrubpine tree in the bleak, barren living room had been decorated with paper cutouts from the kids' school.

No presents under that tree at all.

Johnny and the kids placed piles of wrapped presents around that scruffy tree. Ginny put the groceries on the kitchen table.

We sneaked out, closing the front door behind us, not leaving a trace that it was us who had ever been there. To this day no one in the DeeBee family knows where their lavish Christmas came from back in that bleak December of the 1970s.

Do I believe in doing good works?

No.

Unnecessary.

As Saint Paul said, "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".

Grace + Faith = Gift of God.

Works have no part in the equation.

When people ask Jesus what to do about working for God, He said, "This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent".

Belief in Him is foundational. Doing good stuff is a by-product of being Christian. It's something we do, and do in secret, because Jesus said so. It is an act of gratitude for God's blessings to us given—like that Christmas guitar so long ago—with no strings.

DECEMBER

Thursday, December 1, 2011

The Year I Stole A Christmas Tree:

Desire—I wanted a Christmas tree. My kids wanted a Christmas tree. My wife wanted a Christmas tree. Our home needed a Christmas tree.

Obstacle—I did not have money to buy a tree. We were poor back then. Nobody in the slum where we lived had cash to spend on trees. Not many lighted trees seen on the depressed streets of Springfield.

Action to overcome obstacle—I decided to steal a tree.... Therein hangs a tale.

Desire, obstacle, action. Those are the three story elements I'm working on in my writing as I struggle to turn out my next book.

Yesterday I talked with Michael Swanhart, the counselor who is helping me deal with writer's block and larger problems in my life. At one point, as I bemoaned my life in one area, Mike cheated; he whipped out his I-phone, logged online, and read back to me a passage from my own blog!

That's not fair!

Should a writer be held accountable for what he writes?

Anyhow, among the things Mike and I talked about were memories. For some people suffering from depression, the Christmas season generates painful memories which can exacerbate that overall low-down blue feeling.

Painful memories?

Depression?

Who me?

I can't be depressed. I'm a Christian.

Stop laughing.

Now, I have no intension of dwelling on unhelpful memories.

As Paul said, "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things".

So, here's my happy memory—with the three story elements—of the year I stole a Christmas tree. My memory's hazy but as best I recall this happened in the early 1980s.

I think the statute of limitations has passed for my crime.

Kids wanted a Christmas tree; I had no cash to buy a tree—first two story elements. Now comes the action part:

I loaded the three oldest kids, Jennifer, Donald and Eve, in the old red Ford to get us a Christmas tree. I think, Jennifer, the eldest, was only 8 or 9 years old at the time. They jumped up and down squealing in anticipation. "Daddy's gonna get us a tree! Good ole Daddy," Jennifer said.

I wanted to be a hero in my kids' eyes.

I could be if the clunker Ford would keep running.

Two years earlier, a tree—not a Christmas tree, a big oak—had fallen on the rusted-out old car parked on the street. Branches ripped off the left headlight, crumpled the fender, stove in the roof, and cracked the windshield. The insurance adjuster wrote my car off as totaled—Yes, that had happened two years before, but I was still driving the old rattletrap.

Driving my kids to get their Christmas tree.

Off to the northeast of Jacksonville vast salt marshes spread in primal tracks. Tidal runs lace the area. Mosquitoes, deer, raccoons, bear, alligators, and more mosquitoes inhabit the mud flats. But occasionally a high spot forms in the mudflats, a hammock, a tiny island of solid ground.

Cedar trees grow on these hammocks.

Private land. Private property.

But I wanted a cedar tree.

So I drove north out Main Street. Turned off on Yellow Bluff, turned again on Starrett Road. Ran off the paved road onto shell lanes, turned in past a cemetery onto a dirt road. Drove till that dirt road ended in two water-filled ruts pressed into the sawgrass by log trucks.

The deeper we drove into the swamp, the more excited the kids became singing about Rudolph, Frosty, Three Kings Of Orient'tar, Grandma Got Run Over.

"Daddy's gonna get us a Christmas tree," they chanted.

Ruts ended.

Got out and walked. "Watch where you step. Listen for rattlesnakes. Stay in the track".

Crossed marsh flats where the black mud sucked off Eve's shoes. Picked her up and carried her to the hammock. Picked a tree. Swung my ax. Cut it down. Tried not to make noise—didn't want the land owner investigating.

Carried the cedar tree on my shoulder with kids dancing and shouting and singing across the swamp. Tied the tree to the roof of our old red Ford clunker.

If the land owner or anybody saw me now, I'd be caught.

Reversed the car in a three-point turn at a clear spot.. Eased down the ruts. Came to a clump of palmettos which scraped both sides of the car...

Hit a palmetto root. Too hard. Jarred the car. Bottomed out on the springs.

God-awful noise!

Something wrong. Something bad wrong.

Stopped dead in the ruts. Unlatched the hood...

Damn!

Hitting the palmetto root had bounced the Ford's battery out of its casing and into the radiator fan. The spinning fan blades sliced an eight-inch gnash in the side of the car's battery.

Here I am in wilderness, on private land, stuck in a dead car, with three little kids, and a stolen tree tied on my roof.

Merry Christmas!

Ever pray to get away with stealing something?

O Dear God, Sweet Jesus, What am I going to do? How can I get out of this mess? Dear Jesus don't let me get

caught. Damn! Lord, all I wanted was a Christmas tree for my kids. Shit! Amen.

Ok, John what have you got and what do you need?

Looked in the trunk. No duct tape to patch the slash in the battery. No glue. No nothing but a plastic can that once held my pipe tobacco but now had some loose screws.

A plastic tobacco can... Humm, if I had some way to flatten the sides of the can and some super glue to hold it in place... But I don't have glue.

But my tobacco can is plastic... If I had some way to heat the plastic maybe I could get it to stick to the side of the car battery.

I set the kids to gathering dried brown palmetto fronds in a big pile in the middle of the road between the ruts, the only dry spot around.

Thank God I'm a pipe smoker and always have wooden kitchen matches in my pocket. I lit the palmetto fronds into a blaze. But how am I going to melt the plastic tobacco can?

There's a reason God puts hubcaps on automobiles.

I pried off a hubcap, used my pocket knife to shave the plastic can into ribbons, used the hubcap as a pot to melt the plastic in.

So here I sit in the middle of the road, holding a hubcap over a fire, tired and hungry kids whining—"Daddy, can we go home now:... "I'm hungry... "I need to go the bathroom". And I have a stolen tree tied to the top of my broke-down car, and I'm praying the landowner won't see the smoke from my fire.

The plastic melted.

How to smear it on the side of the battery to seal the gap?

Nothing for it.

Fingers.

I burnt my fingers.

I dipped hot melting plastic into the wound. I spread it to seal. I pressed it in. I let it cool. I dipped ditchwater

from beside the road to fill the battery. I reconnected the battery cables, I herded the kids back into the car.

I prayed.

I turned the key.

The engine started.

For how long?

Gingerly, gingerly, gingerly I eased the car back out to the shell road, back out to the paved road, back out to Main Street. I drove my old Ford clunker home.

Ginny and the kids decorated the tree.

That night my whole family stood around admiring it and saying the same thing we always say every year, "This is the most beautiful tree we've ever had".

Friday, December 2, 2011 A Question Of Masturbation

Recently an e-mail asking me a question about masturbation appeared in my in-box.

Here I am reprinting the text, as well as my reply, And, I'm curious so I ask blog readers how you would have answered if this e-mail came to you?

Here is the e-mail text:

Sir, i have one question to asked you, you may think this as silly but if you can help me i will be very happy....SIR, when i try to belong to Jesus, i always do the wrong things again, i pray and promise not to do again, but i always do it again, that sin is masturbation (please don't think me silly)....please help me..

Here is my reply:

No, your question is not at all silly; you are wise to ask about this.

St. Paul said, "There has no temptation taken you but such as in common to man, but God is faithful..."

What you struggle with is our most common temptation. You are not alone in this. All men go through what you are going through.

The thing to remember is that Jesus said that "Whatsoever is born of flesh is flesh".

And that's all it is--flesh.

My counsel to you is relax. Enjoy the fact that you are human and that the Lord Jesus loves you and cares about you--even if you never stop masturbating. Neither Heaven or Hell hinges on what you do, but on who Jesus Christ is and what He has done for us on the Cross. The Lord knows His own. You are precious to Him. Trust Him to take care of this problem for you. He is able.

You do not mention your age or whether or not you are married. If you are not married yet, then begin to pray about it and seek a partner. Marriage can give us a safe, holy and fun outlet for our sex urges. If you are married already, then the words of King Solomon come to my mind, "Rejoice in the wife (or husband) of your youth.... Let her breasts satisfy you at all times. Yea, be thou ravished with her love".

I am glad that you felt free to write to me about this. Thank you. I hope my thoughts help.

Your friend,
John Cowart

After I hit the send key for my reply, I remembered something a friend once told me: "If God had not wanted you to touch it, He would have put it up out of reach between your shoulder blades instead conveniently locating it right at your fingertips".

Anyhow, I am curious, Readers, please use the comment box to tell me how you would have answered had this e-mail appeared in your own in-box?



Monday, December 5, 2011
Ginny's Christmas Cactus

Ginny's Christmas Cactus began to open this weekend. She nurtured this plant from a tiny cutting:





Tuesday, December 6, 2011
When You Hit A Plane

Yesterday Jacksonville's local tv First Coast News reported:

Troopers confirmed Sunday they are still looking for the driver of a red Ford pickup truck that fled the scene after hitting a disabled airplane Saturday night. The plane made an emergency landing on the interstate on the First Coast Saturday evening.

No one was injured after an emergency landing around 10 p.m. on Interstate 295 South near the ramp to Interstate 95 North.

Florida Highway Patrol Lt. Bill Leeper said the driver hit the wing of the plane, causing damage, but didn't stop. Since the truck caused damage, troopers need to talk to the driver. Leeper said any driver involved in a crash, regardless of whether they hit a car or a plane, is required to stop and contact authorities....

Wednesday, December 7, 2011

A Naive Guy In The Lesbians' Bathroom

Reprinted from page 253 of my book A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad (www.bluefishbooks.info). It was my diary entry on December 2, 2005:

A friend e-mailed me a cartoon that for some reason reminded me of an odd incident that happened to me years ago in a lesbian couple's bathroom... actually, as I recall there were two separate incidents:

Now, before my evangelical readers get all hot and bothered, let me state that I think homosexual guys and lesbian girls are missing out on something nice. I think they miss the best by substituting something less.

Besides, in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans (verses 24 to 32) St. Paul ranks homosexual behavior right up there with envy, greed, arrogance, disobeying parents, bragging, and gossip in his checklist of things which God considers reprobate.

Yes, Paul said, ²⁴ *Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.* ²⁵ *They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.*

²⁶ *Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural*

sexual relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

²⁸ Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; ³¹ they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.

Boy, folks who do awful stuff like that had better watch out on Judgment Day! But since you and I don't do any of those abominable things, we're ok... Right?

Anyhow, over the years I have held dear a number of folks who'd make St. Paul's list, and one time this lesbian couple, who cared for a senile old grandmother, called on me to help them tear down this termite riddled shed in their backyard.

The girls had to run to the store and asked me to keep an eye on Granny till her visiting nurse showed up.

When the young nurse arrived instead of the usual female caregivers, she found this strange man, me, in the house. She needed to go into the bathroom to wash up before giving Granny her shots or whatever.

She closed the door.

After a while she pounded on the bathroom door and yelled that she was locked in. I tried to open the door from the outside. It wouldn't budge. I tried to slip a plastic credit card between the lock plates like James Bond does in the movies. I couldn't trip the lock.

The nurse was beginning to get a bit excited thinking I had shut her in there for some nefarious purpose.

I found a screwdriver and tried to pry the door hinges to let the lady out. Bent the screwdriver.

By this time she was in a near panic and Granny realized that the nurse was locked in the bathroom. She found that funny and began to cackle, loud as a jackhammer.

Finally, I went outside and pried off the screen, forced open the bathroom window which was painted shut, and helped the nurse (who was wearing an interestingly tight skirt) climb out the window.

She was not happy. But she treated Granny—quickly—and left.

When the girls arrived home they said, “Oh we never close that door all the way; that lock sticks. We’ve been meaning to fix it for years”.

I crawled in the window again, got the door open, and fixed the lock.

On another occasion I’d gone over to help the couple move a monster-huge sofa bed. This time, I was the one who needed the bathroom.

While I was in there I noticed this strange appliance prominent on the shelf. At first I thought it was a flare gun... A flare gun in the bathroom??? A pink, plastic flare gun???

It appeared to have a thick barrel leading to a circular chamber attached to a pistol grip with a long black electric cord... What in the world is that thing? What would a lesbian couple use a thing like that for?

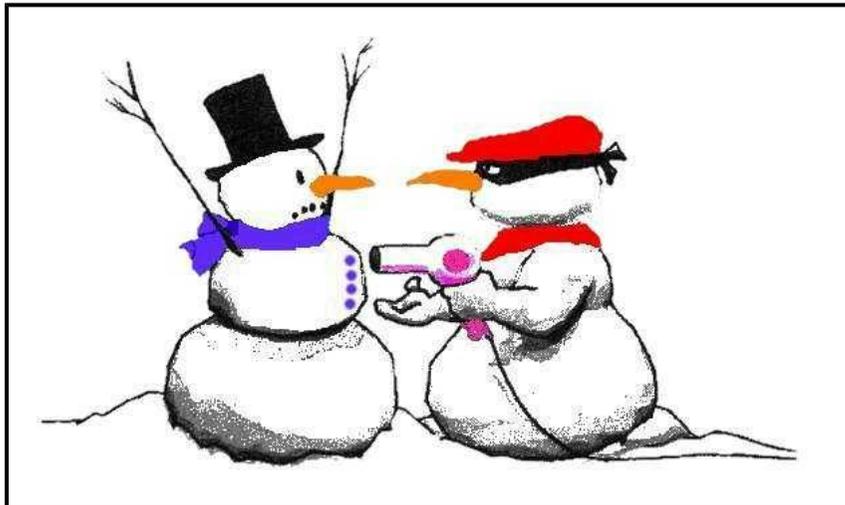
I mean I know that there are stores that sell adult toys... but what is this thing? What would it do? You could get electrocuted...

I imagined this and I imagined that, but nothing I imagined made any sense. How could they use that to...? I mean how would it fit ? I puzzled and puzzled, but nothing in my limited experience supplied an answer...

So when I came out of the bathroom I worked up my courage and asked a very embarrassing, personal question, I described the thing I saw, and asked what they used it for.

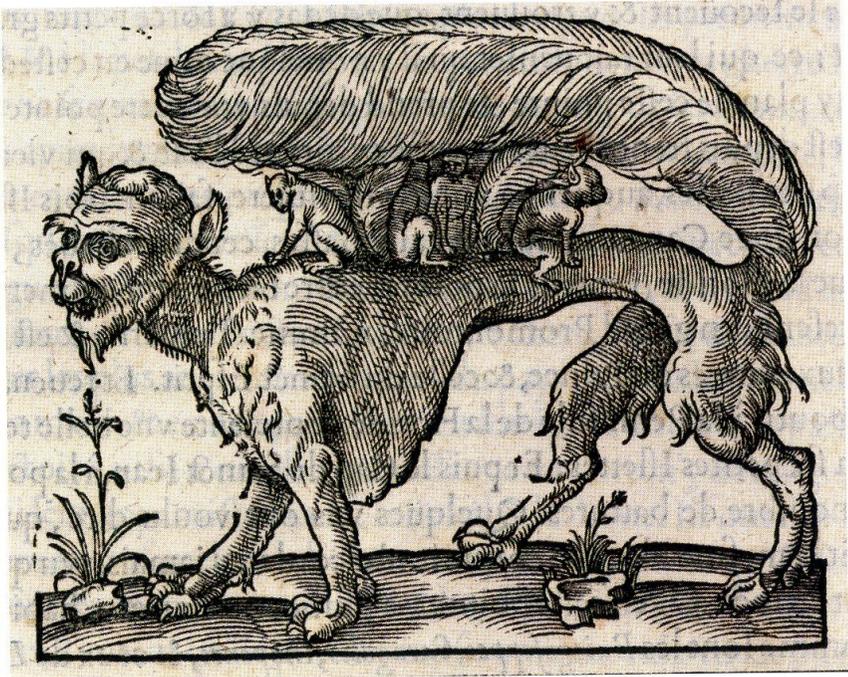
The girls started giggling. Then they laughed. Then they howled in glee. "John, that's a hair dryer!!!! What did you think it was???"

Hey, I'd never seen one before; what was I to think? Anyhow, here's the cartoon that reminded me of that bathroom:



Thursday, December 8, 2011
An Emotional Possum

In the year 1575, a European artist who had never seen one engraved a picture of a possum:



Intriguing picture, but that is not what a possum looks like.

I ought to know because I am one.

This picture came to my mind yesterday while I talked with Michael Swanhart, the counselor who is helping me solve a problem.

You see, I want to write. Since I was a Boy Scout I've wanted to write and tell stories. I tried to write a vampire novel when I was just 12 years old. Got nowhere. This week while searching for something else in my files, I came across some stories I wrote long-hand on notebook paper back in the '60s. I'm still at it. I still want to write and tell stories.

But I can't.

I face this obstacle.

Its name is John Cowart.

Yes, I hinder myself from doing what I deeply yearn to do.

Something inside me squelches my heart's desire.

A vicious bastard, my enemy is.

He knows all the buttons to push to nuke me whenever I get excited about writing.

I've tried to beat him on my own and he is too strong for me. He's studied my weaknesses all his life and for my every move, he knows the counter move. Sucker is the Jackie Chan of putdowns. The Chuck Norris of smashing dreams. The Bruce Willis of frustration.

I can't beat him.

As I prayed about this, I decided to ask Mr. Swanhart for help.

That's where my emotional possum comes in.

Here's an aside: once in Maryland as I hiked along Highway 450 near Annapolis, I found a dead possum beside the road. Car squashed its head.

Yet, its belly moved.

I had studied possums in high school biology class; I knew what was going on.

Possums are North America's only marsupials—i.e. the mother carries babies in a pouch, like a kangaroo. Unlike a kangaroo which only has one or two joeys at a time, a mother possum can birth as many as 13 kits. She has 13 nipples inside her pouch.

So, when I looked in the pouch of that dead mother possum, I saw six or eight babies squirming for life. I tried to lift one out but apparently when the baby latches on, the end of the mother's nipple swells sealing the kit in the pouch so the mother can swing through the trees without dropping baby possums on the forest floor.

Those kits inside the dead mother were doomed.

I looked for a brick or something to smash them.

Couldn't find a thing to do the job.

I could have stomped on the dead possum to kill the babies inside.

No. No I couldn't. My compassion has limits. I draw the line at stomping dead possums in the road.

Eventually I walked on leaving the little ones to their inexorable fate.

Now, back to yesterday's talk with Mike.

The Licensed Clinical Social Worker showed me how that when a creature confronts a perceived threat, we fight or flee or freeze.

He asked how I respond to crisis.

“Withdrawal,” I said immediately.

I hunker down, draw into my shell like a turtle and lay low till the danger passes.

Possums do that too. When threatened, they curl up into a ball and pretend to be dead meat—hence the term “Playing Possum”.

They stay curled until the danger goes away...

Except, opossums have 50 teeth, more teeth than any other North American mammal. When playing dead doesn't work...



They fight as a last resort. They flee when given the opportunity. They freeze as their first line of defense. Must work. According to the fossil record, possums have existed virtually unchanged since the Pliocene Era or whenever.

So, we fight, flee or freeze according to the triggering circumstance.

I find myself afraid to do what I want to do; therefore, I freeze.

It interests me to think that Scripture mentions all three responses:

Flee—Paul told Timothy, “The love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But thou, O man of God, **flee** these things;

Fight—in the very next verse, Paul said, “**Fight** the good fight of faith”.

Freeze—Moses told the people, “Fear ye not, **stand still**, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will shew to you to day: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever. The LORD shall fight for you, and **ye shall hold your peace**.”

So, where is Jesus in my life as I confront the main obstacle holding me back?

Psalm 37 comes to mind: “Trust in the LORD, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. Delight thyself also in the LORD: and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass”.

So, have I ever fled? Yes, in a hostile environment, like say a church social, I’ll say to Ginny, “Let’s get the hell out of here”!

Have I ever fought? Yes. Over the years in my testimony for Jesus, I’ve been threatened with guns and knives. I’ve been spit on and had rocks, bottles and garbage cans thrown at me. Yet, I stood my ground because I believe Jesus Christ is worth a little inconvenience.

Have I ever froze? Yes. I am an emotional possum. Freezing is my defense mode of choice.

As we dressed one morning, Ginny noticed that I’d put on my Incredible Hulk tee-shirt.

She said, “Are you going to be the Incredible Hulk today?”

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

“I’ve noticed that,” she said. “When you get upset, you turn into — the Incredible Sulk!”

Tuesday, December 13, 2011
Kicking The Manger

Note—No phone or internet connection for a few days.

Over the weekend, my daughter Eve asked me to borrow my Santa suit. Couldn’t find it. Best I can remember somebody borrowed it last year and never returned it. Searching, Ginny and I pulled out boxes of Christmas stuff from front closet, back closet, attic and laundry room. We could not find other decorations we remember too... Therefore, this posting, my diary entry for Tuesday, December 12, 2006:

You’ve got to kick our manger to start it.

Ginny & I think like tightwad skinflint Scrooges when it comes to buying Christmas gifts. All year long we shop at garage sales, jumbles, and thrift stores to buy gifts for the many people we care about — but can’t afford to get things for in the local Family Dollar Store.

Yesterday we examined a unique manger scene we’d acquired for only \$3.98.

Let me emphasize that this item is a decoration only; it is paint and plaster and a computer chip. It bears no more religious significance to our actual faith than had it been a replica of a Daytona 500 race car.

Actually this device combines a tabletop fountain with a manger scene, a music box, and a motion sensor.

Some puzzled coolie worker in the Orient assembled this machine with no concept of western taste, religious or secular.

Ginny put batteries in the base and filled the reservoir with water. She flipped the switch on.

Nothing happened.

I glued the wisest of the wise men back in place. (I call him the wisest of the wise because he was the only one trying to escape).

She figured it was broken. But \$3.98 is no great loss if it did not work.

I fiddled with the device and discovered the motion sensor is out of whack — but, when you kick the manger, the star lights up, water flows over the waterfall, and the angel sings “Up On The Roof Top Reindeer Pause, Out Jumps Good Old Santa Claus”.

Actually, the angel does not so much sing as stand aghast at the tinny tintinnabulations of a western song played to notes on some oriental scale... Picture Andre Rieu with a kazoo instead of his Stradivarius .

The Crèche must play 15 or 20 such songs, but at the end of each piece of music, the star goes out and the waterfall ceases.

Yes, the trouble is, with the sensor out of whack, the only way this wonderful manger scene will start again is for someone to kick the coffee table it sits on.

Ginny and I sat for an hour taking turns kicking the manger, laughing our heads off, and trying to guess what possible song the thing was playing at the moment. “Jingle Bells” and “O Holy Night” we recognized; but much other music left us mystified.

Now, some folks might be offended by a Nativity Display that plays “Rudolph” but I delight in the combining of secular celebration with the holiest of Christian doctrines.

We do one because it’s fun; we observe the other because it’s real.

From the time our kids were tiny, we taught them that we all pretend there is a Santa because that’s so much fun; and that we worship Jesus Christ because He is God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and earth, Emanuel come down to earth as a helpless baby to save us from our sin.

It’s hard to confuse the two facets of Christmas, secular and holy.

All indications from Scripture are that Jesus enjoyed secular celebrations like weddings and harvest feasts as well as Passover.

He enjoyed a firm grasp of reality.

The holy and the fun, each in its place, or both blend together with common sense and joy.

Some malls ban employees saying Merry Christmas in favor of Happy Holiday; some churches advocate renouncing decorated trees and giving gifts.

I think both parties need to get real!

Celebration, exuberance and joy are in our very nature. A hunger for the Holy One, a longing for His reality, a thirst for the pure joy of His presence is also deep seated within every heart.

What's to confuse?

To deny either one is to warp reality.

People aren't too dumb to know the difference.

It's odd but I think one of the songs our Creche plays is the Easter hymn, "Christ The Lord Is Risen Today", the very essence of the good news the angels proclaimed.

Another song on the menu contains the lines:

Long lay the world in sin and error pinning
Till He appeared and the soul found its worth".

Heavy stuff.

Wonderful stuff.

The essence of Christmas joy...

Such thoughts excite me, but, I'll get down off my soapbox now.

Ginny and I intend to keep our treasured manger. It works fine if you kick it. I could try to repair it but as Ginny said, "How can you tell if it's broken?"

So, we intend to keep kicking our manger to start the fountain, light the star and play the music.

No we aren't planning to give it to anyone else as a gift.

Some gifts are just too, too good to pass on.

Also, there is that Scripture about not casting pearls before swine ...(Er, not that I think there's anything wrong with swine, you understand).

My camera is still broken so I can't post a photo of our manger scene.

That's a shame.

Because our kickable manger is unique.

In fact, Ginny said, "I'll bet we're the first ones on our block to own one of these things".

Wednesday, December 14, 2011

Nine Treasure Chests, Three Historians, & Me

In the late 1700s, Eugene Moncrief, a French pawnbroker, escaped death on the guillotine only to be murdered and scalped by a jealous Indian here in what was later to be named Jacksonville, Florida,

The story of Moncrief's escape from the French Revolution laden with nine treasure chests full of jewelry and of his subsequent adventures was told a hundred years later in the June 25, 1874, issue of the *Tri-Weekly Florida Union*.

Those are the opening lines of an article I wrote back in 1986.

My piece, the Treasure Of Moncrief Springs, is a chapter in my book *Crackers & Carpetbaggers*. A couple of months ago, Veronica, Ryan and Stephen, three historians from *Metro Jacksonville*, read my work. The chapter sparked their interest and they decided to investigate further.

Their explorations led them to an old building being torn down for urban renewal in downtown Jacksonville. Moving ahead of the wrecking ball in the ruined building, they discovered a treasure in the form of a batch of ancient city maps.

Following these antique maps, the trio uncovered scads of information which had been lost in Jacksonville's 1901 fire, a fire which burned most of the city and virtually all city records.

Their quest led them to the National Archives in Washington, D.C., to contact the *Musée du Louvre* in Paris, to the clubhouse of a hostile motorcycle gang, to the looted site of the 1789 coquina rock home of that French pawnbroker, and eventually to my living room.

Yesterday, Veronica, Ryan, and Stephen visited me to talk about historical sources for local history. Here's a photo of the intrepid adventurers standing by my desk.



Our conversation soon revealed that they know much more about Jacksonville history than I do. They trace fact treasures far beyond my ability. They prepared overlays from the antique maps they salvaged from the demolished building and placed them atop Google Earth maps to pinpoint locations I could only guess at. In fact, their research shows I was at least a mile off in my identification of sites.

I believe a land developer in 1874 made up the story of Moncrief's treasure because he wanted to sell property in the area. Stephen said he thinks the story is true. Ryan said that while certain facts check out from various sources, he remains skeptical about the treasure tale. Veronica did not express an opinion one way or the other.

She said, "We live on a boat so I feel like a pirate on a treasure hunt".

I had great fun listening to their enthusiastic recounting of their adventures.

But, why did these historians want to consult with me?

They know more about local history than I do; that's proven by the in-depth history sections they produce at *Metro Jacksonville*.

Turns out they are involved with a film company producing a documentary on the antiquities of Jacksonville... and with my being a bona fide antiquity, they asked me to prepare a brief commentary about my own research on Moncrief—turns out I even spelled it wrong, it's Mont Crief—for their film.

That's so flattering.

Naturally I'm concerned about how my facial deformity might show up before a camera, but that's a vanity on my part. Viewers will be more interested in the legend of the nine treasure chests than in my appearance.

My part in their film should present a different perspective to the story of historical research because—can you believe it—I wrote most of my history articles before there was an Internet!

Yes, Google, Bing and the other search engines had not been invented yet.

To discover historical facts I prowled through crumbling, yellowed documents which were not even indexed. And I only had access to papers physically present in Jacksonville. No wonder I missed so many things which today are revealed with a single mouse click.

Different world.

Whether or not I can take on another project in the time I have left, I need to pray about. I certainly felt excited at the prospect of friendship and research with these young people, but whether or not it's God's will I get deeply involved. Their project certainly strikes my fancy... I just don't know.

I once tried to write a book about finding and following the will of God.

I bogged down and could not write it.

Can doing something just because it strikes my fancy be doing the will of God?

Why not?

Sometimes I think the Lord has inclined me to do difficult, hazardous things which go against my grain, but sometimes, like any earthly father, I think my Heavenly Father says, "Johnny, why don't you go outside and play".

Then, there's the matter of trouble.

I'm seeing lots of it recently.

Know how to tell if a trouble comes from natural circumstances, the common lot of mankind, or from God as a trial, or from the devil?

The devil always goes for overkill!.

Sucker doesn't know when to quit.

Take Job for instance:

First, the Bible says the devil sent Sabeans to steal Job's oxen and asses; then fire fell on Job's sheep; then Chaldean raiders stole Job's camels; then a tornado, a great wind from the wilderness, destroyed the house killing Job's children; then his wife mocked him saying, "Curse God and die"; then Job's three best friends denounced him for sin saying Job's sin caused all his trouble.

Yes, the devil goes for overkill to the extent that troubles pile so high as to become ridiculous. Laughable.

If a whale attacks you, you can harpoon the sucker; but what do you do when being eaten alive by minnows?

King David, who saw his share of troubles, said, "Trust in the LORD, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. Delight thyself also in the LORD: and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart".

Wow. What a wonderful prospect.

However, I'm drifting far afield from my scalped pawnbroker and what, if anything, my involvement should be.

According to my sources, Eugene Moncrief escaped the guillotine in France, shipped nine chests of diamonds with him when he came to Florida, buried his treasure, took up with an Indian girl, then her boyfriend killed and scalped him.

My three historian friends found old records saying that it was the pawnbroker's wife who killed him... who knows?

You know, maybe when they film their movie, my role can be played by Brad Pitt.... Or maybe not.

Friday, December 16, 2011
Clams and Christmas Treasure

Yesterday, as I drove to Kingsland, Georgia, to buy my brand of pipe tobacco (which I can't find in Jacksonville), I sang to myself and tried to remember the words to an old Moravian Christmas hymn.

Couldn't remember them all.

Happily mangled the words I could remember—who's to complain?

I love to drive long distances alone. Gives me time to sing, pray and think. Of course, from Jacksonville to Kingsland is hardly long distance—trip only takes about an hour each way—When Ginny and I were younger and driving an 18-wheeler over the road, we drove thousands of miles each month.

We had no home in the world but our truck and ping-ponged all over the country from Miami to Reno to New York to San Francisco to Dallas to Calgary to Boston to Key West to...

In those early days we lived three feet apart 24 hours a day and learned one secret to our happy, 43-year marriage—we learned to say, "I love you forever, but I can't stand you right this minute! Check back with me in an hour".

But at my present decrepit age, a drive to Kingsland is a long trip and I enjoyed singing to myself, praying a bit, and thinking about treasure, clams, and the word "peculiar".

I don't know if he were right or not (I don't know Koine Greek) but I once heard a preacher expound on the word *Peculiar* where Peter told the Christians of his day, "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvelous light".

Saint Paul used that same term, "Our Savior Jesus Christ who gave himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works".

A peculiar people? What does that mean? I've known some peculiar people in my day and few might warrant

being referred to by Peter or Paul. Weird is the word that comes to my mind.

But the preacher, whose name I no longer remember, said a Greek soldier going into battle carried a leather pouch (a sort of fanny pack) containing what he considered his peculiar treasure, a thing he would die to protect, to keep out of enemy hands. Might be a lock of his wife's hair, a charm his father gave him, his son's baby tooth—a treasure particular to himself, a thing he valued most, a thing worth fighting for, a thing worth dying for.

And you and I are God's peculiar people, His peculiar treasure.

As I drove, dodging yankee refugees headed away from the bleak frozen north to civilization and sunshine in Florida, I naturally thought our early days on the road and about clams.

When Ginny and I drove the tractor trailer, we visited many of the nation's major museums, historic sites, and art galleries. We enjoyed rodeos in Texas, Indian dances in New Mexico, street fairs in New York, parades in Chinatown... and she often read poetry to me as we cruised over the countryside trying to keep the truck between the white lines.

In 1969 or '70 we'd delivered a shipment in Sarasota and decided to spend a day at the beach in some park where grassy lawn came right down to the sand and water of the Gulf of Mexico. Here's a photo of Ginny in her racy bikini on that day:



Here she is lounging in the back of the truck overlooking the beach with a book of Robert Service's poetry and a road atlas at hand:



As we swam in the Gulf, we noticed a tiny commotion at the edge of the water; right where the waves break on the sand, millions and millions of tiny clams called donax burrow in the sand. A single donax measures smaller than the nail on your little finger; each one sports a colorful shell. Here's a Google photo:

Every time a wave breaks, all hundred million of these tiny clams get washed up from their burrow in the sand—and they frantically scurry and jump and dig to get safely under the sand again.



Ginny and I lay on our bellies in the edge of the waves watching the Chinese Fire Drill of clams for hours. We laughed and laughed at their antics—funnier than a Harold Lloyd movie, funnier than Three Stooges.

Because within seconds of one wave breaking and the clams' panic to get beneath the sand again, here would come another wave washing the donax out again. And again. And again.

We laughed at the clams and then we laughed at ourselves for getting sunburned for being so stupid as to lay out in the sun for hours watching clams!

Here's a Bing photo of donax, in this one you can see the tiny foot they use to jump and dig with:



Time and tide compress donax shells into coquina rock, a prime building material in Florida's Spanish forts and pre-colonial houses.

The donax is so tiny and their colors so blended with the beach sand, that most beachcombers never even notice them. We step over and on them never noticing

their existence. But when you do see them, you see a treasure in the sand...

Once Jesus told a story about a treasure buried in a field. A man walking in the field noticed the treasure. He went and sold all that he owned to buy that field and get the treasure.

I used to think that the Bible meant I was supposed to give up everything to gain the treasure of salvation.

I was wrong.

I've never given up anything for Jesus.

It's all been gain for me.

As I read Mathew's Gospel, Chapter 13, about the treasure in the field, I noticed that earlier in the same chapter, Jesus said, "The field is the world... and he that soweth in the field is the Son of man".

So, if the field is the world, and the person walking in the field is Jesus, then what is the treasure?

You are.

I am.

As I drove Interstate 95, I thought about clams and Christmas—when the Son of God left Heaven and the glory of the Father, when He came into a manger as He gave up everything to buy this field, this fallen world, to rescue the treasure buried in the sand and stepped on and over by indifferent passersby.

Jesus sees value where others don't.

And He said, "I am come to seek and to save the lost".

So, I thought about clams and Christmas and yankee drivers and that elusive Moravian hymn... Couldn't remember the words. Sang "Grandma Got Run Over By A Reindeer" instead.

Tuesday, December 20, 2011

Luminary Night

Much pain, more happiness characterized Sunday's Luminary Night for Ginny and me.

Much pain because my arthritis worked big time, more happiness because Ginny and I celebrated Luminary Night

with thousands and thousands of other Jacksonville residents.



On the weekend before Christmas each year, residents in Jacksonville's Riverside area open thousands of white paper bags, add a few ounces of sand, light a candle inside and line the streets with these.



On Luminary night thousands and thousands of people stroll the streets greeting each other with "Merry Christmas". Somebody or another tries to sponsor the event but mostly it is a grassroots thing that people do simply because they want to. They decorate homes, cars,

trucks, farm tractors, golf carts, skateboards, segways, horse-drawn carriages, bikes, motorcycles... whatever and parade just because they want to. No organization to it. Bumper to bumper traffic backs up for miles as kids on impromptu floats toss candy to the crowds lining the streets. Fantastic fun!



Many residents throw open their homes for strangers to visit. They build fires on the front yards offering any passerby a chance to warm, eat cookies, and drink hot cocoa.

Many people dress up for the event. Ginny and I saw elves, Santas, ballerinas, Grinches, the Mad Hatter from Alice's Wonderland, a guy dressed in a real bear's skin, numerous impressive sweater girls, a hunter carrying a crossbow, snowmen, aliens, formal wear, and body paint.

Those who want music play music on their own; one guy plays carols on a trumpet as he strolls, several violinists, a flautist, drummers, bagpipes, whatever. One family on the main drag invited their church choir to sing in their front yard.



Everyone is cordial. A girl passing in the crowd pressed an tree ornament into my hand saying, “Here’s a surprise present fro you”. At one corner, this woman greeted me effusively while her husband hugged Ginny laughing... As we walked on I asked Gin who they were and she said, “I’ve never seen those people before in my life”.

Throngs of people roamed the streets like that, happy and celebrating and helping each other, and singing—each person doing their own thing, not bothering anybody, celebrating for joy—and I did not see one sign of drinking or rowdiness, there may have been some, but I did not see it.

One highpoint of the event is that local churches open for concerts, plays, etc. And the Riverside Avenue Christian Church holds an open-air, live nativity scene with multitudes of characters and live animals.



Ginny got to pet a newborn baby goat less than 24 hours old:



There were shepherds and kings and angels and wise men and...this must have been an ecumenical event because I saw Dolly The Llama there at the manger:



One thing impresses me most about Luminary Night:

People of all persuasions, Christian believer and atheist, the pious and the indifferent, the charismatic and the apathetic—everyone in our community, even though they differ about the theological implications of the incarnation, yet all tacitly acknowledge that Something Important Happened in this season!

Something important, something happy, something joyous, something giving hope, something fun, something wonderful happened.

And we rejoice that it did.

For, unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and ... His name shall be called Wonderful!

Wednesday, December 21, 2011

Silent Night In Old Jacksonville Cemetery

From page 421 of my book *A Dirty Old Man Goes To The Dogs*

Last Sunday Ginny and I drove to Jacksonville Florida's Old City Cemetery to visit the grave of John Freeman Young. Although I'd never even heard of the man before last week, I felt our visit made for an appropriate outing in this Christmas season.

Here's a photo of Ginny at Young's grave; notice the Christmas ornaments on the wreath:



Earlier in the week, while listening to a radio morning traffic report, I chanced to hear announcer Arthur Crofton say something about Young. That comment sparked my interest, so I did a bit of research and even read a biography of the man.

I've written two books about the history of my hometown so I was particularly surprised that I knew nothing about Young and his relationship with Christmas before.

In the late 1800s John Freeman Young served as the Episcopal Bishop of Florida. But that's not his most notable accomplishment.

I think it odd that his biography tells about his labors as bishop but does not even mention the single aspect of his work that gained world-wide notoriety.

As an accomplished linguist proficient in several languages he translated a song from its original German into English. It's a song you already know most of the words to—at least the first couple of verses. And I'll bet that you and I will both be singing it within the next couple of days.

5. Silent Night! Holy Night"

Sleeps the world in peace tonight.
God sends his Son to earth below
A Child from whom all blessings flow
Jesus, embraces mankind.
Jesus, embraces mankind.

6. Silent Night, Holy Night

Mindful of mankind's plight
The Lord in Heav'n on high decreed
From earthly woes we would be freed
Jesus, God's promise for peace.
Jesus, God's promise for peace.

Silent Night, a poem by Joseph Mohr, had been set to music and first sung on December 24, 1818, in St. Nicholas Church, Oberndorf, Austria. John Freeman Young heard the hymn and his English translation became one of the most popular and familiar of all English hymns.

A pdf copy of Bishop Young's biography, *Soldier And Servant*, by Edgar Pennington can be read at www.archive.org/stream/johnfreemanyoung00penn#page/n3/mode/2up .

While Pennington's 1939 biography contains much of interest to the Jacksonville history buff, it does not mention Young's translation of *Silent Night*. In fact, while the biography dwells on the bishop's church work, I felt disappointed that its diary excerpts contain little about his spiritual life.

Young, a native of Maine, began his ministry in Jacksonville in 1845, but moved to New York as the Civil War approached. Up north, he served at Trinity Church, Wall Street. It was while there he translated *Silent Night* among other hymns. After the war, in 1867, he returned to Jacksonville as bishop.

Tough. A yankee Episcopalian bishop in the war-torn South. One dilemma Young found was that unscrupulous yankee carpetbaggers had come to Jacksonville and taken advantage of recently freed slaves. These businessmen cheated the blacks out of real estate property and possessions. They even discouraged blacks from worship. One of the things Bishop Young did was to establish several churches, such as St. Phillip's, Jacksonville, as churches that welcomed blacks.

Bishop Young did that sort of thing all over the state. One of the more interesting portions of his diary tells how he spend three days and nights alone in a row boat, pushing it through shallow waters with a long pole, in order to visit congregations in a flooded area.

The war devastated Florida and the horrors of reconstruction left churches destitute.

Besides being a musician and linguist, Bishop Young, held an interest in architecture. He instituted the construction of a hallmark style of Florida church architecture known as Carpenter Gothic. Inexpensive local wood was used to form these distinctive church buildings, some of which survive to this day. Here is a photo of a typical example:



Bishop Young died of pneumonia in 1885. He was buried in Jacksonville's Old City Cemetery. He is honored by a stained glass church window. The window gives no indication that he had anything to do with the famous hymn.



Nevertheless, I felt this Christmas season was an appropriate time to visit his grave:



Sleep in Heavenly peace, Bishop Young. Sleep in Heavenly peace.

Wednesday, December 21, 2011
The Kindness Of Strangers

Last night a street bum showed me an incredible kindness.

He honored me greatly.

Last night when Ginny and I drove downtown to the main library, my arthritis pained me so bad I could not walk from the handicapped parking space to the library. So, while Ginny went inside to pick up the books she had on reserve, I sat on a wall beside the fountain in Hemming Park right across the street.

Jacksonville's City Hall fronts Hemming Park on the north side, the library on the east. Four downtown rescue missions lie within blocks, so Hemming Park provides a gathering spot for street bums during the day. At night,

cops clear the park. Can't have bums and winos freezing to death right in front of City Hall—bad for the city's image.

I hurt so bad that I had to sit on a cement wall bordering the park's beautiful fountain. So I sat there smoking my pipe, watching for cops, and waiting for my wife.

A street bum ambled by.

For years I've volunteered in missions and soup kitchens, so I know the look of the homeless.

Shabby gray coat, tattered shoes with flapping untied laces, two plastic grocery bags containing all his worldly goods, stubble beard—typical bum.

Leary of him, I watched as he passed me, paused, and turned.

"Ut oh, he's going to hit me up for a dollar," I thought.

Ginny and I each keep a bit of cash to give to the poor in special pockets separate from our own money, and I'd decided to give him enough for a burger as I watched him approach.

Now, I'm just sitting there minding my own business, smoking my pipe, waiting for my wife. I'd showered, shaved, and dressed in clean clothes earlier in the day; Ginny and I planned to go out for dinner after the library, so I feel presentable...

Of course, I was wearing my favorite jacket, my WWII bombardier jacket, my good leather jacket, my best jacket, My Jacket, the one I'd bought five or six years ago at a yard sale for a quarter.

Maybe that's what caught the bum's attention.

He'd passed me but turned back and came over to me. "It's going to get cold tonight," he said rummaging in one of his plastic bags. "It's going to get cold and you're going to need this".

He pulled a blanket out of his bag. He said, "This ain't cotton. It's real polyester. This will keep you warm".

I protested that I did not need a blanket, but he insisted on giving me his. "That cement gets real cold at

night. The wind comes off the river," he said. "You need this".

And he pressed it on me.

His own blanket.

I reached for my "poor pocket" to pay him a few dollars, but he'd already started walking away. I started to call him back, but thought, *He has not asked me for a penny. Why trivialize the kindness of this stranger? In his mind he's done me a kindness that cost him something. He gave you a gift, John, don't cheapen the act for him by offering to pay.*

I knew something important had happened to me. I thought of the story of the Horse Blanket by, I think, Anton Chekhov or Tolstoy, one of those Russian guys. And I felt greatly honored.

I thanked the bum for his gift and he walked off with an almost jaunty step. He'd seen a guy sitting in the dark and cold and he showed compassion to me. He gave what he could to make sure I survived the chilly night.

I sat on my new blanket waiting for Ginny. It made a fine cushion on that concrete wall.

I was a participant in that encounter; in this next one, I was merely an observer:

About ten minutes later, I saw another bum in the park. This one was familiar. I see him there all the time. Certifiably crazy. Practices karate moves in the same spot every day while talking loud on a cell phone—except that he does not have a cell phone.

He walked along with an unlit cigarette in his hand.

A street girl, or maybe an art student, came peddling by on her bike. She smoked a cigarette as she rode on the sidewalk.

"I need a light," the crazy man said holding out his cigarette as she cycled past.

She wheeled her bike in a circle. Paused beside him. Handed him the cigarette from her mouth. He raised it to light his own from the glowing tip.

She said, "No, keep that one, it's already lit".

And she peddled back around in the direction she's been headed.

Crazy guy grinned. Stuck his unlit cigarette behind his ear. Puffed happily on the one the girl gave him. And walked away.

And the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men of good will".

I'd been a recipient of kindness in one incident; I'd been an observer of kindness in the other. In both, I detected the Spirit of God.

No great firefall of the Holy Ghost, just tiny acts of kindness by strangers to strangers. Sometimes the Spirit comes as a mighty rushing wind, at other times He comes as gentle as dew forming on a garden spider web.

His abiding presence is the same in either case.

And I feel honored and privileged to be on the outskirts of these kindnesses.

When Ginny came out of the library with her books and I told her how I got my blanket, she said it's time to get rid of my favorite jacket in the trash... but she knows good and well that that's not going to happen.

Oh, and what did I do with my new blanket?

I took it home and placed it under my Christmas tree.

It's a gift.

Saturday, December 24, 2011
Christmas Eve



The night before Christmas, with the cat





Thanks to Kathryn Dickens

12-21-2005

CHRISTMAS EVE



(See Genesis 6-8)

09-16-2011

YOU THROW THE CATS OVERBOARD AND I'LL
TELL YOU WHERE I FOUND THE BRANCH



(See Luke 2:1-16)

12-22-2004

WHEN CHRISTMAS PLAYS COLLIDE

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Thanks to Mikel Rice (See Luke 2:1-16)

12-18-2000

I'M SO SICK OF BEING A SHEPHERD ...
NOTHING EXCITING EVER HAPPENS OUT HERE

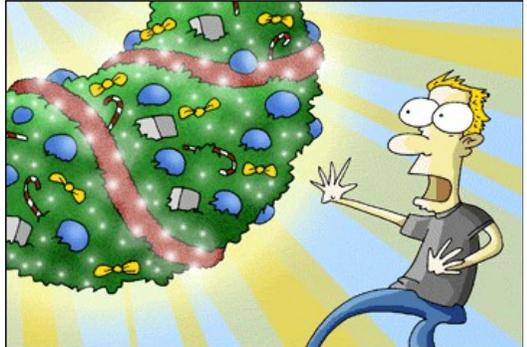
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12-20-2010

Sunday, December 24, 2011 Christmas Day

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Thanks to Mikel Rice

12-19-2007

THE WREATH OF GOD



"I know! I'll run my Christmas screen savers!"

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(See Genesis 6-8)

09-16-2011

YOU THROW THE CATS OVERBOARD AND I'LL
TELL YOU WHERE I FOUND THE BRANCH

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03-14-2011

WELL THAT EXPLAINS IT ... YOU'VE BEEN
STUDYING FROM THE KING JAMES BOND
VERSION

Monday, December 26, 2011
Christmas Continues Around the World

A few weeks ago I posted Christmas In A Little Tin Box, a video my son Donald filmed and which stars me;

You can view Christmas In A Little Tin Box on line at <http://blip.tv/file/1572083/>

Apparently this video sparked the interest of my e-friend Amrita in India. A few years ago Amrita asked me to help her set up her blog, Yesu Garden, at <http://yesugarden.blogspot.com/> . Her news and photos of life in India attracts many more readers to her blog than ever read my own.

On Christmas day, Amrita posted her video of Christmas In A Card Board Box at http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=INhw6R4OHdo

On Christmas Day also, for the first time in ages, I heard from my e-friend Jellyhead in Australia. Back on May 6, 2006, (<http://www.cowart.info/blog/?p=420>)she generated one of my postings called *Once I Got My Ass Kicked, Once I Didn't* which I reposted back in October with the title Theodicy With Two Dogs.

Jellyhead's note yesterday reminded me that during the Christmas Eve service Saturday, the pastor told about a fun Christmas video made by some children in Australia; Ginny and I looked it up on the internet and laughed with delight at their presentation. The Link to that is at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWq60oyrHVQ>

On December 12th, My e-friend Felisol in Norway posted charming photos of her nativity scene, one of the most beautiful I've ever seen. They are at <http://felisol.blogspot.com/2011/12/nativity-scene-on-tuesday.html>

So, the happy message goes out from one end of earth to the other. It tickles me to have even the smallest part in all this.

Tuesday, December 27, 2011
Wrong Number

Our family got together last Friday to celebrate Christmas together—twelve of us packed into our tiny living room. We celebrated two days early because that fits best with work schedules and freed our grown children on Christmas Day for commitments with spouses' families and to have time in their own homes.

All Cowarts talked at once, laughing, teasing, exchanging receipts and gifts and gossip. Conversation filled the air as Donald changed the Christmas music I had picked out for something "more suitable".

Guys brought in folding chairs. Starving children clustered at the buffet sampling olive dip, cheesecake, fried chicken, pigs in blanket, meatballs, chips, cakes and pies and Cheetos and apple slices and Ginny's deviled eggs.

Ginny dropped an icecube tray and kids laughed when I patted her on the ass as she bent to pick up scattered ice. "Get a room!" they teased.

"Any more deviled eggs"?

"Do you want to save the wrapping paper?"

"If it doesn't fit you can exchange it at Target".

I gave Wes, a man of impeccable good taste, the most truly tasteless artifact imaginable, the most truly awful ghastly appalling atrocity ever manufactured.

"Where did you find it," he exclaimed, "I've searched every store in Jacksonville for one of these and couldn't find one".—that brought the house down howling with laughter.

Fred, John and Donald talked about some exciting computer game I've never heard of, while Eve described a special story hour at the library. And we sang *Happy Birthday* to the three with December birthdays and ...

The phone at my elbow rang.

Funny thing. Practically everybody I know was there in my living room already...

I answered.

An elderly woman said, "Oh, I'm so very sorry. I must have dialed wrong. I'm trying to call my daughter's house. Sorry to have bothered you". And she hung up.

Three minutes the phone rang again.

“Oh, I have your number again”.

“What number do you want,” I asked.

She spelled out the number she wanted; it was similar to ours. “I’m trying to call my daughter,” she said. “She said she’d pick me up at seven on Christmas Eve and she’s not here yet”.

“Oh, Christmas Eve is not until tomorrow”.

“Tomorrow? How could I be so silly. I get confused. They want me to move in with them. I’ve lived here in my own home for 42 years. But they say I can’t live alone any more. I don’t know what to do”.

“Yes, after 42 years, moving will be a big adventure for you”.

“If Frank were still alive, he wouldn’t let them make me move”.

She went on to tell me about how her oldest daughter died in 1996 and how her son worked out of state for an oil company.

My daughter Jennifer sat nearby listened to my end of the conversation. I glanced over and saw her grinning at me.

The old lady’s voice cracked and she garbled words so that I could not understand everything she said. The noise of our party swirled around as we talked, so I voiced non-committal responses: Really?... You don’t say...That’s a heavy thing to carry...Moving to a new place is scary... That’s a big decision.

We talked for ten or twelve minutes till finally the lady realized she had no idea of who she was talking to. Just some guy who answered the phone. She again apologized to me for dialing a wrong number.

“I suppose God will take care of me,” she said wistfully.

“Yes, that’s what Christmas is about—God taking care of us”.

We wished each other God’s blessings and Merry Christmas and hung up the phone.

Jennifer got up and came over to my chair. She hugged me, kissed me on the forehead, and said, “Dad, of all the wrong numbers in the world that lady could have got, I’m so glad she got yours”.

Thursday, December 29, 2011
The Ghost Of A Christmas Present

Before Christmas Eve wanted to borrow my Santa suit for a library program.

Couldn’t find it.

Amid over 40 years of accumulated Christmas decorations, things get lost. Maybe somebody borrowed my suit and never returned it. I just don’t remember.

Also, just before Christmas, I hunted a favorite decoration—a bronze casting of a saber-toothed tiger Ginny and I bought at the La Brea Tar Pits back in 1970.

Couldn’t find that either.

I know I had it last year. I promised Donald I’d give it to him.. And I know that to keep it safe, I put it in a safe place where I’d be sure to find it.

Then I forgot where I put it.

Never did find the Santa suit; Ginny found the saber-tooth on a shelf where I’d squirreled it away.

Remember that scene in *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation* where Clark Griswold goes to hide a Christmas present in an attic hidey hole only to find a dust-covered present he’d hid in that same place years before?

Forgetting where I put stuff is nothing new to me:

The following diary entry comes from page 70 of my book *A Dirty Old Man Goes To The Dogs* (www.bluefishbooks.info) I wrote this in March, three months after Christmas, in 2009.

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

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

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

Where could they be?

I could not remember.

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

Someone may have moved them someplace else.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As we waited for our lunch to arrive in the restaurant, Ginny scanned some printed pages from her purse. When

I asked, she explained that the pages were her four-page checklist of Agatha Christie mystery novels. Ginny said one of her life goals is to read every novel Agatha Christie ever wrote—all 80+ of them as well as over 160 short stories. Ginny has checked off as read about half her Christie reading list.

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

Wonder what else she intends?

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

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

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

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

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

We both find the prospect traumatic.

We like being together.

We have fun.

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

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

Remember Tailhook?

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

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

No problem in any of these scenarios.

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

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

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

That's ok.

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

Friday, December 30, 2011 **The Song In My Heart**

The radio station I listen to most often began playing Christmas music about two weeks before Halloween. They stopped playing it at 6 p.m. on Christmas day.

I understand merchants encourage this long session of music to put shoppers in the mood to spend more money for a longer period of time.

So my favorite station plays *The Twelve Days Of Christmas* for 12,000 times.

And they play *I Want A Hippopotamus For Christmas* and *You're A Mean One, Mr. Grinch*, and Alvin & The Chipmunks, and—my favorites—*I Saw My Old Lover AT the Grocery Store*, and *Sleigh Ride*.

They play a chorus of dogs barking *Jingle Bells*.

And—the lady ought to be arrested for contributing to the delinquency of a minor—they play that song about Mommy doing something under Santa's beard so snowy white.

But, as the season progresses, the tone of the music changes.

Now, understand, this for-profit station is for commercial radio. They broadcast so they can sell things. They sell used cars, and weight loss treatments and fast food and tires, and days at the spa and cures for varicose veins and football tickets and batteries and vacations aboard cruise ships and baked hams.

The station exists to sell things.

The station exists as an outlet for advertisements. It is a secular commercial station but as Christmas approaches I began hearing solid theology broadcast in Christmas songs. Songs so familiar that they're played in shopping malls. Songs that contain messages of hope, redemption and worship. Messages of deep theology.

For instance,

O Holy Night contains the line:

Long lay the world in sin and error pining.
Till He appeared and the soul found its
worth.

Ginny and I bought a manger scene while on our honeymoon. Over the past 44 years we've added little figures to the original set. One figure we added is a world globe, a polished black stone ball with the continents of the world etched in.

Long lay the world in sin and error pining...

To pine for something means to desire it intensely but at the same time to fear you will never get it. You feel a sense of loss for something or someone you never had. My dictionary said pining is "to yearn intensely and persistently especially for something unattainable"

We know a hunger that can not feed on this land's bread.

We know something is missing.

There's got to be something more somewhere.

As the deer pants after the water brooks,
So panteth my soul after thee, O God.
My soul thirsteth for God, for the living
God

Long lay the world pining.

As St. Paul puts it, "The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ...

"The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³

"Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly."

Eager expectation...groaning... groan inwardly as we wait eagerly—pining.

And the Christmas hymn does not leave us pining, it goes on to say

Till He appeared and the soul found its worth”

The black globe of a pining soul is not the only figure in our manger:



Yes, God’s response to the misery, sin, darkness and yearning of this world is nothing less than Himself, Emanuel, God with us, The divine clothed in human flesh.

His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

Yes, the Lord took the sorry state of this world, the longing of every human heart, the darkness of sin—He took that personally. No half-way measures would do. No second best.

“Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in

fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross”.

Another Christmas song my secular commercial radio station plays:

Christ by highest heav'n adored
Christ the everlasting Lord!

Late in time behold Him come
Offspring of a Virgin's womb.

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see
Hail the incarnate Deity

Pleased as man with man to dwell
Jesus, our Emmanuel

Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King!"

Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Son of Righteousness!

Light and life to all He brings
Ris'n with healing in His wings

Mild He lays His glory by
Born that man no more may die

Born to raise the sons of earth
Born to give them second birth.

Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King!"

Our situation is not hopeless. He was born for a purpose. For God so loved the world that He gave...

Yes, you and I are on the receiving end of God's love.

And while my radio touts a Midnight Madness Sale with up to 30% off, it also plays *O Little Town Of Bethlehem...*

How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of his heaven.

Think about it; is there any reason you should not let Jesus Christ be the absolute Lord of your life, right here, right now, today?

O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
O Come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.

Saturday, December 31, 2011
2011 Summary

This entry lists the high points of my life in 2011.

January

January 1st of 2011 started with Ginny and me fighting in a big hissyfit over a closet. We learned that when you can't kiss and make up, it's best to kiss and move on.

On January 15th, we saw a pair of eagles from our back garden.

On January 16, my friend Wes conducted the funeral for a severely retarded and deformed woman. He spoke on ***The Value of a Diminished Life***.

February

February 1st, My dying friend Barbara White won Volunteer Of The Year Award.

February 4th: Ginny and I joked about us being God's Weebles. A lot of nit-picking things have befallen us. Again and again we have taken hits—O nothing that taken alone would amount to a disaster, but each little thing rocks us, wobbles us, knocks us about, breaks our spirit, squelches our hope, throws cold water on our passions, disappoints our dreams, shakes our foundations.

No biggies. Just life's little things.

If a whale attacks you, you can harpoon the sucker, but what can you do when you're being eaten alive by minnows?

God's Weebles, that's us.



February 6th, I helped Jennifer format a book about perfume solids.

Also in February I wrote about a woman giving birth to rabbits and about Desperate Housewives of the 18th Century.

February 18th an e-mail informed me that the Russian translation of the profile I wrote about Madam Guyon was published.

March

March 7th brought me both hate and praise mail.

On March 8th, a snake bit me.

March 9th Donald and Helen gave Ginny a new laptop computer.

March 12th: An earthquake in Japan generated a Tsunami wave that swept over large city with almost a million residents. Wave up to 33 feet high and moving at about 500 miles per hour, traveled miles inland sweeping away people, buildings, cars, boats. Early reports say three nuclear plants were damaged and safety procedures failed.

March 15th saw me conflicted about praying for Japs because of my father's WWII experiences.

On March 18th, my daughter Jennifer and I overheard strangers in a Kingsland, Georgia, restaurant quoting from one of my books.

My March 22nd entry reveals my sin of covetousness relating to Barbara White's impending death.

April

On April 4th a giraffe tried to eat Ginny's hat.

April 6th Wes and I met a distraught young woman.

On April 11th, Ginny's lovebird, Fancy, died.



On April 21st, my friend Barbara White died just days after she wrote her final newspaper column. Ginny, Helen. Lyn Lazarus and I managed to published Barbara's *Lenten Diary* at her deathbed request just in time. My family published *Barbara White's Prayer Diary* soon thereafter.

By April 25th, my middle son, Johnny had moved down from Maryland to help us out. He and I saw a manatee up close.

May

May 4th my daughter Eve won a Hootie Award.

On May 17th I learned of a German translation of my book on prayer; I had not known it existed.



May 22 Ginny and I experienced the adventure of seeing **Thin Jesus/Fat Jesus**.

June

June 15, smoke from forest fires covered Jacksonville with a layer of ash.

On June 20th the kids took me to Hooters for Fathers' Day.



July

July 6th I started writing *Rope*, a pioneer novel set in 1840s Jacksonville. Same day, our refrigerator broke and we had to buy a new one.

July 12th I wrote *If God Were A Pirate*.

July 17th I rescued a damsel in distress and put out a fire.

August

On August 1st, Ginny said that the call of God inevitably comes at the most inconvenient moment.

On August 3rd, Ginny began proofreading *Barbara White's Prayer Diary* because I was sick of that manuscript.

On August 11th my writing was censored by the Taste Police.

On August 21st and days following, a reader of my blog identified a location for a Jacksonville photograph of a 1947 murder/mutilation victim. Here's a photo of her body in Los Angles:



On August 26th, I think I saw a demon.

September

On September 2nd, Fred, my eldest son, arrived in town.

On September 6th a beautiful young woman flashed me a dazzling smile—

Little did she know what I was thinking!

On September 11th I searched for a 1902 photograph of Harry Mason.



September 26th I lapsed into a deep black depression.

October

On October 2nd I wrote *Theodicy With Two Dogs*.

October 12th was Sexual Preference Day.

To overcome my depression and writer's block, on October 22nd, I began seeing a counselor, Michael Swanhart, who proved very helpful to me.

On October 23 I watched the Orionid meteor shower.

On October 31, I posted *Stephen King Horrified!*

November

November 4th I reveal my binocular trick.

November 7th was the day for a fun zoo trip with Donald and Helen.

All Things Bright and Beautiful



All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful,
The Lord God made them all.



Each little flower that opens,
Each little bird that sings,
He made their glowing colors,
He made their tiny wings.



The purple-headed mountain,
The river running by,
The sunset, and the morning,
That brightens up the sky,



The cold wind in the winter,
The pleasant summer sun,
The ripe fruits in the garden,
He made them every one.



He gave us eyes to see them,
And lips that we might tell,
How great is God Almighty,
Who has made all things well.

November 6th I began a Twitter account. I don't know what to do with it.

November 10th I wrote about my viewing ***A Virtuous Bikini***.

November 16th I was tempted to steal a horse.

November 19th I prayed a bad prayer.

November 23 Ginny and I visited the Burnsed Blockhouse, a wooden fort surviving from the Second Seminole War of 1842. That was a fun research trip related to the pioneer novel I'm working on.

November 28th We enjoyed a second Thanksgiving with our friend's Rex and Chris; I greatly admire Rex.

November 29th I wrote about ***Ninja Giving and GAHOO.***

December

December 1st I remember the ***Year I Stole A Christmas Tree.***

December 2nd, a young person asked me about masturbation.

December 7th I tell about my adventure in the lesbians' bathroom.

December 8th I realize I am a possum.

December 20th was Luminary Night and I hurt myself bad by walking too much. But the beauty and fun was worth the pain.

December 21st, a poor man on the street gave me a precious gift.

December 26th Amrita in India posted an Internet video which she credits me for inspiring her to do.

December 29th I just finished reading 849 pages of Stephen King's latest novel ***11/22/63***, a tale about President Kennedy's assassination—America's best writer gets better.

December 30th Spent from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at doctors' offices finding out that I'm as well as can be expected for a man of my age and condition. After all tests came in, what might have been serious, wasn't. They referred me to another doctor next week.

At the beginning of the year I set a goal of reading the books I've hoarded on my own shelves for years. This afternoon Ginny sat down with her calculator and added up my reading diary for the year.

In 2011 I have read 29,784 pages in 110 books.

The subject matter of my reading has ranged from a report on Archaeologist Leonard Woolley's *Excavations Of Two Mounds Atchana and Al Mina In The Turkish Hatay* to a memoir by a mortuary attendant. From A.W. Tozer's *Knowledge Of The Holy: The Attributes Of God: Their*

Meaning In The Christian Life to Charles Schulz's *Complete Peanuts: 1979-1980*.

I read James Robinson's 777-page long *History Of Western Europe From The Dissolution Of The Roman Empire To The Opening Of The Great Way Of 1914* to a book of dog cartoons.

I read John Manningham's 1602-1603 Diary and a business management book called *Juggling Elephants*.

I read a biography of President Grover Cleveland and Stephen King's *11/22/63*, a novel about President Kennedy's assassination.

I read a book surveying Florida cemeteries and a book about birthing rabbits.

I read Kenneth Grahame's charming *Wind In The Willows* and a book on how to avoid being killed in a war zone.

I read original transcripts for the 1648 Salem Witchcraft Trials and a book of Dilbert business cartoons.

Yes, in 2011, I have lived an exciting life both in real time and in the pages of my books.

I can't say I've walked with the Lord this past year, but I have more or less stumbled along in His general direction as I've had such fun.

Thus ends the Year of Our Lord 2011.

And now begins 2012—Welcome to the New Year Babe:



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