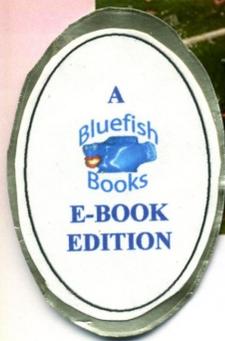
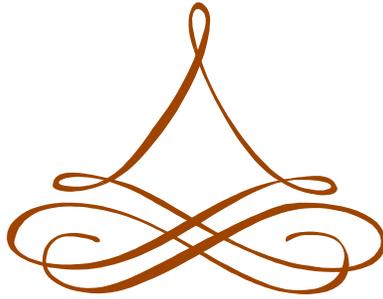


A Dirty Old Man Sinks Lower



John Cowart's 2008 Diary



**A DIRTY OLD MAN
SINKS LOWER**
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John W. Cowart

Bluefish Books



Cowart Communications
Jacksonville, Florida

www.bluefishbooks.info

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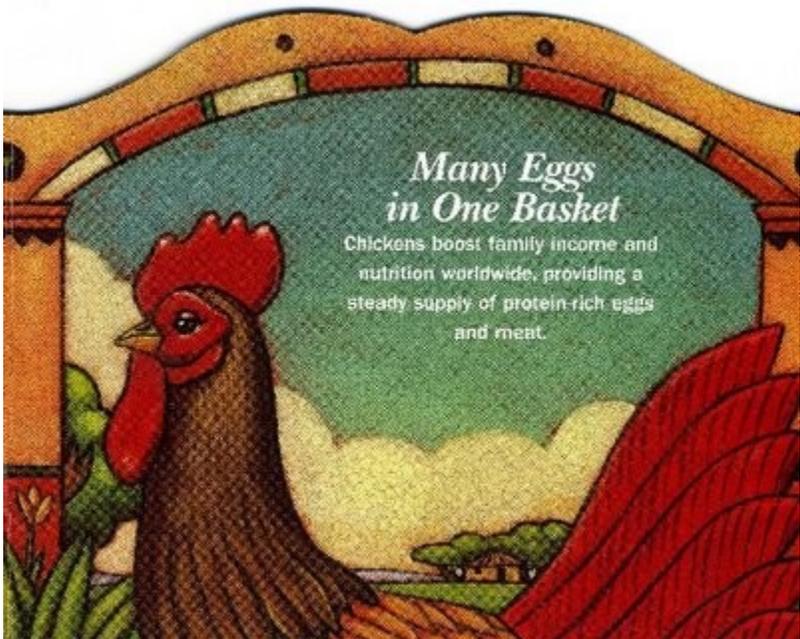
**To Ginny
Who Keeps This Dirty Old Man
From Sinking Even Lower**



JANUARY

Thursday, January 03, 2008

A Chicken With My Name On It



Somewhere out in the world there's a chicken with my name on it.

I just learned of this fowl creature last night after a hectic few days.

Back on December 15th our telephone lines went out, then last Thursday afternoon my internet connection died and it's been a hassle getting it restored.

I attempted all the remedies I knew how to do before calling my guru son Donald. He and Helen came over Saturday and geekified my system without luck. He called the DSL company rep in India who sent out a repairman Sunday morning.

Early Sunday Donald and Helen unexpectedly appeared at our door bringing all sorts of yummys to cook for our breakfast. Helen even brought her own frying pan and all the ingredients for a lavish out-of-the-blue feast. She chased everyone out of the kitchen and filled the air with the aroma of frying sausage and bacon and grits and eggs and coffee and raisin toast.

After that repairman left, Donald and Helen stayed over chatting for a couple hours. They, with Ginny and I, discussed a question which had arisen when I was at lunch with my friend Barbara on Friday. The question involves the relationship between body, spirit, free will, and chemicals.

I've kicked the question around for three days and discussed it with these spiritual advisors whose opinions I respect, then I spent two or three hours trying to write a blog posting about this subject ...

But it proved too complex for me and I just had to give up.

Sometimes I need to leave deep questions in the hands of people smarter and more spiritual than I am.

Sunday night, my internet connection died again.

Again I called in a company repairman who wanted to charge me \$85 for service that used to be free. When I pointed out that we pay a monthly service fee for such repairs, he relented somewhat and did half the work I requested.

Don't you just love the phone company?

Anyhow, my daughter Eve came over this evening and let me know about the chicken.

As a special late Christmas gift to Ginny and me, Eve donated a gift in our name to a charity called Heifer International.

Her donation goes to buy a flock of chickens which is given to an impoverished family in an undeveloped country.

The receiving family pledges to give the offspring of their flock to establish another flock for another poor family in their country.

I know little about Heifer International but Eve and Mark checked out various reports concerning them. The reports reveal how donated money is spent, how much for overhead and administration, how much is spent in fund raising, and how much actually goes to the charity's stated objectives. Eve says this organization checks out.

She says that depending on the amount she was able to give, she and Mark could have bought a water buffalo, a cow, a sheep, a llama, or what-have-you.



Eve and Mark bought a flock of ten to thirty chickens in the name of Ginny and me.

Eve suggests that next Christmas we encourage our family so that instead of giving each other gifts (like my tin Gort robot) that we each make a surprise donation to some charity. Then we alternate years between gift exchange among ourselves and giving to a charity.

Sounds like a winner to me.



Weather reports project that today will be the coldest day here that Jacksonville has seen in decades. Temperatures will drop into the 20s as an arctic front moves South.

As a result all day today hundreds of birds swarm around the fountain in our backyard. Most of these are species I have never seen before. I suspect they are fleeing ahead of the

arctic front.

I hope the chicken with my name on it is someplace warm enough.

I can't get over the fact that some chicken somewhere is named for me. It's so cool to think that somewhere out there in the world there's a chicken with my name on it.

In my mind's eye I have this vision of my chicken.... I'll bet it was given to this white-haired old man in Appalachia, the poorest region of the United States. I see him as living in a shanty farmstead deep in the Blue Ridge mountains of Kentucky.

I see him hobbling around on his cane scattering chicken feed to the flock. I envision this poor old guy, who only owns one suit of clothes (you never see him in anything else), as treasuring his chicken and using it to increase his meager livelihood.

Yes, In my mind's eye I can even see him cradling one of the chickens with my name on it in the fold of his arm right now. I'm proud to help.

Friday, January 04, 2008

Cold & Fire

Colder than the mammaries of a sorceress!

Yesterday the radio weather report said the temperature here in Jacksonville dropped to 21 degrees. Burrrrr.

That's not the Florida I know and love.

I need to warm up.

I need to warm up physically, motivationally and spiritually; I'm cold in all three areas. Fortunately, warming up is possible.

Physically, I need to warm up — but not catch fire like I did the other night when my daughter Eve was visiting.

As she and I talked about that flock of chickens, I accidentally dropped ashes from my pipe and set my bathrobe on fire. I didn't notice till my skin started burning. I beat out the sparks but they kept flaring up again.

I'd like to say this is a rare occurrence but it isn't. Many times I've inadvertently set myself on fire by going to sleep with a flaming match in my hand. So, although I prefer wooden strike-anywhere kitchen matches, for Christmas both Jennifer and Donald gave me pipe lighters that will go out immediately when the button is released.

That way, I won't doze off with a burning match in my hand.

I also got a new gift sweater so I can stay warm without burning.

Of course, to stay warm and safe, instead of robe and slippers, I ought to lounge around the house in a HAZMAT suit.

Motivationally, I'm sluggish about getting back to work writing my book on the history of the Jacksonville Fire Department. I'd hoped to finish the first draft before the holidays. But, since I didn't, I've lost a lot of steam about the project. Instead of writing, I spent yesterday on computer housekeeping chores.

That's the way I ease into working.

Like another old man said, "I starts slow, then I tapers off".

Same story for me spiritually.

In 2008 I intended to read the Bible cover to cover; I have one of those little charts that outlines a

reading program which covers the Scripture in one year.

But... because of my fading sight, I decided I wanted to read a large-print Bible. So I hunted one up from my book shelves. Then I wondered which translation I wanted to read; I have dozens on my shelves. Then I wondered if I wanted to use some written prayers to help me focus...

By the time I pondered all this stuff, the first four days of the year have passed without my reading a single word of Scripture and I see that I'm 17 chapters behind the little chart!

Achhhh!

I'm never going to catch up.

And when I can't catch up, I tend to give up.

Oh well, Jesus said there'd come a day when "Because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold".

While I don't exactly give Jesus a cold shoulder, neither am I on fire for the Lord.

Neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm.

That's bad.

Jesus once told one group of people, "I know thy works, that thou art lukewarm and neither cold nor hot. I would that thou wert cold or hot". He said their lukewarm state made Him want to puke.

So, He's not real keen on those of us who are lukewarm.

Does that mean there's no hope for me and people like me?

Not at all.

He also said, "I am come to send fire on the earth".

And after He rose from the dead and met two men on the road to Emmaus, a village about three score furlongs from Jerusalem, the guys said, "Did not our

heart burn within us while He talked with us by the way and while He opened to us the Scriptures”?

There need not be some spectacular Burning Bush spiritual experience — walking with Jesus in day to day life warms us up.

And, even when there’s only a tiny spark within us, there’s fantastic hope ahead for us.

The ancient Prophet Isaiah said of Jesus, “A bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not quench”.

Ginny and I once saw a bumper sticker painted with bright flames which declared the driver ahead of us was an **Arsonist For Jesus — On Fire For The Lord.**

Good for him.

But if I had to paste a bumper sticker on our car ...

I don’t think they make one showing smoldering straw.

Yes, there is hope for us all because in that same place where Jesus said the lukewarm Laodiceans made Him sick to His stomach, He also issued one of the most famous invitations found in Scripture:

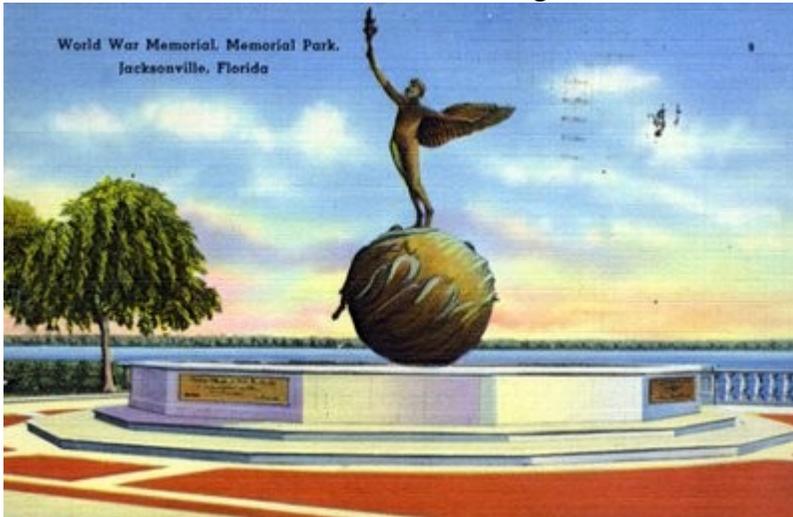
"Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come into him, and will sup with him, and he with me".

Saturday, January 05, 2008

A Strange Dream

Friday I continued computer housekeeping as I formatted DOMSO, my journals from last year. In the afternoon I took a 30 minute nap during which I

dreamed this strange dream:



A wide cement balustrade from the 1920s lines the St. Johns River along a walkway at Memorial Park. I strolled briskly along this walkway whistling happily when I encountered a yacht unloading a group of children at a luxury hotel.

Shepherding this group of kids was Ernie, a karate instructor I knew 45 years ago (He favored the Crane Stance). He greeted me enthusiastically and asked why I was wearing training weights on my arms.

I had not realized that I wore the weights. I was on my way to meet a young woman, (possibly Ginny in her 20s or perhaps some other dream girl). I realized that not only had I come with weights on my arms but I'd left my pipe and tobacco, my billfold, my keys, my pocket knife — in fact, I carried nothing in my pockets. I was hardly dressed to meet the girl — but I just didn't care. I knew it would not matter.

I removed the arm weights and gave them to Ernie who moved the children inside the resort saying that he would see me later. I realized that I had a band-aid over a cut on my hand so I pulled it off and looked around till I found a proper trashcan where I could throw it away.

I started to wait for Ernie to come back but realized that he had not been definite when he said, "See you later".

And I was anxious to meet Dreamgirl so I continued walking along the riverfront. I put my hands in my pockets and whistled and abruptly realized that I am happy.

I'm really, really happy, I thought.

This realization that I am happy surprised me so much that it startled me awake.

Thursday, January 10, 2008

She can't take any more captain...

Computers are finicky things and John's has met its maker. Or at least is sitting in the other room with it's guts hanging out on his son's desk.

He's doing well, but incommunicado until Saturday. :)

---Daughter #4

Saturday, January 12, 2008

Donald Fixed My Shot Computer!

Me Computer, She No Work.

Since December 15th, or thereabouts, my computer has been shot.. It looked like this:

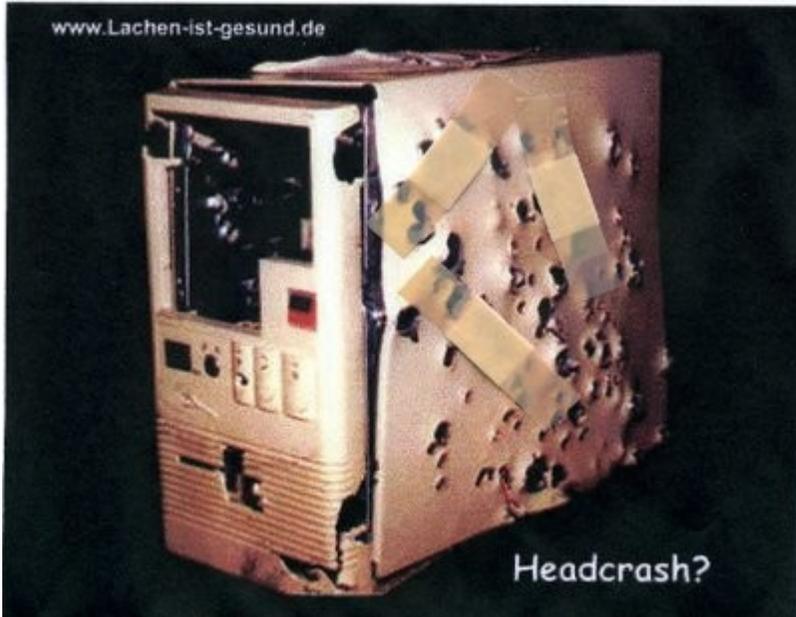


Saturday morning my geek son Donald came over.

He used his great skill and extraordinary understanding of computer wires, software and hardware and he has fixed my machine!

Thanks, Donald.

After his working on it, now my machine looks like this:



Sunday, January 13, 2008

Joking With Ginny

Yesterday at the barbecue restaurant they served an Old Folks Special at a discount price. To balance the meal and make it healthy, you may also order veggies — Fired okra, fried potatoes, fried onion rings, fried mushrooms, fried squash.

Ginny and I ordered the pork plate special and while we waited for our meal, I told her this great joke:

A woman was getting married for the fifth time and told her friend about her wedding plans.

“What happened to your first husband?” the friend asked.

“He ate poison mushrooms and died”.

“What happened to your second husband”?

“Ate poison mushrooms and died”.

"The third husband"?

"Same thing. Ate poison mushrooms and died".

"What about your last husband"?

"Oh, he died of a broken neck".

"That's terrible," said the friend. "How did that happen"?

"He wouldn't eat the mushrooms".

I roared laughing at my joke and Ginny smiled her usual tolerant smile.

When our food arrived, I noticed that the waitress had brought us thin slices of barbecue beef instead of the thin slices of barbecue pork that we'd ordered. Ginny looked at her plate and said that it looked alright to her.

So I asked, "Don't you know how to tell the difference between beef and pork"?

"They look and taste the same to me," she said. "How can you tell the difference"?

"One says MOO," I said.

And I laughed my head off because of that look on her face. "After 40 years of marriage, you still love my jokes, don't you," I said.

"I married you for better and for worse. — And worse and worst and worst," Ginny said. "How'd you like to order some mushrooms"?

Tuesday, January 15, 2008 Coming Soon In Russian

While my computer has been down, real life goes on. Here is a posting from my diary last week:

Sometimes, while we go about the ordinary, wonderful things happen.

Saturday (1/5/08), Ginny and I ate a long leisurely breakfast at Dave's Dinner where one of the guys expressed disappointment that he had not been able to travel to Dollywood for his Christmas vacation.

Then we dropped a few bags of clothes, sheets and shoes off at a mission for the door.

We sat in the park awhile smoking and talking about this and that.

We went Christmas shopping — yes, Christmas shopping! That woman I married wanted to send a special widget to her brother, Eric, as a gift, but she

was not able to find it before Christmas. Instead of sending him something else just a good, she's obsessed with giving him this particular thing. So the Love Of My Life dragged me into another three stores shopping for this thing.

I lost my Christmas spirit weeks ago, but here I am still shopping for a Christmas gift. Guys, that's the sort of thing that happens to you when you fall in love.

When we got home. Our daughter Eve came over to borrow a penny.

Yes, one penny.

She and Mark are getting married next month and she wanted Something Borrowed to carry with her down the aisle. This fixation goes with the old poem for brides:

Something old.
Something new
Something borrowed.
Something blue.
Something something, something (I forgot
the line)
And a penny in your shoe

We discussed wedding plans that become ever more complicated by the minute. But, on the up side, as Father of The Bride, I have the legal right to tease her unmercifully about how I intend to tell embarrassing stories about her in front of all her wedding guests.

After all, what else is a Daddy for?

As you can see, we were enjoying a perfectly ordinary Saturday. Mostly hanging out, filling bird feeders, watching football (Jaguars 31, Steelers 28), watching the political debate from New Hampshire. Ginny baked a raisin pie. Ordinary stuff of life. No particularly religious thoughts. No urge to witness. No agonizing in prayer.

Then I checked my e-mail and see this message:

“За то лепечущими устами и на чужом языке будут говорить к этому народу.”

That’s Isaiah 28:11 in Russian.

It means, “For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people”.

That’s part of a message which came from a stranger, a Christian pastor in the Ukraine. K.K. and his wife asked permission to translate a chapter from one of my books into the Russian language.

The chapter they want is the profile of Madam Guyon from my collective biography, *Strangers On The Earth*.

This came as such a surprise to me. I really feel wonderful, honored and flattered.

Recently I’ve been feeling jealous over how my friend Barbara’s *Along The Way* books are selling so much better than the books I write. I find that discouraging. I feel envious, second-rate, useless.

Jesus said that when someone else sins against us seventy times seven — a rare occurrence even with the most aggravating person — we are to forgive them. When I sin against my self seventy times seven — yes, I dredge up the same sins, resentments and envies again and again even from things that happened years ago — then I must seek forgiveness myself.

So in this present case, I must confess my sin of envy and I find it also helps to pray earnestly for the continued and expanding success of Barbara’s books beyond my own.

I don’t like to do that. It is painful for a writer not to be read. So I tend to nurse my sin. To justify my feelings of envy. To grow moody and peevish and depressed. I feel despair and feel as though I’m just typing on air.

Then, just when I get to feeling down and as though I’m pretty much useless to God and man, here out of the blue comes a privilege like this chance to

have a bit of my work rendered in Russian. I get to speak with stammering lips to a people far away...

You know, that's sort of scary.

What's going on here?

A phrase in my devotions tonight points out that at the creation of the world, God saw light.

And He said it was good.

It was good because He created it.

And, whenever there is any light in us, He also sees that and pronounces it good too.

Even when I myself see no light at all, when everything is murky at best, even then God sees the spark of light He put within us.

And, He says that's good.

Yes, even ordinary days conceal wonders.

Thursday, January 17, 2008

Up Against A Steel Wall

While up in the bleak frozen north today people shovel snow, here in sunny Florida we frolic in our swimming pools.

That's what our Chamber of Commerce would have you believe.

They lie.

Yesterday I was in our above-ground pool all day in the midst of a cold drizzling gray all-day, 40 degree rain.

Why was I in the pool on such a miserable day?

Last week, while planting flowers beneath the pool deck, Ginny discovered an aneurysm the size of a soccer ball bulging from the side of the steel pool wall. A place under there had rusted through the 15+ year old pool siding and water pressure ballooned the plastic lining through the resulting hole.

If that balloon ruptures, 7,500 gallons of heavily chlorinated water would tsunami over our deck, flower beds and yard.

Immediately I turned off the pool pump and filter system to keep vibrations to a minimum. Before I could drain the pool into the flower beds, I had to let the chlorine leech out of the water. So of course, green slime algae rampaged through the water in a matter of days.

If — if I can patch the rusted out steel wall, we keep the pool; if my amateur hydraulic engineering fails, we have to remove the pool altogether because it would cost too much to replace it.

Either way it goes, the project requires huge investments of time and energy from me. I dare not let the pool remain as is because the next warm day it would breed mosquitoes.

So... the final stages of writing my history of firefighting in Jacksonville remain halted while I dabble in green slime.

My prayer life hangs fire while I tangle with hoses.

My spiritual reservoir stands as empty as though some aneurysm has ruptured inside me.

And poor Ginny suffers from a terrible cold, too miserable to go to work or to eat much other than the chicken soup I fix her.

This is not a good time for us.

Between nursing her and sloshing around in filthy water while I hope my idea of inserting a baffle between the plastic liner and the steel wall works, I'm drained.

And the Heavens are silent.

Faithful but silent.

I think that this week, while I struggle with this green pool in Florida, my Lord is skiing on the pristine snowy slopes of Aspen.

And, I strongly suspect He's laughing!

Friday, January 18, 2008
Mark And Ian To The Rescue

Thursday I spent another day lounging around the pool.

See me lounge:



To insert the big silver patch in the foreground of the photo, I pried up part of the deck to insert it between the pool liner and the steel wall with the big rusted hole.

This endeavor proved I am not a carpenter.

However, I'm skillful in the use of duct tape, diamond wire, plastic garbage bags and an old dog blanket.

By crafting these elements into a single effective patch, I repaired the pool wall. I estimate my patch will extend the pool's life for another year or two.

Yes, I'm a slob.

Yes, I neglect basis home repairs.

Yes, I tend other people's vineyards more than my own.

But I'm not entirely responsible for the condition of this swimming pool. I've seen a survey map of

property showing this pool in place in 1967. So plain old age is a factor in its condition.

Having fixed the pool damage I mentioned yesterday, now all I have to do is rake out the leaves, clean away the algae, revamp the filtration system, replace hoses, fill the pool, add the chemicals — and wait for the year's first hard freeze.

So, with the pool crisis averted, in a few more days I can return to writing that history of the fire department.

One problem with being a writer is that life fills up with projects which are not writing. I'm sure that when his pool wall rusts through, Stephen King spends his time the same way I do.

Here is a photo of the writer at work, it's me contemplating my next home repair project ---

After I've finished cleaning the pool, that is.

(Wouldn't this next picture make a great cover photo for the next book in my Dirty Old Man series?)



I plan to remove some spongy wood from the side of the house, reset a door, climb on the roof to re-attach some boards and stop up that place where the squirrels get in our attic and...

Slight problem:

As fixing the pool deck boards proves, I can plan one thing in my mind, but I forget that when it comes to actually doing the repair, I never learned how to drive a nail straight. This pool project also demonstrates that I'm getting old. I do not have strength or stamina to do the job any more. This simple project of pool repair exhausted me and left my hands and legs quivering and trembling and shaking at the end of the day.

That's bad news.

I really wanted to do the other repairs my self. I'd scheduled time for them in the Spring... But, I forgot my physical limitations.

I'm not as strong as I think I am.

This realization makes me feel old and useless.

Used to be I was young and useless, but now I feel this double whammy.

However, God is faithful.

His strength is made perfect in weakness. Here when I reached the limit of my physical resources, a donor (who wishes to remain anonymous) appeared at the house this evening offering to pay for at least some of the needed repairs and bringing two young men to do the repairs for us.

Mark and Ian come highly recommended as skillful home repair carpenters. They are young, strong, handsome and pure-hearted. They spent the afternoon scaling ladders and measuring and testing woodwork and poking here and there. In a few days, they'll give us a cost estimate and we'll go from there.

See, I planed to do the job my self.

But now that I'm not able to — as I've always said — it will take two good men to replace me.

Ginny attempted to go into work today but fell sick again and came home after only four hours in the office. She'd also overestimated her strength and returned to work before she was fully recovered from that cold. She's still sick as a dog so I put her back to bed and called our daughter Jennifer to bring over some ice cream.

Jennifer and her friend Terry brought in Chinese carry-out for our supper. They joined us for devotions after supper. This was the first time Terry had been exposed to our normal after supper devotional practice, so we played a game of High-Low as part of our prayer time. In this game, each person around the table in turn tells the high point of their week and the low point of their week. The others rejoice or bemoan each person's tale of highs and lows. It is a fun, non-threatening way to enjoy praying with people you don't know very well.

Poor Ginny, she said the highpoint of her week is finally being able to drink warm chicken soup!

The four of us sat around afterwards talking about art and birds in general, hawks, owls and woodpeckers in particular. We spent hours in such warm, fun, general conversation

Finally, as the hours whiled away, I used my extraordinary tact as a gracious Christian host and said, "I love you people good, but go the hell home. I'm tired and want to go to bed".

They caught my subtitle hint and left.

Another typically exciting day at the Cowarts.

Saturday, January 19, 2008 **Breakfast With Wes**

(Wrote this in my diary while my computer was down earlier this month)

As soon as I got into my friend Wes' truck to go to breakfast Monday (1/7/08), I spotted a new (to me) edition of the Greek New Testament on his dashboard.

Before we drove a block, we immediately sprang into a discussion of the differences between the *Textus Receptus* and the Westcott & Hort editions of

the Greek text. Westcott & Hort followed the variant readings of *Codex Vaticanus*, thought to be the work of the Church Father Origin about the year 300 —

And we all know what that means.

(Actually, I have no idea either, but scholars like Wes see it as very important).

And Wes told me about John William Burgon, a conservative English translator whose office was bombed, apparently by liberal scholars, because of his work on the 1881 English Revised Version.

I'd never heard of Burgon before.

Once we got into the restaurant, we gave our order to Nicole, the young lady who served our table. And having ordered breakfast, our conversation focused on the Greek word *Monogennes* as an example of variant renderings.

Because Wes cares so passionately about the minutia of accurate Bible translation, he's easy to bait. Being a fuzzy-thinker, I play devil's advocate in our discussions.

Wes feels adamantly that the proper rendering for the Greek word *Monogennes* is "Only Begotten" as in the phrase, "For God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son..." The Westcott and Hort crew render *Monogennes* by the English word "unique".

Thus, we have "Only Begotten Son of God" on the one hand, and "The Unique Son of God" on the other.

I took the stance that unique means unique, i.e. one of a kind without peer or duplication anywhere in the universe. Wes advocated that there is a significant difference between "Only Begotten" and "unique".

I fail to distinguish much difference because, for one thing, I know no Greek, and for another, I pay little attention to detail.

Wes began an impassioned Socratic questioning to bring me into the realization of the importance of *Monogennes*.

I insisted that unique means unique, stands alone, like none other.

We were having a great time.

And Nicole listened to snippets of our conversation each time she passed our table. As a waitress at this corner diner, she must handle a lot of walk-in crazies.

When she brought our food, I warned her, “When you read your Greek New Testament, be sure to read the Textus Receptus instead of Westcott & Hort”.

“Sure, Mr. Cowart,” she said. “I’ll do that”.

That was so funny... Well, maybe you’d have to have been there.

We had such great fun!

I’m the grasshopper to Wes’ rock.

Yet, when we talk it’s like whetting two knife blades against one another to sharpen both.

While Wes’ scholarship is great — he carries a Greek Lexicon around in his truck, he’s an accomplished organist, he teaches a class for physicians at a local hospital and a class for alcoholics at a street-mission sort of place — while his scholarship is great, yet his charities are greater.

He has a great knowledge of the Scriptures, but it is not academic in that he attempts to live it out as best he can. In the years I’ve known him, I’ve seen him, with great compassion of heart, comfort, council and aid illiterate street bums.

Me, I amble through life in happy ignorance of Greek, Hebrew, English and common sense.

While I appreciate scholarship on one level, I feel leery of it too.

Scholars are just too detailed.

I mean, when some guy goes to autopsy my body, he can make that Y incision and pull out my liver, heart and lungs. He can analyze my blood and learn all about my DNA and chromosomes and triglycorides. He can finger my pancreas and saw open my cranium and weigh my brain in a pan. He will know every physical detail — but he will know nothing about me.

His intense scrutiny may reveal my innards, but can not discover who I am.

The autopsy will not show whether I preferred John Milton or Ogdon Nash in poetry. It can't tell whether I was loving or cruel. The sound of my laugh remains unknown, as does what things made me laugh. Who I loved, what I dreamed. The tunes I whistle. The authors I read. The thoughts I think. The beauty I saw. The sins I sin. The people I care about. The prayers I pray — none of that will be revealed.

The guy or gal who performs my autopsy will not know me.

I think that same idea carries over into Bible knowledge, that knowing Jesus is much more important than knowing about Jesus.

And that's a more important difference than the one between "Only Begotten" and "Unique".

The problem with trying to autopsy Jesus is that He ain't dead.

Doubting Thomas wanted to know how many centimeters deep the spear thrust went into Jesus' side. But when confronted with the living Lord, Thomas fell on his knees saying, "My Lord and my God".

Thomas' questions on knowing about Jesus became irrelevant when it came to knowing Jesus.

It's like when I Google some subject and get 1,330,612 responses. I may look at six or eight sites, then the sheer volume of information overwhelms me and I throw my hands up. All my questions may be answered somewhere on the net, but the glut of answers makes me forget what I was searching for in the first place.

Now, while I admire biblical scholarship and I'm glad that scientists exist who study such matters and minutia, I'm convinced that the dumbest, most ignorant, illiterate uneducated man living can walk with God in joy.

There are not many beautiful people or rich people or smart people in this world, yet the love of

God extends to every living soul. And we can all understand love even when we can't read Greek or even follow the instructions on microwave popcorn.

I'm convinced that right this minute, every person knows everything they need to know about salvation, life and godliness. But we reject the knowledge that lies within our own heart and fob off the Almighty God with weak evasions.

Light came into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

We don't know Christ because we don't want to know Christ.

No other reason prevents our worship and our salvation.

At Judgment Day we will stand without excuse, naked and shamed.

But, I'm getting off my subject — back to my friend Wes...

Wes manages to well carry that balance between knowing about and knowing.

I'm so thankful that scholars like him exist.

Other than that, some morning I might find myself reading Wescott & Hort without realizing my mistake.

Besides, knowing the Scripture enables Wes to tell great jokes.

For instance, when I asked him what he thought of the debates between the eight or ten presidential candidates on television Saturday night, he referred me to the passage about government in Daniel 4:17 (in the King James Version only)!

I looked it up.

In that passage, the pagan King Nebuchadnezzar observed:

The matter is by decree of the watchers,
And the demand by the word of the holy
ones:

To the intent that the living may know that

Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men,
And giveth it to whomsoever He will,
And setteth up over it the basest of men.

Monday, January 21, 2008
Man With A Knife: A Non-Event

Once, when asked where he'd been, a famous Bible personality replied that he'd been roaming to and fro over the surface of the earth, from going up and down therein.

Friday, that could have been my answer to the same question.

With Ginny down sick with her vicious cold, I ran several errands she normal takes care of; that meant I got to drive her new car for the fifth or sixth time since we bought it back in August.

Whee!

I got to drive her new car!

I drove to the bank, the gas station, the hardware store, the post office, the credit union, the grocery store — and to WalMart.

In WalMart I bought wooden matches for my pipe, swimming pool chemicals, odds and ends, and flowers to take home to Ginny to lighten her suffering with that cold. I would have bought a loaf of bread too, but after walking three blocks in that monstrous huge store without being able to find bread, I gave up.

When I went out to the parking lot to put things in my car and move on to my next stop, a man with a knife in his hand approached.

About a four inch blade.

Although cars filled the lot, no people were within a hundred yards of us when he came out from behind a car parked about three spaces away.

He carried the knife in his right hand and some small something in his left. And he was talking with animation, gesturing and babbling some patter.

Alarmed the moment I saw his knife, I determined in my heart to kill him if he made the slightest aggressive move. I focused on his shoulders as he talked and gestured to me; an opponent may fool you with his eyes, but no one can move hands or feet without his shoulders broadcasting that move first.

It's been years since I studied aikido, but when that guy approached me, I immediately assessed his posture and dropped back into a stance which appears relaxed but is a strong position for launching killing blows.

I am not a violent man but I made up my mind that if this man needed killing, I'd do it....Probably I overestimated my ability; the last time anyone attacked me, he knocked me down from behind, stole my wallet and ran away all in one fluid motion.

Hurt my pride more than anything else.

But this time, I'd got my tail feathers all atwitter over a non-event (as usual). The guy in the WalMart parking lot was just a gregarious good 'ol boy who was driving his wife's car when a tail light went out and he'd stopped in WalMart to buy a replacement bulb but when he went to put it in the socket broke and he was using his knife to pry tiny pieces apart to fix it. And he wanted to explain his frustrations to somebody.

And I happened to be there.

It never occurred to him that approaching a stranger in a parking lot with an open knife in hand might not be a smart move on his part.

I'm glad I'm the person he approached or he might have ended up in real trouble.

I sympathized with his frustration over his broken taillight. Then I drove on to my own next errand stop at the Post Office.

Now, in all my driving around, I had not consciously given God a thought... but as I pulled out of the Post Office parking lot, I realized with surprise that all the time I've been driving here and there, I'd

also been praying about this and that, for one person or another.

It's been so long since I've driven anywhere, I'd forgotten that I do that — pray while doing mindless, repetitious tasks. Such are my most precious prayer times.

And I had forgotten that.

While doing ordinary chores, while going about daily duties, these are the best times to meet and love the Lord Jesus.

I fear that Hollywood movies have conditioned us to expect spectacular showmanship from God. Yes, parting the Red Sea was spectacular, but He only did that once. Throughout the Bible He met people who were fishing, working in an office, plowing a field, driving their wife's new car, or whatever.

God does not do PRODUCTION NUMBERS — or at least not very often.

He was not in the whirlwind nor in the earthquake, but in the still small voice.

When Moses pronounced the first and great commandment, He said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might".

He then tells us the times to think of Him:

"When thou sitteth in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou riseth up."

This thrills me!

I think it is great that God meets us in the ordinary, even when we drive on the highway... But today, I'm going to have to get used to that "when thou liest down" part of the commandment.

Ginny's cold is better (I think it was the flowers that brought her out of it). But that contagious woman I'm married to has infected me.

Today I hack and cough and drip and sniffle.

Today it's my turn to lie in bed and be pampered.

Tuesday, January 22, 2008
Blessed To Give/ Hard To Receive

Yes, Ginny gave me her vicious cold.

As she recovers more and more, I get sicker and sicker.

After ten days of living in ghastly misery, she felt well enough to return to work today; I feel so miserable myself that I intend to lay abed and wallow in misery, too sick to read and hardly able to watch vcr reruns of the Monk detective mystery stories.

It's a good thing that we both have not felt ill at the same time. We'd have been in real trouble if that happened.

On the up side of things, this morning I walked outside and snapped this photo of the swimming pool.

Yes, this shows the same pool as the photos Ginny took on Friday (1/18):

Isn't it beautiful!



I feel proud to have accomplished that miracle at a cost of only a few day's work and about \$45, whereas, before I began my amateur innovations, a \$3,000 expense loomed before us.

Had I not been able to patch the broken steel wall, we'd have had to remove the pool altogether and then where would I pray on summer nights when I float on an air mattress looking up at the stars?

Anyhow, I'm proud that my improvisations — using diamond wire, duct tape, an old dog blanket and plastic garbage bags — appear to have worked so well to repair this pool. This gift of improvisation is the same I once used to build parade floats from scrap materials and to teach Bible lessons using odd bits of things I found in the trash.

But many skilled workmen do not improvise; they do things right.

Ginny and I talked at length about this Sunday morning over breakfast. A donor who does not want to be named has offered to bring in skilled carpenters to make some crucial home repairs for us. Rotten boards in the eaves to be replaced, door re-hung, lightening fixtures updated, etc.

This donor is investing big bucks taking care of us — and it makes us very uncomfortable.

I spoke on the phone with him, urging him to tone things down a little and let me do some of the things I feel capable of doing, but he said it's more economical to have professionals do the job quick and right. He has a spending cap for the project and this is the kindness he wants to do us out of the goodness of his heart.

Being on the receiving end of charity pushes us out of our comfort zone.

As Ginny and I looked over our checkbook, we see that our own charitable giving has declined over recent years. That troubles us.

We like to be givers.

It feels good to be a giver.

Speaking to a delegation from Ephesus, St. Paul quotes Jesus as saying, "It is more blessed to give than to receive". (Oddly enough, this quotation does not come from any of the four Gospels).

Yet, the entire foundation of the Christian faith rests not on giving to God but on receiving from Him.

In the final analysis every person on earth, no matter how materially wealthy, is on the receiving end of God's charity. What have we that we have not received?

"He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not. He came unto His own, and His own received Him not. But to as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name".

Receiving Christ is the first step in the Christian life.

We find that enormously hard to do.

Receiving the gift of God pushes us out of our comfort zone.

It gets worse:

The Scripture says, "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him".

That's even harder because I want to be a giver, Big Daddy blessing lesser folks with my bounty.

Spiritually I resemble a toddler whose spent the last 20 minutes trying unsuccessfully to zip up a jacket and still refusing help, slapping away hands, and insisting, "I can do it myself, Mother"!

And here the Lord God, a jealous God, does not put up with my nonsense. He knows just how big I am, how vain, how proud, how pathetic playing King Of The Hill on a dung heap.

But, it is so hard to receive from God or anybody else.

Being on the receiving end of some donor's charity make me realize how weak I am.

That's good for me.

Painful, but good for me.

His strength is made perfect in weakness.

So, while Ginny and I appreciate the donor's charity and the skill of the construction workers who will actually do jobs I can't do, we are having to learn how to manage and expand our personal comfort levels to be able to receive.

It's a deep spiritual lesson we don't really want to learn.

Wednesday, January 23, 2008

Remember Job's Wife

Tuesday afternoon the cynical advice of Job's wife made perfect sense to me.

Remember her?

She's the one who, when life turned sour, told her husband to curse God and die.

Maybe this wretched cold influenced my thinking. Maybe it's just a swing in my normal morbid mind-set. Maybe that package in the mail upset me inordinately.

Whatever.

But this was one of those times when I'm ready to renounce God as a fraud and sulk in a corner nursing my wounds.

Every few months I get in one of these moods. The heavens turn to brass. Prayer seems a waste of time and changes nothing. The Scriptures read like gobbledygook and myth. God is gone, if He were ever there in the first place. I hurt and Christ offers neither remedy nor hope.

How's that for a glowing Christian testimony?

Am I the only Christian to go through periods like this?

At such times, Job's wife makes perfect sense.

Curse God and die. Why bother trying. Why keep pissing against the wind. What's the use. Why keep trying in the light of so much failure?

Nothing I do matters. My efforts are useless. I'll just fail again. The game's not worth the candle.

Somebody up there's got it in for me.

All of the above says how I honestly feel this morning.

Days of gray drizzle contribute to my funk. Sleep deprivation drains me. Frustration about my inability to do the house repairs myself adds to my guilt. This cold saps my energy. Flat book sales discourage me. Money may not stretch, but checks sure will bounce.

And there's nothing good on tv!

But the kicker, the last straw, came when the mailman delivered that package yesterday. It contained 500+ proof pages of a book I worked on while on hiatus from my Fire Department History. Yes, between chapters in the fire history, I formatted my own diary thinking to publish it. And the printer just mailed me the proofs.

The front cover looks distorted. The back cover text blurred. Headers and footers mutilated the title and copyright pages in the front of the book. And in the back of the book, the index didn't index.

All this I saw without actually reading a single page!

And I'd worked so hard on this thing.

I really believed I had it perfect.

I treated this manuscript exactly as I'd done others.

What went wrong this time?

Despair gripped me.

That package broke my spirit.

That's when I remembered the advice of Job's wife.

Poor John.

Maybe he needs a hug — or a kick in the ass.

But, after wallowing in self-pity for an enjoyable length of time while I mulled over the words of Job's

wife, I remembered the words of Satan in the *Book of Job* (which scholars say is the first book of the Bible to be written) and I found some comfort.

Yes, oddly enough, Satan's observation comforted me.

Satan questioned, "Does Job fear God for naught"?

Satan taunted God charging that only because things went well for Job at first, that was the only reason Job had faith in God.

Satan observed that it's easy to worship God when life is bright and sunny. Like in that Rev. Fun cartoon:



Thanks to John Verbrugge (See 1Chronicles 4:9-10) 01-23-2002

**YOU MUST BE JOB ... MY NAME IS JABEZ, I'M
YOUR NEW NEIGHBOR**

So, God allowed Satan to wipe Job out. Everything from his kids to his cattle, the evil one destroyed. Job's property reduced to ashes. His proof pages messed up. His computer screen said, "Fatal Error". His body wracked with murrains (I'm sure that's the biblical name for this same kind of cold I have). Job's friends belittled him and his wife said, "Why don't you curse God and die".

In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly.

In fact, out of all the mess, Job's faith grew stronger even though he saw no answer to his troubles, no answers to his questions.

Yet while all this was hitting the fan, Job said, "I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though, after my skin, worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God".

As to his afflictions, Job declared, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him".

Now, I realize that my troubles add up to nothing compared to Job's. I know that I'm undergoing a temporary funk, a funk that a good nap may well cure. I also know that this trough looks familiar; I've wallowed in this same ditch before — those are my scratch marks on the wall from last time I was down here.



Thanks to Dad Hengeveld (See Job 1)

09-19-2001

FIRST THINGS FIRST, MR. JOB ... ARE YOU AWARE THAT YOU ARE DUSTY, ASHEN, AND WEARING SACKCLOTH?

I know that I'm a big cry baby moaning over troubles that don't amount to much in the larger scheme of things — but I don't live in the larger scheme of things, I live in my tiny circle and things hurt here at the moment. —

Why, I even cut the inside of my mouth on a sharp potato chip last night!

Job never did that.

So I feel I've earned the right to cry and bitch and moan.

But, while I do not have Job's faith... I do have his example.

Thursday, January 24, 2008
Still Enjoying Ill Health

"Still enjoying ill health," was a phrase my mother used about a hypochondriac aunt; it also describes me recently. Yesterday I lay abed all day reading a copy of Stephen King's most recent book, *Duma Key*. Ginny picked up a copy for me the other night when she went out for supper. I've only managed to read the first 200 pages so far, so I still can't say what the book is about. But, Chapter Six, the one where the hero reads poetry to an old woman with Alzheimer's, is one of the most touching and beautiful passages I've ever read. God willing, I'll spend today warming my bed and reading more.

Friday, January 25, 2008
Pre-Cleaning

Years and years ago I taught a Bible class at a church where a number of society people worshiped.

One lady in the Bible class had five maids come into her home each week to do the heavy cleaning for her.

She once told me that on the day before the five maids came in, she would scurry through her home picking up and cleaning up ahead of time so those maids would not think she and her family were slob.

I used to think that was funny; now, I know how she felt.

Next week carpenters Mark and Ian are scheduled to come to my house to repair various damages I've allowed to build up for a dozen years.

I have this urge to rush outside and clean up ahead of time so they won't think I'm a useless slob.

Too late.

They've already been here and made their estimates.

There's some kind of spiritual lesson here; I'm not sure what it is.

Besides, although I am getting over this cold, the pre-cleanup job looks overwhelming to me. I haven't finished reading my Stephen King book nor even touched those proof pages.

Yesterday, for the first time in a week, I felt strong enough to shave and take a shower... but when I turned off the hot water faucet, I broke it!

Another job for the repairmen.

Sufficient to the day...

Tuesday, January 29, 2008
Primary Voting Day & Good Excuses

Ginny and I go to the polls today to vote for a candidate among the scads of people running for President, and to vote about a change in local taxes.

It's a duty and we do it.

Enough said.

Now, on to important issues:

Our bathroom plumbing remains broken. To be fair, yesterday the plumber did run a snake through the sluggish tub drain and it does drain better than it did before. ... But that was a side issue from the reason I called in a professional in the first place.

We called the plumber to come out because the pipes are old, leaky and rusted and need to be fixed. For only \$60 he told me that our pipes are old, leaky and rusted and need to be fixed.

He fiddled with the faucets and left them leaking worse than before he arrived.

I will have to get in there and do the job myself.

I resent having to do this because it's such a mind-consuming task.

I'm in the middle of proof reading the diary manuscript, a task which requires some focus; I still haven't finished that fire history book, and here I have to think about plumbing and paint and tile work.

“Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness...”

Yeah. Sure.

And while I do that, I’m supposed to let water run down the inside of the walls?

I’ve tried to avoid getting tied up in material things but I’m being forced into home repair projects now which I intended to get to this Spring after I finished the fire history book. The projects are worthwhile and will improve our quality of life, but I can’t do plumbing and edit copy at the same time.

And, I used to have some minor-grade spiritual life which I’ve lost while preparing the area for carpenters (who proved unreliable and did not show up when they promised), and while re-hanging the sagging gate and while stringing up that birdfeeder for Ginny, and while repairing the ruptured steel pool wall.

Thus, I feel torn.

And pushed.

And pulled.

And pressured.

And I faintly hear the voice of Jesus saying, “Come; for all things are now ready”.

He said that’s what happened when a certain man gave a great feast and invited many people to it. But they all began to make excuse:

One said, “I have bought a piece of ground and must needs go see it”.

Another said, “I have bought five yoke of oxen and I want to prove them”.

Another said, “I have married a wife and therefore I cannot come”.

Every one of them had a perfectly good excuse.

But Jesus said, “None of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper”.

He said, "Likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple".

Responding to His invitation is more important than repairing faucets, or building walls or editing copy or writing history or even voting for a new president.

Yet all these lesser things command my attention at this moment.

Somehow, the trick is following Jesus **in the midst of** all these mundane things.

I haven't learned that trick yet.

I'm working on it.

Wednesday, January 30, 2008

E-Mail Traffic From and About Strangers

Checking my e-mail this morning revealed 56 messages in my inbox.

A reader in London asked about an 1833 engraving in My August 13, 2006 Blog. As is often the case when someone asks me a question, she knew more about the subject than I do.

A message from my son Johnny told me about the USS New York, a recently launched US warship especially designed to fight terrorists. Twenty-Four tons of steel from the World Trade Center attack was melted down and recast to construct this ship:



Two other messages related to my book *Strangers On The Earth*:

A message from a reader in Russia said:

"John I appreciate your wholesome and good humor in Christ Jesus for my confession, which brings me into harmony with you, is the first answer of the Westminster system's "What is the chief end of man?" TO GLORIFY GOD AND TO ENJOY HIM FOREVER.

"Frankly, I feel that I bug some of my closest friends due to my great joy in Him! I am a strong advocate of knowing and loving Him with you and do continually remind myself, my wife and our cat to rejoice in Him..."

"Yet that which has brought us together is the life of Jeanne Guyon. I knew her not until your work came into view yet what I did know of her helped me many a day gone by as I would sit and recite "a little bird am I shut from the fields of air" on through the beautiful acknowledgement that our Sovereign God, who brings donkeys to rebuke their owners, does rule and govern for Jeanne's little bird was "well pleased because it pleases Him."

A copy of the chapter about Madam Guyon can be found at <http://www.cowart.info/John's%20Books/Guyon/Guyon.htm>

A reader in Germany responded to the last chapter in *Strangers*, "The Worse People On Earth", my profile of five missionaries killed in Equator

This reader said:

"Mr. Cowart,

"First of all let me tell you that "Aucas" are despective name to Huaoranis which is the real name of them. Aucas means "savages" and that was a nickname given by the Quichuas of the Rainforest because of the constant attacks they where victim from the Huaoranis.

"As you posted the Huaoranis did live in a stone era because their culture, due to various circumstances, did develop in such a way that they were not courious or interested on producing more or making more for consuming. Their life was based on survivence and the warfare situation like was based on external situation due to the harrassment of foreign tribes.

"Considering the Huaoranis did not developed such a high conception of thinking or self recognition then it is not fair to judge them with the same parameters as you or me shoud be judge so your article lacks of that base for telling whom is good and whom is bad.....

"God and Bad is just an appreciation otherwise how can you explain that the Huaoranis did kill the 5 missionaries in the 50ths intentionally and you still remember but the US army during the ocupation of Irak did kill thousands and thousands of possible terrorists but also innocent people???? Is that god or bad???...."

This reader goes on to say the missionaries worked in collusion with oil companies to steal land from the Acuas.

He says, "After having the chance to read and get the truth I do realize the way people manage the

information according their convinience so it is the case of your article and the acctions of the ILV (Summer Linguistics Institute)

"I am very sorry to disbelief your article but it is filled with lies and based just on the arguments that benefit only the missionaries and the ILV (Summer Linguistics Institute) and keep the "Aucas" as an ignorant, stupid and brutal bunch of people in the middle of the forest".

A copy of my *Strangers* chapter on the five martyred missionaries can be found at <http://www.cowart.info/AucasTheWorstPeopleOnEarth.htm>

FEBRUARY

Friday, February 01, 2008
My First Commercial Ad

My granddaughter's high school is having a thing.

They are printing a program for this thing.

They're selling ads in the program.

I bought an ad.

Here it is:

Whee!

Seeking a Settled Heart
The 19th Century Diary of
Puritan Richard Rogers

Crackers & Caperdaggers
Accounts in the History of Jacksonville, Florida
by John W. Cowart

Glog

Richard Tull
The Civil War Diary
of John Thomas Blakely, CSA

Bluefish

Books

Bluefish Books specializes in
old diaries & letters, history,
biographies, memoirs, novels,
inspirational books, and other
works edited or written by John
Cowart.

<http://www.bluefishbooks.info>

I thought about advertising the books in my Dirty Old Man Goes Bad series, but considering this is a high school event, I thought that might not be a good idea.

Sunday, February 03, 2008
Resolute!

I have married a resolute woman.

Mind you, *resolute* was not the first word that came to mind when I wrote that sentence. *Pig-headed* headed my list of choices. Then I toned it down to *stubborn*; but that sounds too critical. So I tried *persevering*. Then I resolved to use *resolute* to describe my beautiful, charming (but pig-headed) wife.

Remember how she took me Christmas shopping on the day after Thanksgiving? She'd determined that she wanted to buy a certain trinket as a present for her brother Eric, and his wife..

The stores had sold out of said trinket.

But Ginny wanted that present. None other would do. And, once she sets her mind to a goal... Remember how the Terminator robot in that movie locked into his mission and would not be deterred even if a bus hit him?

My diary posting for Saturday, January 5th, 2008, (see blog archives in the sidebar) records how two weeks after Christmas Ginny was still shopping for that specific trinket. Yes, two weeks after Christmas!

Well, guess what we did yesterday?

Again, we went Christmas shopping for Eric and Dot's present.

She got it!

She got it!

She finally got it!

Determined. Resolute. Preserving. Stubborn. Steadfast. Pig-headed — whatever term you care to use, Ginny got it.

Resolute!



The words of an old hymn come to my mind:

I am resolved to follow Jesus.
I am resolved to follow Jesus.
I am resolved to follow Jesus.
No turning back. No turning back.

Wednesday, February 06, 2008

BTW Countdown

People used to date events according to A.D., a Latin abbreviation meaning year of our Lord, and B.C., meaning Before Christ.

Uncomfortable with the religious elements of that dating system, some non-Christian folks chose to record dates as C.E., meaning Common Era, and B.C.E., meaning Before the Common Era.

We Cowarts now date our lives according to BTW or ATW — Before The Wedding or After The Wedding.

Yes, Eve and Mark's wedding aboard that cruise ship has become the watershed event on our horizon around which all life revolves. Donald and Helen's van broke down and they debate whether to get a new one BTW or ATW. Plumbing repairs at our house hinged on having the work done BTW or ATW.

Ginny and I gambled, betting on the skill of the plumber to effect repairs BTW.

We won.

Pat Claydon of Pat's Plumbing Company, Jacksonville, came out Monday morning and fixed our A.D. 1952 bathroom fixtures in a jiffy.

Mr. Claydon arrived when he said he would. He had all the tools needed. And he knew what he was doing. He quickly got us up and running. The first plumber we called claimed he'd have to smash out tile walls, order parts which would take three weeks to arrive, and that the work would close our bathroom for three days while he repaired things.

Pat fixed everything in about two hours — without breaking a single tile.

We are very pleased. Wish we'd called on Pat first. His number is 786-2121.

I've also worried that getting our yard in order stood as another urgent BTW project. I'm proud of our garden and wanted to show it off at its best to wedding guests. That meant a major Spring cleanup BTW.

Not needed.

After innumerable phone calls involving airline schedules, sleeping accommodations, clothing questions, restaurant reservations, and transportation issues, I realized that if I do not chop down the vines on our jungle path, the wedding will not be spoiled. The Bride will not dissolve in tears if I have not leveled the flagstones. Visitors will not turn aghast if the cassia tree is not pruned.

All that garden work can come ATW.

A third project weighed heavily on my mind — proofreading the 500 pages of my diary, the third book in my *Dirty Old Man Goes Bad* series.

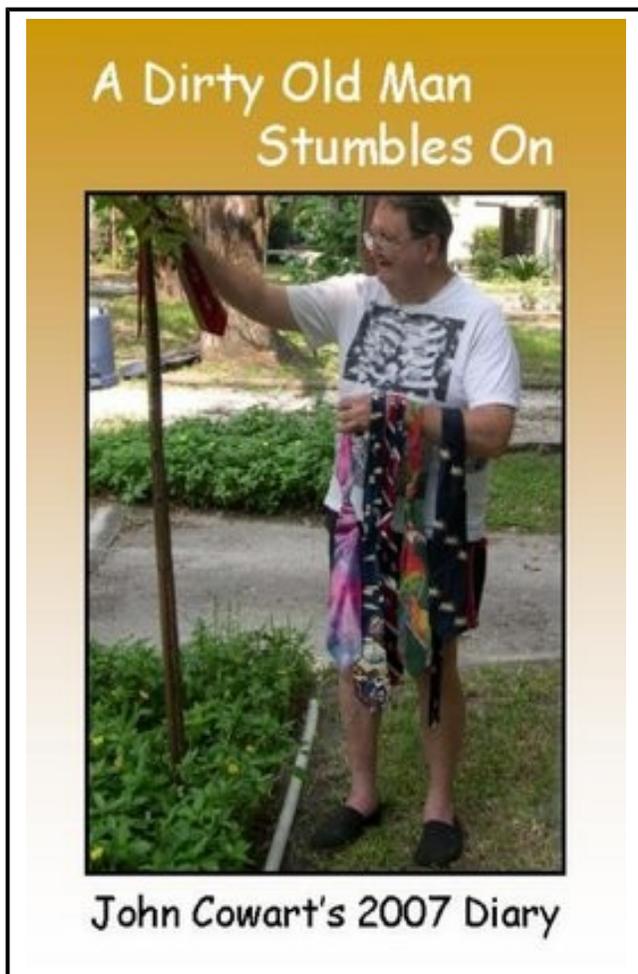
Sneaking odd minutes during Super Bowl commercials and rising extra early in the mornings, working late at night, and neglecting virtually all else...

I got it done!

Thanks be to God.

I added the manuscript to my on-line book catalog yesterday afternoon.

Here's a photo of the new book's cover:



Just now, seeing all those old neckties draped over my arm (I use them as plant tiebacks) reminds me that I'll need to wear a tie to give away the Bride at the wedding. And I realize that I have not actually buttoned the collar button on any shirt in maybe two years (the clothes I'm wearing in the cover photo are normal work attire for a writer).

Can I still button a shirt collar button?

I doubt it.

I'm much fatter now than in my suit-to-the-office wearing days.

I know!

I know what I'll do!

I remember how to tie an old fashioned Windsor Knot in a necktie; I'll tie one so large that it will cover the fat gap at my neckline without my having to actually button the collar.

Problem solved.

Who pays any attention to the Bride's father at a wedding anyhow?

Between pool repair, plumbing, and proofreading and wedding preparations, I've neglected prayer — and I've become petulant.

Lot of Ps in that sentence; here's another one:

Jesus **performed** His first miracle at a wedding.

Had He not done that, He'd have gotten lost in the shuffle.

He has gotten lost in my personal shuffle this week too.

Not to worry.

In ancient days in Greece, if a king's retinue met a bridal procession in the streets, the king had to give way. This was her day and even kings stood aside.

Jesus understands that sort of thing. He's a gentleman.

I'll think about my own spiritual deterioration ATW.

Thursday, February 07, 2008
Water/Wine Served Daily

Just in case some confused wedding guest wanders down the jungle path in our back garden, I spent Wednesday chopping vines to clear the way.

We grow lavish tangles of wydellia, wisteria, smilax, kudzu and wild scuppernong grape vines in the back quarter of our yard.

I chopped and trimmed and pruned and weed whacked in mad abandon. This activity in no way actually related to our daughter's wedding, but it proved a great way for me to work off energy before the event.. I highly recommend weed whacking to all fathers of the bride to be.

Eve and Mark, Helen and Donald, Jennifer and Julie, Helen's sister, Ginny and I — all met at a Chinese restaurant to celebrate Chinese New Year, Year of the Rat in their calendar. We laughed ourselves silly telling juvenile jokes about a generic groom, and teasing the engaged couple.

For years our kids have urged Ginny and me to write a book about the secret of a happy marriage; we might if we knew the secret. But we don't have a clue as to why we thrive in romance after 40 years of marriage. It's just the grace of God and nothing we do.

But for some strange reason, we seem to have been given what everybody else in the world wants to have.

The chief end of all human endeavor is to be happy at home.

And for us, Home is where Jesus dwells.

Anyhow, getting back to my vine chopping — as I worked I realized that in my diary entry yesterday I mentioned the first miracle Jesus performed; it was at a wedding.

He turned water into wine.

John's Gospel is the only one that mentions this.

John says, "This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth His glory; and His disciples believed on Him".

The Greek work for **miracle** is *semelon* (I looked it up) That Greek word can also be translated by the English word, **sign**.

"This beginning of signs did Jesus... and manifested forth His glory".

What sign was it that manifested His glory?

He mixed an instant beverage.

He did the same thing He always does, but He did it faster on this occasion.

God always acts consistent with Himself.

And for this wedding He turned six jugs of water into wine. John says each jug contained two or three firkins of water.

No, I have no idea what a furkin is either.

Every jug of wine in the history of the world started life as water.

Rainwater falls on the earth, vine roots absorb it and transport it to be stored in the grape. Something that grows naturally on the skin of the grape (I forget whether it is an enzyme, fungus or mold) causes the juice inside the grape to ferment and eventually become wine.

God changes water into wine every day.

At that wedding, Jesus did the same thing He always does in an abbreviated time span. I've read somewhere (sounds like C.S. Lewis) that every miracle or sign mentioned in the Gospels are natural, everyday acts of God writ large.

Jesus didn't perform some cheap parlor trick at the wedding, He gave this sign to manifest to observers Who He is.

From my truck driving days I think of a shipping manifest which shows the exact contents of the truck. With His signs throughout the Gospels, Jesus shows

His exact contents — that in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.

Now here's where things get interesting:

The ruler of the feast didn't see the sign.

The bridegroom didn't see the sign.

John mentions a governor of the feast (I'm not sure is he's the same as the ruler of the feast) but whoever he was, he didn't see the sign.

I'm not even sure if the Virgin Mary, who was at the wedding, saw the sign, John does not say one way or the other. The Bride's reaction isn't mentioned either.

But the Gospel specifically says, "The servants which drew the water knew".

Important people missed the whole thing.

But the ones who served stood in a position to see the sign, to witness the miracle.

They still do.

Friday, February 08, 2008 For They Shall Be Called...

Jesus is smarter than I am.

Of course what with Him being the Son of God and all, you'd expect Him to have an edge when it comes to spiritual things.

But I'm talking about common sense.

He has that too.

Case in point: Once when He was teaching spiritual things to a huge crowd, "there were gathered together an innumerable multitude of people insomuch that they trode one upon another".

Representatives of the Pharisees there began to urge Him vehemently and to provoke Him; they were, "laying in wait for Him, seeking to catch something out of His mouth that they might accuse Him".

Even with all that going on, in the midst of that mob scene, Jesus was trying to tell folks about the Holy Ghost,. This is the place where Jesus taught that God knows every sparrow that falls (Reminds me that I need to clean the bird cage before any wedding guests show up) and that God numbers the very hairs on your head (Do I need to cut my hair before the ceremony or am I OK?).

So there was Jesus teaching spiritual things...

But one guy in the crowd interrupts saying, "Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me".

Jesus was smarter than I am.

He refused to get involved.

"Man," He said, "Who made me a judge or divider over you"?

Yes, Jesus refused to get enmeshed in a squabble over how to divvy up an inheritance.

He knew a can of worms when He saw one.

Not me.

I jump right in and try to mediate.

Yesterday, I tried to be a peacemaker in not one, but four disputes among family and neighbors. No I did not seek these occasions out, but when people presented me with their problems, I offered sympathetic advice.

Jesus would have known better.

One dispute involved living arrangements. The lady saw me working in my front yard and came over bitching and moaning. Her first words to me were, "It's a mess. It's a mess. It's a real mess!".

It was.

Another dispute boiled into my front yard as one neighbor complained that another left a borrowed lawnmower out in the rain and got water in the gas tank.

I, you understand, am personally involved in none of this.

I'm just cleaning my yard in preparation for my daughter's wedding tomorrow.

But no sooner had I finished mowing my own grass, than the phone rang: a. dispute over dividing an inheritance.

A bunch of phone calls followed. People were practically stepping on each other.

All I wanted to do was rake leaves.

Not being as smart as Jesus, I tried to make peace between the warring factions as they talk of police involvement, court hearings, lawyers, and subpoenas.

I have nothing to do with any of this — but guess who ended up talking with a cop last night and guess who everyone is upset with.

Then here comes a guy claiming one of my daughters owes his company money and he wanted me to give him her address and phone number.

He really got upset when I refused.

I do not give any caller such information about any of my daughters. He claimed he was from a credit collection agency but all he is to me is a voice on the phone. If he doesn't even know she no longer even lives in Jacksonville, then he's no friend of hers.

When I refused to divulge any information, he became more demanding.

That made me a bit snippy.

"Look," I said. "I do not own your company a penny. There's no reason to call me. Ever. My daughter is a grown woman almost 30 years old and she handles her own affairs. And, No. I will not take your name and number for her to call you back. And I will not tell her you called. I am not a messenger service".

Wet lawnmower guy.

Disputed inheritance people.

Living arrangements lady

Bill collector.

Ain't nobody loves me this morning.

Seems everyone I talked to is upset with me.

But I'd only tried to make peace because on some level I care about all five of these people who contacted me (except for the bill collector phone guy who can go to Hell as far as I'm concerned).

I've managed to offend everybody.

Oh well, as the Scripture says, Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God — Among other things.

Bye now. I'm going to clean the bird cage.

Ginny's bird appreciates me.

Even though he bites.

Saturday, February 09, 2008
On Eve's Wedding Eve



The photo, taken Friday night by my wife, Ginny, shows my sister-in-law, May, taking a photo of my middle daughter Eve and Mark, her groom for tomorrow.

Yes, my diary entry for Friday reads like one of those interminable genealogies in the Old Testament. But you can't tell the players without a scorecard so here goes:

On the eve of Eve and Mark's wedding the far-flung family gathered for a pre-wedding get-together party. We'd all agreed beforehand to tell embarrassing stories about Eve but she arrived late to the party and we never got around to seeing the blushing bride really blush.

We'll humiliate her at some later date to be announced.

What else is a loving family for?

My middle son Johnny missed his flight from Washington, D.C., and came in later; Fred, my oldest son, stayed in Maryland. Johnny, who competes in ballroom dancing contests, will dance with his sister, Eve, at her wedding Saturday.

Ginny's brother, Eric, and his wife, Dot, flew in from California. They spent the day Friday swimming with sharks and dolphins at Marineland before coming to the party. Eric is an attorney with degrees in engineering and marketing; Dot works as an executive for a skin care company — That's skin care not skin flicks.

My little brother, David, and his wife, May, and her sister Carol, drove up from south Florida for the wedding.

David actually brought a shotgun.

It's not needed (Mark appears happy to go through with the wedding) but, being a protective uncle, David brought his shotgun just in case.

Actually David and May brought the shotgun because of a recent break in at their house and he wanted to remove it from the place while they were away from home for the wedding.

May worked at the hospital all night Thursday but she's a party animal and wouldn't miss Eve's wedding. Her sister, Carol, recently moved here from Arizona. It snowed a foot there the day she left and today's temperature here was 77 degrees, perfect weather for swimming in a shark tank.

Our daughter Patricia and her boyfriend Chris drove up from Gainesville. She's excited about her new job in a lab there. And Chris, besides being a computer person, is active in dog rescue. In fact a mutual love for dogs brought them together. They slipped away from the party for a while to check on a dog they'd recently placed.

Our son Donald and his wife Helen shot pool using billiard balls with embedded led lights inside so they light up flashing when they roll. Donald is a computer network administrator who is saving the Everglades. Helen is a graphic artist and yesterday a poster she designed for me was featured on Amrita's Yesu Garden Blog in India.. Donald and Helen volunteered to drive out-of-towners all over creation for wedding related activities.

Our daughter Jennifer hosted this party but she had to drive to the airport late to pick up Johnny (see above). Her idea of wedding preparation was to have her dog groomed today. Can't have a wedding with an un-groomed dog.

Mark's mother, Nancy, and his brother Mike flew down from Michigan (where not many people were swimming with sharks or without today) to celebrate with Mark. If you watched the Detroit Thanksgiving Day Parade on tv, you saw Nancy on one of her show horses from Harmony Farms.

For fun, Mike enjoys fencing. Modestly, he describes his skill level as only a third of the way between beginner and Olympic; he's obviously much closer to Olympic than beginner.

Also attending the party were Eve and Mark (That's them in the photo at the head of this post). Our daughter, Eve, is a Head Librarian and the groom, Mark, is an attorney aspiring to become a judge

someday. They met via an internet dating service and tomorrow they marry.

Be careful where you click.

The captain of a docked cruise ship will marry Mark and Eve Saturday. After the reception all of us guests go ashore to watch the happy couple sail away into the sunset for their honeymoon amid sunny Caribbean isles.

My wife, her name is Ginny, walked around the party showing off a silver service pin she's been awarded at work this morning — and a gold one too. That's two distinguished service awards in one day. The place would fall apart without her!

Speaking of falling apart — I attended the party too.

Ginny and I begat some of the people listed above.

I told you this entry would read like an Old Testament genealogy.

Sunday, February 10, 2008
Need More Be Said?





Monday, February 11, 2008
After The Ball Is Over

Just suffering from post-wedding let-down today.

I had such big plans to entertain out-of-town wedding guests.

None of my plans worked out.

Just as well; my concept of beauty, fun, and joy doesn't always dovetail with other people's. I have to be careful not to bully through my plans without listening to the plans and preferences of others.

As my daughter Jennifer reminded me Friday, I am not the center of the universe.

(She is. Just ask her.)

While I relish the beauty of the marsh, other folks slap sand gnats.

Not everyone sees things through my eyes.

For instance, when I was a teenager, I uncovered a human skeleton on Fort George Island.

What a thrill.

I intended to show the spot to out-of-town wedding guests during a tour of the 1830s Kingsley Plantation after the wedding. What cooler thing could we possibly do after a lavish ball?

Then Ginny and I planned a banquet at a luxurious seafood restaurant. We kicked around ideas for a visit to the equestrian center, tubing on the Ichetucknee River, strolls on the beach, maybe let them toss a shrimp net, and, of course, I wanted to show off our own garden.

Instead, most guests ended up shooting pool, playing video games, drinking beer and eating pizza.

Six or eight of them disappeared off the radar altogether without our having a chance to even say good-bye to them.

I feel both relieved and disappointed.

Although surrounded by people I care about but seldom see, I hardly had an in depth conversation

with any of them this weekend. There are a lot of people in our extended family that I do not really know at all. I'd sort of hoped this occasion would remedy that.

But, alas, airline schedules, motel reservations, personal plans, a cell phone lost (or stolen) aboard the ship, transportation snafus, missed phone calls, misunderstandings, happy confusion, etc. intervened.

In other words, everything ran normally for a logistical operation of this magnitude.

Ginny took two extra vacation days off work so we could spend time with out-of-towners. And I prettied up home, garden, and plumbing — but no one made it into our home for a visit.

Guess I'll have to eat all those cookies, chips, danish pastries and shack treats we brought in all by myself.

I also underestimated the energy level of guests.

The cruise ship experience exposed us all to a strange new environment, happy but unfamiliar, and by the time we reached the parking lot afterwards, I think we all suffered from exhaustion.

From the post-wedding parking lot on, my plans were supposed to kick in.

They didn't.

So instead of showing visitors the beauty of "Real Florida" over the weekend, Ginny and I found ourselves with unexpected, unscheduled free time. We dabbled in our garden, lingered over lunch, and lounged browsing through the Sunday newspapers.

Nice to recharge our batteries.

Since she has Monday off, and none of the anticipated visitors are around, we're talking about driving out to Fort George by ourselves this afternoon. It's part of the Timucuan Preserve.

It's one of the most beautiful spots in Florida.

Maybe we'll see a painted bunting, or notice the corner of a pirate chest exposed by the tide, see a

whale jump, find Indian pottery in the shell midden, catch a blacksnake, kick up a Civil War coin, or maybe even find another skeleton....

My kind of entertainment.

I'm looking forward to the day.

Friday, February 15, 2008
Watching Ben Work

I love work.

I can sit and watch someone work for hours.

That's exactly how I spent yesterday — watching Ben work.

Yes, Ginny and I moved directly from the joy and stress of Mark & Eve's wedding last Saturday to the joy and stress of home renovations this week.

For years I have neglected the simplest jobs of home maintenance so that the cumulative result became dire.

Yes, I'm guilty.

Squirrels found their way through holes in the wall and rotten wood fringed our deck. By putting off doing minor chores, I'd let things degenerate into a huge chore — a chore I estimated would take me three weeks to do, if I could do it at all.

Well, yesterday a Jacksonville Beach contractor, Mr. Ben Spiker, came to our house to do the job. His phone number is 708-7566. In one long day he accomplished more than I could have done in three weeks. And he did it professionally with skill and precision.

It was a joy to watch him work.

You know the kind of joy you get when you see someone who really knows what he's doing, doing it. It's almost like watching a dance — only with hammers and saws and drills and routers.

Here's a photo I took of Ben Spiker headed up the ladder with another jigsaw puzzle piece of new wood on our roof:



Someone pleased with his work recommended Mr. Spiker for work at my daughter Jennifer's house and she was so pleased with his work that she recommended him to me for the things I needed done.

I'm glad she did.

While I watched Ben work, my daughter Eve came over. She's fresh off the boat from her honeymoon in the Bahamas. Mark and she must be starting marriage out right because Eve was headed for dinner with her friend Trish while Mark planed an evening of war games with his buddies.

"Let their be spaces in your togetherness..."

Eve brought over a folder of wedding photos to show me.

It pleases me so to see her so happy.

If Donald, John, Helen or Jennifer (the finks!) ever e-mail me the cruise /wedding photos they promised, I'll post a link but maybe they haven't recovered from the wedding festivities yet.

Between shipboard wedding and home repairs, I haven't had much of a spiritual life this week. Haven't thought of Jesus at all.

I mentioned my low spiritual state to my friend Wes Tuesday over breakfast at Dave's Diner.

Wes told me not to worry about it.

"Folks who are religious all the time are apt to lie about other things too," he said.

Monday, February 18, 2008

On Being Down While Up

Violent self-hatred characterizes my days recently.

Being up on a ladder triggered this bout of feeling down.

Yes, I've spent the past few days on top of a ten-foot ladder — until my fat ass broke the ladder and I had to spend hours repairing the damn thing so I could climb it again. Not only that, but over the weekend we got to make three trips to the hardware store because nothing in this damn house fits.

But, didn't we have a repairman in for two days last week?

Yes. And he did everything we asked.

But I saw a minor adjustment that needed to be made and I'd watched him do such tasks in less than 30 minutes, so naturally I tried to do the same thing he did.

And I did — for ten hours Saturday till I broke my ladder and it got too dark to see how to work any longer, then I spent another four hours on top of the ladder Sunday afternoon and I still was not able to make the repairs.

I'll have to try again today.

What a damn, incompetent, useless piece of shit I am.

What an utter klutz!

Any damn fool ought to be able to fix a simple light fixture but I'm too useless and stupid to even unscrew one blub.

I feel so mad at me, so disgusted, so angry at myself.

No, this is not a case of simple humorous self-depreciation in my writing that I use as a self-defense tactic, not my country-bumpkin, dumb blond act which masks pride. This is a real visceral loathing at my own incompetence.

Really, I expected so much more of me.

And not only is this related to my immediate circumstance, but as I fumble atop that ladder, my mind dredges up thousands of stupid, foolish, inane actions, words and mistakes from my whole life and gives me an instant replay of remorse.

And this is just the first week of home repairs.

Weeks and weeks and weeks of this crap stretches interminably into my future.

And the hell of it is that when all this home repair stuff is done, we'll live in exactly the same box with roof and floors and walls that we've lived in all along.

The only Scripture that I hang onto at the moment is a phrase from the epistles that we are "Accepted in the Beloved". That it is the mercy of Christ that makes me acceptable to God not my own well-rounded personality and virtue.

I've noticed both from reading biographies and from personal observation that often when elderly Christians get close to the finish line something minor happens that kicks the props out from under them, that torpedos their beliefs, that reduces the person to despair and tempts them to sourness. This event strips away everything leaving only a bare-bones faith — if that.

Jesus leaves us nothing, absolutely nothing, but Himself.

It's kind of a final exam before graduation.

If my recent experiences are this kind of test, then I'm failing miserably.

Being on top of a ten-foot ladder does not lift me ten feet closer to Heaven.

Quite the opposite in fact, I'm never more down than when I'm up there.

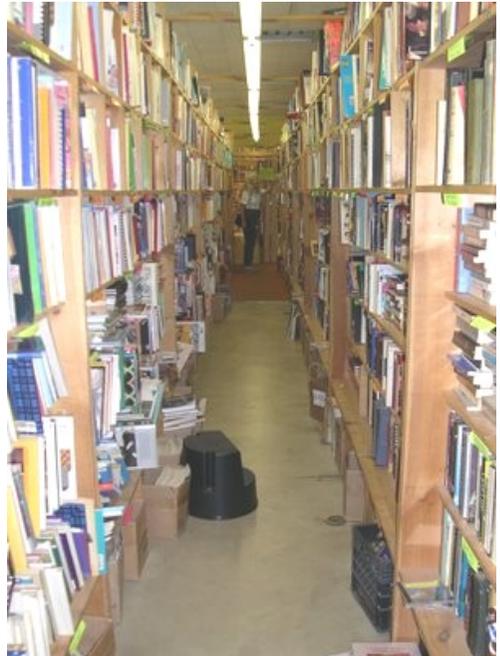
Seeing that I was so down while I was atop that ladder, to cheer me up Ginny bought me a dozen jelly donuts on one of her trips to the hardware store.

I don't know what preachers might make of it, but I felt closer to God eating a jelly donut than I did while up on top of a ten-foot ladder.

Tuesday, February 19, 2008
By Its Cover

Monday Ginny and I carried 200 books in four boxes to Chamblain's Book Mine, a prominent Jacksonville used book store, to trade in for credit.

This is part of our clean-the-house-and-reduce-clutter campaign. After all, having eleven bookcases in this tiny home crowds us a bit; and when we paint the bedroom, we're going to have to move all those boxes of books under the bed somewhere.



Chamblain's contains a massive collection of used books. It spreads floor-to-ceiling

through three buildings in a labyrinth of aisles. Here's a 2006 photo I snapped of Ginny browsing there for books:

For years the store sported a sign in the window:

WE SPECIALIZE IN OLD, RARE, UNUSUAL, OUT-OF-PRINT AND NON-EXISTENT BOOKS!

Every book lover understands that happy sign perfectly.

Years ago, I was Chamblain's first customer. Mr. Chamblain bought the store from its Shelby Street location and moved it, under his own name, to Hershel Street. Late one night as I drove by I noticed him inside unpacking and getting ready for the grand opening of the store. He had the front door propped open as he unloaded boxes of books so I walked in and bought a five volume set of Samuel Pepys' Diary — Mr. Chamblain's first sale after he bought the business. That was over 25 years ago and although the location has moved again, I've been coveting items in his collection ever since. Our children still shop at Chamblain's often.

Culling my own library pains me. I must abandon my mind-set as an archivist and keep only those books I actually read or use for research. I mean, honestly, will I ever read that 1901 biography of President William McKinley even though it was published just weeks after his assassination?

No. It had to go.

But nothing points out my grasping materialism more than having to cull a book from my collection. I always think of some reason to hold tight to every volume.

Yesterday, customers thronged the bookstore. When we arrived, we felt lucky to find a parking space far from the door.

I lugged our boxes of books to the desk to be evaluated for trade-in credit. Over 20 customers had placed their own boxes and bags of books at the desk ahead of me.

While Ginny browsed deep in the stacks, I watched Scott, the young man who processed these incoming books to see whether or not to buy them for the store.

He worked like a fury!

More and more customers with armloads of books came in and stacked their treasures around him. I timed him as he evaluated each book and decided whether to accept or reject it.

As close as I could tell, he processed at least 40 books per minute!

I do not know the exact criteria he used, but he looked at condition, cover, wear, subject matter, author, re-sale value, and a host of other factors, then decided about each book. He rejected outright more books than he accepted.

At a rate of 40+ books per minute!

He's done this for years and his experience makes him efficient.

Yet, it saddens me to compare that man's speed in evaluating books with the fact that for my own books sometimes I have spent days tracing just the right fact, just the right word to include in the books I write...

I did include one book I'd written in the stack and I watched Scott reject it at a glance — justly so, it was not suitable for his shelves.

But that saddened me nonetheless.

A funny incident:

One book I culled from my own shelves was a copy of *The Bible And The New York Times* by Fleming Rutledge.

Scott accepted that one.

But, just as he did, Ginny appeared beside me from out of the stacks excited because she'd found a copy of a book she was sure I wanted, it was a copy of *The Bible And The New York Times* by Fleming Rutledge!

She was buying the same book I was trading in!

Scott got a good laugh at our confusion and gave me back my copy of Rutledge. We didn't have to buy that same book again.

Oh well, as the Scripture says, "Of the making of many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh".

How true.

Thursday, February 21, 2008
If I Have Kissed My Hand...

Wednesday I pruned bushes in our yard.

In the evening, Ginny and I watched the total eclipse of the moon; the tv weatherman says there will not be another lunar eclipse till the year 2010.

Here's a photo I snapped from our backyard garden:



Seeing such beauty reminded me of two things: a private joke and a thought from Scripture.

Lone ago when we were courting, at times I'd take Ginny's dainty hand in mine, lift it to my lips, then kiss the back of my own hand.

And I'd say, "What in the world to those French guys get out of this"?

She would giggle like a girl.

She still does when I do that.

I suppose you'd have to be us to understand.

This lunar eclipse also reminded me of the words of the Patriarch Job when he told God that he had never kissed his hand to the moon. (Job 31:26-27)

"If I beheld... the moon walking in brightness, and my heart hath been secretly enticed, or my mouth hath kissed my hand: This also were an iniquity to be punished by the Judge," Job said.

He's saying that the beauty and majesty of nature, of God's creation, can entice us to worship the created thing more than the Creator. The kissing of the hand to the moon appears to be an ancient act of homage or worship.

I'm not sure if the ancient pagan worshipers kissed the back of their hands or if they sort of blew the moon a kiss, but they acknowledged the created thing, while neglecting the Creator of all things.

Job mentions kissing the hand to the moon in the middle of a laundry list of evil things:

"If my step hath turned out of the way... If I have withheld the poor from their desire... If I have seen any perish for want of clothing... If I have lifted up my hand against the fatherless... If I have made gold my hope... (If I kissed my hand to the moon)... If I covered my transgressions..."

Those were evil iniquities Job said were worthy of being punished by the Judge.

I don't know of anyone in modern times who kisses his hand to the moon (there may be some but I've never run across any) but the other sins on Job's list beset us even today.

If we don't hold God in highest esteem, then we hold something less than God in highest esteem.

My grandmother believed that sleeping in moonlight caused mental illness. She made sure the curtains were drawn tight on moonlit nights; she said that crazy people were called lunatics because of what the moon did to them.

Made sense to her.

Sometimes I wonder if we all haven't been sleeping in the moonlight.

Saint Paul said, "When they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful, but became vain in their imaginations... (They) changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image... (They) changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen".

Paul sees this corruption as a deliberate act; I'm not so sure about that.

I wonder if we see beauty in nature then slip into regarding the visible more than the Invisible. It's an easy transferring to make. As when Job speaks of making gold our hope, we can so enjoy the blessing that we lose sight of the One who gives that blessing.

And we lose sight of ourselves.

The Psalmist David said, "O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! Who had set thy glory above the heavens... When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained: What is man that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that thou visitest him?... O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!"



A Historic Note For The Kid In The Attic:

In the Pacific Ocean during Wednesday night's lunar eclipse, the *USS Lake Erie*, an Aegis-class cruiser, fired a three-stage SM-3 missile shooting down a rogue US satellite in space.

The satellite, known as *USA-193*, was built by Lockheed Martin Corp. and failed shortly after launch in December 2006. In addition to its high-tech payload, it contains about 1,000 pounds of frozen hydrazine, a hazardous propellant stored in a metal tank.

Some experts have compared the task of hitting the satellite to hitting a bullet with a bullet about 150 miles above Earth.

The satellite, the size of a small bus, was speeding through space at 18,000 mph, about twice as fast as the test missiles previously targeted. "It's moving at roughly 300 miles a minute, and so you need to know where it's going to hit. And if you're off by just a minute on that, that's 300 miles off," said Ivan Oelrich, vice president for strategic security programs at the Federation of American Scientists.

A Pentagon spokesman, Bryan Whitman, dismissed suggestions that the operation had been designed to test the nation's missile defense systems or antisatellite capabilities or that the effort had been to destroy secret intelligence equipment.

"This is about reducing the risk to human life on Earth, nothing more," Mr. Whitman said.

Yeah. Sure.

A standard military tactic since year one is "Always take the high ground". That way your enemy has to attack uphill while you drop rocks on his head.



AP Photo: US Navy Standard Missile-3 (SM-3), used to shoot down the falling satellite, is launched as part of a test, 6 Nov 2007

Friday, February 22, 2008
A Dirty Old Man Stumbles On

I never swore a vow of poverty.

Might as well have, the way things worked out.

I'm poor in everything but love and books. That's a pretty good deal. Bill Gates has his life and I have mine. And, in the last analysis, I would not trade places with the poor guy.

But... If I had more material, I'd definitely be a materialist.

But, since I don't, I'm not.

What got me thinking along these lines Thursday is that I culled two more boxes of books from the shelves of my eleven bookcases, and it surprised me how stingy I feel about my books. I cling to them. I treasure them. I regret having to cull a single one.

With my mind-set, I'll need to be buried in an oversized coffin lined with books.

As the bumper sticker says, The Man With The Most Toys When He Dies, Wins!

My friend Barbara treated me to lunch yesterday; she'd come over bringing a sweater she'd bought for Ginny. As we drove away from the house we saw the postman in the distance and chased him down to pick up an expected delivery of two more books — sample copies of my latest book, *A Dirty Old Man Stumbles On: John Cowart's 2007 Diary*.

Yes, I culled two boxes of old books from my shelves, and added two new copies of a book I'd written myself.

Here's a copy of the refurbished book cover:

A Dirty Old Man Stumbles On



John Cowart's 2007 Diary

Yes, 498 pages all about ME!

And I lead such a fascinating life.

Diary index entries include:

- ▣ Romance In Olden Days
- ▣ Pantyhose
- ▣ Miraculously Obvious
- ▣ Pleasures For Evermore
- ▣ Stacking Eggs
- ▣ The Ugliest Virgin
- ▣ Inspiration For Digging Ditches

□ Knowing When To Quit

Which I don't.

Anyhow, I'm happy that my book turned out so well. I'm really pleased with it. That's one volume I don't plan to cull. After all, it's about me.

I hope book buyers find it as enthralling as I do and that it sells millions of copies. (it's available at www.bluefishbooks.info — Hint. Hint).

But, back to materialism, Jesus once told a rich young ruler to sell all that he owned, give the money to the poor, and to follow Him.

Some Christians believe this is a specific instruction to one specific individual; others believe that it's a blanket instruction to all dedicated Christians.

I think that people who have no commitment to Christ at all, and people who have a soul-deep commitment to Him above all else — both groups have an easier time getting along in life than us in-betweeners.

Those of us who vacillate — like say a guy who want to follow Christ but at the same time wants to hold on tooth and claw to his book collection — we are the ones whose lives and minds churn like beach sand in sea waves.

In their calls to commitment, preachers politely tell us we need to paint or get off the ladder (if you know what I mean).

Be for Christ or oppose Him outright.

It is the lukewarm that makes God want to puke.

So, I culled two full boxes of books from my eleven bookcases.

Won't Jesus be just tickled pink with me today?

Monday, February 25, 2008

Quick Notes

I'm pressure washing the house in preparation for painting. Hardly time to sit down at my computer recently.

My daughter Eve managed to post some of her wedding photographs; they can be found at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/24065865@N07/> The wedding and reception were held aboard a cruise ship but there's not a single photo of the boat. That strikes me as so strange.

Friday during breakfast at Dave's Diner, some young girls were flirting with a young man there. When he teased them about how they should be in high school, one girl informed him that they did not need to attend classes because, she said, "Me and her graduated last year".

And all last week the Duval County School Board debated hotly about how to teach either evolution or creationism in local high schools. Er, maybe they should teach English?

Also, while Dr. Woody froze a number of skin cancers on my arms, he examined a suspicious place between my shoulders.

The good doctor determined that the bothersome area is not another cancer but a fungus caused by being around a cat!

Now, who do I know that owns a cat?

Tuesday, February 26, 2008

Pressure Washing With Jesus

An approaching cold front compels me to finish pressure washing the house as soon as possible. An abrupt drop from near 80 degrees into the 30s threatens to generate violent weather this evening.

The job of pressure washing the house in preparation for painting resembles the job of parachuting from an airplane, once you start, you're committed for the whole trip down.

Wish I hadn't started in the first place, but since I have, I need to see the job through to the bitter end.

I'm engaged in the mindless task of running the pressure nozzle back and forth, back and forth,

blasting one board at a time, trying to cover each one evenly.

The high-pressure jet of water peels dirt, algae and old paint from the deck and walls; it will also peel skin.

Care to guess how I found that out?

So I need to pay attention to what I'm doing and the noise of the motor chugging along building pressure precludes all thought.

Like an automaton I sway back and forth, spraying and avoiding getting sprayed. No thought involved. No prayers uttered. No plans made.

Where is Jesus on days like this?

"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee," Isaiah said.

But my mind is not stayed on anything but layers of grime, spider webs, wasp nests, splashback and tangled hoses.

What part does the Lord God play in the rote?

One of the apocryphal gospels quotes Jesus as saying, "When thou hewest the firewood, I am there. When thou drawest water from the well, I am there. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them".

In some religious homes, I've seen a wall plaque that says, "Christ is the head of this house, the unseen guest at every meal, the silent listener to every conversation".

Over the noise of the pressure washer motor, if I think at all, I think about naked ladies I've seen on the internet; but mostly my mind dwells on horrible mistakes I've made in the past, people I've offended, sins I've enjoyed but regret, opportunities I've flubbed, remorse I deserve.

And I despair.

Yet as I see cleansing water blast away grime, I cling to the phrase of Scripture where God says we are accepted in the Beloved. Welcomed by the Father

because we are friends of His Son. And the worthiness of Jesus outweighs every stupid, petty, wicked thing I've ever done.

Yes, even that.

So I spray away roach eggs latched deep in crevices. And I knock wasp nests out from behind the light fixtures.

And I get soaked in splashback and my glasses get fogged and my hair gets tangled ...

And in the rote of this mindless day, I walk with God.

———

Monday night in the grocery store parking lot I got played for a patsy.

Again.

Ginny says I walk around with a bright neon sign above my head. A giant red arrow points to me flashing the message:

SUCKER! SUCKER! SUCKER!

Every bum, wineo, homeless person, crazy, scam artist, and needy soul in Jacksonville zeros in on me when they see that flashing sign and hit me up for money.

But that's ok.

I have plenty of money to give away; my wife works.

Ginny and I get accosted by poor people so often that I make a habit of carrying a couple of dollars, enough for a burger, fries and a coke, in a separate pocket away from our own spending money. That way I don't have to fumble with my wallet when accosted but have a ready amount in reserve to give. (Greedy folks have been known to grab a person's whole billfold or purse as the donor fumbled for loose change to give).

Mostly when I'm on the street, I just try to look belligerent so poor people will be intimidated and not

ask me for anything — that's what Jesus would do, isn't it?

Anyhow, last night I successfully avoided two homeless guys who ensconce themselves at either end of the long bench the store has outside for customers. For ages these guys have systematically panhandled shoppers.

They are regular fixtures and I know to avoid them.

But later, as Ginny and I loaded our week's groceries in the back of the car, a pickup truck pulled up behind us and a young woman began her patter from the driver's seat.

Husband beat me and stole my purse. Need to pick up my little girl. Have a place waiting at the shelter. Churches won't help. Cops no good. Running on fumes. Need gas money.

I've heard such tales dozens of times before.

A systematic scam?

Or a genuine need?

As I listened to the woman's tale of woe, Ginny finished loading our groceries. She later told me that she was praying that I'd give this woman exactly what was really needed. No more. No less.

I reviewed my options: Send her packing. Give her the few reserve bills I keep in a separate part of my wallet for just such appeals. Give her the money I'd brought along to buy supper out for our own dinner.

Suspecting this was just another scam, I nevertheless shelled out a few shekels. Feeling like a fool while I did it. What if this woman's need was real?

We Christians can afford to be taken in by a scam; we can not afford to neglect God's poor.

So I gave.

But I gave grudgingly.

Ginny said she'd prayed that I'd do just the right thing. She said, "If you'd given her nothing or if you'd

have given her all we had, it would have been the right thing. We are guided in these matters”.

Yes, we are.

But I forget that.

Thursday, February 28, 2008

Instead Of Painting

Well, I finished pressure washing our house. Painting the walls comes next. Ginny and I plan to buy the paint tonight and begin painting this weekend.

Whoopee. Am I looking forward to that.

In the mean time, I spent Wednesday morning challenging my friend Wes to translate the Bible into modern English.

He balked.

He says the King James Version is all the translation anybody needs; I countered by asking why he reads the Bible in the original Greek himself if the 1611 translation is adequate.

What brought this discussion on is that Wes recently acquired a book which pulls his chain. He's so thrilled that the University of Michigan Digital Library had reprinted the 1894 edition of Frederick Henry Ambrose Scrivener's **A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament, Vol. I and Vol. II**. A reproduction of the text can be found at http://www.ccel.org/ccel/scrivener/ntcrit1/Page_Index.html

It tickled Wes to show me Scrivener's comparison of the Complutensian Polyglott with the Textus Receptus, the Greek text on which the King James Version of the Bible is based.

The Complutensian Polyglott was a six volume set first published in 1514. It contains columns filled with the most ancient Bible texts in Hebrew, Vulgate, Aramaic (Targum Onkelos), and Septuagint versions.

Here's a sample of what that Complutensian Polyglott looks like:

The downside of this conversation with Wes results in my feeling guilty about how little of God's Word I actually spend time reading.

I dabble at Scripture.

I know no Greek, Hebrew, Latin or any other related language but that's no excuse. Even though some Bible scholars have actually died to make the Scripture available to me, I neglect study or even casual reading on most days.

PS: If anyone really wants to buy a copy of the Complutensian Polyglott it can be found at <http://www.lulu.com/tigran> . Better hurry and get yours today before they sell out.

Me, I think I'll pass.

I have a house to paint.

MARCH

Saturday, March 01, 2008

Her Next Husband

Friday as I prepared our house for painting, Jennifer, Barbara and Rick came over for a visit. Also an e-mail appeared in my inbox from a gentleman in another country.

He's concerned about his wife's next husband.

Here are some excerpts from his letter along with my reply:

John, During the early hours of this day I undertook to enhance my young Christian wife's understanding. My question for this present occasion was: "M., I am concerned that after I have left you to be with the Lord that you will know and practice Colossians 2:8. Tell me now how can you tell the difference between a man who professes to be a Christian but in reality is a philosopher?"

The passage he refers to (Colossians 2:8-10) says, "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the God head bodily. And ye are complete in Him, which is the head of all principality and power".

She read and carefully studied Colossians 2:8 in both her native tongue and her Authorized Version English Bible. I worked at my desk and awaited her response. In a short while she said "I would not know how to tell the difference between a philosopher and a true preacher of the Word."

He told her to read the website of a noted evangelical preacher's "Notes On Hell".

After some thirty or forty minutes my wife turned and said that he has written about "God's grace", "punishment" and "the lost in hell" and added "I hear television and radio preachers talking about his use of 'rebellion' also. Aren't those terms biblical?"

I answered her with a conditional affirmative, "Yes, those words you have quoted from his writings are Christian concepts yet it is his overall philosophical deviation from the force and meaning of the original *autographa* - the Hebrew and the Koine Greek Scriptures - which raises my eyebrows."

My wife is highly literate in both of her daily languages' grammar but the syntax of (the preacher's) use of her noticed terms did not seem to relate to the admonition of the Apostle Paul.

She inquired, "Would you please write this up and send it to John Cowart and others and ask him to make comment also for me?"

I told her that this is a good suggestion and that I would ask the Christian brothers to consider and return comment on what she had excerpted... in the light of the Apostle Paul's warning in Colossians 2:8.

"Great!", she said and added "For you yourself have often said that wisdom wouldn't die with you!"

My reply:

Dear M & K,

I'm busy painting our house so my answer needs to be short and quick.

Your concern for M.'s well-being after your death is commendable.

I too am married to a woman much younger than I am. And since I have prostate cancer, in the natural run of things, she will out live me. As loving husbands it behooves us to provide for our wives as well as possible.

And you and I are doing such acts of love right now.

In your case, preparing her intellectually; in my case painting the house so Ginny will not have such worries after my own death.

However, her choice of a next husband is none of my business.

In Matthew 22, some men asked Jesus about a woman who married in turn seven brothers who died one after the other. The questioners wanted to know whose property she would be in the resurrection.

Jesus rebuked them affirming that she was not anyone's property. "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage". They are as free as the angels.

Saint Paul said, "The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord" (II Corinthians 7:39).

Ginny and I are to remain faithful to each other so long as we live but once I'm dead, even though I'm a control freak, she's free to marry philosopher or football player.

That's her choice.

Now the important thing for my peace of mind about such matters is found in the very passage you refer to, Col. 2:10: "Ye are complete in Him".

No, wisdom does not die with you or me.

Our wives also have the spirit of Christ and are complete in Him.

They must have been divinely guided to marry us in the first place, so they can rely on that same guidance to lead them in choosing an even better husband next time.

You can relax. M. has already proven herself to be a woman of exquisite taste and superior good judgment — she married you didn't she!

As to the famous preacher you mention: Sorry, but I've never heard of the man before.

As to the difference between a worldly philosopher and a true Christian?

“Hereby know ye the spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is the spirit of antichrist” (1 John 4:2-3).

As to your concerns about Heaven and Hell:

Our family dog Sheba lived with us for 17 years.

If you were to take me into a huge hotel and hide me behind any closed door there, Sheba could find me.

She would not know anything else about what lay behind the closed door, she would not know if it were a bathroom or a ball room.

All she would know or care about is that her beloved master stood behind that door.

And when that door opened she would jump on me and lick my face.

What lies behind the closed door of death?

What is Heaven like? What is Hell like?

Who cares?

The Beloved Master stands behind that door.

What else matters?

If you're interested in my further thoughts on this matter, you may enjoy reading a newspaper column I wrote, *The Party At The End Of The World*.

Now, I have a house to paint.

Surely there are easier ways to love Ginny than this.

Maybe we ought to buy these women candy and flowers.

Monday, March 03, 2008
Guess How We Spent Our Weekend



On Top of our world



Higher than the giraffe's head.



We painted the house to match Ginny's hair.



Fashion model for house painting.

Tuesday, March 04, 2008

Pizza & Tee Shirts

After I'd spent the day housepainting (got about a third of the place done now) Monday night my son Donald and his wife Helen invited us to join them for dinner at Moon River Pizza.

This place serves a great salad and what we consider the best pizza in Jacksonville. They cater to a younger crowd. By that I mean, I look around and wonder what these people do during daylight hours.

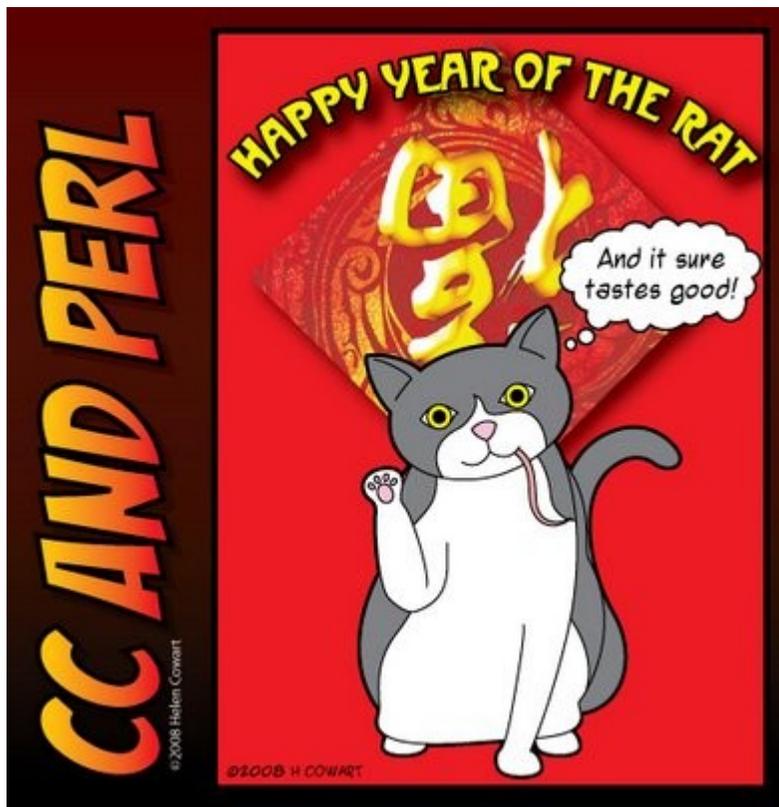
Our conversation centered around poverty (their income's dropped to half what it was last year) and computers and art and gas prices. Ginny and Helen say my idea of executing oil company executives for treason is undemocratic — but I'll bet it would work.

And we talked about tee shirts.

Helen runs a tee shirt business and she's busy silk screening a huge order of shirts for a marching band. She also designs shirts and a comic strip featuring CC & Perl, two of her five cats.

The shirts can be found at <http://www.cafepress.com/ccandperl> ;her comic strips are at http://www.ccandperl.com/?page_id=5

Here is a shirt design Helen created to celebrate Chinese New Year last month:



As we talked about tee shirts, a group of young people entered the restaurant. None of the guys sported orange or green spiked hair and the girls' breasts were actually all the way inside their halter tops so I knew right off that they didn't look like Moon River Pizza regulars.

But as they approached the counter to order, I noticed one young man's tee shirt. It was gray with huge block letters saying:

I
**DON'T
BELIEVE
IN GOD**

How strange, I thought, that someone would need to proclaim something like that. Perhaps it's merely youthful defiance. He and the crowd he was with definitely fell into that age category more likely to die from traffic accidents than from any other cause.

I wondered if he sported that slogan to generate conversation. Maybe it was a challenge for Christians to witness to him. Maybe it was an invitation to argue.

(Once in Wal-Mart I saw a guy wearing a black shirt on which white letters proclaimed: **The Voices In My Head Tell Me To Kill People**. That shirt was not an invitation to conversation).

Perhaps the young man ordering pizza liked to wear support for his faith — or lack thereof — by the slogan on his chest, the way some people feel so unsure of their own faith that they need bumper stickers to affirm it.

How would anybody know I'm a Christian if I don't wear a lapel pin or a bumper sticker. Would they ever guess it from the way I act?.

I've noticed that the deeper a person's commitment is to Christ, the less they feel compelled to make public displays of it or to sport religious symbols. Their faith is so rock solid that it needs no external self-affirmations.

The conformation of their belief is internal. They have nothing to prove to themselves. They do not NEED for me to know their beliefs. My confirmation is unnecessary.

Maybe I'm reading too much into seeing the young man's tee shirt.--- Got tee shirts on the brain.

Here's why:

Saturday for house painting, Ginny wore my favorite tee shirt so she would not get paint on her lovely skin. My favorite tee shirt, so faded that you can't read the design on the chest any more, the one

with holes from pipe ashes burned in it, the one with the frayed collar, the one with the seams tattered to ribbons.

My favorite tee shirt.

She says she's sick of seeing me in that rag. She refuses to ever put it in the washing machine again. She says she's going to throw it in the garbage when she's finished painting.

Don't tell her, but I'll fish it out again and keep right on wearing it.

My shirt is an outward sign of my inward condition.

Thursday, March 06, 2008

The Ghost At My Shoulder

First, the happy news:



Yes, at a state-wide kick-off meeting Wednesday Ginny won the coveted Stuffed Celery Award.

She works with a team of people who feed about 200,000 hungry children a year. This semi-charitable group held an organizational meeting yesterday and Ginny won this token of recognition for her superior knowledge of efficient procedures.

Yaah! Ginny

Then, on the other hand, there's me.

Every time I make a mistake, I mentally kick the shit out of myself. I call myself vile names and berate myself unmercifully. Every mistake I make churns up a thousand other mistakes from my past. In a flash, 68 years worth of mistakes, faux pas, blunders,

missed opportunities, sins, stupidities, failures — all burst forth with their accompanying pain as though they happened just an hour ago.

I rage and curse and accuse myself. And as one 16th Century Puritan said, “I dislike my self right well”.

Today this perverse talent of mine exercised itself to the extreme.

I’m painting our house.

It’s light gray with dark charcoal trim.

The eaves are boxed with white soffit.

I use a thin metal masking board so the lines between trim and walls and soffit are sharp and crisp...

Most of the time.

But since my hands shake after a few hours work, I began to bleed paint from one color to another. When I tried to correct my mistake with a damp rag, I smeared the paint even worse.

And I flew into a rage at me.

I am unbelievably harsh on myself.

About this time a helpful neighbor came over to tell me what I was doing wrong and how I should have done it.

Gee, thanks.

I happened to be painting an area over where we store the garbage cans when he approached. For a while he watched me trying to delineate sharp crisp lines in that cramped area then he said, “John, why take so much trouble back there? Who’s to see”?

“My mother,” I snapped immediately without thinking.

I realized I was right.

I’ve been mad at me for offending my mother even though she’s been dead and buried for more than twenty years.!

Once I painted her home — actually, I refurbished the whole place from plumbing to window screens. I

painted with meticulous care, just as I've been doing on my home today, because I knew she was a perfectionist. Yet, I heard her complain to her sister, "Johnny's out there just slopping paint around".

Mother, God rest her, was a fault finder.

In fact, she never found anything else.

Once I won a huge sterling silver loving cup with my name engraved in a scroll between the handles. My parents had not been at the awards banquet and when I proudly brought the 18-inch high trophy into the house, my mother accused me of stealing it.

She would not believe that I could have won such a thing till she saw what the jeweler had engraved.

Even then she viewed it with suspicion.

Kind of soured me on awards — not that I've won all that many of them.

Like a fool, I proudly carried my first published article to show her.

Before reading it, she said, "Johnny, you'd better not have written anything in there to make me ashamed".

But she was ashamed.

The one refrain I heard a thousand thousand times while growing up was, "Johnny, I'm so disappointed in you".

Anyhow, I try to paint exact sharp, crisp lines, and I curse and berate myself when I smear paint or even spill a drop. I feel as though my mother is watching over my shoulder, standing there accusing me of slovenliness.

Immediately when I realized that I wanted the paint lines in the garbage can storage area to be perfect, I then worried about what I may have done to my own children, how I may have warped them through lack of praise, how I may have belittled their achievements, how I may have spoiled their joy and squelched their spirits.

That grieves me.

I never meant harm.

I'm just passing it on.

I'm sorry.

However, I can think of one hopeful note in all this mental regurgitating.

In Psalm 27:10, King David says, "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up".

And here is a verse I can identify with; one of my teenaged cousins had a baby and she threw it in a dumpster behind the old Pic'nSave on Eighth Street. A store employee heard the baby cry and fished it out.

Fuel for much family gossip.

But, the promise God Himself makes in Isaiah 49:15 says:

Can a woman forget her sucking child —

That she should not have compassion

On the son of her womb?

Yea, they may forget..

Yet, will I not forget thee.

Bad parents beget bad parents. From generation to generation we pass on the unconscious mind-set we have seen acted out in our predecessors.

That's not necessarily a bad thing.

My touch of creativity, which I see displayed also in my children, I saw first in my mother's handicrafts.

Yet, when it all does go haywire, when the ghost of an accusing parent stands over my shoulder while I paint above the garbage cans, when I'm harder on myself than any responsible adult would ever be on a child, when the haunts and taunts of 60 years ago still plague me and make me hate myself, Even then, the Lord will take me up.

Even then, Jesus loves.

Me.

It's hard for me to add that last word. I'm one of those miserable souls who mentally amend Scripture. You know, "The Lord is the Shepherd of everyone except John Cowart... For God so loved the world, except for John Cowart, that He gave His only begotten Son..."

Yes, even though I'm a Christian, that's the way I really feel. For me it is an act of raw faith to put aside my background and gut feelings to root-believe God's word that in spite of my self-image and the ghost continually at my shoulder that Jesus loves me.

Even me.

And I don't even have to color inside the lines.

Friday, March 07, 2008

On My Knees



I spent Thursday on my knees.

No, not praying.

I crawled around the outside walls of our house on my knees with a trowel and a bucket dabbing thick black tar on the lower edges of wall boards near the

ground. This tar coating provides a sealant so that when rain water splashes back from the ground, it should not seep up underneath the edges of the wood causing wood rot.

Remember the Southern folk tale of Br'er Rabbit and the Tar Baby?

The Tar Baby — that's me.

Tar sticks.

Because some carpenter of the 1950s when our house was built nailed unpainted lumber within an eighth of an inch from the bare dirt, to get the sealant up underneath behind the wood, I had to crawl on my knees, and to see what I was doing, I had to press my ear to the ground and peek...

Tar dribbles.

Globs of tar stuck in my hair, beneath my fingernails, on my hands, on my shoes...What's that spot on my glasses?

Did you know tar tastes salty?

Years ago Ginny and I visited the La Brea Tar Pits where Pleistocene animals got stuck in the tar and their fossil bones are still there.

Years from now, when paleontologists excavate the Jacksonville Tar Pits they will find this big lump and exclaim, "We didn't know they were so fat and ugly"!

Yes, I can see a museum exhibit in my future.

I want to type more about the spiritual implications of being stuck in tar, but a lightening storm with tornado threats approaches and I need to shut down my computer.

Besides that, for some reason my fingers keep sticking to the keyboard.

Saturday, March 08, 2008
Some Spiritual Implications Of Tar

This continues yesterday's diary entry:

Lightening strikes and tornado alerts forced me to shut down my computer Friday. During the storm I huddled in a hallway sipping hot tea, smoking my pipe, eating peppermint sticks, and reading a book on the archeology of London — a great way to weather the storm.

Weather authorities say between six and ten tornados raged across north Florida. Many homes were damaged and two people killed in Lake City a few miles west of here.

Between two and four in the afternoon, using the cover of the storm, a thief broke into my next door neighbor's home and stole some stuff. I did not see or hear a thing so I could be of no help at all to the police.

When the storm broke, I'd been blogging about my adventures with tar and I was just getting ready to write a transition about the spiritual implications I find about tar.

So here goes.

Three things strike me about getting stuck in tar:

First, thank God tar is the only thing I'm stuck in. All around me I see folks mired in sticky stuff and struggling like that mastodon in the La Brea Tar Pits. Stuck in dead-end jobs. Stuck in unhealthy relationships. Stuck with bills. Stuck in life.

All I have to complain about is a bit of tar in my hair.

While I painted Thursday, Warren, a concerned neighbor, came over to tell me about an 80+ year old man down the street. The bank is foreclosing on the old man's home. He has a deadline to be out of the place where he has lived for many, many years.

Why?

I thought his home was paid for.

It was.

But then his grown son wanted cash to start a trucking business, the old man took out an adjustable rate mortgage on his home to give money to the son,

the son defaulted, the bank is foreclosing and putting the old man on the street.

The son moved to another state.

Warren asked what we and our neighborhood watch group can do to help. We discussed this strategy and that, including taking up a collection around the neighborhood (A few years ago that worked to keep a family of renters down the block from being evicted). We began to devise a plan to help the old man.

But when Warren went down to talk about it, the old man turned down any help. He's so sick of the whole mess he's ready to give up his house and move to an apartment across town. He's just weary and wants to get away.

He feels stuck in his situation.

The tv news talks all the time about America's mortgage crisis where thousands and thousands of people are losing their homes daily, but this is the first time that I know of that it has stricken anyone in our immediate neighborhood.

What does that have to do with tar?

While Warren told me about the old man's problem, he watched me work. "What you should have done, John," he said, explaining about undercoating.

He gave me a bucked of tar.

Before I even started painting, I should have coated under the lower boards with tar.

But I didn't.

So I had to go back and start from scratch again..

I'd jumped right in with cosmetic painting to pretty things up, while neglecting the basic cause of our wood rot.

That's something I do all the time spiritually.

I want to look good.

I don't want to fix basic problems.

Jesus speaks of tombs filled with putrefying flesh breeding maggots — but with pretty whitewashed walls on the outside.

Is that what I'm doing with my life?

Do I really want to live so hypocritically?

The New Testament Letter To the Hebrews speaks to me saying, John Cowart, "For when the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God..."

Instead of prettying things up, I need to go back to the foot of the Cross, to remember the foundational things of faith.

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

Such facts seal the wood rot of my soul.

No need to whitewash myself till the tar of God has been applied.



This brings me to the testimony of Saint Patrick of Ireland; there was a man who knew all about being stuck.

As I crawled on hands and knees in the dirt around my house applying tar to the baseboards I've been remembering that every year in early March I begin to get requests from teachers and students about information on St. Patrick's Day, March 17th.

Back in 1979 I wrote a magazine article profile of St. Patrick; it's been reprinted numerous times and now forms a chapter in my book *Strangers On The Earth*.

As I wallowed in tar, I remembered a passage from my own book:

Patrick's sense of gratitude to God for creating and saving him permeates his writings. "I was an illiterate slave, as ignorant as one who neglects to provide for his future. And I am certain of this: that although I was as a dumb stone lying squashed in the mire, the Mighty and Merciful God came, dug me out and set me on top of the wall. Therefore, I praise Him and ought to render Him something for His wonderful benefits to me both now and in eternity," he wrote.

In my working on my house and thinking about Patrick, I equated *mire* with *tar*.

So I get my hands and hair and glasses and arms a little dirty, sticky and gooey. So I learn the taste of tar. So I wallow like a mastodon stuck in a tar pit. So I have to bathe in paint thinner to get cleaned up physically and have to go back to the very first principles spiritually.

No big deal.

My situation is not hopeless.

I'm not stuck.

Among other things, the blood of Christ acts as a great paint thinner.

Monday, March 10, 2008
Quick Weekend Notes

During the violent storm Friday, a thief broke into our next-door neighbor's home and stole some stuff.

Then on Saturday, a cedar tree in that neighbor's front yard split and fell ripping out their electric, phone and tv cable lines as well as tearing some shingles off their roof. Tough weekend for our neighbors.

Saturday night Ginny used her superior mechanical skills to repair our DVD player which stopped working during an episode of Ginny's favorite program. She skinned her knuckles pounding the machine. We bought a new DVD Player on Sunday.

I printed and handed out some neighborhood watch flyers for Monday's meeting.

Over the weekend also Donald bought a motorcycle, and Helen bought a motor scooter which will scoot faster than 90 mph!

I got to try out Helen's scooter. --- Wheee!

Tuesday, March 11, 2008
The Last Trump

Years ago on returning from a trip to Israel, my friend Barbara White brought me a shophar — what the King James Bible refers to as a trumpet.



In ancient times, warriors sounded this musical instrument (made from the horn of a ram) to warn of approaching enemies, to sound battle charges, to call people to worship the Lord, to celebrate new moons, to herald the king, to make announcements — to tell everyone everywhere, “Pay Attention — You’ve Got Mail”.

The unique haunting sound of the Trumpet of the Lord certainly commands attention.

I remembered my shophar, (which I had stored away) yesterday when Barbara came over and took me to breakfast at Dave's Dinner.

Barbara is Bluefish Books' best selling author of her Along The Way series and we discussed some fan

feedback she got recently; two different sources used the same phrase about Barbara's books. Each said, "Reading this book set me free me from a heavy burden I've been carrying for years".

It's feedback like that that makes writing books worthwhile.

Barbara and I also discussed Ezekiel's experience in the valley of dry bones. The prophet preached to these crumbling relics and succeeded in bringing together flesh and tendons, but he still had a bunch of dead men before him. It was not until the Spirit of the Lord breathed on them that life appeared.

We talked about how we arrange and manipulate and finagle the dry things of our life circumstances to bring about the desired order, but until God breathes on our efforts, they remain dead, crumbling things.

We concluded that the essence of faith is the constant acknowledgement that, "The Lord, He is God. It is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves".

Every incident of faith tells me that He is God — and I'm not.

We also talked about small group dynamics; in her case a Bible study group, in mine, a neighborhood watch meeting which I chaired Monday night.

In our final meeting last Fall, the neighborhood watch suddenly, abruptly and unexpectedly elected me as this year's coordinator. Monday night's meeting was the first I was to chair and I felt extremely nervous about appearing before this group.

I carried along the shophar pictured above to talk about watchmen and warnings and the need for clear signals. We passed the shophar around the group as we planned our activities for the coming year.

Various people tried their hand at blowing the shophar.

Reminded me of the farting contests back when I was a Boy Scout.

But Jamie and Rick succeeded in blowing a blast on the shophar — much to the amusement and laughter of us all.

And I quoted the Scripture where Saint Paul said, “If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, then who shall arm himself for the day of battle”.

All this got our group off to a good start. Among anticipated events is for some of us to take training in Jacksonville’s Office of Emergency Management’s CERT program.

The initials stand for Civilian Emergency Response Teams. It’s based on the premise that in a major catastrophe (hurricane, tornado, terrorist attack, etc.) , each neighborhood may have to stand alone without outside help from three to ten days.

The CERT training would prepare us to rescue people trapped under debris, render first aid, fight fires, set up temporary morgues, etc.

Heavy stuff.

But practical.

As the high point of the Watch meeting, I told one of my great jokes!

(Did I hear my beloved Ginny moan?)

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".

Did I just hear somebody blow that shophar again?

Wednesday, March 12, 2008

Fun With Hamartiology

My friend Wes and I have remained good friends for so many years because we disagree about so many things.

We enjoy playfully butting heads over life, prayer, politics, practice, and theology. And on some level we regard each other with great love, respect and admiration — even though he's always wrong.

Yesterday he came over early and treated me to breakfast at Dave's Dinner (I ought to own stock in that place) where our conversation ranged from personal issues to global corporate corruption.

We returned to my house where we puffed our pipes and talked for another three hours.

I'm trying to convince Wes, who is a Greek geek, to translate the Bible into modern English; he resists saying the King James Bible is clear enough to be understood by anyone who wants to.

But mainly our conversation focused on sin.

Wes pointed out a phrase often found in Ezekiel and Jeremiah about how mankind sins to provoke God to wrath. If I understand him correctly, Wes feels sin is deliberate, active, and intentional. Hatred of God and rebellion against Him.

I think Wes gives mankind too much credit for thought beforehand.

I think we blunder into sin without thought more than as a result of deliberate action. We live in an atmosphere so sin-laden that we seldom realize that things are sin. We just see them as the way things are and the normal way things are done. We live no more aware of sin than a fish is aware of water.

Wes pointed out the Scripture in Ezekiel where God says to the prophet:

Hast thou seen this, O son of man?
Is it a light thing to the house of Judah
that they commit abominations which they
commit here?
For they have filled the land with violence,
and have returned to provoke Me to anger;
and lo, they put the branch to their nose.

At this point I veered away from the doctrine of sin to question the phrase "they put the branch to their nose". I have no idea what that means. On one hand, I think of the phrase, "Wake up and smell the roses" and on the other hand, I envision a dog sniffing out a bush to pee on. I'm not sure which way Ezekiel meant it when he said sinners put the branch to their nose.

After Wes and I discussed corporate sin (gas companies, mortgage lenders and CEO profits) we moved on to political sins.

This week New York governor Eliot Spitzer got caught paying \$5,500 to a prostitute. That's one wicked price to pay! Now many, including Wes, feel Spitzer should be put out of office for moral turpitude.

I contend that the man's sex life, while wrong as a sin against God and his wife, has no bearing on his

ability to govern and he should remain in office. After King David screwed Bath-Sheba, Uriah's wife, God still allowed him to govern and blessed him.

"Spoken like a true Clinton defender," Wes said.

Wes teases me about being a Democrat while he remains unenlightened.

After we disagreed about sin on global, corporate, and political levels, we talked about personal sin and personal temptations.

No reason to reveal the stuff Wes said, but we got a hardy laugh about a sin I'm struggling with at the moment — I want to steal an ashtray.

Yes, the lure of petty theft tempts me continually. Has all my life.

And even though I have a cabinet full of ashtrays, since I saw a unique one at a neighbor's home last week, I've been obsessed with ways I can steal it.

"But you haven't given in to that temptation," Wes said.

"Yes, but I still may. I'm trying to figure out how to steal it," I said.

Isn't that pathetic?

I don't need that ashtray. I have plenty of my own ashtrays. But I'm still lured by that one. I'd bet that if I were to ask, my neighbor would even give the thing to me, but I want to steal it without her knowing that I took it!

Isn't that pathetic?

Rebellion against God or unthinking stupidity. Either way sin makes little sense.

But soon our conversation turned to happier things; we left off talking about the nature of sin and began talking about personal redemption.

We talked about the magnificence of Christ in dying for the two of us personally and for people in general.

We talked about the wonderment we each feel at God's love.

We talked about how we often question the love of God as we see bitter life circumstances all around us daily.

Yes, God's love is not always evident, in fact it is often obscure or downright invisible, which makes His love all the more an object of splendor and wonder at those rare times we are aware of it.

This morning I came across a quote from the 19th Century British preacher Charles Spurgeon where he said, "We were mingled with the mire: we were as when some precious piece of gold falls into the sewer, and men gather out and carefully inspect a mass of abominable filth, and continue to stir and rake, and search among the heap until the treasure is found".

I think Wes and I agreed that the love of Christ resembles the Spurgeon quote. That for us the Lord God came down into the worst filthy mire of sin. He came of His own accord. We nailed Him down like a bug on a card and let Him wiggle there on naked display till He died. But the Lord of Life, by His resurrection, raises us up too.

No sin, even that one, is greater than God's love.

Whether we drifted thoughtlessly into sin or whether we deliberately provoked God, makes for an interesting conversation about hamartiology, but the greatness and splendor of God Almighty remains beyond words.

Beyond wonder.

Well, enough about Christian fellowship!

This week I've done nothing but enjoy food and conversations with Ginny, Donald, Helen, Maggie, Marlin, Jennifer, neighborhood watch folks, Officer Grant, Barbara, and Wes.

It's time for me to finish painting our house.

It would be a sin not to.

Friday, March 14, 2008

Preparations For Things To Come

I'm still painting.

Actually, I'm getting ready to paint.

Most of my work for the past two weeks has been preparing the walls of our house rather than actually applying paint to them.

The preparations to work consume more time than the actual work.

For instance, I've removed the rain gutters so I'll be able to paint the wood behind them. And, I've uprooted plants growing against the foundations so I can paint the tier of cinderblock at ground level; yesterday alone this last project generated eight garbage cans overflowing with old leaves and mulch and plant clippings.

As part of our home security system, years ago I planted vicious thorn bushes under each window. That's a great deterrent for would-be burglars — and for housepainters.

To prove it, scores of gnashes and slashes puncture my hands and forearms.

As I've worked, it occurs to me that before I lay hands on a paintbrush, most of the work of house painting involves preparation. And I look at my spiritual life of which I so often despair because I'm so shallow and waffle in my dedication to Christ.

I wonder if I expect too much of myself.

Maybe most of my life is preparation too.

No wonder God has spent the past 68 years preparing John Cowart.

Look at the raw material He has to work with!

His hands got scared too.

During off moments, for pleasure I've been reading a 696-page book, a survey of the complete Old Testament. The authors come across as mealy-mouthed about many things but they capture my

attention with the scope and grandeur of God's actions in history.

The Lord God is not distant.

In Him we live and move and have our very being.

The authors' evaluation of Samson particularly touched me the other day:

The story of Samson has been told and retold both in expurgated form and in lurid detail. What is to be made of a man who cavorted with Philistine women... The story becomes somewhat bizarre... By Samson's folly of stupidity, the secret of his great strength is discovered....The Philistines are able to bind him, put out his eyes, and imprison him... In a final burst of strength accompanied by a cry to Yahweh, Samson collapses a Philistine temple by pulling away the pillars that support the roof, killing a large number of Philistines.

The story of Samson certainly illustrates no New Testament ethic!

He was selfish and showed little or no control of his passions... a negative religious hero—an example of what God's charismatic individual should NOT be...

Yet, Samson trusts in Yahweh and is put in situations precisely for the purpose of punishing Philistines. In Hebrews, Samson is named as one of the great herons of faith (Heb.11:32ff).

The lesson of the Judges is, above all, that those who are dedicated to Yahweh can be used by Yahweh.

Elements in their lives may not be in keeping with the Lord's will.

Their methods may not stand up as exemplary...

Again and again God's servants fall short in their private and public thoughts and acts... Nonetheless, because of their dedication, Yahweh could use them to deliver Israel from its oppressors and to keep the tribal federation alive until Israel was ready for the next stage in His great redemptive purpose.

I find that statement comforting.

In spite of folly, stupidity, negatives, unrestrained passions, lack of control...

Samson didn't do anything right.

In every situation he goofed and had to bully his way out.

Yet, God found him usable and he's numbered as a hero of faith.

Yes indeed, I find that comforting.

A Historic Note For The Kid In The Attic:

Last night's tv news mentioned off hand an upturn in the number of flu cases in Jacksonville.

I find this intriguing because back in the 70s when I dug graves at Evergreen Cemetery, I stumbled across row upon row graves where whole families died within a day or two of each other during the Spanish Lady flu epidemic which swept the world at the end of World War I.

Then this morning I read a *New York Times* report that schools in Hong Kong, with out prior notice, abruptly closed yesterday because of a flu outbreak.

Over 500,000 students were dismissed.



"The abrupt closing of the schools, announced late Wednesday night, prompted considerable alarm," the *Times* said.

"As the closing of the schools reminded investors of the last lengthy school closing during the SARS outbreak, the Hong Kong stock market plunged 4.79 percent on Thursday, performing worse than any

other Asian stock market except India's as stock markets across Asia declined..."

In all 184 cases of flu have been reported in recent days.

The Hong Kong government assures everyone that this outbreak is seasonal flu — not Bird Flu.

The *Times* said, "Avian influenza is flu infection in birds. The disease is of concern to humans, who have no immunity against it. The virus that causes this infection in birds can mutate (change) to easily infect humans. Such mutation can start a deadly worldwide epidemic".

Some officials object to the sudden school closing saying there is no need. "The government is telling people not to panic, but on the other hand is acting in panic," one said.

"School systems in the United States sometimes close during seasonal influenza outbreaks, but typically wait until so many children and teachers have fallen ill that absenteeism is chronic and every child has already been exposed to the virus", said Dr. Arnold S. Monto, an epidemiologist at the University of Michigan.

Hong Kong may be acting responsibly in closing schools earlier, he said. Malik Peiris, a Hong Kong University microbiologist, said that three common strains of influenza viruses are now circulating in Hong Kong: A(H1N1), A(H3N2) and influenza B. But he said there was no sign of bird flu, which is A(H5N1).

"Is it H5N1? Definitely not," Mr. Peiris said.

Monday, March 17, 2008

Two Voices From The Blue

Over the weekend Ginny and I joined other volunteers from our MED Neighborhood Crime Watch group and hundreds of other volunteers from Jacksonville's Green It Up/Clean It Up Division in their 13th annual river Spring cleaning project.

That means we chopped weeds and picked up trash along our Adopt A Road stretch of Willow Branch Avenue.

For our efforts we each got a tee shirt with the River Celebration logo:



That's a picture of an otter, not one of our celebrated river rats (which are much larger).

I continued painting our house and fretting that I'm not getting any writing done.

Last night Ginny said that if I really wanted to write, I'd be writing.

She's right.

That's discouraging and I got to sulking about how my writing has no value.

What a downer.

Now, years ago I wrote a profile of St. Patrick of Ireland; it's a chapter in my book *Strangers On The Earth*. And at 4 this morning when I turned on my computer to start work, I received the following e-mail:

Dear John,

About 28 years ago, you wrote a great short story on St. Patrick in HIS magazine (IVP). And that article so fascinated me, that I wrote you and asked you if you would mind if I photocopied it and sent it to family, friends, fiends and even the local newspaper and you sent me a nice note saying something to the effect that you were flattered that anyone would care. Anyhow, I continue to send it out to my family, friends and have substituted fiends for neighbors.

In my early days, I went to St. Patrick's grade school and church and was an altar boy for the priests and bishop when he was in town (Walla Walla-if you can believe that). And during those 16 years, I (and everyone around me) was completely uninformed about St. Patrick even tho we had lots of statues of him, said prayers to him and even my Uncle was

named Patrick...and the whole bunch of us were clueless as to who he was.

It has not been since becoming a "protest-ant", that I learned from your article and others, what a godly, focused, grateful, caring, in-your-face, kind of guy he was. So again, thanks.

So Friday, I was trying to send my son , Colin ... a copy of your story and I got fouled up on the transfer of files. My daughter, Shannon, found your website and I have been cruising through it... And I am looking forward to hearing from you and reading some of your other works.

Thanks again for bringing St. Patrick out of obscurity ... and for bringing joy to many others. I have given the article to bartenders, saints, sinners, relatives, Greeks, Jews, even Catholics. And of course, I still enjoy the looks on the Irish faces when I tell them....he was English.. Ha, what irony God bestows on us..

Just about every year for the last 25+ years, our tradition on St. Paddy's Day is to cook up some potatoes in some fashion, maybe have corn beef and cabbage (tho the origins of all that is dubious) and read your article to family and friends gathered around the table. Thanks for being part of our family and our history.

Have a memorable St. Patrick's Day..... and may we participate in getting the "Good News" out to our "pagan Picts" compelled in love, just like Patrick.

Mike

That e-mail certainly gave me a lift.

From 28 years ago!

Maybe when I finish painting the house in another two or three days, I'll find spirit, energy and time to start writing again.

My history of the Jacksonville Fire Department still simmers on the back burner awaiting my attention. But at the moment, I'm spending as much time on top of a ladder as any fireman in Jacksonville!

Yes, instead of going to church, I spent Palm Sunday painting.

Is painting a sin?

Must be.

The only place in the Bible I recall anyone painting anything was when Jesus compared some hypocrites to sepulchres which had been whitewashed outside but inside were filled with rot.

Jesus never whitewashed anything.

That reminds me of a joke:

Wayne was a painter, a sly one. He discovered that he can stretch his water-based latex paint and make it go farther by thinning it with more water.

And he thinned his paint a lot.

One day he got a contract from a little country church to paint their white clapboard building. So he got out his scaffolding and began painting, adding water to the paint again and again.

As he neared the end of the job, there came a horrendous clap of thunder, the sky opened and rain poured down.

It washed the thinned paint from the church walls.

The thinned useless paint ran down the walls and puddled on the ground.

Conviction of sin overcame Wayne.

He fell to his knees and cried out: "Dear God, forgive me! What should I do?"

From the thunder, a voice rang out: "Repaint! Repaint! And thin no more!"

Wednesday, March 19, 2008

You Missed A ... BANG!

Over the past three weeks, I have concluded that the words "You missed a spot" constitute grounds for justifiable homicide.

Want to know anything else about how my paint the house project is going?

Thursday, March 20, 2008

Jesus Rose or Rotted



Easter approaches and I hope to finish painting before Sunday.

The problem with Easter is that it comes but once a year.

The root foundation of the Christian faith is that Jesus is Lord of life proven by His resurrection from the dead.

He rose or He rotted.

If He rotted, nothing He said or did counts for anything.

If He rose, nothing except for what He said or did counts for anything.

If He's dead, he's dead. He's just another 180 pounds of worm food — Like the rest of us.

But if He lives, then not only does He live for ever, but He lives each and every day and is with us as much on Groundhog Day as on Easter.

Anyhow, with Easter approaching and painting still to be done, I've been around and around our house on a ladder painting odd crannies. And I've crawled around and around our house on my hands and knees clearing roots and painting foundation brickwork. Now it's time for the walls.

This job proved harder than I expected. My hands cramp, my back aches, my knees hurt. My arms grow stiff...

I'll swear, I feel like a 70-year-old man!

But I'm still young yet; I won't even be 69 for another four months.

My beloved Ginny is taking a few days off work to enjoy a long weekend together — not painting! To focus on time with her, I plan on not making journal entries again till one day toward the middle of next week.

Jesus will still be the living Lord of Life then too.

Yes, at His right hand are pleasures forevermore.

We can relish His presence and enjoy His comfort and wonder at His will and rejoice in His springtime, and we can experience love.

Unless, of course, He rotted in the grave.

Then we can eat hard-boiled eggs.

Tuesday, March 25, 2008

A Healthy Boy

Last Friday while Ginny visited her doctor, I sat alone in the waiting area midway along a long hall, a long wide hall which stretches for at least 40 yards.

The outside door opened and a grandfather entered dragging a protesting little boy. The kid looked to be between six and nine years old and he did not want to go to a doctor's appointment.

“I don’t want to go in there! I don’t want to go in there,” he screamed.

The unrelenting grandfather tugged the kid by the arm to the registration desk to sign in. The kid struggled. He refused to move his feet and his grandfather pulled him across the slick floor, his heels sliding and leaving scuff marks.

“I don’t want to go in there! I don’t want to go in there,” the kid screamed.

As they passed me, the kid screamed, “Don’t make me go in there. I don’t need to go in there! I’m a Healthy Boy”!

The unmerciful grandfather ignored the healthy boy’s protests and carried him through some double doors to a pediatric area behind me. I could still hear the boy protesting at top volume.

Soon a loud commotion broke out.

The double doors burst open.

Here ran the boy down the hall racing for the outside door with a nurse in hot pursuit and the grandfather panting, a distant third.

The kid almost made the 40 yards to the door before the nurse collared him. She held the fugitive till the grandfather arrived and the two of them dragged the boy stiff legged back down the corridor.

At the top of his lungs the boy screamed, “I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die”!

They passed through the double doors out of my sight.

Silence reigned.

Up till then I’d been the only person in the waiting area, but now various people wandered in to take a seat. One family arrived with two little girls, six or seven by the look of them; they settled in to look at magazines while waiting their turn in pediatrics.

The double doors opened and out came the disheveled nurse, and the harried grandfather.

The healthy boy marched smugly in a straight line a few paces behind them.

As he passed the two little girls, the healthy boy turned his head sharply and said in a conspiratorial aside to them, "It doesn't hurt a bit".

Wednesday, March 26, 2008
Staring At The Walls

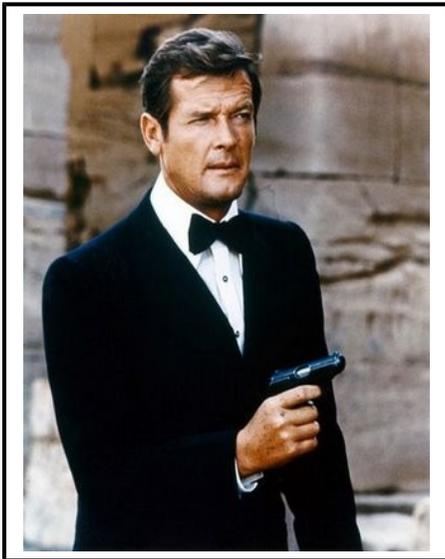
Back on January 17th when I began the project of repairing and painting our home, in my mind's eye I envisioned the project as looking something like this:



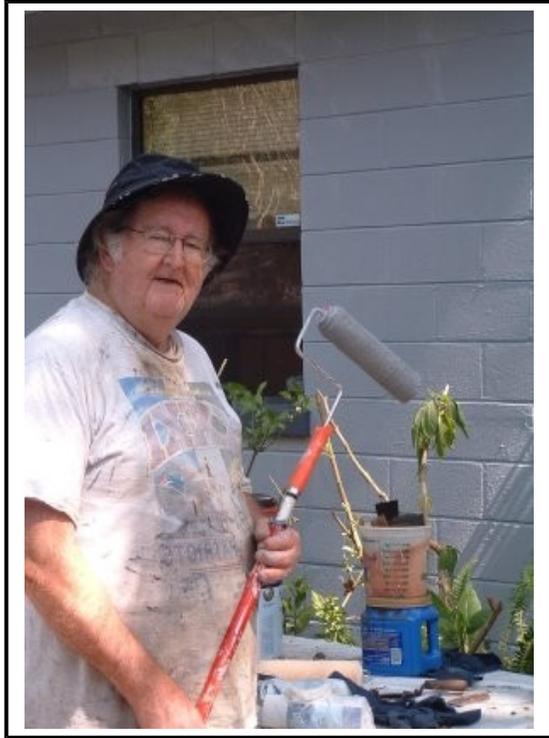
Yesterday when I finished painting, except for minor touchup spots, I see that in reality our home actually looks like this:



Also, back on January 17th when I began this project, in my mind's eye I envisioned my self as looking something like this:



Yes, James Bond bares an uncanny resemblance to me in my own mind's eye. However, yesterday when I finished painting, except for minor touchup spots, I see that in reality I actually look like this:



These reality checks tip me off to the fact that recently I've spent too much time staring at the walls.

Really.

When you paint a house using brush and roller, you spend a lot of time staring at the walls. For two months now I've examined the walls of our house again and again for signs of termites or wood rot. I looked for protruding nail heads, for cracks, for crevasses, for warped wood, for grooves, for uneven spots, and for misplaced drips of tar or paint.

I've looked at the walls so closely that I lost sight of the home.

I've avoided friends, skipped church, stopped blogging, growled at Ginny, alienated my children, slighted neighbors, neglected reading, forgotten God — all in the name of repairing our home.

That's a problem I have with undertaking any BIG project; it becomes the be-all, end-all of life, a life we were meant to enjoy. The project lures us into living for it.

Yes it is nice to have the house painted and looking crisp.

But the price has been costly — and I don't mean the money we've spent at Home Depot, although they greet me by name there now.

Incidentally speaking of money, while I've been painting, this past weekend, Ginny brought her computer out to the living room and hooked up it to mine and calculated our taxes for last year.

Here's a photo of her smiling and celebrating over the tax return (you can guess which computer is mine):



Have I been saying that we should never undertake BIG projects?

Not at all.

But I need to pick more important projects than house painting to obsess over, to focus on.

The Scripture says, "Thou, Lord, wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee".

Even while doing other things, important things, it is possible to keep our minds stayed on Him. The sentence prayer. The quick, "I love you, Lord". The whispered intercession. The hymn beneath our breath. The unspoken question. The thought of Christ. The remembered need. The prick of conscience. The

second of repentance. The surge of thanksgiving. —
These are true heart worship.

And we can do them with a paintbrush in hand.

Or a steering wheel.

Or a stethoscope

Or a spatula

Or a shovel.

Or even with a computer mouse in hand. Because worship is not so much what your hand does, but where your heart is.

Yes, the wise man does indeed build his house upon the rock.

But me?. I live in Florida where there is nothing but sand to build on. The next hurricane may mar the paint I've lathered on these walls so painstakingly. In fact it may take away the walls themselves.

It takes more than paint to build a home.

Building my relationship with Ginny, with our kids, and with our friends and neighbors ranks higher in priority than any amount of nailing, tarring or painting.

I tend to loose sight of that.

Fortunately, I am blessed with a forgiving God, a forgiving wife, forgiving kids and forgiving neighbors

Do you suppose that's because of my uncanny resemblance to James Bond?

You mean you fail to see the resemblance?

Well then, I ask you this — just how many houses has James Bond ever painted!

Friday, March 28, 2008
Boats & Scripture

One day earlier this week, (I forget which day because all this house painting and home repair blend my past two months into one long day), anyhow maybe Tuesday my friend Barbara White happily

interrupted my painting to take me to breakfast at Dave's Diner.

As usual our conversation ranged over a wide variety of topics from activities of children to recently-read books.

At one point she made a telling remark that has stayed with me.

I told her about a 700+ page book I've been reading, a survey of the Old Testament. The authors examine various theories of inspiration. They critique Wellhausen's theory about J, E, P and Q sources, and they compare biblical chapters with ancient Ugarit texts. They delve into possible sources Bible writers and editors may have used in transmitting God's Word.

Years ago I wrote a light newspaper column about Bible transmission so I'm a bit familiar with the scholars' approach to Scripture. And I find their speculations interesting but curious.

It's good to know that such scientists as archaeologists, paleographers, papyrologists, translators, and textual critics devote such intense study to the Bible. Their researches are far beyond my understanding but it's good to know that such scholars exist.

Saint Peter said, "Prophecy came not in old time by the will of man; but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost".

And Paul said, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God..."

The interesting thing is that both Peter and Paul use nautical terms for the words *moved* and *inspiration*. It's as though they were talking about a breath of wind filling the sails of a ship to push it through the sea.

I've read in my ponderous Old Testament Survey up to the book of the prophet Amos, a man who claimed to be no prophet nor the son of a prophet. Yet he was moved by the Spirit to write.

I think of the biblical writers as different kinds of boats moved by the wind to the same port. Some books like John's three letters seem like windsurfers darting over the waves on a surfboard with a sail attached. Others like Paul's letters remind me of oil tankers heavy-laden with crude to be refined into energy for running our daily lives with gas for electricity, cars and lawnmowers. James and Peter's letters resemble fishing boats bringing in a practical catch. Isaiah is a container ship plowing through rough seas carrying the treasures of the Orient. The Psalms are a runabout with a leisure fishermen lounging while dangling a line in the water. Canticles is a pleasure yacht and the Pentateuch is a tug — all moved across the water by the breath of God and all sailing to and from the same port.

And on every boat, there's some poor glob crawling around on hands and knees chipping paint.

That's me.

Hey, it all can't be pretty imagery.

Anyhow, as I enthused to my friend Barbara about Ugaritic texts and papyrology, she related how she was touched to tears by the Good Friday service at her church.

"John," she said, "I don't believe in God because of the Bible; I believe the Bible because of God".

She's way ahead of me in understanding Scripture.

Oh, the Four Gospels?

What kind of ship are they?

I picture a brilliant white cruise ship with the Captain welcoming passengers at the head of the gangplank and saying, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest".

Monday, March 31, 2008

The Spiritual Implications Of Rain Gutters

Saturday Rex and Donald teased me about having no sense of humor.

I do have a sense of humor.

But we were dealing with a serious situation.

Over the past several weeks I have painted our house. One major thing remained to be done — attaching rain gutters. I could not do this by myself. Last week in lifting a heavy lawnmower onto a work table to repair it I pulled a muscle in my side and that injury combined with my arthritis, prostate cancer and quiver tremors leave me in such pain that I have trouble bending over or lifting my right hand as high as my head.

So I had to ask my friend Rex and my son Donald for help.

I hate asking anybody for help.

I'm proud of doing things my self.

Too damn proud.

Rex and Donald responded willingly. But they found my afflictions funny as I'd grunt and groan whenever I tried to lift anything. They laughed at my pain and accused me of having no sense of humor.

Here's a photo of them riveting rain gutter sections together:



Now, before they began, I'd painted the house to perfection. No drips. No spills. All lines crisp and straight. Then Rex and Donald showed up. Here's a photo of them just getting started:



They leaned ladders against my perfect paint job and swung like monkeys from my roof. No I did not find their riveting and caulking and drilling and grinding and chopping and leveling and snapping the chalk line at all funny. And they said I have no sense of humor. I felt they were in dire need of adult supervision — which I, pipe of wisdom in hand, supplied:



Rex is an experienced contractor. He took Saturday away from building his own new home to put up these rain gutters for me. We'd agreed that I would ride to the hardware store with him and buy the materials with my credit card but before he came to my house Rex went to the store and bought all the materials out of his own pocket as an act of charity.

He also brought over professional tools for the job: several different kinds of ladders and drills and grinders and cutters and riveting tools.

Here he is on a ladder attaching rain gutter:





And here is a photo of Rex and Donald smudging my newly painted walls while they accused me of having no sense of humor:



Is it any wonder that I have no sense of humor?

The photos show what a nice paint job I did while working by myself before these two showed up to help.

Here is what my house looks like after the two of them finished showing off their own skill, precision and craftsmanship:



Who says I don't have a sense of humor?

Now I turn to the serious spiritual implications of installing rain gutters.

And this proved indeed serious for me.

I'm ashamed at what I'm about to write.

As well I should be!

This is so squalid.

I should be a better Christian than this — but I'm not.

This next reveals the way I am, not the way I should be.

The bottom line is that instead of feeling grateful to Rex and Donald for their help, I feel resentful.

The did a beautiful job for me, but I resent having to ask for help in the first place, I resent that the job did not start when it was supposed to and will take

another week to complete. I resent that they did things in a different manner that I would have done it had I been able to. I resent feeling helpless and dependant on the charity of my friend and son. I resent the prospect of having construction clutter around for another week. I resent lacking the skill or the tools or the strength to finish this job myself.

Isn't that pathetic?

Here Rex and Donald gave up a huge chunk of their weekend. Each paid cash out of their own pockets for materials and food and cokes. They went to a great deal of inconvenience to help me. They coped with my lack of humor and bitching and armchair supervision.

And instead of appreciating their sacrifices, I grow bitter.

Pathetic!

But typical.

As my grandfather used to say, "Some folks would complain if you was to hang 'em with a brand new rope".

That's me.

When I talked over my spiritual darkness with Ginny, she said that I resent God because He is answering my prayer for help, but doing it in a different manner than the way I envisioned it. I want Him to do it the way I want Him to do it!

She said I'm resentful because I'm not in total control.

She said that everything in life is a spiritual test.

Even installing rain gutters — or watching someone else install them — carries spiritual implications

Both giving help, and receiving it, measures our devotion to Christ.

When it comes to getting a job done, the process matters more than the outcome.

The building Rex, Donald and I have been working on will not last forever, the relationship I build with my friend, with my son, and with my wife will.

The only thing in the world that lasts forever is people.

All that may be true — But, I do too have a sense of humor!

APRIL

Wednesday, April 02, 2008 The Nails Were Too Short

Yesterday, while doing home repairs, I hurt myself bad.

Again.

Last week I'd pulled a muscle in the right side of my chest, Yesterday I twisted my right knee. All the time the arthritis in my right hip pains me. Before long I'll be scuttling along sideways like a crab.

The problem was the nails were too short.

We have a boardwalk running along the ground for about 25 feet between the back deck and the pool steps. There are 4X4 inch posts driven in the ground with 2X4 joists nailed between them, and 2X6 inch planks nailed on top.

Over the years the whole structure has sagged and warped and fallen in spots.

As part of my home improvement project (which I've been entangled in since January 17th) I decided to level out this boardwalk. This involved removing boards by crawling around on my hands and knees, prying out old nails, leveling the joists, drilling holes, and re-nailing the planks in securely.

Drilling holes?

Yes. Among the many talents God has given me, the ability to drive a nail straight is not one of them. Christ may have been a carpenter but He didn't pass

that skill on to me. So I have to drill a hole through the board in order to hammer the nail in straight.

As soon as I began tearing the boardwalk apart, the cause of its deterioration became evident. Whoever had built the thing in the first place, had used nails hardly two and a half inches long.

These nails were too short to hold the boards in place.

When I hammered the thing back together, I used 3 ½ inch nails.

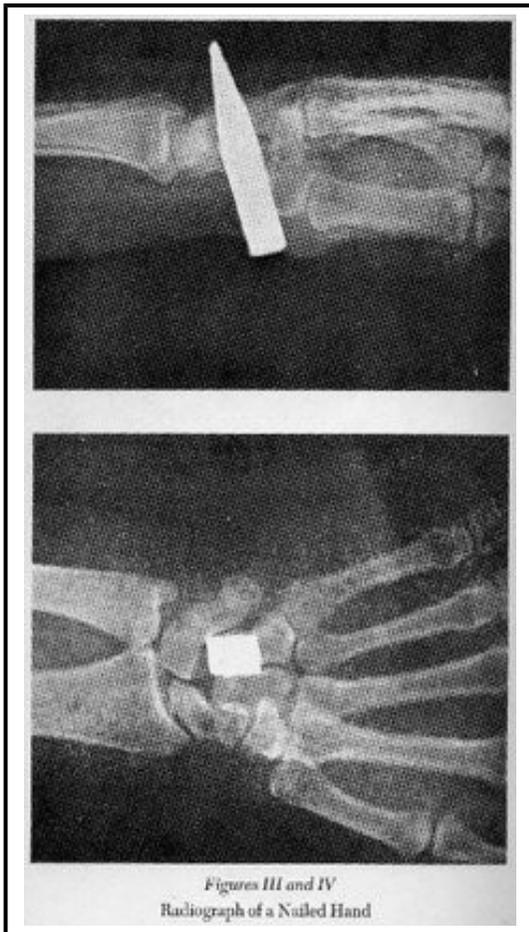
Solid workmanship if I do say so myself.

Anyhow, as I crawled around doing all this, I zigged when I should have zagged, caught my foot beneath a joist when I turned to reach for my crowbar, and twisted my knee.

Damn!

The combination of pain and nails reminded me of something:

Between the years of 1932 and 1935, Dr. Pierre Barbet, a surgeon at St. Joseph's Hospital, Parris, conducted some macabre but interesting experiments with nails and cadavers.



Using square-cut nails to tack an amputated human arm to a board, Dr. Barbet suspended weights from the arm to see how much it would take before the nail ripped out through the fingers.

He and his colleagues performed this experiment dozens of times

Dr. Barbet wrote, “One finds that in the middle of the bones of the wrist there is a free space, bounded by the capitate, the semi-lunar, the triquetral and the hamate bones”.

A nail driven through the hand in that spot, called Destot’s space, would support 288 pounds of weight without ripping out through the fingers.

And no bone would be broken or shattered by the nail.

Dr. Barbet described his work in his book, *A Doctor At Calvary*, (Image Books, Doubleday, ©1963).

Although he was a surgeon, he was also a scientist who studied the process of crucifixion on the human body. There is a name for experts in this field, crucifixures or cruciologists or something like that; sorry, I've forgotten the exact word.

But anyhow, Dr. Barbet concluded, "Hanging by the hands causes a variety of cramps and contractions in the crucified which are described under numerous general headings, stretching to what we know as 'tetany'. Eventually these reach the inspiratory muscles and prevent expiration; the condemned men, being unable to empty their lungs, die of asphyxia. They can, however, escape for a few moments from this tetany, and from its consequent asphyxia, by lifting the body upwards with the feet as a support.

"At this moment the knees and the hips are extended, the body is raised, while as a result the angle formed by the forearms with the vertical decreased slightly, in the direction of the original right angle. The body thus alternates, during the agony, between a sagging position and a state of asphyxia and a raised position which brings relief..."

The doctor draws a picture of Christ writhing on the cross, pushing up on the nails through His feet in order to breath — or to speak.

He pushed up on those nails to say, "Father, forgive them..."

In his anatomical experiments Dr. Barbet used short nails, hardly 3 inches long.

I've heard of a singing group called Nine-Inch Nails but I've never heard them sing and I know nothing about them; I suppose the group name is derived from some idea that it would take nails 9 inches long to hold Jesus to the cross.

I doubt it.

Even those nails would be too short.

Just how long of a nail would it take to pin down God?

Before His crucifixion Jesus said, "I lay down my life for the sheep... I lay down my life that I might take it up again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it again".

He said this sort of thing again and again throughout the gospels saying that although He is God come in the flesh, yet He voluntarily went to the cross for our sin.

He suffered agony for us.

No matter their length, nails alone were too short to hold Him to the cross.

It was love alone that held Him there.

Love for us.

Last night during our normal prayer time after supper, Ginny and I got to talking about John the Baptist and the virgin Mary. We discussed how the call of God had come to each one of them and to other people mentioned in Scripture.

Ginny observed, "They agreed with God, but they were not sure of just what it was they were agreeing to".

We decided that's a good summary of the Christian life.

We don't agree to something; we agree with Someone.

Thursday, April 03, 2008
Wedding Photos Arrive

Yesterday the postman delivered a packet of wedding photos from our daughter Eve and Mark's wedding on February 9th. They were taken by my brother David.

Here's a photo of David. A few years ago he survived a lung transplant so to avoid possible exposure to infection, he wears a mask. He's sitting

with Carol, his sister-in-law, while May, his wife, a former dance instructor, was jitterbugging on the glass dance floor (with neon lights underneath).

The masked man is my brother David, with his sister-in-law



The night before the wedding my own bride Ginny celebrated flourishing her camera:



Eve and Mark were married by an official aboard the cruise ship *Celebration*:



Here is the coven of bride's maids:



I walked Eve down the aisle to give her away:



The cruise line provided a reception with ice sculpture right next door to the lounge where the ceremony was held:



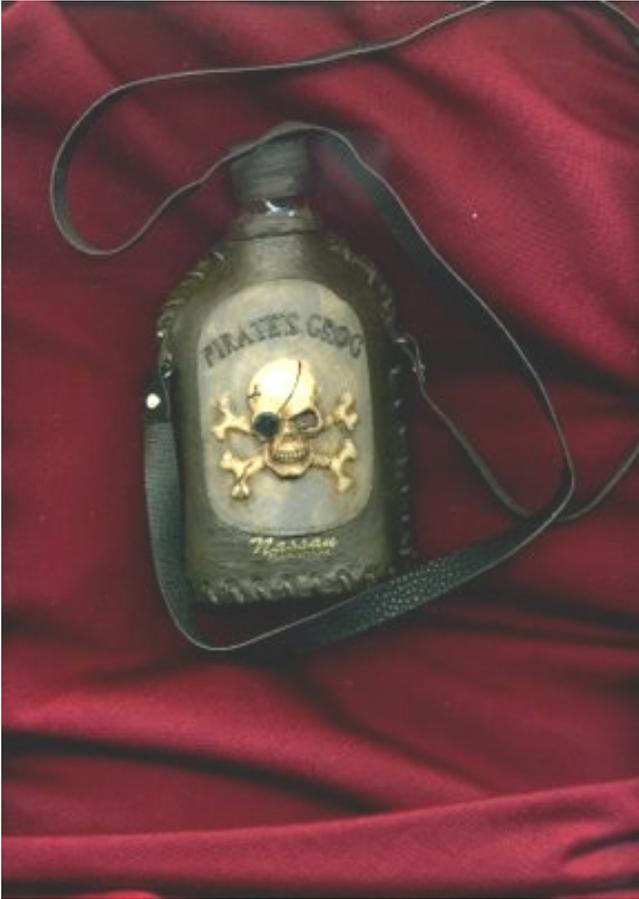
Here is the happy couple:



After the reception, family and wedding guest left the ship while Mark and Eve sailed away into the sunset to honeymoon in the Bahamas.



All they brought back as a souvenir for me was this empty rum bottle:



Friday, April 04, 2008

Make Straight In The Backyard ...

Philip Wylie played a unique conversational gambit as an icebreaker on meeting strangers.

Wylie was the author of *When Worlds Collide*, *Opus 21*, and *Generation Of Vipers*. His writings inspired the comic book characters of Spiderman and Flash Gordon.

In 1930 Wylie wrote the book *Gladiator*, which became the basis of the comic book hero Superman.



On meeting a stranger at a cocktail party, Wylie would ask, "If God walked in through that door right now, what one question would you ask Him"?

Inevitably the stranger would conclude that if God walked in the door right now, there would be no question. All questions would be answered by His presence.

Although Philip Wylie's books were favorite reading among sophomores when I was in college, I had not thought of him for years until yesterday while I leveled flagstones in our backyard.

Yes, I painted the chimney. Yes, I tarred behind the woodwork. Yes, I caulked the walls and painted them. Yes, I pressure washed the deck. Yes, I repaired the hole in the side of the pool.

Our home is improved.

Darn sure better be after all the work I've put into renovating the place since January. From top to

bottom everything about our home has improved except my disposition.

So now I've worked down to leveling a flagstone walkway in the backyard.

Don't want anybody to trip.

This leveling involved chopping tree roots, which over the years have pushed the stones aside, or adding sand in places where over the years rain washed out the underpinnings of the stones.

As I worked, I thought about Philip Wylie's icebreaker and about the words of the Prophet Isaiah:

Prepare ye the way of the Lord,
Make straight in the desert a highway for our
God.

Every valley shall be exalted
And every mountain and hill shall be made
low:

And the crooked shall be made straight,

And the rough places plain:

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed...

The message is, Get ready. Prepare to meet thy God. He's about to walk in through that door.

Jesus once said, "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him and will sup with him and he with me".

Any questions?

My daughter Eve drove over from work to spend the afternoon talking with me. Something at her job upset her and she took the afternoon off for a mental health break.

As she sat telling me about what happened at work and watching me level stones, I asked her opinion about one troublesome stone that I'd worked with for over an hour.

She said, "Well, Daddy, it's level on one end".

Monday, April 07, 2008
Without Straw

In 1901 the Great Fire of Jacksonville burned over 400 acres of the city's core. Immediately afterwards reconstruction began. This time, instead of heart pine boards, the builders constructed many buildings of brick to avoid having the place burn down again.

In their rush to rebuild, they mixed a light, sandy mortar to hold these bricks together.

Thank God.

Because over the past few weeks demolition crews have been knocking down some of these after-the-fire downtown buildings and when a crane hits a turn-of-the Century brick wall, it crumbles in a pile leaving most of the old bricks intact.

Guess how Ginny and I spent our weekend.

We wanted weathered brick to line some flowerbeds and for a walkway and other projects around our house, so we visited a demolition site and salvaged bricks.

What fun to prowl through the rubble collecting bricks and looking at old papers and fixtures the demolition brought to light.

Rain hampered our efforts and we got soaked and filthy with demolition dust, but we now have plenty of weathered brick.

Some folks might call us Dumpster Divers; we prefer to think of ourselves as salvage recyclers.

We recycle a lot of things. Last Thursday I sent a pickup truck load of clothing and household goods to a mission for the homeless. A dozen huge black leaf bags and cartons of goods can be reused by folks who need them.

We are also in the process of culling our bookshelves. Over the years I have accumulated eleven bookcases stuffed with arcane volumes; and there are books in our closets and boxes of books beneath our bed.

We spent last night sorting which of these to keep and which could go to the used bookstore (again) or to the Friends Of The Library book sale.

This process is painful for me.

When I give up a book, I feel loss. I cling to my books. I think that I'm sure to need this reference tool in the future. I fully intended to get around to reading this other book someday (I've intended to read it for the past 30 years). But this book has such great illustrations. And that one has a classic tooled-leather binding. And this one may help me grow spiritually if I were to read it. And that book on Kourion tells about an ancient ruined city (destroyed by an earthquake on July 21, A.D. 365) which I've always wanted to visit. And Mr. Darby gave me that book... Er, he didn't exactly give it to me, I borrowed it from him ten years ago and haven't returned it yet.

I can't get rid of this book; it has that poem by what's-his-name, the poem about the girl in the yellow dress, the poem that made me feel haunted the first time I read it and still gives me goosebumps. And here's a copy of *Bomba The Jungle Boy* that I read so much instead of doing homework that I almost failed third grade. And here's that copy of *Dracula*, the first book I ever stole. And here's that Stephen King first edition of the story I enjoyed so much and want to re-read. And here's a Bible study book on Esther that I marked with notes and here's the book that....

I can find some reason to never let go.

Never!

But, I have to.

Rats have gotten into the boxes of books stored in the shed.

If I do not cull, dispose of, recycle, make room for — these books will be lost forever, shredded by rodents, silverfish, termites.

This distresses me.

I do not own these books.

They own me.

Maybe by recycling and passing these volumes on to some younger person, I will enrich his life. I remember how pained I felt when I was young and could not afford to buy the books I needed for school. I remember how deeply I coveted certain books which over long years of collecting I now own (but still haven't read).

I draw my identity from the books I read — and from the ones I write.

So instead of culling my bookshelves, I'd rather carry bricks.

Bricks are lighter.

Much lighter.

Tuesday, April 08, 2008

A Typical Neighborhood Watch Meeting

Monday night for our monthly Neighborhood Watch Meeting, Lisa brought a snake for the Show & Tell segment, and Ayolane, a naturalist, delivered an impromptu talk about how to identify dangerous snakes we might meet in our gardens:

Sharp-tail, OK; blunt-tail, bad.

The group of about a dozen people went around the circle for our High/Low exercise in which each person tells the high and low points in their life since the last meeting, the best and the worst thing that's happened to them.

I passed around a 1,500 watt lightbulb and a 2,000-year-old clay lamp from an archaeological excavation. (Just things I happen to have laying around the house).

Using these props I gave a mini-devotional on the phrase, "Ye are the light of the world". I put a wick and some lighter fluid in the lamp -- and for the first time in 2,000 years, it gave off light.

Officer Craig Grant from the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office reported on crime statistics within a half mile of

where we were meeting. He gave us various tips on home and personal security.

Judy distributed tee-shirts with River Celebration logos from our last park clean-up day and we planned the next one.

Again we went around our circle so each person had a chance to speak about whatever concerned them in our neighborhood or in life in general. One person is calling JEA about street lights, another is arranging for branches to be cleared from around a traffic sign.

Then to close, and as the highpoint of the meeting, I told one of my wonderful jokes:

The workman installing wall-to-wall carpet in a home had just finished tacking down the edges of the rug and replacing the molding around the room. He noticed a small lump beneath the carpet in the corner of the room.

Patting his shirt pocket, he said, "Darn. My pack of cigarettes must have dropped out. I'll have to rip out all the tacks and peel back the rug and..."

Wait just a minute here, he thought. No I won't have to redo all that work.

He reached in his tool box and pulled out a length of 2X4. He pounded the lump down flat and smoothed out the place, rubbing the 2X4 back and forth over the spot.

Satisfied, he packed his gear and returned to his truck in the drive. As he put his tools away he noticed his pack of cigarettes on the dashboard.

As he tapped one out of the pack, the lady of the house came out saying, "Oh Driver, have you seen my canary? She got out of her cage".

Thursday, April 10, 2008
My Life In A Dryer

For the past six months I feel as though I've been living in a clothes dryer.

I tumble from thing to thing to thing, from to this to that and to the other in an unending cycle going nowhere.



Graphic is from <http://monkeyinadryerblog.blogspot.com>

The problem with doing one job is that it reveals another job that also needs doing.

When I paint a wall, then I notice how much the trim around the window needs painting. When I paint the window trim, I see how dirty the curtains are. Washing the curtains, exposes how much dust has built up on the plate rail. Dusting the plate rail shows how badly the ceiling fan needs cleaning.

This process continues till I find myself digging out drainpipes underneath the concrete slab house foundation — which I see is being cracked by tree roots, so I'll need to...

At some point I have to call a halt.

I have to declare that it's Good Enough.

If I don't call that halt and make that declaration, then my life careens out of control and my days are dictated by an ever accumulating array of tasks which, while nice, are not necessary.

I have to learn to say, "It's good enough for now".

Acknowledging the Good Enough is especially important in marriage. Because, although Ginny and I are what the Bible calls "One Flesh", we are not always of one mind. In fact, I'm married to this left-handed, wrong-headed woman.

She does not see things or do things the way I do.

And, instead of forcing the issue and fussing at each other over trivia, we've each had to learn to tolerate the other person's methods and acknowledge that while the job is not done the way I'd do it, it's been done Good Enough.

No job is as important as she is.

Getting along with her matters more than seeing the job done perfectly (meaning as I would have done it).

Remember back in November when I was writing a book on the history of the Jacksonville Fire Department?

Then I put that book aside to celebrate our anniversary, then came Thanksgiving and Christmas and four family birthdays, then our daughter's wedding, which led to replacing the rotten wood on the back deck, which meant painting, which meant sealing the wood with tar, which led to clearing bushes from the house foundations which led to transplanting thorn bushes and replacing rain gutters.

That job revealed that I needed to clear books out of the storage shed which meant culling the bookcases inside to make room for the books from outside, and that means collecting things for a garage sale next month which means I'll need to ...

See what I mean about living in a clothes dryer?

What I need to do is finish writing that history of the fire department.

The status of the house is good enough.

In fact, the place is in better shape than it has been for years.

The same can't be said of me.

I've lost my focus.

Time to say Good Enough and do what I'm called to do.

Author Stephen King, who once worked in a laundry, urges aspiring writers to stop dicking around and write. He points out that it is entirely possible to

spent the rest of your life trying to do your laundry to perfection.

But we aspiring writers tend to think the primary activity of a writer is to avoid writing.

The thing is, B-List projects are so much easier to do than A-List projects. B-List things are manageable. When I check a B-List project off my list, I feel a sense of accomplishment. I see immediate results. And I've gotten the job done in a controllable time-frame.

And when I chop down a tree, that sucker stays chopped down!

B-List stuff is not an on-going, life-long job — like living for Christ.

Walking with Christ can never simply be checked off my list as over and done with. And, the results are seldom visible. And I have to keep going back to basics as though I'd never started in the first place.

Being a Christian is not for sissies.

It's easier to write a history of the fire department than to walk with Him and it's easier to paint walls and cull books and tar wood and salvage bricks and level flagstones than it is to write a history book.

I keep thinking that in order to be thoroughly Christian, I need to know more, to see deeper, to read classics, to think harder...

BULL!

All we ever need to know about God, we already know.

That's true of everyone.

The ball's in our court now.

I think I'm dry now. Ginny and I are taking several days off to recharge our batteries. So I'm unlikely to post in this journal again till after April 14th — That's the anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic;.

And, when we get back from our time off, I intend, God willing, to resume writing that fire history book.

Or, I may just keep tumbling along.

I need to take down that rickety garden shed, or clear the jungle path, or transplant the mulberry tree or ... by the time I get finished, the house will need repainting again!

So goes my life in a clothes dryer.

Tuesday, April 15, 2008
A Peaceful Long Weekend

Writing about peaceful, joyous things is more difficult for me than writing about things that annoy me.

Must be because I'm a natural-born complainer. But this past weekend contained nothing for me to complain about. Mostly Ginny and I sat in our garden talking, reading or just being in silent love together.

She potted a few flowers and I vacuumed the pool, but mostly we just got re-acquainted as we talked about faith and politics, children and news articles, future plans and distant memories.

Nothing ruffled our feathers or clouded our horizons.

Sunday the sky misted rain as we drove about 15 miles out to Baldwin for a country breakfast at Everybody's Restaurant. Customers there must tip well because our waitress told us it was her first day back at work from having taken her family for a vacation in Hawaii.

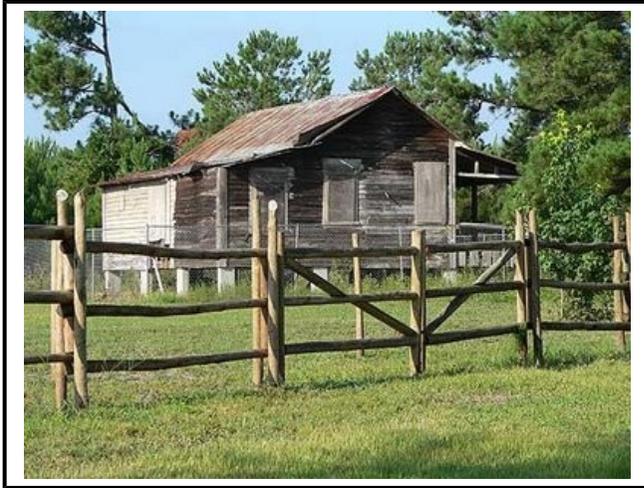
Around us local customers talked about buying new pressure washers, and what the preacher said, and what might be wrong with a sick cow. I love eavesdropping on such conversations and hearing the speech cadences of pure Southern language.

On the drive out, we had seen a sign to a historic preserve at Camp Milton, a Civil War fortification where in 1864 our brave Southern boys attempted unsuccessfully to defend Jacksonville and the Homeland from barbarous invaders from the north.

After breakfast we returned to the cutoff and visited the site. Because of the rain and early hour not

a single other person was in the park. We strolled through the ancient battlefields and along a boardwalk to view the ruined earthwork ramparts.

One interesting feature of the preserve is a typical Florida Cracker homestead; this house, which is being restored, reminds me of my grandfather's farmhouse in Graham, Florida:



Oddly enough, though I'd once worked at the adjacent Whitehouse Oil Pits (which may relate to some of my physical problems today years later) I had never been to Camp Milton before. Whitehouse is the name of a small rural community now mostly absorbed by Jacksonville.

For some unfathomable government reason Jacksonville's Mosquito Control Board was partially responsible for cleaning up the oil pits. When I worked there the place, a Superfund Site, was a vision from Hell — except it was too toxic for demons.

Odd that with my interest in history, I never realized that the huge Civil War fortification was so near.

Anyhow, Sunday morning Ginny and I strolled alone in misting rain through lush swampland and spring meadows. We spotted numerous bird species we could not identify but we enjoyed them too much to really care about which kind of bird they were.

So from the turmoil of ancient war, we strolled in happy peace.

And now we turn away from the real world and back to our normal daily activities.

Wednesday, April 16, 2008
Miracles That Don't Work

On tv last Sunday night, I saw a film clip of a little kid trying to drink from a water fountain, the kind they call a bubbler. He almost had the knack of it, but he couldn't get a drink.

He'd press the button on the side and water arched forth. But when he leaned forward to drink, the flow stopped because he couldn't keep the button down.

He puzzled and puzzled over the contraption, a comic expression on his face.

Finally some adult lifted him up while pressing the button and the kid drank.

This came up Monday as my friend Barbara White, author of the Along The Way series of books, treated me to breakfast at Dave's Diner. As usual we gossiped about friends and family, books and videos, politics and newspapers, the whole state of Christ's church and the world.

But mostly we talked about divine healing.

Barbara's grown daughter undergoes chemotherapy treatments often. Barbara drove her to several radiation treatments last week.

Among the Scriptures we talked about was that odd instruction in James' letter that says, "Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him".

Barbara observed that we often try to reduce the miraculous to a formula.

If I do such and such, then God has to do thus and so. He's obligated.

Nonsense.

What has any of us ever done to put Almighty God in our debt?

Barbara said this play called life is about Him, not about us. We are stage hands or bit players in His story.

“It’s all about Jesus,” she said.

Now the apparent formula for healing in James’ letter seems to be first, call the elders, I suppose that means the wisest and smartest people among us, Naturally that means doctors. If you don’t believe me, just ask one of them.

They are to pray and anoint the sick person with oil. I suppose that means give him the best treatment available — Like when Jesus commended the Good Samaritan who poured oil on the wounds of the guy who’d been mugged on the highway.

A friend of mine who works at the Mayo Clinic says that the duty of a doctor is to amuse the patient till he either gets well or dies.

I’m not that cynical.

Not quite.

Although years ago a physician did prescribe Vioxx for my arthritis pain. But when I read the label warnings on the bottle, I decided I’d rather endure the pain than risk poisoning myself and trashed the stuff. This was long before the maker recalled the drug when they admitted it was killing patients.

But I’m not cynical about medical science. I suspect the Vioxx scandal is more related to Merck’s accounting department than to its physicians.

Sometimes the stuff they do for sick people at Mayo works; but not always. I mean they push all the right buttons but the patient dies anyhow.

Maybe it takes a miracle.

I think I almost saw a miraculous healing once. Maybe.

I’m not sure. I have my doubts.

What happened was, about 50 years ago a young pregnant woman tumbled down a long flight of stairs from her third floor apartment. At the emergency room she was told she'd lose the baby. For some reason, she and her husband called me. I went over, anointed her forehead with olive oil and prayed. A few weeks later she gave birth to a healthy son.

Did my voodoo charm of oil and prayer make any difference at all?

Was the happy outcome the result of what the doctors did for her in the emergency room and hospital?

Might she have sustained the fall, foregone any treatment at all, and had the healthy baby anyhow?

I have no idea.

After all babies are tough little fellows. They cling to life tenaciously.

So maybe the birth of that child was a normal thing. Maybe that kid was just hardheaded.

But anointing the woman and praying seemed the thing to do at the time. So I did it.

But this is not a magic formula.

If I grease the sick one's forehead and pray, then God has to...

No He doesn't!

Indeed He has set physical and spiritual rules in place in the universe. Normally such rules work. But often they don't.

I press the button. I see the water splash. I lean forward...

Damn!

It stopped.

What went wrong?

Nothing.

It's just that I'm too little to reach — some Adult has to lift me up.

That's the only way things work.

Thursday, April 17, 2008
**Two Conversations, A Camera,
& A Galleon Of Canola Oil.**

First, Happy Birthday to Ariel; she turned 18 Tuesday.

When my friend Wes treated me to breakfast yesterday, he said the name *Ariel* is Hebrew that means *The Lion of God*; Ariel corrected him saying it means *The Lioness of God*. Wes countered with the feminine form of the Hebrew word...

I said that I thought Ariel was the name of the Little Mermaid in the Disney movie.

They laughed at me.

Wes and I drove back to my house to smoke our pipes and talk about the Nicene Creed, the nature of the church, Aryanism, and the place of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity.

We're way too old, but we'd make really great sophomores!

Wes thinks of the church in terms of each local congregation, He cited Christ's words to seven individual congregations in Revelation, and Paul's writing epistles addressed to individual congregations in specific cities.

I tend to think of the universal church as all believers living and dead from Adam to unborn generations in the far future, mighty as an army with banners stretching throughout time and eternity.

Pretty high-minded for a guy who seldom attends church, huh?

I feel that God raised up different denominations to fit the individual tastes of different people just as He gives the gift of music. Some folks' taste runs to rock & roll, some to country western, some to classical.

I could be wrong about this.

Wes says that's highly likely.

Concerning the Trinity, Wes said his grandfather used the analogy of an old kerosene lamp. The wick burned, the flame flickered, the light touched all corners of the room. Yet all three are one lamp.

Now God is unique.

He is Creator; all other things are created. Therefore, nothing else in the universe is like Him, not exactly like Him. But various analogies from created things can give us hints as to His nature.

For instance, I've heard the Trinity compared to solid ice, liquid water, and vaporous steam, different states of the same H₂O. I've also heard the Trinity compared to an egg, one yoke, one white, one shell = one living egg.

My own favorite analogy is a deep-fried shrimp. The shrimp is the center, the crisp bread coating covers it, the warmth permeates the whole shrimp.

Wes said that comparing the Holy Trinity to butterfly shrimp is silly.

But I happen to like fried shrimp.

Speaking of silly.... No, that's unkind.

What he's doing is not silly, (but to me a tad strange):

Wes asked me to take some photos of him with my digital camera so he can post them to an online dating service.

How did couples ever meet before computers?

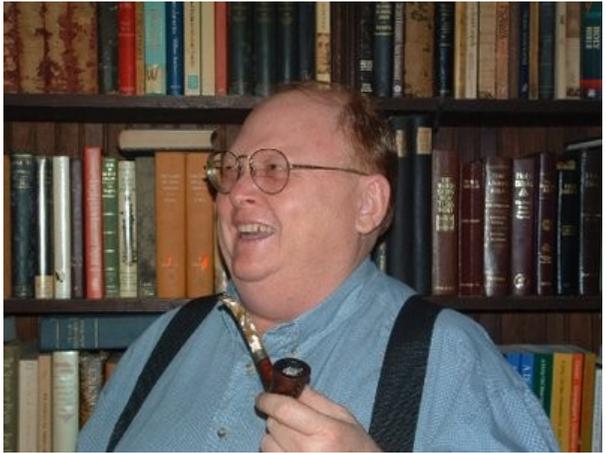
Thank God that Ginny and I stumbled blindly into each other 40 years ago. It's a strange new world now.

Anyhow, Wes wants to date---Via computer.

So I
took a
dozen
photos of
him.

He will
chose one
to lure a
potential
mate.

That's
how they
say it works
anyhow.



My computer also says that I'm the millionth visitor and that I've won a free dance lesson.

I don't know which photo Wes will pick, but I think this one portrays him best:

Why is he laughing?

Instead of "Say Cheese" as I snapped the photo, I said, "Wes, look intelligent".

Strange this next thing should come up.

About 18 hours after I wrote Wednesday's entry, the one about divine healing, Ginny and I attended a pizza party with six or eight other people (Only one of whom had read my blog entry).

Our hostess, a mature lady, suffers from a debilitation illness.

She has good days and bad, and had planned the party on a good day, but last night turned bad for her and she was in considerable pain.

As party conversation gravitated toward healthcare issues, I felt uneasy as I remembered what I'd written that very morning. I excused myself and went outside to smoke a pipe and pray as the conviction grew inside me that I should anoint this woman with oil and pray for her.

I resisted that conviction for as long as I could.

Then, feeling like an utter fool, I blundered into the kitchen looking for some olive oil. A lady there asked what I needed and I said, “You know if she has any olive oil?”.

“No. But I think I saw some canola oil in the cupboard. Would that do?”.

No reason why not. The Scripture just says “oil”, it does not stipulate what kind. I suppose whale oil or peanut oil or 3-in-1 Machine Oil would do just as well. So I said, “Canola oil will do fine”.

She pulled out a gallon jug of the stuff!

I carried it into the party where the sick woman lay on a couch. I dipped my thumb into the oil jug, traced a cross on her forehead, and prayed for her. Not having read my blog, she and most of the others there, had no idea what I was doing, but one caught on and said that for this trick to work you have to use virgin olive oil.

Now, I don’t know how to tell virgin olive oil from the kind that’s been... well, from the other kind.

But I said canola oil would work just fine. After all it is not the oil nor the guy praying but the Lord who raises up the sick. I joked that maybe I should pour the whole galleon on the lady instead of just a dab; that way she’d really be anointed.

Now let me emphasize that everyone at the party knew the lady’s colorful past. In her youth she’d been... Well, let’s just say it was a little too late to worry about virgin oil.

When I said that, the lady and the party-goers roared with laughter.

In fact the whole thing was a hoot! With much joking and commentary and laughter — and maybe a little thinking.

Will my silly ritual restore the lady to health?

I have no idea.

We’ll see.

But, it seemed like the thing to do at the time.

So I did it.

Sometimes trying to live faith in everyday life makes you look like a fool.

I should be used to that by now.

Friday, April 18, 2008

Money Matters

Any day now a royalty check for my first quarter book sales should arrive.

We'll be rich beyond our wildest dreams of avarice.

Well, almost.

At least we can afford groceries next week.

Anyhow, Ginny and I spent the morning planning how we will spend all this anticipated money.

When I walked her out to the car so she could drive to work, as she opened the car door, she struck a pose like one of the presenter girls on a tv game show.

She lifted her arms and proclaimed, "I am **the David Copperfield of Finance!** I can make cash disappear faster than anyone else on earth!"

I laughed till tears ran down my cheeks as she drove off.

That other magician, David Copperfield, only made the Statue of Liberty vanish. You can see a video of his stunt on You Tube.

Saturday, April 19, 2008

Four Odd, But Cool, Incidents

Yesterday at Ginny's work, she had to go to a different part of the building to get something from storage. A door in the hall opened and a man stepped out of a meeting.

He stopped abruptly intently looking at her.

"You have absolutely beautiful hair," he said.

The stunned gentleman was former Jacksonville Sheriff Nat Grover!

I understand how he felt.



Yesterday an earthquake measuring 5.2 on the Richter Scale shook 16 mid-west states. It was centered in Illinois along what geologists call the New Madrid Fault. No casualties were reported and little property damaged but it is unusual for earthquakes to be felt by people in this region at all.

One of the odd facts of history I remember is that in 1812, a major quake along the New Madrid Fault caused the Mississippi River to flow backward for a time (some accounts say it was for days). The quake actually changed the course of the river.

———

The lady from the pizza party called yesterday.

She was at her cardiologist's office. He'd said there was no sign of damage to her heart and that her problems may have been caused by a reaction to some medication she was taking.

"The Old Man Upstairs is looking out for you," he said.

Her other physical problems remain.

We'll see what happens — If anything.

She was very happy about the cardiologist's report.

My own state can best be described as one of doubtfully believe.



Yesterday, on Kings Road over in Southside, only a few blocks from where I grew up as a boy, a construction company was renovating a building when workers made a strange discovery.

During the 1950 and '60s the building had been home to Skatetown, a roller-skating rink where teens hung out.

In renovating the building workers found about 30 wallets, billfolds and purses stuck in a hollow space between some walls.

No cash was in the wallets leading the construction foreman to speculate that they'd been stolen from the lockers of teens while they skated. The thief stripped the cash then dropped the wallets into the hollow space between walls to hide the evidence.

But he left everything else in the purses and wallets. Old snapshots in accordion sleeves, folded up love letters, bus passes, birth certificates, pressed flowers — anything a teenager might carry in a wallet.

As a sign of those far-away times, virtually every one of the 30+ wallets and purses contained — a library card!

The construction company is attempting to locate the original owners to return the items discovered between the walls.

———

Speaking of construction...

Also yesterday, in my latest ploy to avoid writing that fire department history, I began cleaning out and tearing down our rusted garden shed.

I found termites have shredded some old maps I had stored out there.

I filled five garbage cans with debris, valuable debris that I've been saving for years just in case I would need it someday.

Jesus said, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth where moth and rust doth corrupt and where thieves break through and steal... For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also".

But what if I really need those old lawnmower wheels, Lord?

What will I do then?

And here's a perfectly good replacement bulb for our car's headlight... Er, right, that was a headlight for our car three cars ago.

Tomorrow I'm borrowing three more empty garbage cans from my neighbor Rex.

Monday, April 21, 2008

Animal Tales

Sunday, my friend Barbara White hosted a lavish cook out for the whole Cowart Clan at her home on Turtle Lake. She commandeered a huge BBQ grill from the management and obtained the use of a lounge overlooking the lake. And she served, among other things, her famous Chopped Olive In Whipped Cream Cheese, my favorite.

Ginny prepared a platter of deviled eggs, Helen brought luscious pineapple, Donald grilled burgers, Eve brought lemon cake, and other folks brought over favorite dishes — and we all talked about animals.

When we strolled on the pathway around the lake and on the dam spillway, we watched a 4-foot gator unsuccessfully stalk some water bird. As we lounged outside talking we watched an osprey furnishing a nest. I saw a water snake swimming among the lilies — and we all talked about animals.

As several of us sat outside smoking, a retarded girl and her family feed breadcrumbs to the school of fish that gather at the dam. These fish are so accustomed to people feeding them that the school can detect the vibrations of footsteps on the dam and will actually follow people, crowding close in hopes of bread crumbs.

We watched an anhinga, sometimes called a snakebird because it swims with only its head above the water, catch fish and bring them to a partially submerged log to flip over and swallow head-first. We counted 15 turtles sunning on that log. The anhinga saw the retarded girl throw breadcrumbs, it waited for the fish to gather at her feet, then it dove and caught one of the gathered fish to carry back to the log. Again and again it did this. Fascinating — And we all talked about animals.

Of course we gossiped about family members too.

And, as we did, I gained the strangest insight.

Mark and Eve are the two gentlest people alive. They are sensitive, retiring, quite, shy, timid, soft — and as, from a distance, I watched them stroll along the dam, I told the others that someday God would use Mark and Eve to accomplish some heroic task, a feat requiring great courage and personal danger. It's hard to see them as heroes, but they will be. I'm sure of it. That was the oddest feeling to have about this unlikely couple — and we talked about animals.

Yesterday Mark and Eve got a new kitten, Simba. This new cat, which they deliberately went to the humane society and got, adds to the four cats they already own!

Why in the world would any sane person want more than one cat?

But, yesterday also, Donald and Helen went to a different humane society shelter and got a dog. It adds to the four cats they already own.

Must be some hereditary genetic defect in my offspring.

Helen said that as they browsed among the cages at the pound, a family came in also looking for an animal to adopt. The two rambunctious boys, ages about 7 and 9, dashed from cage to cage yelling, "I want this one! I want this one"!

The tired young mother turned to Helen and said, "How'd you like to adopt two boys instead of a dog? They've had all their shots and they're almost housebroken".

Helen and Donald chose a dog instead.

The family engaged in a long conversation about cat carriers and ...

It's 4:45 a.m and I just got back from seeing about a neighbor who suffered another heart attack, his third. A few minutes ago, I saw Rescue 10 unit pull up to his house, put my slippers on and went over. Warren was still conscious as they gave him shots and fixed an IV, so I knelt beside him and chatted as they prepared him for transport.

I offered him these words of Christian comfort:

"You can't die yet. Who would I borrow tools from if anything happens to you"?

It only hurts when he laughs.

Carol, his wife, will keep me posted.

Tuesday, April 22, 2008
A Decidedly Unchristian Rant!

I am a kind and gentle man.

I treat everyone on God's green earth with kindness, tolerance, patience, compassion and charity — Everyone except for garbage men.

Them I can do without.

Monday is our regular trash collection day. As I have cleaned our garden shed, I scrupulously complied with every city regulation concerning trash. I made sure all trash was in cans or black plastic bags. No single item weighted over 40 pounds. It was placed neatly at the curb no more than 24 hours before scheduled pickup time.

The sorry bastards did not pick up my trash!

The three men on the truck decided that it was too heavy or something for their delicate little hands to handle. They parked at the curb, discussed the matter, then drove on leaving my garbage at the curb.

Before they got a full block away, I was on the phone to city hall. A recorded greeting from the mayor's answering machine greeted me, but I punched through the abominable phone tree of city government to reach one of his flunkies.

I calmly explained the situation.

Well, the word *calmly* may exaggerate a bit.

The flunky tried to sidetrack me with questions about hazardous waste, (we take such stuff to the special collection point).Weight? (I said that I am pushing 70 and I carried every can and bag from our backyard to the curb by myself; and if one old guy could handle it, surely three strong young men, who earn more per hour than I ever did, should be able to lift a can of garbage all of three feet into the back of the truck!).

The flunky tried to fob me off by talking about budget cuts and offering to pick up the stuff next Monday — but I could not leave it at the curb for seven days; I'd have to move it again.

I said that some people are too sorry to be garbage men.

I want my garbage collected NOW!

I did my part, they should do theirs.

The flunky regretted ever answering the phone but relented if I'd agree to give them one hour to contact the truck. Don't these people have radios or cell phones?

Sure enough, in an hour the same three guys and their truck appeared again at our door. For some reason in that hour, they'd decided my garbage cans were not too heavy to lift after all.

A pox on all their houses!

The problem with a stupid incident like this is that it's mind-consuming.

I have fumed about this all day.

While Ginny shopped for groceries this evening, at 9 o'clock at night, I sat on a bench outside the grocery store still replaying the whole thing in my mind again and again. I can't let go of it.

These sorry garbage men pulled my chain.

Outside the grocery store I fumed hating their guts, and trying as a mediocre Christian to pray for them. Ever heard of imprecatory prayers?

But these guys pushed my overload button!

You know, sometimes in my heart, I pray that after my death I will be remembered as a man who loved. I want genuine love to characterize my life.

That's some goal for a misanthrope, isn't it?

I overload on people easily and I recharge my batteries by being alone. I just can't cope with too many people in a day. I'd make a great Christian hermit. Boy, can I be pious when nobody's around to rub me the wrong way.

In thinking about the garbage men, I again realized that life is hard and I think it a great sin to make somebody's life harder than it needs to be. Then I got to wondering how often I do that very thing myself?

Can it be that Jesus died for garbage men, city hall flunkies, and even me too?

Hard for me to believe that this evening.

But, in case you haven't noticed, when it comes to loving people, the Lord Jesus is downright odd.

Oh, my!

Isn't it blasphemous to say Jesus is odd?

I looked the word up in the dictionary just to make sure. *Odd* is defined as "differing markedly from the usual, ordinary, or expected".

Yep. That's Him alright.

Wednesday, April 23, 2008

Two Sheds In Two Days

Monday, I hammered apart our old, rusted out metal garden shed.

Years ago, when I should have torn it down, instead I posted a sign on the door saying, "Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here" — the same notice Dante found engraved on a rock at the mouth of the Inferno.

I thought that was funny, and it was easier to post a sign on the door than to clean out and tear down the old shed.

Tuesday, I disassembled a newer shed at my daughter Jennifer's home, loaded the parts on a trailer and brought them to my house to reassemble as our new(er) garden shed.

This morning I intended to write a clever diary posting about the spiritual implications of the word *shed* as both a noun and a verb.

My dictionary says the root of the word means something like *to separate or set apart*. Shed as a noun refers to a small, building likely used to set things apart for storage; *shed* as a verb also relates to setting something aside — The cat shed hair all over my favorite chair, or blood shed is common on Friday nights in Jacksonville, or a geological watershed separates water flowing in different directions.

I intended to write about one of my happiest days when Alva, my mother-in-law, took me to an

archaeological dig in a Maryland corn field and we excavated a farm shed from the 1500s. Apparently an epidemic wiped out the farm family suddenly and their storage shed crumbled to dust leaving all the treasures they had stored in it buried beneath the corn field.

And I intended to tie this stuff together with the words of Christ when He said, "This is my blood which is shed for many".

But the more I thought about it, the more I realized I was stretching my point. My thought process on this is just too contrived.

If faith is real and valid, no artificial arrangement is proper.

Who needs contrived religion?

My sheds are rickety old buildings with useless stuff I'm too stingy to let go of, buildings where rats and spiders and roaches dwell.

Sheds have no spiritual implication — unless I really contrive something.

I'd be lying to say otherwise.

I can't honestly make more out of this than there really is.

Therefore, I've got nothing this morning.

Friday, April 25, 2008
When I Whack A Rat

Two weeks ago my neighbor tore down an old garden shed in his yard.

Last Monday I finished tearing down a 20+ year old garden shed in my yard.

Tuesday, I disassembled a shed in my daughter's yard and transferred the parts to my yard to reassemble.

All this activity displaced the local rat population.

Yesterday as I worked I saw eight rats in my yard. They overrun the place.

I lifted a board, one which I'd lain on the ground just Tuesday, and five rats ran out from underneath.

I dropped that board in a hurry.

I waited an hour. I crept up on that same board, shovel in hand. I quickly lifted the board again and began whacking rats.

Killed two.

Broke my shovel handle.

But when I whack a rat, it stays whacked.

Monday, April 28, 2008
Lord Of The Normal

Nothing extraordinary happened over the weekend.

Ginny and I shopped for groceries, office supplies, and for materials for next month's neighborhood watch meeting.

My friend Rex came over Saturday afternoon and most of the day Sunday to install the rain gutters on our house. He works in heavy industry and is skilled at all phases of construction, mechanical, and metal work. As he worked, I felt absolutely useless. I do not do well on ladders and I have trouble standing up when I kneel on the ground. This limits what I'm able to do and it feels odd to be the object of Rex's charity. I'd rather be a giver than a receiver.

However, I'm very thankful that Rex has helped us so often and in so many ways. Without his aid, we'd be living in a shanty.

I did get the new garden shed erected all by myself. That's something. And I killed another rat which had escaped from the old shed.

Ginny and I reviewed several plans about what to do with the space tearing down the old shed created.

We enjoyed the normal weekend flow of friends, family, visitors and phone calls.

In fact the word *normal* well describes our life this weekend.

Nothing wrong with that, Jesus is Lord of the normal as well as of the extraordinary. Bland is beautiful.

One funny thing did happen:

A little boy from the neighborhood, who is somewhere between five and ten years old, was looking at the cover photo on my book, *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad*.

As he thumbed through the pages, the boy asked me if there were any other pictures in the book.

His dad remarked that from the cover photo, it looks as though I was burying a body in my back yard.



The kid, who'd been half listening to our conversation, perked up exclaiming, "You buried a body in your back yard"?

I replied, "No. ... No... Not yet".

The expression on his face was hilarious!

Tuesday, April 29, 2008

What's Going On Here?

Monday my friend Wes told me that a lady in the church he attends recently found her mother's diary, a diary from the 1920s.

The daughter had no idea that her mother had kept this diary. It surprised her to discover that her mother had a life before she was even born. In fact, the mother's diary even records how she and her future husband first met.

After the old lady's death, the daughter found her mother's diary as she was clearing away things to sell the house. She almost threw the book away along with other old papers before she realized what it was that she'd stumbled on to.

This news inspired Wes and me to talk for a long time about diaries.

I've kept my own daily (almost) diary for over 40 years (off and on).

That practice teaches me an important fact — At any given moment, I have no idea what's going on in my own life!

I trivialize things that turn out to be significant, and I magnify things which turn out to be passing fancies. While a thing is happening, I have no clue how important or how minor it really is in the long run.

For instance, a few years ago the Senior Acquisitions Editor of a major publishing house called me about the manuscript of a book I wrote. He flew South to confer with me about changes he wanted in the manuscript. He talked about promotions, a book signing tour, cash advance, press run...

I thought his visit was so important. That I devoted page after page of my diary and much energy from my life to the meeting with this man.

I thought he represented a breakthrough in my writing career, We'd be poor no more. I'd be a rich and famous writer. I'd come into my own. I felt he was the most important person I'd ever meet...

Two weeks later his company fired him for embezzling and fraudulent expense account claims.

No one else in his company wanted to touch any project associated with him.

It turned out that he proved of no significance in the course of my life at all.

My book fell through the cracks.

Much ado about nothing.

On the other hand, neither Ginny nor I actually remember first meeting. We know the general time and place and circumstance; but when we first met, we neither one made enough of an impression on the other to warrant marking it on a calendar.

And now we've been happily married for almost 40 years and she's turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me in my whole life!

Only I didn't know that initially.

When I first met her, she was just another girl in the crowd.

My diary at the time made no mention of even meeting her!

That shows how much I know about what goes on in my own life.

That's why I try (sometimes) to rely on God's guidance in daily life. He alone knows what the future holds and what is truly important. That's why I try (sometimes) to listen to His instructions and pay attention to His values.

Sure, I rebel and insist, like a 3-year-old, that I can tie my own shoelaces. I believe that I can do it myself. But in my right mind, I know that my times are in His hands; that I don't really know what's going on in my own life.

As King Solomon said, "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not to thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths".

Sounds poetic, but it's humbling for me to try (sometimes) to live that way..

So, while my diary may not record what's really going on in my life — because I don't know what that is — at least, I do try to record the great jokes I hear.

For instance, Saturday my friend Rex told me this one:

You've always heard that you can't take it with you, but this wealthy man wanted to try. He made a contract with the Lord that when he died, he could take one thing with him. He packed the largest suitcase he could find with gold bars and hid it under his bed.

The rich man died and appeared before the gates of Heaven lugging this massive heavy suitcase. The

angels in charge of airport security pulled him out of the line of people headed up the hill.

The angel said, "You're not allowed to carry anything through the boarding gate".

"Yes I am," the man boasted, "I have a contract with the Lord that I can take one thing with me, and this trunk is my one thing".

One angel read the contract and said to the other angel on guard, "He's right. This contract says he is allowed to take it with him".

They ran the trunk through the x-ray machine and passed the rich man through security. Then the angel guards watched him trudge up the hill straining and tugging and laboring and panting to get his heavy suitcase into Heaven.

"Strange lot, aren't they," said one angel to the others. "Why do you suppose that with a pass to bring in any one thing he wanted to, he'd pack a suitcase full of nothing but paving stones"?

Wednesday, April 30, 2008
Brunch And A Train Wreck

After she drove her daughter to chemotherapy Tuesday, my friend Barbara White treated me to a steak omelet brunch at Dave's Diner, then we returned to my house, sat outside by the garden fountain, and talked for four hours about God's control over circumstances and our personal responsibility in life.

Guess which one of us contributed the following tidbit to the conversation:

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!

You're right! It was me.

That's a poem I once saw on a reporter's cubicle in the newsroom way back in the days when I worked for the local newspaper and I've remembered it all these years. How come I can remember that sort of thing but have such a hard time remembering Bible verses?

Although a grown woman, Barbara's daughter now weighs well under a hundred pounds. This morning, her physician said that the regime of chemotherapy has stopped being effective and he started her on a new regime.

"We are not out of options," he said.

Barbara attends her church regularly but she told me that she draws little comfort from the politics, programs and procedures of the church.

"I find I care less and less about more and more," she said.

Barbara herself is a cancer survivor having undergone surgery and treatment several years ago. She knows from experience what is involved and what her daughter endures.

The element which comforts her most as she and her daughter go through this troubled time is music as she remembers hymns and praise songs. At one point over pancakes in the diner she softly sang a few phrases from one of the songs about walking close to the Lord.

Such songs remind her that she and her daughter are not in this alone, that Christ is present here and now, even when we are not aware of His presence.

"God makes all things work together for good," Barbara said, "But He lets us make our own mistakes".

One particularly good thing comes out of this cosmic train wreck:

Relations were once strained between Barbara and her daughter, but in driving her several times a week to chemo, Barbara and her have bonded to the point of enjoying one another's company and laughing

together. "We've never been closer than now," Barbara said.

As we talked about God's control and human responsibility, butterflies fluttered amid my flower beds; squirrels drank from the fountain, bluejays attacked the birdfeeders, and lizards soaked in patches of sun. The garden radiates peace.

Yet because of all the construction debris around my house and all the work that remains to be done, I feel my yard and garden looks like a train wreck scene; I'm so sick of all the mess and clutter.

I told Barbara about my home repair projects, about painting and rain gutters and tearing down sheds. And about the anguish I go through in deciding which books to keep and which to dispose of.

In the past few years Barbara moved from a house to a condo, from her condo to a one bedroom apartment, then to an efficiency apartment. At each step she had to whittle down her possessions.

Paintings. Books. Heirlooms. Furniture. Dishes. Houseplants — all left behind.

"How do you cope with this reduction of possessions?" I asked her.

"My memory helps," she said. "I find that I forget that I ever had such stuff, so it's no longer so important. Sometimes losing your memory can be helpful".

Did we arrive at a definitive answer to the question of God's control over circumstances and human responsibility?

No.

Of course not.

Better minds than ours have struggled with this question for ages.

Yet every person can live in the love of God without knowing the answer.

As Barbara said yesterday, "Jesus does not give us answers; He gives us Himself".

MAY

Thursday, May 01, 2008 **The Dog House In My Garden**

I never actually saw the doghouse in my garden. It was gone before we moved here.

Twelve years ago when we bought this house, the former owner pointed out a wooden platform toward the back of the yard and told me he built it to keep his dog's house above the damp ground.

I'd left the platform stand all these years and used it to store odd bits of lumber.

Wednesday, I tore that platform down as part of my home fix-up campaign.

The 4X4 supporting pilings of the doghouse extended four feet underground with only six inches showing above the surface.

I pounded them from side to side with a sledgehammer to loosen them before I could pry them out.

I am not a sledgehammer kind of guy.

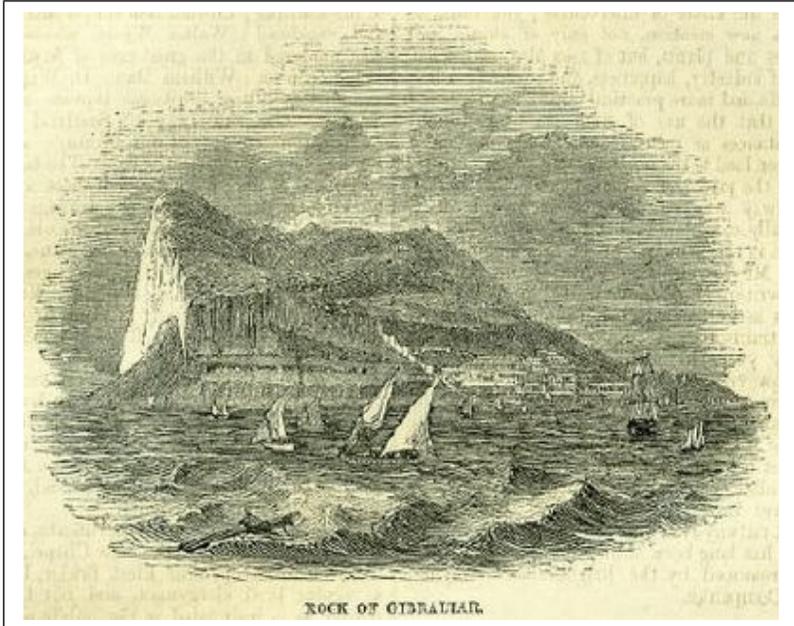
Today, I ache.

I needed to remove the old doghouse platform in order to run an underground electric cable to another outbuilding. This meant I had to splice electric lines together. To waterproof (I hope) this line, I cut an old rubber bicycle inner-tube, ran the wire through the resultant hollow, sealed the ends, and dug a trench to bury the thing.

Slight problem.

Six or eight inches below the present surface of the ground, I discovered a brick patio. Over the years water-washed silt had covered this brick pavement and grass had seeded itself over top. Until I began digging, I had no idea that bricks underlay that section of my yard.

That must have been the Gibraltar of all doghouses!



At various times during the day I talked with three visitors who interrupted my work: one needed to borrow tools; one needed consolation on a death in his family; one needed help with a confidential problem.

I love pittering around in my garden. I enjoy solving landscaping problems, watching birds, squirrels and lizards, viewing flowers, rescuing spiders from the sprinkler can, mowing grass, sitting smoking my pipe while pondering the next step in tending the garden.

I think the Lord created Adam to do just this sort of thing, to pitter in the garden and walk with God.

People should enjoy their work and enjoy peace in God's company.

But, Adam and Eve ate the onion.

Sin brought forth sickness, turmoil, death.

And thorns infest the ground.

Then Christ, who Paul calls the Second Adam, came to save us and to destroy the works of the devil.

I think ideally He came to restore us so we, like that first Adam, could pitter in our garden, everyman under his own fig tree, and enjoy God's company.

To a certain extent, that's the life I daily enjoy now — and I feel a tad guilty about it.

Yes, pittering in the garden and enjoying peace should be the natural state of every Christian. Such is normal life (of course with adjustments for individual tastes and callings, but you get the idea).

However during a war, peaceful people get drafted into the army. We leave home and hearth and garden flowers to live in tents, sleep on the ground, eat combat rations, expose ourselves to loneliness, death and dismemberment.

We live in a war zone.

We live in enemy occupied territory.

There's a Heaven to gain and a Hell to shun.

Wounded people — blasted and torn, screaming and moaning in pain, crying out for help — litter the battlefield. The stench of death cloys our air. Hardships and vicious cruelties abound.

Sometimes, I indeed feel guilty about the peace I enjoy while pittering in my garden; I feel as though I ought to do more, to devote more time and energy to evangelism and social service.

But sometimes I also wonder if my role is not that of a supply clerk. While not in direct combat myself, maybe I contribute a little something to the war effort.

Yes, sometimes our calling is to simply write encouraging letters to soldiers in the field.

To remind them of Home.

Saturday, May 03, 2008

While Lugging Trash To The Curb

Ever meet a total stranger and strike up a conversation as though you two were long-time friends?

That's what happened to me Friday.

I'd been straightening the garden shed and when I lugged another garbage can full of debris to the curb, I met a lady who was waiting for her son, one of our neighbors, to arrive.

She was just passing through Jacksonville on her way from her home in another city to Savannah for another son's college graduation.

We struck a cord.

After only a few words, I invited her back to sit with me in the garden to wait (her son did not know she was coming to his house till she called him on a cell phone so he was off across town getting his hair cut).

In just moments this lady (I'm not sure I even caught her name; I think it is Betty Jo) and I were chattering away as though we'd known each other for years.

She went back to her van and brought over some Vernon's Ginger Soda, (a brand hard to find in Jacksonville) and we talked about the song *Under The Boardwalk*. I thought the Beachboys recorded it; she said it was by the Drifters.

We talked about computers. One of her sons recently gave her a Dell laptop and she's learning how to use it.

We talked about her work. She manages a Popeye's Fried Chicken restaurant in her home city. She says hiring good, conscientious help is her biggest problem. She thinks America's work ethic seems to be disappearing.

We talked about gardening and squirrels and lizards and the virtues of different types of barbecue sauces.

She asked me about good places to visit in Savannah. I told her about things Ginny and I enjoyed on an anniversary second-honeymoon there a few years ago.

All in all I suppose we talked about inconsequential matters and I doubt that we'll ever met again, but it was a pleasant interlude on a hot afternoon.

Her son arrived and they drove off to buy him a new shirt to wear to the graduation.

I went back to organizing my new shed.

I suppose over the past few weeks I've written everything there is to say about tearing down an old shed and building a new shed.... Except...

Except...

Well, there is that disturbing Bible passage in Luke Chapter 12 from verse 13 through verse 21 where Jesus said...

But, I just don't want to go there.

That's not something I want to think about right now.

I should have pondered that Scripture BEFORE starting all this work.

For Date Night, Ginny and I went out to enjoy a special offer at an AYCE barbecue place (the letters stand for All You Can Eat) and I made the management regret their special offer.

We anticipate a carefree weekend of love and relaxing and talking and pleasure gardening. No more sheds to reconstruct, trenches to dig, electric lines to splice, or doghouse foundations to uproot.

Thanks be to God!

Sunday, May 04, 2008
Lovingly Stroked By God?

At the barbecue restaurant as Ginny and I enjoyed our meal, an elderly man walked from a table in the rear of the place gingerly escorting his wife, an obvious stroke victim.

That's true love, I thought. To care for her in that incapacitated state says more about love than a whole library of romance novels.

Through the plate glass windows where we were sitting, we watched the old man carefully install his wife in the front seat and get her belted in. She could do nothing to help. She acted like a zombie with a lopsided smile.

I expected the old man to get in the car and drive away, but instead he returned to the rear of the restaurant...

He returned to the rear of the restaurant to get his daughter, also a stroke victim in as bad a shape or even worse off than her mother.

Two of them!

This poor bastard was caring for two stricken family members at the same time!

It was painful to watch as he guided the wobbly daughter, a woman in her 30s, through the maze of tables and out to the car to install her in the back seat.

Ginny and I talked about the horror of disability and the depth of love we'd just witnessed. "What kind of God would saddle that old man with two stroke victims," I asked? "That seems cruel".

"The Lord didn't cause the stroke," Ginny said. "He allowed it to happen".

Not much difference to the old guy taking care of those women.

Sometimes in telling people about God, I think I'm defending the Indefensible.

Faith does not fly in the face of reason; faith flies in the face of experience.

The love of God is certainly compatible with the dictates of reason; but I have a hard time reconciling the love of God with my own life experience and the experiences of people I see around me every day.

Why doesn't God just kill us outright, crush us like bugs instead of stroking us with affliction? Wouldn't that be kinder, more loving?

Is God helpless to prevent the strokes that mother and daughter suffered?

Was it something genetic that runs in that family, a natural phenomena? And God said, "Tough luck. But that's just the way it goes. What do you expect Me to do about it?".

I've heard Christians explain such things as strokes and famine and disasters as a just punishment on humanity. They say that we each and every one deserve eternal torment now and in the hereafter because we have sinned, and that the fact that some of us live happy, healthy lives is a mercy of God, when in fact we all ought to be stroke victims. They say that vile, nasty sin merits the harshest of punishments, so what do we expect when some people get stroked by God here and now?

I've heard other Christians explain stroke victims and the like as God giving the rest of us test cases on which to exercise our charity. How can we show love unless we have some poor bitch to practice on? We can help only if there is someone who needs our help; we should be glad we are stretcher-bearers instead of the slob on the stretcher.

Other Christians tell me that in the long run even stroke victims will eventually realize that God loves them and that He brought tragedy into their lives to lead them to a bright happy future waiting in store for them after they have suffered in frustration and humiliation for years and years and years on earth — someday there will be pie in the sky.

What a crock!

I have no answer myself, but I find such answers as those I've heard other people suggest unsatisfactory.

When I was in college a skeptical friend teased me saying that religion is an opiate of the people, that faith is an easy way out of intellectual problems, that Christians refuse to face reality, that we have a Pollyanna view of the universe.

Faith may be a lot of things, but easy it's not.

To love the Lord thy God when you suspect Him of causing, or allowing,, strokes requires a supernatural gift of faith. A gift He gives.

When I was younger I worked for a while as a hands-on care-giver at different times to three different stroke victims so I have an inkling of what that old man in the restaurant went through to get those two women up, to get them diapered and dressed, to get them down the steps and out to the car, to bring them to a restaurant as a treat, to cut up their meat and feed them by hand, to sop up their spills, to endure the stares of embarrassed other customers, to get them back to the car, and finally to get them back home and lifted into bed.

Such activity on the part of that old man required Herculean effort. He did not have to bring them out for barbecue. He could have spooned them mush at home in front to the tv. But he did all that work to take his ladies out to dinner.

That's love.

I wonder...

Maybe Ginny and I did not just see an old man escorting stroke victims to his car.

Maybe we saw God.

Tuesday, May 06, 2008
A Scary Time At Sea

I'm afraid.

I don't know what to do.

This is a scary time for me.

A transition time. A transition to — I don't know what.

I'm adrift at sea in a leaky row boat and I can't see the shoreline. I don't know which way to go, which way is safe.

I feel lost and my little boat floats in danger of being swamped.

Monday I removed the last of the debris from the work I've been doing on the house. The place is in better shape than it has been for years.

Now, I don't know what to do next.

I'm adrift.

This creates great anxiety for me. Since January 17th I've been painting and sawing and cleaning and renovating... For the past week, I've stretched the jobs out, doing niceties around the place instead of necessities, correcting little things that bug me, taking longer about things no one will ever see, or if they did, notice.

All this busy work to avoid facing whatever comes next in my life.

Back before Christmas I rushed to finish writing that book on the history of the local fire department. I tabled that project for the holidays and by now I've really lost my taste for it. And this is a book which I began writing in 1986!

I don't know whether I should push ahead and finish the damn thing, try to write something else, or look for a real job, one that pays cash money

I can't piddle around the yard forever.

So I ask, "Lord, what would You have me to do"?

And I get no answer.

God has clammed up.

No roll of thunder. No whisper of wind. The stars too are silent.

Or, if God is speaking, I don't hear Him.

Naturally, my mind jumps to the worst possible scenarios. Even God finds you useless, John. You've been fooling yourself, Cowart, the Good Shepherd never has led you to do anything. Jesus has got it in for you because of the porno sites you looked at on the internet; He's in a huff and giving you the cold shoulder. God has no use for petty thieves like you. You're too fat and lazy and stupid and unspiritual for Christ to have any dealings with you — ever! God's guidance is for other people, godly people, people better than your sorry lazy ass. Love you! Hell, God doesn't even like you, He can hardly tolerate you.

Oh yes. My naturally glum mind has a field day during uncertain times.

And for me, to a certain extent. all times are uncertain times.

That is so scary.

To feel that neither God nor man has any use for you.

To feel worthless.

Back a few years ago an editor asked me to write a book about How To Find The Will Of God.

"Sure," I said. "I can whip that out in a couple of months".

I researched Scripture. I studied the biographies of historic Christians. I examined my own past experiences. I even wrote a glib newspaper column about finding God's will; I titled it How To Tell God's Will From Pizza.

I thought my column was so clever.

But, I was not able to write that book.

I just couldn't do it.

I eventually defaulted on the book contract.

Last year, on March 30, 2007, I wrote a diary entry about how I arrived at the decision not to seek any treatment for my prostate cancer.

Sure, I can pontificate to other people about how to find the will of God.

But, when all is said and done, I must conclude that for myself, I have no idea how to find God's will.

I'm at sea in a leaky rowboat and I don't know which direction to row to shore.

Fear of doing the wrong thing (again) paralyzes me.

I'm scared to row in any direction.

What does the Scripture say about all this?

"Whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him... And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men".

I hear that, but...

Working on house and garden stove off my anxiety while I stayed busy. But now that the yard chores are done... I'm in a quandary.

I feel that no matter what I do, it will be wrong.

Looks like after 68 years of living and thinking like this, I'd get used to feeling glum by now. Yes, I'm a Christian who has repeated the above thought process again and again for about 50 years!

I've lived scared all that time.

I've lived depressed all that time.

I've lived confused and apprehensive all that time.

If I have one hope, one modicum of joy in Christ, it is that He is faithful.

I love the Lord because He loved me first.

I suspect that His reality is not my reality. He's God and He knows what He's doing. I believe my perception of reality is wrong and His is right.

Isn't that magnanimous of me?

The Lord should be tickled pink that He has my approval.

And O yes, my fear and confusion are my daily reality. In spite of that, in my writings, no matter what

the subject, I try to leave readers with one main thought.

My message is simple — There is hope.

How can I say that when I feel lost at sea in a row boat?

Well, my secret is this:

I harbor a suspicion that my boat sloshes about not on the trackless ocean -- but on the waters of a lake.

A great big land-locked lake.

No mater which direction I chose to row, shore lies dead ahead.

Thanks be to God.

Thursday, May 08, 2008
**Raking Gumballs & The Fish In Our
Fig Tree**

Wednesday I raked gumballs, pruned bushes and replaced the fish in our fig tree.

Thirteen tall sweetgum trees surround our back yard. They provide cooling shade for us and a haven for nesting birds. They make our back yard seem more secluded than it really is.

But they drop seed pods — Thousands upon thousands and tens of thousands of hard, sharp, spiky husks which I call gumballs. We dare not walk barefoot in the grass and even if anyone wears shoes, the gumballs turn underfoot and twist unwary ankles.

Here's what a gumball looks like:



They need to be raked up.

So, yesterday I raked.

This trashcan contains three plastic bags of nothing but gumballs I raked up!



Raking gumballs puts me a step closer to finishing the outside work on our house which I began back on January 17th. Here is a photo of the rear deck. Notice the new rain gutters which my friend Rex is installing. Notice the fresh walls and crisp trim which I painted. Notice fountain I refurbished. Notice the deck I pressure washed. Notice the brick walk which I leveled (mostly):



Then I spent ages and anguish tearing down the old rusted metal storage shed to make this quiet nook for conversations. Yes, this is where the old shed used to be. Notice the faux white wishing well; it's really just a pile of bricks salvaged from a 1901 building; they hide an electric junction box:



And here is a photo of the new shed I erected in a different corner of the yard where the salvia is just beginning to bloom:



Not many of our flowers have opened yet. Here, around the pool deck, clusters of salvia, pregnant plant, firecracker aloe and flamingo plant just begin to flower, while on the deck red and yellow hibiscus open to the sun:



And, here at the entrance to our jungle path ruins of the Parthenon welcome visitors amid Wandering Jew Vine with tiny white flowers while the requisite Florida pink flamingo peeks from behind a flamingo plant:



One flower that has opened in full force is the aromatic white jasmine surrounding the wooden swing in a grotto inviting visitors to be still and rest::



I still don't know what God wants me to do with my life from here on — “Be still and know that I am God”, I suspect — but meanwhile, I keep myself amused in our garden. For instance:

Our fig tree is beginning to put on.

This attracts birds.

They steal my figs.

I foil the marauders with this fish in our fig tree:



The fish is 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*.

Terrifies the birds.

What a laugh to see them squawk!

That'll teach 'em to steal my figs!

Thursday, May 15, 2008
**Hip-Deep: Thoughts On An
Inspirational Poem**

In *Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri opened his poem about his journey with these words:

In the middle of our life journey
I found myself in a dark wood.
I had wandered from the straight path.
It isn't easy to talk about it:

It was such a thick, wild and rough forest,
That when I think of it my fear returns...
I can offer no good explanation for how I
entered it.
I was so sleepy at that point,
That I strayed from the right path.

Before long Dante's journey took him to the
mouth of a cave, the entrance to Hell; chiseled in rock
above the mouth of Hell were the words — Abandon
Hope All Ye Who Enter Here.

Dante's poem resonates with me recently.

"I had wandered from the straight path. It isn't
easy to talk about it... I can't offer any good
explanation of how I entered. I was so sleepy... I
strayed from the right path".

Sounds pretty bleak.

A footpath into Hell.

While Dante's decent into the Inferno led him to
classic poetry of high drama with vivid scenes of wild
landscapes, of demons and of the damned in torment,
my own decent into the dark night of the soul leads
into the bland.

The way I'm feeling, were I to write a poem at the
moment, it would not be chicken soup—but tofu for
the soul.

I live in a hell made of oatmeal.

No milk.

No sugar.

No butter.

Just oatmeal.

Cold.



***Gustave Dore's engraving of Dante
talking to a guy stuck in Hell's muck.***

My recent state manifests itself in a lack of interest in anything.

I can't get excited about reading or writing, prayer or pornography, Bible or blogging.

There's just nothing inside me at the moment.

That's the key — at the moment.

I've been down this path before. I've wallowed in this slough time and again periodically. It is a downer, but it's not permanent.

Every swamp drains. Every bed of quicksand eventually dries.

Once out fishing I sank hip-deep in mud.

When you're stuck in deep muck, every movement of your legs creates a stronger vacuum to hold your feet fast in the mire. Every struggle locks you in tighter.

You have to lay flat on the surface of the mud to distribute your weight and gently swim your way out.

You get filthy, but you get out.

Your shoes may well be sucked right off your feet, but you can escape alive.

Yes, Dante's journey started off with him lost in a wood at the mouth of Hell and he went downhill from there; but eventually, his journey took him into celestial realms, to Heaven, to a vision of God.

Abandon Hope.

Hell no!

Where I am now is but a way station on the journey.

Home lies ahead.

Jesus is Lord even here in the piney woods at the mouth of Hell.

He's been here before.

Resurrection from the dead — remember?

Oddly enough, while I'm in this dark night of my own soul, some other people seem to find me helpful. The other day my friend Wes said that a visit with me was the high point of his week! And the other night I emceed a civic meeting to which people responded with enthusiasm.

Isn't that odd?

Here I'm stuck up to my ass in oatmeal, yet other people seem to get something out of my company.

Strange, that.

I know what it is.

People just love my jokes.

For instance, to close that meeting the other night, I told this one:

For Christmas the seven dwarfs pooled their money and bought Snow White a digital camera. But, even with pooling their money the dwarfs did not have enough to buy her a loading dock to make prints of her photos.

Nevertheless, Snow White was happy and went through the forest taking snapshots of each of the dear little dwarfs and of the dear dear little animals. Chipmunks, and squirrels and bunnies and deer.

She wanted to give copies of their photos to everyone at the forest's New Year's Eve party, so she took her new digital camera to a Wal-Mart Photo Center to be developed.

The clerk explained that she'd have to leave the camera because the rush of folks wanting their Christmas photos overwhelmed the facility.

A few days later Snow White returned to the store to get her pictures.

The clerk apologized saying that he had so many customers that he'd had to outsource work and Snow White's camera had been misplaced.

Snow White began to weep. "I did so want to give all the dear dear dwarfs and the dear little creatures of the forest copies of their own photos," she said.

The clerk patted her on the shoulder saying that he would place a trace on her order to locate her camera.

"But I wanted to give them their photos at the New Year's Eve party," Snow White said. "They'll all be so excited to see their own photos".

"Don't worry, Snow White," the clerk said, "Someday your prints will come".

Tuesday, May 20, 2008
Broken Down

Hi! This is Ginny.

John's computer has decided that it does not want to work.

I think the squirrel in the wheel has died.

He will be back on line when he gets it fixed. (The computer is number 6 in the lists of things which recently have decided to not work.)

JUNE

Saturday, June 14, 2008
Still Broke!!

Hi again from Ginny.

Thursday, Donald replaced the power pak in John's computer. He said, "that should have fixed it." Turned it on; nothing. We are waiting for him to cannibalize a different computer for other parts that will fix the rest. Computers are wonderful things as long as they work right!!

So today, John and I cleaned up the area near us that our Neighborhood Watch had planted Crepe Myrtle trees. The trees are blooming in a profusion of white and red flowers.

John has discovered a sure fire way to fix plumbing problems -- buy a new house.

In the midst of all this, God is still in His Heaven and we are all right.

Tuesday, June 24, 2008
I Am Up And ...

I can't say I'm up and running.

Up and wobbling along may be a more accurate description.

About six weeks ago my computer's power source overheated and melted little yellow plastic gizmos (capacitors?) inside the mother board. The heat corrupted hard drive files.

Bad news.

My son Donald, a computer network manager, worked long and hard to resurrect my hard drive.

Alas to no avail.

So last night he installed this new computer for me. He's done a terrific job of establishing me in the computer world from scratch again. None of my work would be possible without him.

This new system is like having a brand new notebook without a single word in the pages.

The endless possibilities of the blank pages stretch before me and I puzzle over how to start all over again.

While the computer has been down, I've kept busy. Here is a photo of my To Do List from last Thursday (The Ls in the margin indicate stuff I needed to climb a ladder to do).

Well, I can't post the photo. I can't make my FTP Server take a photo. I tried to do it both through Blogger and as a Contribute web link and I can't make either one work.

Ah yes, those endless possibilities of a blank page.

I need to go back to Computer Kindergarten and learn how to write cursive again.

Do you know how to make an M?

And last Saturday, Ginny and I, along with other members of our Neighborhood Watch Group, tended the strip of crepe myrtle trees we planted at the entrance to our community:

I'll post a photo of the beautiful trees too - once I learn to make an M.

I suppose my having no access to a computer for the past few weeks may be a good thing because I've been in such a slump that anything I might have written would hardly be uplifting for readers.

Yes, a few days before the computer overheated (lucky it didn't set our home on fire), I entered one of the deepest darkest mires of depression I can ever

remember. I wallowed in feelings of bitterness, resentment, worthlessness and apathy.

A sad state for a Christian --or anybody.

When I'd think, "Christ died for you", my response would be, "So what".

The only prayer I could pray was, "Lord, I'm such a mess. Help".

That's not a happy state from which to write uplifting stuff for other people to read. Reading a phone book would be more inspiring than anything I could have produced recently.

So it may be a good thing that I did not have access to a computer to write anything because I'd be tempted to either ooze bitterness or to fake a happy faith and I really want my writing about Christ to reflect what is, not what ought to be, the way things are with me, not the way things should be.

Nothing in particular triggered my depression's start; and I can't pinpoint how or why I've begun to come out of it last week.

Just something I have to endure, I suppose.

However, during the past week four odd things happened which spark hope inside me:

1. The Old Woman's Socks

Patricia, my youngest daughter, phoned. She works as a medical lab technician in another city.

We have not talked about matters of faith for ages and I suspect that our belief systems are quite different. She's a vegetarian and I think she subscribes to the fringes of New Age philosophies and lifestyle. Whereas I'm just a common Christian.

At her lab, she seldom has direct contact with patients, but late one night she happened through the waiting room and found a despondent old woman who ought not to have been in the building.

Patricia struck up a conversation and listened to the old woman's woes. The old woman said her

biggest trouble was that she could not get her socks off.

My daughter knelt in front of the heavy old lady and started to peel off the dirty socks.

Immediately Patricia realized that the socks had bonded to the woman's skin and that the lady's feet were so corroded that maggots worked alive in the dead flesh.

To peel off the socks would have stripped raw meat from the woman's feet.

It appeared to be gangrene.

Patricia called her supervisor at home and they made arrangements for the old woman to be admitted to a hospital where Patricia continues to check on her progress.

I'm so proud of Patricia.

Several people in the lab had commented on this smelly, stinking old lady, but Patricia was the only one to knell before her and check her feet.

So, my daughter and I are not on the same page in the theology books. I hope I would act with the compassion that she shows.

She humbles me and I'm proud of her.

2. I Got Caught And The Girl Hugged Me

Last Monday my eldest daughter Jennifer drove me grocery shopping.

Leaving me to shop, Jennifer went next door to a shoe store (Poor child really needs another pair of shoes to add to the twenty-eleven pairs she already has!)

Anyhow, as I placed my groceries on the conveyer belt at the checkout, a girl ahead of me in line ran into problems with the cashier. The girl, obviously one of the nouveau poor, was trying to buy baby food with WIC coupons (a sort of food stamp for new mothers).

The tired cashier grew impatient at the girl's fumbling (actually the cashier acted like a snotty bitch) and she called over the manager to berate the young mother.

I saw what was going on and I remembered back to the days when we were poor and Ginny had to use WIC coupons to buy baby food for our children.

The cashier and store manager were being unnecessarily harsh with this young mother who did not know the ropes of government charity.

I continued unloading my cart on the conveyer but when I thought no one could see me, I surreptitiously did the girl a small kindness and went back to unloading my groceries.

Jesus said there are certain things we should do secretly and that's what I tried. I did not want to embarrass the girl; I wanted what I did to pass unnoticed.

Really, I did try to hide what I'd done but the girl's mother, who was standing to the side, saw me and after they had left the line, she must have told the girl.

The young woman ran back, threw her arms around me, hugging me, crying and thanking me profusely.

Of course, right then is when my Jennifer showed up again just in time to see this young woman kissing her doddering old father in the grocery checkout line.

Jennifer didn't have a clue as to what was going on.

But, alas the bagboy in the next line did.

He too had observed me and came over to say how he was impressed by such a small act of kindness. Tears flooded his eyes.

Really, it was nothing, but the bag boy said it was the kindest thing he'd ever seen anybody do.

I thought he was going to hug me too.

I'd never make it as a bank robber; I can't do anything without getting caught!

3. By The Garbage Truck At Dawn

Hot Florida sun warped the old planks in my friend's pool deck.

She decided to replace the wooden deck with one of poured concrete.

The concrete men ripped the old deck apart and dumped the lumber at the curb for the garbagemen to haul away. But city regulations require that nothing in the trash can be over five feet long or weigh more than 40 pounds.

The old planks sat there at the curb uncollected.

This peeved my friend.

She called city offices about the delay in trash pickup.

Then one morning last week, a city crew arrived at 6 a.m. and began loading the old planks into the back of the garbage truck.

My friend, still a trifle irate about the collection, went out to supervise and make sure they did it right. She notice that while the crew worked, the driver withdrew off to the side and stood with his head down as though mulling something over, debating something with himself.

After some internal struggle, he timidly approached and said, "Lady, I need to ask you to forgive me. I've been resenting you because you called the office to complain. Please forgive me".

Shocked, my friend realized that she also harbored resentment toward the garbagemen over the delay in collection.

She humbled herself and asked the garbageman to forgive her.

The two stood there beside the garbage truck at dawn forgiving and being forgiven.

Such is the Christian life.

4. I Forget What Number Four Is...

Oh yes, I remember now.

Several times recently I've struck a match and lifted the flame to my pipe for a smoke only to hear the pipe gurgle because I forgot to fill the bowl with tobacco.

Disconcerting.

While my computer has been down I spent several days trying unsuccessfully to solve a plumbing problem.

One day I thought I had the bathroom sink drain working. I turned on the hot water to test it. I gathered up my tools and took them outside to put away in the shed. I stopped to prune a dead limb off a tree. I ambled over to talk across the fence with a neighbor. I checked the pool filter and carried a book over to...

Did I turn off the hot water spigot?

I couldn't remember.

Back inside the house the hall carpet gave me my answer -- it squished beneath my feet.

The water overflowing onto the floor was cold. The hot water heater tank holds about 55 gallons. I'd run it all , and then some, onto the floor.

What a mess.

Another night I went into the kitchen to cook dinner.

I opened the meat tray to find it empty???

I distinctly remember taking the meat out of the freezer.

What had I done with it?

I remembered reading cooking instructions on the label. I intended to put it in the meat tray to thaw. But I'd put it right back in the freezer instead of in the thawing tray.

The meat remained a solid white, icy clump.

We ate sandwiches and soup that night.

At my age the specter of Alzheimer worries me.

Ginny and I've been married close to 40 years; she'd notice any strange gaps in my behavior.

I asked her, "Honey, do you think I'm loosing my mind"?

She pondered my question for a moment then said, "With you, Love, that's kinda hard to tell".

Thursday, June 26, 2008

Thoughts On Lost Files

Of all the people mentioned in the Bible, the Prophet Jeremiah would best understand how I feel about loosing my computer's hard drive and all the files on it.

About six weeks ago my computer's power source overheated melting little plastic yellow things inside and corrupting the hard drive.

This hard drive contained 20+ years of research, notes and partially finished book manuscripts. The notes for one historical novel alone ran close to 900 pages.

Yes, I made backup discs for some things, but I have not kept them up-to-date. I'm constantly going back and forth between files and writing projects to refine them, so who knows what I backed up or when.

My son Donald, a computer whiz, cannibalized parts from several different old computers to build the one I'm writing on this morning. He put a lot of anguished labor into getting me online again; but he has not been able to resurrect my old dead hard drive. Looks like the stuff that was on there is lost forever.

Loosing all this material leaves me in a quandary.

When Donald first told me that he may not be able to restore my files, the news stunned me.

My thoughts ranged from bleak despair - *All my work, all my life, has been worthless or God would not have let it all be destroyed* - to a feeling of freedom's elation - *I can retire! No more sitting for hours at the computer till my tailbone aches! I'm free!*

I questioned whether losing everything was from the hand of God, Who might not want me mudding up His reputation with my writings; or from the devil who fears truth; or whether my trouble might just be a normal vicissitude of life that everyone endures.

I thought of flood victims along the Mississippi River who are losing their homes this week and of forest fire victims in California who see their homes and everything in them burn in a matter of seconds this same week. And I compare their great losses to my pain at just losing a few computer files.

Then I thought of the homosexual guy I talked with over breakfast Monday in Dave's Dinner; he'd just come from the funeral of his partner of 22 years. What is my loss compared to that poor bastard's?

Damn, but I'm self-centered!

I also remember William Carey's example. He's known as the Father Of Modern Missions. He served in India for 40 years beginning in 1793. A master linguist, Carey translated the Bible into 34 languages; and he worked by lamplight while his wife, driven insane during a cholera epidemic, raged violently in restraints in the next room.

And he worked without a computer.

If I read the record correctly, (I included a chapter about him in my book *Strangers On The Earth*). about 1830, the house caught fire and Carey rescued his wife and let ten of his Bible translation manuscripts burn to ashes.

He started to reproduce those manuscripts by hand all over again from scratch.

When his manuscripts burned, Carey said, "I wish to be still and know that the Lord He is God, and to bow to His will in everything. He will no doubt bring

good out of this evil and make it promote His interests - but at present the Providence is exceedingly dark”.

So California fire victims and Mississippi flood victims and the homosexual guy and the missionary all lost things important to them. I should feel ashamed of my self but I feel my loosing my work to the computer crash more keenly than I feel their losses.

That’s cause I’m me.

What should I do now?

Then I remembered the Prophet Jeremiah.

The word of the Lord came to him saying, “Take thee a roll of a book and write thererin all the words I have spoken unto thee...”

Jeremiah dictated to a scribe named Baruch who wrote a scroll 35 chapters long and sent the scroll to King Jehoiakim. (The Bible story of what happened is found in Jeremiah, chapter 36).

“Now the king sat in the winterhouse in the ninth month and there was a fire on the hearth burning before him”. As the long scroll was unrolled, the king took out a penknife and sliced off sections of the parchment as he read them and fed them into the fire.

I think this is the only place the Bible mentions a penknife. In ancient times writers sharpened quill writing pens with a small knife, hence the name. The penknife was also used to erase mistakes by scraping the lampblack ink off the surface of a velum skin.

Just thought you’d want to know.

Anyhow, the king fed every inch of Jeremiah’s manuscript scroll into the flames “until all the roll was consumed in the fire that was on the hearth”.

And Jeremiah did not have a backup disc.

Yet, “The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, after that the king had burned the roll... saying, ‘Take thee again another roll, and write in it all the former words that were in the first roll which Jehoiakim the king of Judah hath burned....

“Then took Jeremiah another roll... and wrote therein all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire; and there were added besides unto them many like words”.

Yesterday, I spent hours trying to recover files from years of backup discs.

A daunting task.

Jeremiah’s story aside, I still wonder if it’s worth the effort.

Friday, June 27, 2008

I Have These Needs

Yesterday as I shuffled backup files from old discs onto the new computer, I chanted a litany of needs.

I need this missing folder. I need that file. I need that photo. Where is that graphic file, I need it. I need to remember where this goes. I need another disc. I need a PDF copy. I need a hard copy. I need...

I kept saying and thinking things like that all day long.

My whining about my needs triggered a memory of a missionary story that I heard years ago:

A missionary to some impoverished third world country was invited to conduct a revival in a remote village. After days of travel through rough terrain, he arrived in the backcountry and was greeted by the local Christian pastor.

The pastor escorted him to a hut to stay with a church family.

Their poverty astounded him. Yet they generously gave him their only egg for supper and the father chased a goat out so there would be room on the floor to spread a sleeping mat. The large family gave him the best they had to offer in the way of hospitality.

Late in the evening, his host led the family in prayer and as they bedded down around a log fire on the floor, he drew the missionary aside and made a gracious offer:

“If there’s anything you need, anything at all, just let us know and we can show you how to get along without it”.

Monday, June 30, 2008
Our 39-Year-Long Honeymoon
Continues

Our 39-Year-Long Honeymoon Continues. Who would have thought a love affair could last so long and continue so intense?

This Fall we will celebrate our 40th Anniversary.

Ginny and I have no idea why our relationship flourishes as it does. We don’t feel as though we do anything special or different from other couples, but something clicks for us. We think we are recipients of God’s grace.

Most of the day Saturday we sat in our garden watching the grass grow and the birds fuss at feeders while we talked, continuing a conversation we started in 1968.

We compared the relative merits of white grapes and red grapes. We compared the relative merits of various presidential candidates. We talked about the ambitions we had as highschool students and how life dealt us a different hand from the one we expected. We talked about books and movies and tv shows and vacation plans and home repairs and sex problems and picnics and crime statistics and how computers have changed our life.

Then we floated on air mattresses in the pool holding hands and talking about animals and our children and insurance policies and changes in our garden and how June Cleaver, Beaver’s mother on 1950s tv, dressed in heels and pearls to vacuum her house.

While Ginny, across the yard from me, attended to Fancy, her caged bird (named for Fancy Feast Cat Food), I watched her work and offered prayers of thanksgiving. That such a beautiful woman could love

me is the mystery, glory and secret joy of my life. Ginny is the best thing that's ever happened to me.

We drove to Crabby Ben's for a late seafood lunch. We carried our books inside and sat munching fried shrimp while reading and ignoring each other in companionable silence. Gin read a murder mystery set in Martha's Vineyard; I read a book on Florida paleontology.

I laughed on reading an explanation of how one fossil pit on our west coast contains the bones of land dwellers such as a giant, 20-foot-tall sloth and a smaller tree-dwelling sloth, as well as the bones of bison, oxen, armadillo, and saber-toothed cats mixed with the bones of marine creatures such as whales, sharks, catfish and turtles. Land and sea creatures all mixed in one fossil layer.

The book speculates that one day the land animals, including tree-dwellers, decided to swim west in the Gulf of Mexico and they all were attacked by sharks or drowned.

That's so much more reasonable than attributing such fossil beds to Noah's Flood, isn't it?

I form a mental picture of a sloth climbing down from a tree and going swimming with a burrowing armadillo.

Oh well, to each his own.

As Sunday's highpoint Mark and Eve invited us to dinner and to see the new condo they moved into two weeks ago. It's a charming new home for them as they begin their fifth month of marriage.

This week Mark received word of a promotion increasing his responsibilities, authority, and pay check.

Three Cheers For Mark!

My computer was down for six weeks, so when I checked my accounts I was surprised to find that my books from my on-line book catalog have continued to sell - without my supervision.

I don't know how they could do that without my checking on them daily.

As an extra surprise, last week I received an unexpected royalty check from a company for an edition of one of my books published in the Philippine Islands a couple of years ago.

Honestly, I'd forgotten that book even existed till I got this check for it.

Could it be that my work carries on without me?

Just before my computer burned out, I investigated marketing plans to sell my books. For my local history things, I thought of placing ads on local restaurant placemats. I'm not sure if that's the way to go or not.

When I made some calls, I found that placemat marketing can prove expensive.

No Problem.

Money is no object ---

My wife works.

JULY

Tuesday, July 01, 2008

Jesus Does What?

Last night, as Ginny and I drove home from the grocery store, I prayed about a temptation I'm struggling with.

Yes, that one.

I've alternately wallowed in or relished this thing for years and years and years.

As I prayed, the watermelon we'd bought bumped around in the back of the car as we crossed the railroad tracks to our house. I know how that watermelon feels - Headed home but getting jostled and bumped on the way. And likely to bust wide open.

I wondered why Jesus doesn't deliver me from temptation? He's the Savior, why doesn't He swoop down in a burst of light and a mighty "Shazam!" and save me from all the things that bug me?

But He doesn't.

Or at least He hasn't so far.

I have a bone to pick with Him - That's what they call prayer.

Anyhow, my questions reminded me of Neal, an Australian guy I haven't thought about in years.

Back in the 1970s I ran across Neal as I was doing some sort of volunteer social thing for the Salvation Army; I forget just why I was there, soup kitchen work or something of the sort. Not important.

But at the time I felt more religious zeal than I do now and I was - can you believe it - interested in street preaching.

What a hoot.

I am the shyest, most retiring, most timid, guy you'd ever want to meet.

I can speak to the public in a tightly controlled environment (I memorize every word I'm going to say beforehand) but to speak to strangers !!! It would take an act of God for me to venture something like that --- That's where Neal came in.

It just so happened what while I was at Army Headquarters this guy from Australia shows up to train Salvation Army staff members in an unusual technique for street preaching. Neal represented an Australian evangelistic group called Open Air Campaigners.

I have no association with the Salvation Army beyond occasionally washing dishes at their mission, but an officer invited me to sit in on the training session.

Neal's gimmick was to set up an artist's easel in a park and begin to paint pictures that illustrated Bible stories; as folks gathered around to watch him paint, he would tell the story.

I only saw him do this once because he was only staying in Jacksonville for a day or two. But the concept of what he did clicked with me and eventually I tacked together an easel of my own and used stick-figure drawings as a crutch to talk to people who watched me paint. Did that as a hobby for several years... (That's another story).

Oh, I should also say that I have no association with Open Air Campaigners either; Neal was the only one of these folks I ever met.

What made me think of Neal as I prayed about my temptations was what he told me about how he was delivered from being a roaring drunk to becoming a Christian.

He and some drinking buddies in Australia, I forget which city, saw this guy painting a picture in a park. They realized the guy was a do-gooder of some kind and decided to heckle the preacher.

Neal told his buddies, "Watch this. When that guy says that 'Jesus saves', then I'm going to yell, 'Saves From What'. And when he says, 'He'll save you from the bottle', I'm going to yell, 'He can't save me from this one, cause it's empty'. And I'll turn it up to drain the last drop, then throw the bottle at his head. That'll teach him!".

Sure enough , in the midst of the preacher's message, he shouted the magic phrase, "Halleluiah, Jesus Saves".

Neal yelled, "Saves From What"?

And the preacher yelled back, "He'll save you from whatever's got you licked".

Neal's bottle never got thrown.

Friday, July 04, 2008 **Just Call Me Leo**

I can't do it today because today is the Forth Of July, but as soon as the courts open Monday morning, I intend to file and have my name legally changed.

For the past couple of days I've been treading water waiting to hear from Donald to find out whether or not he can restore my old computer hard drive.

What I do next depends on what he says.

I'm sorting out where my life, as far as work is concerned, should go from here.

I've decided to be rich.

That's how I came up with this name change idea.

It will be hard to fit my new name in full on a book jacket, should I continue to write. A few inconveniences always come with fortune.

But with all my wealth, I'll manage.

So, come Monday morning, I'll be sitting on the courthouse steps waiting for the doors to open.

I'll file to have my name legally changed to - get this -- Leona Helmsley's Favorite Dog.

Oh, if you haven't been following the news, in her will the late hotel heiress Leona Helmsley left Eight Billion Dollars to dogs.

As soon as my name change goes through, I'll petition the courts for my money.

But I won't get swell headed; after Monday, you may call me Leo for short..

Our Fourth

Well, forget about my name change. Somebody else beat me to it. They will get the Eight Billion Dollars.

Did you know that there is now a law firm named Dog, Dog, Dog and Dog?

Ginny & I enjoyed a quite happy Forth of July in our own backyard. Mostly we just talked.

When I calmly observed that life is unfair and spoke about reality as I perceive it, she called me down about my perceptions.

She said, "John, you hold a Black Belt in sniveling".

Nevertheless, I took her on an outing Sunday.

We drove to Fort George Island to visit the ruins of the Kingsley Plantation, which date to the 1790s. Here are a few of our photos:







When we returned home we found a dozen of our Nightblooming Ceres flowers had begun to open.

Since these flowers only bloom one single night and wilt away at sunrise, a bunch of us gathered in the dark on our back deck to watch the flowers open.





Monday, July 07, 2008
Another Thing About Our Fourth Of July

This is almost a non-event.

But...

A few weeks ago Ginny found a computer thing laying on the grocery store parking lot. I think it's called a zip drive, about the size and shape of a disposal cigarette lighter; it plugs into a computer USB port and holds scads of files.

Ginny brought it home and Donald hooked it up to a computer to see if he could identify the owner and we could return it.

Turns out the thing contained many military files. Obviously it had been lost by someone stationed at a local base.

Donald discovered the name of the officer - lets give him a good biblical name... say, Zechariah - and we looked for that name in a local phone book. Called the number. Got a recording saying no incoming calls were accepted.

We tried several ways to get in touch with this officer but no luck.

I tried contacting the base locator office, the chaplain, and the base computer security lab - no luck with any of them.

Then a new phone book came out. We had an address.

My daughter Eve drove me by there and the house looked abandoned so I left a note in the door.

Sunday when we returned from our outing at the Kingsley Plantation, there was a message on our phone answering machine. Zechariah responding to my note on his door.

He'd been out of town and was on his way to the base to hunt for the very files we held. He said these files were vital to his teaching a class for pilots tomorrow.

Since I had not been able to locate the disc thing's owner, I'd been tempted to overwrite his files and replace them with some of my own but because I know what pain it is to loose computer files as I did and have been bitching about for six weeks, I held on to this officer's files without disturbing them.

He drove immediately to our house to pick up his computer drive. He was very thankful to have them back because he needed them for his pilots' class.

Those files may make a big difference in somebody's effectiveness in our military.

Ginny, Donald, Helen, Eve and I all feel good about the tiny bit we did to support our troops – and we all feel that it was cool for all this to work out on the Fourth Of July weekend.

Tuesday, July 08, 2008

Little Things

Ginny spliced a couple of vacation days onto the Fourth of July holiday to give us an extra long weekend together. So naturally yesterday she spent the day working in one room and I in another.

We'd take breaks to drink coffee together, otherwise we might as well have been on different planets—True Companionship.

We each concentrated on little things.

She repaired a zipper, rolled coins from her change jar, sorted a boxful of brochures from historical sites we've visited over the past couple of years—Little things like that, things she's meant to do for ages.

I also concentrated on little things.

Little things which can infuriate me!

For instance, the automatic em dash function on this new computer. The stupid thing changes what I feel to be the correct formatting of the em dash into one that looks unprofessional and wrong and cheap and amateurish and tacky!

Tacky! Tacky! Tacky!

Now, not everyone knows the difference between en dashes and em dashes; but when you look at a page where they are misused, you get this vague feeling that “something doesn't look right”.

The fact the this new software “improves” my writing style by automatically changing the way I use an em dash right into a wrong use of this punctuation—and will not let me change it back—drives me nuts.

And I can't find my *AP Style Manual* to check.

I spent a couple of hours obsessing over this problem yesterday.

A pox on all their houses!

Ginny says to ignore this little thing and get on with my work.

She says she hopes this is the biggest computer problem I ever face.

No sympathy from that quarter.

But I think small things are important.

I believe it was John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, who said that while we may avoid "big sins" like murder and such, but that "little sins, respectable sins" usher us into Hell by the backdoor.

In the Bible, the Prophet Zechariah asks, "Who hath despised the day of small things"?

And remember that poem, about the kingdom being lost "For want of a horseshoe nail"?

Anyhow, Ginny and I each worked on separate small things all day Monday.

In the afternoon as we floated on air mattresses in the pool, we noticed another little thing:

No less than eight birdhouses surround our large backyard.

Not a bird lives in a single one.

And we paid good money for those cute little houses.

Stupid birds.

But, Saturday, after finishing up yard chores, I hung my gardening hat on a nail where we hang pool towels to dry...

Under the watchful eye of the lizard on the downspout, guess what a couple of wrens did...



See the rascal?

In my hat!

Here's an enlarged photo:



Reminds me of the immortal words of Dr. Seuss:

**My teeth are gold.
My hat is old.
I have a bird I like to hold.
And now my story is all
told.**

Wednesday, July 09, 2008
They Used To Call Them Lucifers



Since I began smoking 50+ years ago I have used large wooden kitchen matches to light my pipe.... Although I do recall once, when I was out of matches in the small hours of the morning, I got down on my hands and knees to light my pipe from the pilot light of a gas water heater.

I own a windproof Nimrod lighter which my son Johnny gave me about 35 years ago; I carry it in my pocket at all times in case I want to light up outside on a windy day. But, to me, all lighters make my pipe tobacco taste like lighter fluid, so I prefer wooden matches.

Some wooden matches strike anywhere; others only strike on the side of the box. Problem with the strike anywhere matches is that they strike anywhere. I've even had them catch fire in my pocket. The neat thing about strike anywhere matches is that, to show off, I used to snap that white match head with my thumbnail, or on the enamel of my front teeth, or even on the zipper of my pants.

How macho is that?

When I find them, I buy matches in quantity because not all stores carry them anymore. Periodically, I decorate tin Altoids boxes to carry my matches in; usually the decoration has to do with some writing project I'm working on.

Because I've been working on a history of the local fire department, my current matchbox features a striker on the bottom, a Currier & Ives fireman on the outside cover, and a young lady in (well, mostly in) a red negligee on the inside cover.

Yesterday, I opened a new case of matches to fill my tin matchbox.

The case label has changed.

No longer am I lighting my pipe with a match.

No, the new label informs me that I am using a **Diamond Ignition System**.

What nonsense!

What's wrong with calling a match a match?

For some reason the names of things are no longer the names of things. When I worked as a janitor, I was called a janitor; now the guy doing that same job is called a maintenance engineer.

The word *Hero* no longer means "a man distinguished by exceptional courage and nobility and strength... A champion: someone who fights for a cause... a person of great strength and courage celebrated for bold exploits".

Now tv reporters use the word "Hero" to refer to the a guy who phones for an ambulance at an accident scene.

Words are watered down to become essentially meaningless.

For instance the noun *God*. A specific name for a specific person has been diluted to mean almost any vague, hazy, fuzzy mist which seems more or less nice.

I've even heard preachers speak of "the Christ Event"!

They seem to be talking about a situation when a borderline supernatural entity initiated its transgression adjustment mode.

That supposedly clarifies what the old English Bible means when it says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself".

Oh well, I've been sitting at this computer for a while now. Time to take a break and use a Diamond Ignition System on my pipe.

Maybe that term is not so bad. In 1827 when chemist John Walker first produced usable wooden matches, they called them lucifers.

Friday, July 11, 2008
Loafing With Jesus

I heard a joke when I was in the Boy Scouts 55 years ago.

It must have stuck with me because yesterday reminded me of it.

Seems this kid owned a dog with a long tail. The kid wanted to shorten the dog's tail but he didn't want to hurt his dog too much.

So .he cut the dog's tail off—an inch at a time!

Today, I am that dog!

Back on June 24th I tried to post a scanned photo of my To-Do list to show how busy I'd been working and what a good boy I am.

Then, I could not figure out how to post a picture with my new computer—but I can now:

This feeling is a satanic trap.

I feel I should get a lot accomplished because I'm me.

I treasure such high expectations of me that when me fails to meet them, me disappoints me and guilt ensues. I feel crummy because I'm me and I expect so much of me because I'm secretly great. And I could show it if I could get done all the stuff I want to get done.

Does that make any sense?

Yesterday as I berated my self for not being Superman, the devil whispered in my ear, "Work for the night cometh wherein no man can work".

I thought that was a Bible verse, but it's not. I believe it's an old Puritan motto. But it condemned me nevertheless. I want to get stuff done! None of this inch-at-a-time crap!.

I want it done and over with.

But as I fumed in frustration, a real Bible verse came to my mind:

King Solomon said, "There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labor".

And here I've been pushing and straining so I can scratch another chore off my list.

That's a hard way to live.

Then came to my mind the words of Jesus, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy; my burden is, light".

Well, that's fine for Him to say. But I've got things to do. Important things. And I'm not getting them done. Work is piling up on me.

Looks like if I'm doing God's work, then I could expect a little help down here.

Am I doing God's work?

Apparently not.

I'm tacking my own projects and plans onto His coattails like a KICK ME sign.

He doesn't play my game.

That's why I get so frustrated.

So, just what is God's work?

When some folks asked Jesus that very same question, He said, "This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent".

Oh.

That's something different from what I had in mind.

All this stuff is too deep for me. So I shut down my computer and read a murder mystery all yesterday afternoon.

Relax.

Jesus said it's ok.

One thing did get accomplished late yesterday afternoon.

A young lady from our neighborhood crime watch came over and crafted some flyers advertising a local history speech I'm scheduled to give next week. I have not mastered this new computer's different way of doing things so I doubt if I could have produced the flyers without her help. Thanks, Twila.

Monday, July 14, 2008
Tears At Breakfast

Ginny and I went out for breakfast Sunday at the Country Kitchen Restaurant.

At one point during our meal, I glanced up to find her looking at me intently.

Immediately I assumed something was wrong.

I asked her what was wrong with me.

Have I dribbled egg down the front of my shirt?

Did I miss a spot shaving?

Is there something in my hair?

Ginny said, "Nothing is wrong. It's just that sometimes I enjoy looking at you".

Her answer stunned me.

I started crying.

Tuesday, July 15, 2008
Old Things

An ox shoe.

A Civil War sword.

A penny minted in 1848.

A World War I artillery shell.

A 10,000-year-old spear point.

A shotgun used to repel looters after the 1901 fire.

Last night, at a MED Neighborhood Crime Watch meeting, I gave a talk on the history of Jacksonville.

I let the small group handle a bunch of rusty old artifacts which I've accumulated over the years. Some of the stuff came down to me from my parents through both branches of the family; other artifacts I've dug up in my studies of Jacksonville history over the years.

I enjoyed giving my talk and the small audience laughed in all the right places.

Speaking of old things, this month I turn 69 years old.

This month also Ginny has a birthday; she's 60 years old—Plus shipping and handling.

And this month both our son Donald and his wife Helen also celebrate birthdays; so we'll have a collective birthday party for all concerned next weekend.

I think we're all getting older, enjoying life now, looking forward to more of it, satisfied to die—like kids at the airport playing games, running around, having fun, playing tag, having a blast while waiting for their flight to leave.

Whenever I give my history lecture, I always close with the story of Mrs. A.B. Anthony who lived in Jacksonville during the 1888 yellow fever epidemic which killed one out of every ten residents.

I do not know the name of the richest man in Jacksonville in 1888.

I can't remember the name of the mayor.

I can't remember the name of the governor.

I'd be hard put to name the president of the country in 1888.

But I remember Mrs. Anthony.

She owned a cow.

During the epidemic, while people died all around her and the city threw bodies into mass grave pits, every morning she'd go out and milk her cow. She take the bucket of milk and a tin dipper and go from house to house giving sick people a drink of milk.

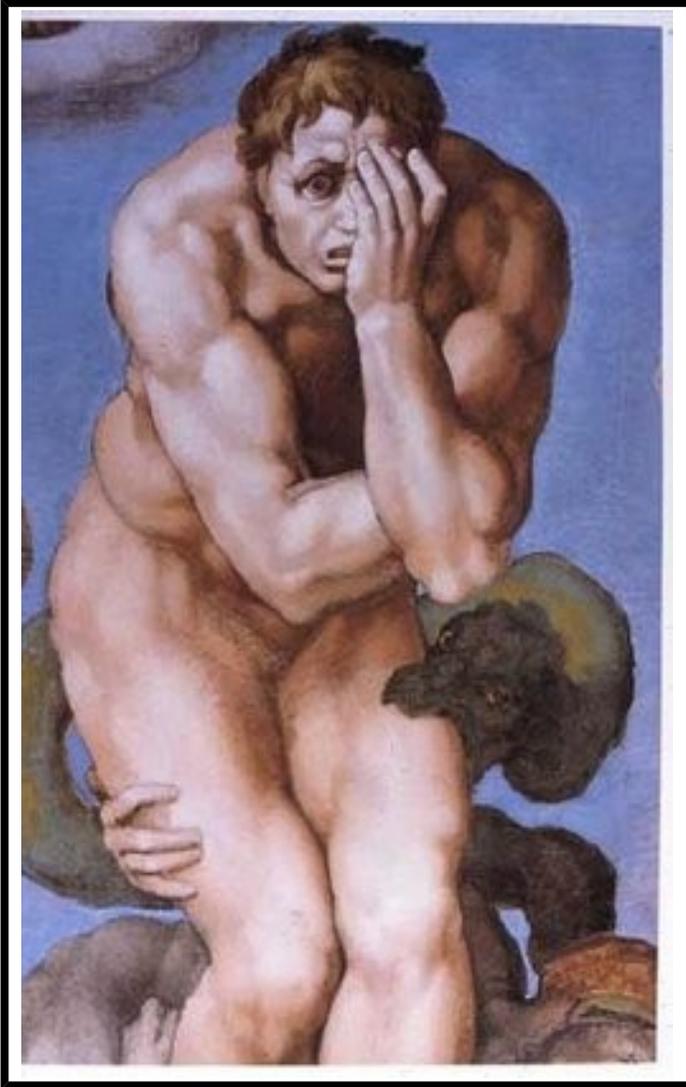
While wars abound and politicians politic and actors act, it is little acts of kindness that really count in the long run.

While hatred may make headlines, love makes history.

As the Apostle John said in his old age, “Little children, love one another; for love is of God”.

Wednesday, July 16, 2008

Where The Worm Never Dies



The day after my mother's funeral, Ginny, our four children, and I had to move from the house we'd rented for nine years.

Our landlord sold the house and our deadline to move fell the day after the funeral.

We did not have a place to move to.

Oh, we'd searched for a new house, but deal after deal fell through. We actually packed for two contingencies: one, if we found a different house to rent; the other, if we had to live in our car.

Yes, things were that bad for us.

We really faced having to abandon all our household goods and live in the car.

How we got a house to rent for the next ten years through the help of U.S. Congressman Charles Bennett is another story, but the things I'm thinking about this morning are regret, remorse and forgiveness.

These topics cropped up in conversation yesterday when my friend Wes took me out for breakfast.

We each talked about things in our lives which we regret. To regret is to mourn the loss of something precious to you. Although Wes is much younger than I, we are both men who have suffered loss.

Our losses make us the men we are today.

We concluded that following Christ has proved costly for us, and that to this day we regret some of the things we gave up thinking that God wanted us to—Whether He did or not is another matter, but it seemed so at the time; although now I suspect that we, or at least I, gave up stuff in misdirected zeal that had little to do with devotion to Christ.

Wes teases me for being overly pious saying I have higher standards for myself than God does.

When I speak of stuff we gave up, I'm referring to good wholesome things which we chose to bypass in favor of some perceived future good.

I think you'd call that being pious snots.

However, the losses we regret give us an appreciation for the skills and talents of other people. For instance, when I was younger I aspired to become an archaeologist, a passion I deliberately set aside. I regret losing that vision but having once had it

makes me appreciate what people in that field of studies are doing today.

When Jesus spoke of taking up a cross daily and following Him, I wonder if on a shallow level, our regrets are our daily crosses.

Maybe it's just me, but in my own mind I confuse and mingle **regret** (mourning the loss of something precious to you) with **remorse** (a gnawing distress arising from a sense of guilt for past wrongs).

Not only do I regret loosing something, but I also wallow in self recrimination feeling that it's my own damn fault for having lost it.

Double whammy there.

Gnawing Distress and I are old friends.

I always wonder what I should have done different.

Jesus spoke sorrowfully of a place of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, "Where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched".

At my age I no longer have enough teeth left to gnash, so I'm home free in that regard, but the worm part I know all too well.

With my conversation with Wes fresh in my mind, last night as Ginny and I entered a restaurant after a library trip, across the parking lot, I saw a woman I thought I knew.

On second glance I realized it was not her.

But I cringed and my heart had dropped anyhow.

Which brings me back to the events around Mama's death and funeral.

My father was an only child. He only had one cousin.

Mama had slews of brothers and sisters and a huge extended family who all remained close often visiting and eating together and holding crowded family reunions.

All these people gathered at Mama's house before and after the funeral.

As they caught up on family news, they boasted about what good jobs they had, and their new cars, and prosperity, and influence with companies where they worked, and rental properties they owned, and that sort of thing.

Being desperate to find a place for my family to move to, I buttonholed each one individually asking for help finding a job with their companies.

Every single one refused me.

I spoke about renting one of their houses—I had the cash—and was told that they would not rent to me because “HUD people are too dirty”.

After the funeral party broke up, everybody went to their own homes and I went to see my friend Congressman Bennett who, in twenty minutes, used his influence to locate a home for my family. We moved in the next day and lived there for the next ten years.

For years and years and years after Mama's funeral, not a single person from Mama's extended family visited, or phoned, or even mailed us a Christmas card.

I felt that during a time of trouble all these people had left us to die beside the road.

Not one person from that close extended family contacted us in any way.

I wrestled with a certain amount of bitterness.

Actually a lot of bitterness.

Back when Mama was alive and any one of these people were in trouble, they often called on me to change a tire in the middle of the night, or mow their grass or bring in groceries or lend them money or help move furniture or visit the jail.

I always went and did what I could for them.

Then—nothing.

I imagined they were afraid I might ask for money or something although I never even once had before.

Well, Ginny and I fended for ourselves. We established our home and raised our children and lived our lives with no help or even a word from the extended family.

Then, a few years ago, one of them called wanting to reestablish contact.

How was I to react?

After years of silence, he wanted whatever-the-hell-he-wanted.

Closeness?

Family ties?

He expected to be welcomed with open arms.

I treated him with cold courtesy.

That was the best I could do.

I am not a warm person in any circumstance, but I treated him with the same courtesy I'd treat any other stranger.

In my prayers I had forgiven these people for deserting us and leaving us to die beside the road. I wish them every one well but I do not wish to get involved with them socially. If one of them called on me, I would help to the best of my ability. But, I would remain stand-offish and regard them with deep suspicion, expecting to be hurt again.

I don't intend to let that happen.

I've wondered about forgiveness. When I forgive someone, does that mean I still have to associate with the bastard?

Does forgiving someone mean you have to feel warm fuzzys toward them?

I do pray for them occasionally; "Lord, bless them and keep them—Keep them far away from me"!

I know. I know. --- "Forgive me my trespasses as I forgive those who trespass against me".

Easier to say than do.

So in the years since Mama died, I've not tried to establish any contact with relatives. I'm not sure I could handle it.

I did go to the funeral of one of them—but only because I needed to talk with a rapist I knew would be there.

I wanted to talk with him about forgiveness.

It was my duty....So I did it.

But, the worm never dies.

So, what am I to do with my thoughts about regret, remorse and forgiveness?

When Jesus took me on, He got a whole can of worms in the bargain.

Don't know for sure, but I imagine He gets that mix with everybody.

One word of comfort comes to my mind, the words of the Apostle John, who was known as the apostle of love:

"If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things... And this is His commandment, that we should believe on the name of His son Jesus Christ, and love one another".

Yes. That's the ticket...If our heart condemn us...

Worms are for fishing.

Thursday, July 17, 2008
The Din Of Iniquity

No. That is not a misspelling.

Although yesterday Jacksonville police raided a whorehouse not far from here (see news report at <http://www.news4jax.com/news/16903466/detail.html>) I'm not writing about that den.

The word **din** I'm using means "a continual noise, a welter of discord, a noise which annoys with insistent repetition".

It's something you hear.

And yesterday I heard plenty.

It started with our Neighborhood Watch's tire drive.



The streets in our neighborhood form a giant horseshoe. Fifty-seven houses line this horseshoe. For various reasons

nine of those houses sit empty at the moment. That leaves 48 occupied houses.

Many of us have accumulated old tires in our backyards because you have to go through such a rigmarole to get rid of them.

So, as a public service, our Watch group plans to collect old tires around the neighborhood and arrange for the city to haul them away.

To notify folks about this project I printed up a flyer and yesterday I delivered it, going from house to house all around the horseshoe.

As I walked, a number of people stopped to talk with me.

I heard and saw a lot.

No one stipulated that what they were telling me was told in confidence, but by it's very nature, I feel I should not repeat specifics, but speak in generalities.

Mostly I heard the din of iniquity.

Tale after tale of sin in the world, in our little horseshoe, and its dreadful, awful repercussions—the widespread, indirect, unforeseen effects of our actions.

No, I heard no tale of murder or bank robbery or child molesting; the iniquity I heard about were the common, everyday evils that form the whitenoise in the background of our lives.

I encountered homes stricken by cancer, stroke, heart disease, alcoholism, or drug addiction. I came across cases of agoraphobia, people terrified of

leaving their houses. I encountered squalor and poverty and unemployment. I encountered an old woman terrified of dying. I heard tales of couples breaking up—one guy left his wife to shack up with her grown daughter from a previous marriage. Tales of backbiting and bitterness; of elderly grandparents being saddled with raising bastard kids; of rebellious teens stealing their parents blind; of bickering and squabbling, of bipolar disorders and insurance policies being canceled, of car wrecks and gas prices and ...

I encountered human misery.

Man that is born of woman is few of days and full of troubles.

We live in a fallen world that is still falling; we haven't hit bottom yet.

Somehow, we have the idea that wickedness originates from some super villain. We think of wicked being like the Joker, Batman's nemesis, or of Blowfeld (that's not spelled right), the archfiend enemy of James bond. We think of Hitler or Attila as being wicked and full of iniquity.

But the big guys have no corner on sin.

The truth of the matter is that sin is in the world, in my city, in my own little horseshoe, in me.

Christ came to save us not only from sins but from sin, the underlying condition of the world.

I know that.

I know that the Gospel message is that the love of God is shown towards us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

I know that in my own life, He has blessed me with a quiet life of love with my books and my wife, that He gave us a home in this horseshoe as an island in the tar pit.

I know that I represent Him here where I live even though I am in no way a worthy representative. My own overall sin and sins disqualifies me from that honor; yet, here I am.

But yesterday's walk house to house in the neighborhood listening to strangers who confided in me just because I'd listen, this walk confronted me with the fact that I do little to alleviate the daily misery that seethes around me.

People might think I'm a religious fanatic.

So I say little and watch them suffer.

Instead of proclaiming the love of God and the delivering power of the Lord Christ here in the horseshoe, I plant trees, give history talks, and collect old tires.

My friend Wes, who is much more evangelistic than I am, says, "John, we've got to cure you of this social activism; all you're doing is trying to make the world as nice a place as possible for people to go to Hell from".

He says that most human misery comes as a natural consequence of our rebellion against God.

He's probably right..

But as for me, I hear the din of iniquity all around me, and I turn the TV up louder to drown out the sound.

Friday, July 18, 2008

Why The Big Spoon?

Thursday morning I researched sources for a precise word and for an obscure Bible passage, but I couldn't find either one.

I need to learn more about dictionaries and God's word. Frustrated at research, I gave up and read a murder mystery. Heavy rain outside made for happy, drowsy, cozy reading inside.

Then a thought nagged me.

I feel I need to clarify two things I wrote yesterday.

First, I wrote of myself as a representative of Christ. *Representative* is not quite the right word; it

creates a mental image of someone important, like an ambassador in tux with a red sash across his chest presiding at a state dinner in the embassy.

That's not me.

A better term might be *salesman's sample*.

I am a *salesman's sample* of Christ's. Something a salesman might pull out of his case to show potential customers the manufacturing process.

It's not the finished product but gives customers a general idea of how the product is made..

Take what can be done with old tires for example.

The salesman wants to promote a finished product such as surgical gloves or garden mulch or road paving material or a cutting mat for your kitchen. So he begins by pulling out a handful of shredded rubber which was once a castoff tire and he explains the manufacturing process as he tells how "Green" his product is because it recycles old tires and turns them into something useful.

That's what I was trying to convey when I said I represent Christ; I don't represent Christ; I represent what He can do with an old tire off the junk heap.

He specializes in that sort of thing.

That's what He does with people.

He displays samples to show what He is able to do with the lousiest material.

It's the sick who need a Physician, not the healthy.

In one speech, Moses told the people, "Thou art an holy people...The Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto Himself above all people upon the face of the earth".

That's something to brag about... Or is it.

Then Moses told them why they'd been chosen.

He said God chose you not because you're great but because you are the lowest, sorriest, most stiff-necked, piss-poor, no good, sorry, no-account,

complaining, aggravating , annoying, hard-hearted people He could find.

He chose you not because you are worthy “But because the Lord loved you”.

He chose you to show what He could make of such cast-off material.

The above is not an exact quote of the words from Deuteronomy 7, but you get the gist of what Moses said.

That idea comes again and again in Scripture: that God chooses people not because they are superior but because they are pathetic.

In his very long speech, about ten chapters long, Moses went on to say, “The LORD thy God is among you, a mighty God and terrible...The LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward... He is thy praise, and He is thy God”.

The whole thing is not about us, but about God.

Of course Moses was speaking to Jews fresh out of Egypt; but years later, Saint Paul said much the same things to the Christians at Ephesus.

He said that God saves us not because we’re great guys, but because He scrapes the bottom of the barrel.

Paul characterized the saved as the lowest, sorriest, most stiff-necked, piss-poor, no good, sorry, no-account, complaining, aggravating , annoying, hard-hearted people God could find.

Paul says we were putrefying dead and breeding maggots, children of disobedience, living in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, children of wrath.

“But God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, hath quickened us together with Christ and raised us up together and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus... We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus...”

Salesman’s samples.

God shows off the raw material and what He's doing with it, how He's recycling us and creating beauty out of ashes.

To scrape the bottom of the barrel for His raw material, God used a tool.

Think of it as the Big Spoon.

Had He not been going for the very bottom, He would not have needed the Big Spoon.

Christ died on that Big Spoon.

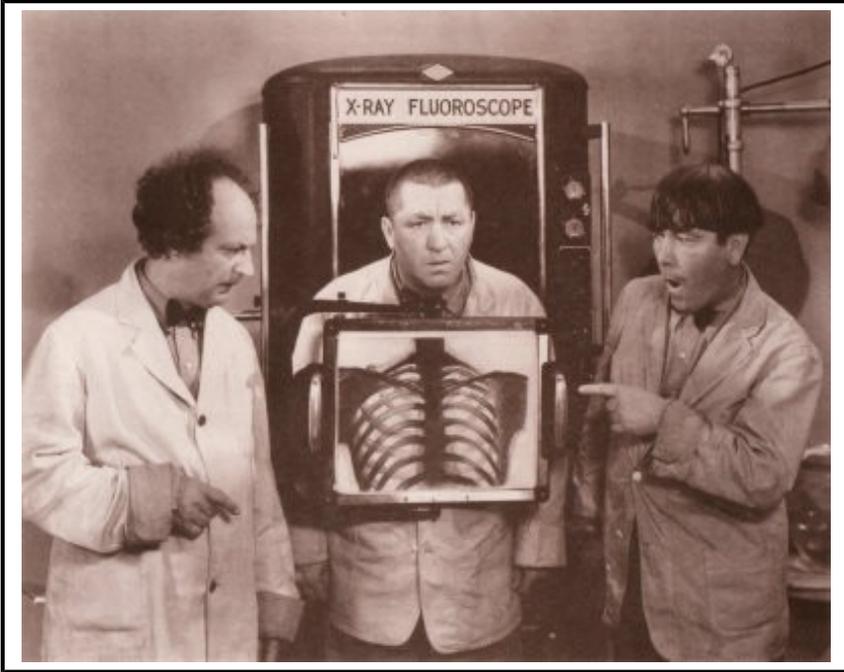
It's called a cross.

The second thing I'd like to clarify from what I wrote about yesterday concerns old cast-off spare tires.

The old tire collection I'm helping with is a public service for my neighbors; I assure you that no old tires clutter my own backyard garden. I keep my own yard clean and trimmed.

The only spare tire at our house is the one around my waist.

Saturday, July 19, 2008
Medical Options



Friday I accompanied Ginny to Dr. Woody's office where he gave her a number of options about treating her diabetes.

The current treatment she's been on is not proving as effective as we'd hoped.

So Dr. Woody presented her with several new options to think over before choosing one. We'll go see him again in three months, so she has plenty of time to decide which path among the several available she wants to take.

Used to be a doctor would hand you a pill and say, "Swallow this; it's good for you". Now the rage in Jacksonville medicine is to let the patient chose which of several treatments is best.

I imagine that's so that if you get sicker, the doctor can say, "Well, you can't blame me. You're the one who picked the treatment. It's all your own fault".

Back on March 30, 2007, (see my archives) I recorded how I made my own decision among six or eight options for treating my prostate cancer.

Ginny faces that same sort of decision with her diabetes.

Here's one funny incident related to medical options:

Once, quite a while back, Ginny and I talked with Dr. Woody about my erection problem. He outlined for us five or six treatment options then he said, "You two can choose whatever works best for you. I'm flexible about this".

I replied, "That's the whole problem. I'm flexible too".

The three of us broke up. We laughed so long and so hard that a nurse rushed into the treatment room to see what was wrong. She charged in all set to do battle to protect her doctor. That set the three of us to laughing even harder.

My but we have fun at the doctor's.

Yesterday was not that much fun.

Ginny faces some serious decision making.

When we left Dr. Woody's, we shopped for a birthday present for our daughter-in-law, then we went to lunch at Chick-Fil-A, a fast food place, where we lingered talking about options for about two hours.

During the afternoon, Ginny wanted some alone time to mull things over.

I made one suggestion, then left her alone to think.

Whatever she decides, I'll back her up 100%.

Later in the day, I showed my support for her decision-making process.

Did I encourage her to read the Bible, fast and pray and seek God's will?

Not exactly.

For her comfort, what I did was put in a DVD movie, *Men In Black*, a 1934 movie in which the Three Stooges play the part of doctors, for her to watch and enjoy.

That was the most Christian thing I could do.

Monday, July 21, 2008
A Quick Note

Ginny & I missed our own birthday party Saturday.

Our eldest daughter hosted a party for us, Helen and Donald because we all four have July birthdays. It was also Jennifer's own housewarming party to show off her new home.

I had prepared one of my little illustrated devotional talks which I usually give on such occasions—when I have a captive audience.

But, Alas...

But just as we got ready to walk out the door to leave, Ginny suddenly got sick and we missed the party. I felt inclined to call rescue for her but she decided to tough it out on her own.

She's feeling better at the moment but she still had to stay home from work this morning. She'd had a doctor's appointment Friday morning and Dr. Woody took her off some prescriptions and started her on new ones.

Whether or not stopping and starting the medicines may relate to her getting sick, or whether she just caught some bug—We have no idea.

Many family and friends have called in or popped by to check on her. They brought in food, especially chicken soup, and presents from the party.

Long ago Ginny and I talked over and agreed about procedures to follow in case of sudden illness for one or the other so such a thing would not catch us by surprise.

Anyhow, this illness of hers proved to be more of a nuisance than anything else.

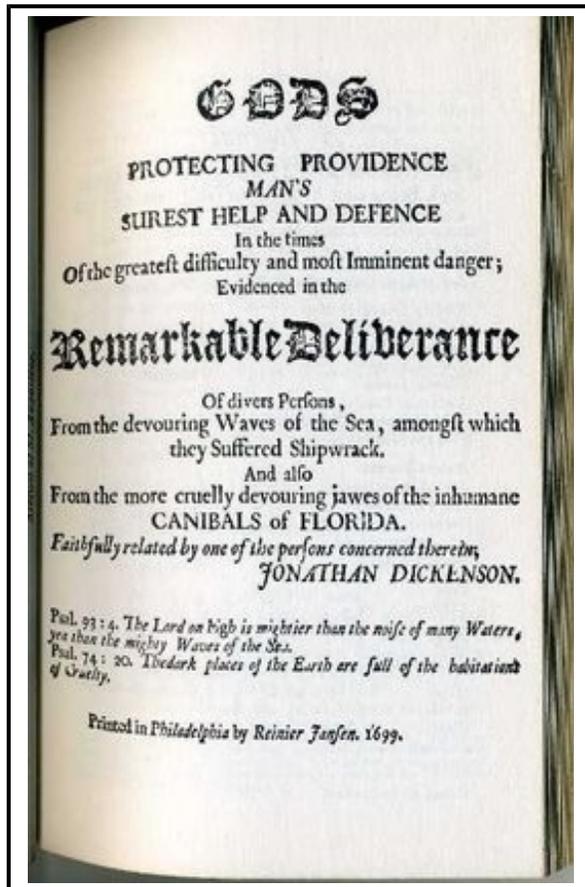
Love is not always candy and flowers, although these certainly have their place; sometimes love means holding her hair out of her face while she vomits.

I've discovered that as a nurse, my compassion and concern, my pity and patience, for the afflicted one lasts for about the first 30 minutes of the illness.

After that it's all grudging duty.

Wednesday, July 23, 2008
Seven Months Naked On The Beach

Tuesday Ginny felt well enough to return to work; I could have resumed work also, but instead I spent the day reading a book she gave me for my birthday—a reproduction of Jonathan Dickinson's 1696 *Journal*.



Wow! What a great book!

Dickenson (or Dickinson, he spelled it both ways) was a 17th Century Quaker merchant who sailed from Jamaica bound for Philadelphia. He kept a daily record of his adventures. His *Journal* was published in 1699 and went through numerous printings.

On September 23, 1696, a hurricane drove Dickinson's barkentine, *Reformation*, aground near what is now Jupiter, Florida. Waves battered the ship to pieces. Dickinson, his wife and their six-month-old son along with about 25 other people survived the shipwreck.

But on shore, hostile Indians captured them and stripped them naked. The Indians stole all their clothes so that the cloth would not get bloody when they killed the shipwrecked people.

For seven months, the party, under hourly threat of death, was passed from one band of Indians to the next as the naked survivors struggled to walk along the beach 230 miles north to the Spanish colony of St. Augustine.

In his *Journal*, Dickinson recorded their faith and privations in broiling Florida sun, amid clouds of mosquitoes so thick the naked people buried themselves under beach sand to sleep and through the inch-thick ice of a winter Nor'Easter. Sharp shells shredded their bare feet and sawgrass sliced their legs as they trudged through deep mud of marsh and tangles of mangrove roots with Indians prodding them at spearpoint whenever they stumbled.

Though the Indians refused them food or water, clubbed them, or held knives to their throats, the Quakers refused to lift a hand against the savages; instead they relied on God to move the hearts of the savages—and He did.

Dickenson's *Journal* records numerous incidents of the party being saved from savages intent on killing them.

"The hearts of all men are in the hands of God," he wrote, "And He can turn them as He pleases. When these man-eaters' fury was at height, their knives in one hand, and the poor shipwrecked people's heads in

the other; their knees upon the others' shoulders, and their looks dismal; on a sudden, the savages were struck dumb, and their countenances changed that they looked like another people..."

Although shortly before, the Indians had killed, cooked, and eaten a party of shipwrecked Dutchmen, this time, for no apparent reason—except God's hand—the savages abandoned the intended massacre of Dickenson's group.

Twice in my own life I have seen the hearts of mobs intent on harming me turned aside from their purpose by the hand of God without my lifting a finger; That's an awesome thing to have happen. Made me feel a bit eerie.

Five of the Dickenson party died of exposure on the trek north, but not a one fell to the "canibals".

On another level, Dickinson's *Journal* records details he observed about how the Florida Indians build houses, danced, brewed beer, smoked tobacco, treated the sick and weak among them (not good), and obtained food (few of them practiced agriculture).

Dickinson's *Journal* is the best extant record of Florida Indian life during the late 1600s.

After being relieved of their sufferings by the Spanish governor of St. Augustine, the Dickenson party continued north to Charleston, South Carolina, by canoe. They crossed the mouth of St. Johns River between present-day Mayport and Fort George Island, just a few miles from our home. Ginny and I visited ruins on Fort George Island back on July 6th (*Our Fourth* in my blog archives). Sawgrass marshes the Dickenson party crossed show up in some of the photos we snapped.



But at the time of our visit I didn't associate Fort George Island with the Dickinson *Journal*.

Shows how much I know about local history..

Anyhow, Tuesday I read this wonderful book in one sitting, too fascinated to put it down.

Ginny certainly knows what it takes to spark my fires.

Thursday, July 24, 2008

Serf In Training

Yesterday I wrote about Jonathan Dickinson's 1696 horrific trek along the beach of East Florida. Ginny gave me a reproduction of his *Journal* which was published in 1699.

Then, last night our daughter Eve and her husband, Mark, came over and gave me a compressed gas Space Pen from NASA's Kennedy Space Flight Center—which now sits on a stretch of beach which Dickinson's party passed in privation after their shipwreck.

Mark and Eve toured the NASA facility over the 4th Of July weekend.

So, from 1696 shipwrecks to modern-day moon shots, I'm well supplied with related souvenirs.

I think that's so cool.

Mark proved himself to be an astute listener last night. In only a few minutes of conversation, he isolated and identified a writing problem I have struggled with for a month without being able to even state my own problem. I've percolated it again and again but I've just been too close to it to see what's been wrong. He offered several practical suggestions and I'm indebted to him.

He also said that my seemingly insolvable problems may be the result of God's gently nudging me in a different direction.

Why didn't I think of that?

Speaking of a different direction: This morning I published two brief items, one on an incident in Jacksonville history, the other a biographical sketch of Christian mystic Madam Jeanne Guyon, in KNOL , Google's new on-line encyclopedia which was just launched today.

No. I'm not authority enough on anything to be contributing encyclopedia articles anywhere, but no one else had touched on these subjects in KNOL yet, so I exercised my vanity just for the fun of it.

Ginny and I have begun CERT training classes; CERT stands for Community Emergency Response Teams. The idea being that in a massive catastrophe (such as a hurricane, nuclear attack or major industrial accident) police, firemen, and other first responders may be overwhelmed and not be able to get into isolated neighborhoods.

Therefore, Jacksonville's Emergency Management authority, is training civilians to put out fires, rescue victims from collapsed buildings, render emergency medical aid, and things of that sort.

One funny thing; Ginny and I are both soft-spoken people, so when we told Mark and Eve about our

training to be “CERTS”, Mark, who is involved in role-playing games set in Medieval times, thought we’d said “SERFS”.

“You’re training to be serfs!???” he exclaimed.

We got a good laugh over that.

I think Mark’s training to become King.

He’d make a good one.

Saturday, July 26, 2008

If I Had A Basket...

Woke at 3:30 this morning and began cleaning out a desk drawer stuffed with old papers. I wanted a quiet project so I would not wake Ginny that early.

As I sorted old papers I came across a copy of the Burns Depression Checklist. Dr. David D. Burns is a professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the Stanford University School of Medicine; he pioneered in the field of cognitive therapy.

I tossed the checklist in the trashcan.

Then I thought better of it and pulled it out again.

I answered the test questions.

My score shocked me. I scored off the chart in severe depression.

If you’d have asked me if I were depressed, I’d have answered, “No. I’m fine”. But as I reviewed specifics, I realized that the only thing that keeps me from being an emotional basket case is that I don’t have a basket.

Later in the morning, when Ginny and I ate breakfast at Dave’s Diner, I told her my findings. She attributed my depression to the recent crash of my hard drive causing the loss of tons of work. “I could tell that really threw you for a loop,” she said.

But as we talked, I realized that the current bout of depression goes back long before my hard drive fiasco.

Like a boat with a slow leak, I've been gradually sinking. Nothing so dramatic as hitting an iceberg like the Titanic, just a slow, almost imperceptible settling lower and lower in the water.

For the next in my Dirty Old Man series of books I think I'll use the title *A Dirty Old Man Sinks Lower*.

Ginny says that I've struggled with depression for the 40 years we've been married and that she knew she was getting damaged goods even before she married me. She compared my depression with her diabetes. "You can't cure it," she said, "But you can manage it".

Even with all that, she says I'm a fun guy to be around.

Sometimes.

Looking back over my past journal entries, I see the current bout with depression may have started as long ago as last September or October. But it's grown so gradually that I did not realize it was returning.

I keep this journal to show what the Christian life is like for one lone guy—Me. I don't presume to show what the Christian life is supposed to be, but how it works out for me. And my postings are evangelistic only in the sense that I want to show someone who is thinking of becoming a Christian what they may be getting into.

Mostly, I write for myself and for the kid in the attic who may come across my old journals 50 years from now.

So, I'm beginning to realize that recently I've been struggling with symptoms of depression without addressing the causes. My conversation with Mark, my son-in-law, the other night and the Burns test this morning have been an eye-opener for me.

Yes, Mark is a young whippersnapper, but he's a wise young whippersnapper.

While I've been aware of a vague sense of *something's not right*, now that I see I'm depressed, I can take steps to fight it. The thing just snuck up on me; I'm so low in the water that I see fish swim before

my eyes and I wonder what they are doing up here in the air.

Like the old country/western song says, “ I’ve Been Down So Long, It Looks Like Up To Me”.

But the first step toward solving a problem is knowing there is a problem.

Only the sick seek the Physician.

This brings me to the question of how a man as sinful (see numerous former postings) and depressed and messed up as I am dare claim to be a Christian?

Doesn’t Jesus save and satisfy?

Doesn’t He generate instant purity?

Doesn’t He solve all your problems?

Not necessarily.

I draw comfort from an odd source in the Scripture: the first few verses of the very first book, *Genesis*...

“And darkness was upon the face of the deep... And God said, ‘Let there be light’... And God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day”.

Ok, there are only 24 hours in a day.

Everyone knows that.

But half of those 24 hours are hours of dark.

Yet the whole shebang goes by one name—Day.

And we all say that—Only 24 hours in a day.

So, I think God looks at me and sees my darkness, my sins and my sin, and my depression, and my goofs, and my failings, and all my darkness. Yet He also sees His Son in me—Christ in you, the hope of glory.

And He calls the whole shebang by one name—Christian.

Because of His love, I dare to call myself by the Name.

No, I don't have a basket.

And, Thanks Be To God, I don't need one.

Wednesday, July 30, 2008
Catch-Up-Hodgepodge

Since my last entry exciting things, peaceful but interesting to me, have happened.

Ginny and I enjoyed a happy weekend just hanging out. Talking, praying, working in our garden. When I say working in our garden, I mean that we sat outside and talked about things that we could do in the garden, but we didn't actually do a thing but enjoy. Not a lick of work.

Last week I'd given her a cigar plant, a tall bush with bilateral fan-shaped leaves covered with small tubular red flowers. The guy I got the plant from said it would attract hummingbirds. And within three days of my replanting the bush in our garden, sure enough hummingbirds began to feed from it.

Also as we sat talking, an enormous red-shouldered hawk landed on a birdbath isolated in a corner of the yard and drank.

So from tiny birds to huge ones, we enjoyed their display.

We talked about coping with depression and I feel so silly for not recognizing how depression had gradually seeped into my mind. I've renewed some positive thinking techniques to combat that (No happy pills for me thanks). Already I see a marked improvement.

We talked about how life can change in a matter of seconds; a phone call, a winning lotto ticket, a traffic accident, a hard-drive crash. While Ginny and I resist change, we're quite happy with the way things are, we also prepare for it—at least the ones we can see coming.

We prayed the ancient prayer, "In Thy light, may we see light; and in Thy straight path, may we not stumble".

We reflected on how much our fortunes have changed in recent years. And we acknowledged that God is our ultimate source of provision. That renews our thankfulness.

One sad/funny thing happened at the grocery store:

The store offers discount cards; but you have to give the card to the cashier before she rings up your purchases or you don't get the discount.

I did not know this.

So, we are in the checkout line.

I'm at the front of the cart unloading groceries onto the conveyer belt; Ginny is at the back of the cart making out a check to pay.

She suddenly realized that we had not given the cashier the discount card.

Ginny began to wave the card at me and shout, "Give it to her! Give it to her"!

I did not see the card in her hand.

I had no idea why she was shouting at me.

Being a dirty old man, immediately my mind flashed back to a scene from porno movie about a fraternity party.

This threw me into great mental confusion.

I began laughing.

Ginny puzzled over why I was laughing about a discount card.

But with all the people around I could not explain until we finally got out into the parking lot and were putting our groceries in the car. My explanation tickled her and we stood there laughing like fools about the discount card and the porno film.

"Only you would think like that," she said.

That's one trouble with pornography, flashbacks occur at inappropriate times and places. As the Scripture ought to say, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they are nothing at all like John Cowart".

Ginny and I continue training for our Civilian Emergency Response Team. In teaching us how to deal with bombs and other explosive devices, our instructor said, "Stay away from it. Keep other people away from it. Or be a canary".

The canary remark refers to the old coal-miner's practice of lowering a caged canary into the mine to test for poison gas—The sensitive canary died first.

When one class member asked how close to the bomb is it safe to get, the lieutenant said, "If you can see it, it can see you".

That's something to remember.

Yesterday I had brunch with my friend Barbara White. I had not seen her for about six weeks; she's tied up ferrying her grown daughter back and forth for chemotherapy treatments.

Usually after a breakfast at Dave's Diner, we come back and sit in my garden to talk, but since the day was so hot we just stayed at Dave's for a couple of hours.

Nothing deep in our conversation. Mostly we talked about movies...

But when we began to talk about prayer, Barbara observed, "God has never once answered any prayer of mine that began with the word *Why*".

That's something to think about.

Thursday, July 31, 2008
Sex Photo

Caution: this post contains explicit material which immature readers may find too intense-- or will not understand.

Wednesday I devoted myself to mechanical clerical stuff designed to help me catch my work up to where it was last November.

This involved restoring files and reviewing time management and work flow charts; and here I once

thought that being a writer involved merely putting inspired ideas on paper.

Ha! Don't I wish!

For me, once an inspired idea clicks, for it to go anywhere, I need practical tools, such as the time management and work flow charts. Otherwise, it stays nothing but a pipe dream.

So, while I did clerical stuff, I ran Blogger Play on my computer. Blogger Play is a real-time slideshow of photos which bloggers all over the world post on their sites. It fascinates me to see what other people are posting. Some photos just sell shoes or oven mitts, others are lovely. Clicking any photo traces it to its source.



Thus, when this photo flashed across my Blogger Play screen, it reminded me of Ginny and me. The photo comes from <http://krazzypictures.blogspot.com/>

It reminded me of us because I think this photo shows both the way we really are and the way we see ourselves after 40 years of marriage.

Looking at the photo I recalled an odd phone conversation I had with a young lady acquaintance about six or eight weeks ago. I can't remember why she originally called me because I hardly know this

girl, but as we talked she felt free to ask me some personal questions. I don't know, but I think she used me as a sounding board related to some things going on in her own life.

Anyhow, she asked how many women I've ever had sex with.

What a curious question to ask a near stranger.

Maybe she felt free to ask because I am a stranger and because she felt safe.

I told her that I've only been with Ginny and my first wife.

"You've got to be kidding! How arcane," she said. "That's unheard of. You mean you've never had sex outside marriage"?

"That's right," I assured her.

"What about before you were married"?

No. I never did.

"That is so weird," she said.

She asked, "What's the matter? Don't you like sex"?

That question broke me up laughing!

This poor child had no idea. Not a clue.

For us, sex is mostly joy. Age, health and agility may temper some of the ways we used to perform, but we are creative people and find no lack of fun, joy, laughter and geriatric passion in our bedroom.

Of course I like sex. But we keep it to ourselves.

Now, I can't claim my own experience comes by virtue of being pure-hearted. Mostly it's because women have never exactly thrown themselves at me. Lack of opportunity does not rack up credit points in virtue.

"You mean, you've ever even been tempted," the young lady asked.

"Nonsense. Of course I've been tempted," I said.

I recall once when an attractive Christian girl and I were on the verge of going to bed together. We discussed it over coffee in her apartment and mutually decided that such an action would be contrary to our individual characters.

Another time, within five minutes of lift off, the girl's father interrupted us. I hate him—and I'm thankful for him.

I was faithful to my first wife as long as we were together.

And one reason I've remained faithful to Ginny is purely selfish—greater pleasure.

Just about anybody can plunk out *Chopsticks* on any old piano, but I've heard of a master concert pianist who ships his own Grand Piano from concert city to concert city. He keeps it tuned and polished and practices with no other. He could play some tune on any piano, but seeking the best, seeking perfection, he always plays his own Grand.

The young lady on the phone asked me if Ginny had ever been with any other man.

"Not that I know of," I said. "Of course I haven't locked her in a chastity belt for 40 years, but I'd be surprised if she had. She was a virgin when we married and I think that being a chaste person is part of her intrinsic character."

"You two are so quaint," the young lady said.

Way back when, Floyd, a crusty old truck driver, my mentor in driving 18-wheelers, told me, "The only pussy you'll ever regret is the one you didn't fuck".

As a Christian I hate to admit that there's a grain of truth in what he said, but there is.

I sometimes do regret that I did not take advantage of the few sexual opportunities I've had. On the other hand, I know of no marriage happier than ours, and I have no regret at all that I passed up on those other women.

Sometimes I think that the love Ginny and I have been given is what everybody else in the world is looking for.

So I look at this photo and think it represents the way we really are and the way we think of ourselves after 40 years of marriage...

Oh yes, by the way, it's the shadow figures that are our reality.



AUGUST

Friday, August 01, 2008

I See A Big Raw Frog

Once, when I faced the unpleasant duty of forgiving someone I did not want to forgive, my long ago friend Poke McHenry, a popular newspaper columnist, offered me spiritual counsel.

“John,” Poke said, “When there comes a time in your life when you absolutely have to eat a live frog raw, it’s best not to look at it too long beforehand”.

Well, for six or eight weeks now I’ve been looking at a frog.

Poke was right.

Eating the thing doesn’t get any easier by taking my time looking over the problem from every angle.

Therefore, I’m proud to announce that this past week I have eaten the raw frog.

My current frog relates to a book project I needed to restore after my hard drive crashed destroying hundreds of pages of work. I avoided the project for as long as possible but yesterday I completed reconstructing 246 pages of lost text.

This restoration has taken me all week long.

Because I hesitated to tackle the project for so long, it grew larger daily.

Eventually I faced eating an elephant-sized frog.

Still do.

All those 246 pages must be reformatted manually, one paragraph at a time.

I shriek!

But, as Jesus said, “Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof”.

I’m not to borrow tomorrow’s troubles, but take care of today’s.

I remember telling my children when they were in school and faced a science project assignment that overwhelmed them -

How do you eat an elephant?

One bite at a time.

So I find that I can’t look at this manuscript too long and that I need to eat my own words one bite at a time.

That’s where I am now.

The next step in the project daunts me, but I’ll tackle it.

Who knows, I may develop a taste for raw frog.

Yesterday my daughter Jennifer drove me around for some errands. We enjoyed lunch at Dave’s Diner talking about dog training. Afterwards, she bought me, among a basketful of other things, nine new goldfish to add to our aquarium.

They’re beautiful.

Yesterday also I learned ,from a blogger in Great Britain, about a huge religious meeting taking place a few miles south of here (everything in Florida is a few miles south of Jacksonville). I checked out several websites related to this event.

I’d approached those sites anticipating something good.

But the more I read about this event, the more creepy crawly I felt.

I see that event promoters can arrange flight and hotel reservations for people who attend the meetings. They recommend restaurants which offer special discount rates to attendees. They promote fainting at a leader’s touch, physical healings, book sales, tv reviews, DVDs and — Can I be reading this right???

--Encounters with angels,.

A bunch of people urge others to travel to Florida to see God in action.

And people from all over flock to this thing in droves.

As I read the material, listened to sermon excerpts, and viewed videos, that creepy crawly feeling increased.

Something Jesus said kept running through my mind:

“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 lightening cometh out of the east and shineth even unto the west; so shall the coming of the Son of man be”.

Humm... That puts a different light on things happening downstate.

God breaks in where we are at this moment.

We need not travel anywhere to meet the omnipresent God.

But what about seeking God?

If the Scripture teaches me anything, it's that God seeks me a whole lot more than I seek Him.

So, do I intend to drive even a few miles downstate into the desert of south Florida?

No.

So anyhow, I see I have this real big frog on my plate....

It's looking back at me.

Sunday, August 03, 2008

I Learn How -- After I've Done It

I've noticed this phenomena before:

I don't learn how to do something till after I've already done it.

Curious.

Work piled up so that Ginny and I decided to put in an extra work day Saturday. I don't know what she was doing in the other room, but I continued formatting that 246 page manuscript I mentioned Friday.

I reformatted it one page at a time till I neared page 188. then it occurred to me that if I selected a segment where I wanted to change to a different font. Then I could right-click and chose the option *Select Text With Similar Formatting*. By my doing that, and changing one font in one place, the computer changed every other place that same font appeared throughout the whole 246 pages.

All at once.

And here I'd been scrolling through text making changes one page at a time.

One paragraph at a time.

Thus, while the first half of the manuscript took me three days to format, the second half--once I learned what I was doing--was formatted in just seconds!

Isn't that amazing?

I did not learn how to do it, till I was almost through doing it.

Back when we installed the rain gutters on the house, I did not learn how to work the rivet gun till only a few rivets remained to be done.

In my faith, I remember time and again when I did not learn to obey Jesus till long after I'd already been trying to do it on my own.

Maybe that why He said for us to take up our cross daily and follow Him.

Maybe that's why the Scripture says we are to "Taste and see that the Lord is good".

Neither a step of faith nor a computer option makes much sense till after we're committed to doing it...

Which brings me to another subject.

My youngest son, Donald, and his wife dropped by yesterday to deliver a birthday present from our friends

Randy and Lisa. Ginny and I had missed our birthday party on July 19th. And Donald and Helen could not deliver the present until now.

Donald explained some research he's doing:

Back in 1926 a mathematician named Cunningham discovered that by taking the square root of any number and adding or subtracting the number one, you ended up with a number which can be factored. Donald is developing a computer cluster which can factor Cunningham Numbers...

Whoot?

Donald thinks that deserves a whoot anyhow.

I have no idea what he's talking about.

Another of his research projects involves linking eight camera's to a GPS system with a computer system, all aboard an all terrain vehicle. This construction drives into devastated areas after a hurricane or tornado to assess wind damage. The pinpoint information can be used for rescue, recovery and reconstruction as well as to formulate protective measures against future storms.

While Donald enthused about his research projects, I hurt Helen.

In conversation, I touched on a sensitive subject which pains her.

Instead of shutting my big mouth when I realized I was distressing her, I tried to expound and explain and elaborate -- thereby hurting her more.

I made her cry.

Damn!

I would not have hurt her for the world, I love Helen and value her as a great addition to our family.

Yet I bullheaded on keeping talking, trying to straightening things, making it all worse.

Damn!

Why can't I learn to shut up till after I've already spouted off?

I do not learn how to do something till after I've already done it.

Er... maybe that explains the gift Randy and Lisa sent to Ginny and me.

They gave us a copy of Burton's translation of the *Kama Sutra*.

Tuesday, August 05, 2008

Meeting Mike

Put a sword in Mike's hand, toss a bear skin across his shoulders, and you'd have a Viking warrior.

Salt and pepper hair tied back in a ponytail. Muscular arms. Solid stance. Rugged countenance. Chiseled features. Exuding power.

If I didn't know better, I'd think Mike posed for that picture of the emperor Charlemagne in the history books.

My friend Wes brought Mike over to meet me yesterday and the three of us went to Dave's Dinner (where else?) for breakfast then returned to my backyard to sit and smoke and talk about Christ.

I hesitate to meet new people. But Mike soon made me feel comfortable as he told about his own journey with Christ. He said that during the Viet Nam war he served America as a machine gunner on a helicopter.

He said that during that war only one of the enemy was killed for every 20,000 bullets fired. As a Marine slogan goes, "When in doubt, empty the magazine".

Mike referred to his time "in country" as a simple time in his life "because the only thing you worry about is staying alive today". He said he de-humanized the enemy so he had no qualms about firing on them.

But after the war, he and his ex-wife worked in Canada where he met a Vietnamese expatriate; they visited the man's home and had dinner with his family. Once the enemy had a face, I had to see him as a human being just as I am, Mike said.

“Wasn’t long after that that I began to read the Bible and pray—you can’t imagine how unusual that is for a guy like me—then I turned my life over to Christ and nothing’s been the same since,” Mike said.

He advised me to pay attention to my instincts. “Your instincts may not always be 100 per cent accurate,” he said, “But they are always good. So follow them”.

The Bible uses the phrase “Mighty man of valor” 37 times; after meeting Mike for the first time Monday, I form a better mental picture of what the Scripture means by that phrase.



The seal of Gedaliahu ben Pashur discovered in Jerusalem

Back on June 26th, I wrote comparing my own hard drive crash and loss of files to how the Prophet Jeremiah wrote a 35-chapter long scroll only to have it cut up and burned a strip at a time by King Jehoiakim.

Well, yesterday’s Google news (at <http://www.wnd.com/index.php?fa=PAGE.view&pageId=71386>) announced that a signet seal of one of the bad guys in that biblical incident, Gedaliah son of Pashur, *has* been excavated by archaeologists *in Jerusalem*.

Gedaliah and his wicked buddies dropped Jeremiah *into a cistern to drown, but the water was too shallow so the prophet wallowed in scum, slime and mire at the*

bottom of the well. That sort of thing was an occupational hazard for prophets.

In His own sweet time, God *sent some good guys with ropes to pull Jeremiah out of the well and stand him before the king to keep right on prophesying..*

Whenever I hear about any exciting archaeological discovery, it gives me such a kick. I envy the people honored to conduct such excavations. I wish I could be with them.

Oh, incidentally, the Prophet Jeremiah uses the term “Mighty Man of Valor” five times in his book, but he never uses it to describe himself; he only uses that phrase to point to God’s glory:

Thus saith the LORD, “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight”.

--- Jeremiah 9:23-26

A deep theological problem I have with the Prophet Jeremiah is that I never think of him without also thinking of the great 1971 Hoyt Axton hit song:

Jeremiah was a bullfrog,
He was good friend of mine.
I never understood a single word he
said,
But I helped him drink his wine.
He always had some mighty fine wine.

Sing it!
Joy to the world...
All the boys and girls now ,
Joy to the fishies in the deep blue sea
And joy to you and me.

I may not remember that Scripture quotation but that tune’s going to be running through my head all day now!

Wednesday, August 06, 2008

Triage

Last week as July temperatures soared above 90 degrees, our air conditioner broke. It sounded as though a helicopter had landed inside the house walls.

Ginny and I have been saving toward having the whole 20+ year-old system replaced but we can't afford to do that job yet.

After we weighed options about what to do for a long while, I called my former neighbor Rex, whose family moved out into the country a few weeks ago, and I asked him to come back and repair the AC for me.

I hated to bother him because he's in the midst of job changes, outfitting a new house, caring for an adopted child and an elderly mother-in-law, and preparing his old house for sale.

But in spite of his own full plate, Rex drove back into town immediately. He disassembled our helicopter, identified the problem (the thing he calls a squirrel cage is out of round and vibrates anchor screws loose), and repaired our ac so it will work for at least another couple of months.

Thank God for Rex! He's such a good neighbor to come at once and take such pains for us when he no longer even lives in this neighborhood. I don't know what we could have done without him; I have neither the strength to lift out the heavy machinery, not the sight to see into the dark crevices where the loose screws hide, nor the knowledge to fix the problem myself. Thank God for Rex!

He's a one cool guy who keeps us cool too.

Ginny and I attended another Civilian Emergency Response Team training class last night.

The evening's class covered disaster medicine triage, a heavy subject.

People are going to die in a major disaster.

That's a given.

Our training assumes that the number of live but severely injured victims will far exceed us amateur

rescuers and trained professional help will be a long time (maybe days) in arriving at the scene.

We are learning the START method of triage to give the injured the best chance of survival. Our goal is to do the greatest good for the greatest number as we race against the clock with limited non-professional resources.

The time element looms large because we'll have about 30 seconds per person to determine who among the injured lives or dies. We must evaluate, institute rapid treatment, and move on to the next person as quickly as possible.

Last night's training scenario involved the wreck of school bus with only 28 students aboard. In a major disaster of course there'd be many more victims needing immediate help. And you're working in a non-sterile, and maybe dangerous, environment.

If you spend too much time on Victim Three (say trying to give him CPR) , then victims four, seven, twelve, nineteen, and twenty-three may bleed out. START triage trains us to do what we can for Victim Three as quick as we can, then tag him dead, and move on to the next person trapped in the wreckage.

Heavy stuff.

It weighs on me that out of the 57 homes in the horseshoe formed by our street, Ginny and I are the only people who signed up for this training.

We'll do what we can for folks, but as our instructor said, "Sometimes, you just have to let 'em die".

As we studied the START triage method, I thought of the Rich Young Ruler told about in Matthew 19 and in Luke 18; Jesus gave him his best chance at survival but when the young man refused, Jesus let him walk away.

Jesus did not chase after him.

I've heard the idea of God pleading and pleading and whining for us to repent and believe on the risen Christ for salvation.

I doubt if that's a true picture.

Sometimes in the divine triage, He just lets us die.

In one place God said, "My spirit will not always strive with men". In another place the Scripture says, "Today is the day of salvation".

Triage is heavy stuff.

On a lighter note (this is for the Kid In The Attic)

My journal hardly ever mentions politics but there is a presidential campaign going on in the US right now.

The Republican candidate is John McCain; the Democratic candidate is Barack Obama.

I do not plan to vote for any Republican because I see them as consistently making life harder than it needs to be for poor people; I do not plan to vote for a Democrat because when I voted in the Florida Primary, the Democratic party refuse to count votes from Florida.

After the Florida Primary, I decided that I'd write in the name of some other candidate on my ballot in November.

Now, here's what's funny:

Last week the Republicans ran a political tv ad comparing the democratic candidate to media celebrity Paris Hilton, a young lady famous for being famous.

Essentially the Republican attack ad portrayed both the Democratic candidate and Ms Hilton as ignorant bimbos.



Photo from Ms Paris Hilton's Presenditail Campaign Ad on August 6, 2008

Well, this morning the articulate Ms Hilton, lounging in a bikini, responded by releasing her own campaign ad: It can be viewed on line at <http://www.funnyordie.com/videos/64ad536a6d>

Want to bet that many voters, disgusted with the political infighting of the major parties, will place her name on their ballots?

I will not make such a frivolous choice.

I think only fair that the other candidates deserve equal time.

When I see McCane and Obama in bikinis on tv, then I'll decide who to vote for.

Friday, August 08, 2008
Exemplary & Exhausted

During the annual job performance rating at her office yesterday, Ginny earned an **Exemplary** ranking, the highest any employee can earn.

I'm proud of her.

On the other hand at my work all I get is exhausted.

Dealing with my hard drive crash, I've done all I'm able to do to restore and reconstruct my manuscript on the history of the Jacksonville Fire Department. Prospects for recovering this book look bleak. So I've called in outside help, my neighbor's son Adam who recently graduated with a degree in computer science.

If he is not able to resurrect the files, then I'll have to scrap the project altogether; there's just too much material missing from years of research.

Last November I was within weeks of finishing the manuscript, even had the book cover designed; so I hate to scrap this book manuscript because some people already want to buy the book even though they haven't even seen a sample copy yet.

Ginny's exemplary; I'm exhausted.

But together, we're still one hell of a team!

Sunday, August 10, 2008

A Case Of Dozer Envy

When Rex moves, he really moves!

About six weeks ago my neighbor Rex began moving his family to a new home in the town of Macclenny a few miles west of Jacksonville. He owns some acreage out there in the pine woods where he's building a new home himself. He's building it from digging the foundations to mounting the chimney cap.

He has mechanical aptitude.

To landscape the new home, he decided to move some things to his new home before he rents out the old place in our neighborhood.

So Friday he showed up next door with a bulldozer.

A huge yellow machine with metal tank treads, a digging scoop on one end and a bulldozer blade on the other. With surgical precision Rex lifted three trees, a bunch of border grass, and a dozen hedge plants (each between eight and ten feet tall) out of the ground and placed them in a truck to transplant at his new home.

I helped out by carrying him a glass of ice water.

Mostly I just watched.

My camera is out by our fountain where I've been stalking the elusive ruby-throated hummingbird to snap a photo, so I missed taking a picture of the dozer in action.

Now here's the kicker.

Sid, Rex's son who is about seven or eight years old, tagged along to help. Rex has taught Sid how to operate this big yellow dozer. During a break, Sid explained to me how one lever lifts the shovel and another dumps it. He explained to me how the dozer will turn on a dime if you make one set of treads churn forward and the other set in reverse.

Rex had time constraints so neither Sid nor I got to work the dozer Friday, but Rex says that Sid can dig an adequate hole once they get home--- I emphasize that Rex observes every safety precaution and supervises closely as he teaches his son skills which he himself learned as a boy.

Over the years I have watched Rex teach Sid how to peddle a tricycle, ride a bike, drive a battery-powered ATV. What a great Dad. Sid is growing up with a sense of confidence and such a positive self-image knowing he is loved and protected and that he can do mighty things.

I never learned how to do stuff like that.

How I wish my Dad had shown me guy stuff like this.

I wish I could have passed on such skills to my sons and daughters.

I wanted to drive Rex's dozer and dig a hole myself so bad I could taste it.

A guy with that kind of dozer power at his finger tips must feel like Godzilla or the Incredible Hulk!

I wanted to try my hand at ripping up trees.

Wow! Picture me at the controls of a big yellow dozer.

How macho is that?

But, no time.

There was work to be done.

I didn't get to climb up to the driver's seat.

I never touched the controls.

I felt both disappointed and relieved.

Actually I was scared to touch the thing. Boy! Is that dozer loud.

So, I had to be content with letting a seven-year-old boy mater of factly explain to me how the big yellow dozer works.

Oh well, when it comes to gifts, God has endowed each of us with our own. When it comes to mechanical aptitude, I'm a whiz with a Scotch Tape dispenser.

Most of the day Saturday, Ginny and I lounged in the pool floating on air mattresses, holding hands, chatting, and napping.

We enjoyed lunch at Georgie's BBQ where we briefly talked with the manager, the guy whose heart red-lined once when we were there. I wrote about that back on July 29th "One Thousand And One..." and on August 3rd "Was It Something I Said" in 2007.

By God's grace a roomful of people jumped in to save his life.

I could not help but reflect on the difference between that situation of responding to an individual having a heart attack and the CERT Training we are taking to prepare for dozens or even hundreds of victims in a major life-threatening situation.

Our training gears us for major disasters such as an atomic bomb, a Cat Three hurricane, or a terrorist attack when there will be multiple victims in bad shape and no outside help can arrive for days on end.

In such scenarios, if we survive ourselves, our goal is to do the greatest good for the greatest number—Keep 'em breathing, Keep 'em from bleeding out, and Keep 'em from further shock.

And, of course, if the place is on fire, to Keep 'em from burning.

No CPR. No holding hands. No splinting broken burns —just do the essentials for as many as possible knowing that many others will suffer and die out of our reach.

I wish more people on our block had signed up for this training.

We have no guarantee that we will survive, but if by God's grace we do, it's going to feel awfully lonely out there.

Monday, August 11, 2008

Where To From Here?

This weekend I hunched over my computer keyboard trying to figure out where to go from here.

If our friend Adam, who recently graduated with a degree in computer science, can repair my broken hard drive, then I plan to finish the book on Jacksonville's fire department history. If the thing is too broken for him to restore, I've outlined another novel to write.

But, in outlining this novel and profiling characters and setting up scenes, I discovered that my initial premise is not true.

Bummer.

I attempt to be an honest man and enough false ideas float around in the atmosphere already, so it goes against my grain to promote an idea that I don't believe is true.

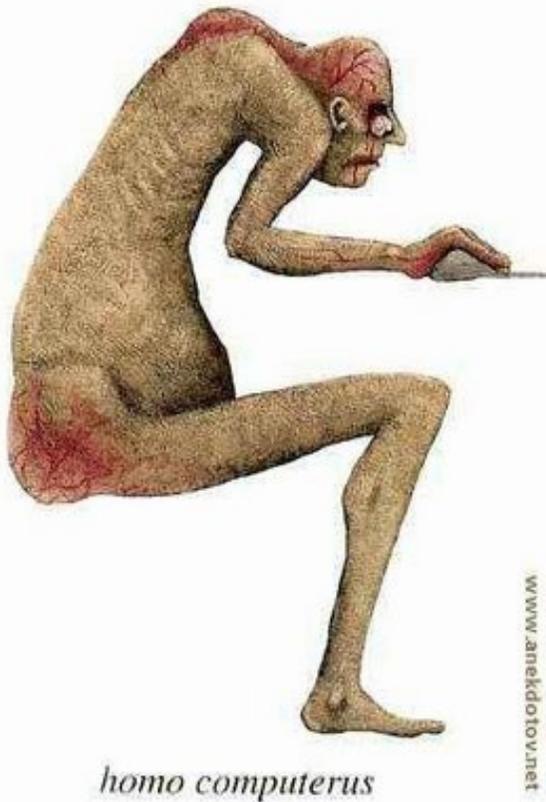
But this is a novel, a work of fiction. Nobody believes a make-believe story. Yes, a novel should be true to life, but it is a work of the imagine. The rabbits in Richard Adams' *Watership Down* act real, but no one is lead astray into thinking real rabbits talk.

Nevertheless, I feel uncomfortable promoting a false premise.

So, I hunch brooding over my computer, waiting for word from Adam as to whether or not he can restore my history files.

I've been at this thing too long.

I'm beginning to atrophy.



Tuesday, August 12, 2008
A Long Tough Day

Writers read.

Monday I finished reading *IT*, a 1,000+ page novel by Stephen King.

A writing handbook I'm studying suggested that the aspiring writer study and analyze a book by an admired writer, and Stephen King is the writer I chose because I consider him to be the greatest craftsman alive.

I think I've read every Stephen King book, fiction and nonfiction, available. My favorite is *Desperation*. But I chose *IT* to analyze because of King's large cast of characters and how he portrays them in the different ages of their lives.

My trouble with trying to study and examine a Stephen King book is that flow of his storytelling captures me so that I forget to analyze and just enjoy the story.

What a pleasure King is to read!

Over lunch at Dave's Dinner, my friend Barbara White and I discussed King's *Dead Zone* and marveled at his skill in foreshadowing events.

Barbara is retired religion editor of the local newspaper. Recently she spends a great deal of time ferrying her grown daughter, Mary, back and forth for chemotherapy treatments. I think Mary is on her fifth course of such treatments now and her doctor says she has lasted beyond the normal protocols for such treatments for small-cell lung cancer. He said she is on the outer fringes of treatment now.

Caring for her daughter exhausts Barbara.

I used my analogy of taking a loved one to a bus station or airport. And Barbara found it helpful.

You know, after you've packed everything, kissed and said your goodbye's, and driven to the station, and unloaded baggage on the platform, and read the bulletin board, and talked over last minute instructions... And still the bus does not come for another 45 minutes!

Those last dragging minutes debilitate anyone.

You love 'em, but you're ready for them to leave.

There is no lack of love in your impatience, only the weariness of hanging around the bus station. Or the doctor's office. Or the hospital room.

The guys at Dave's teased the restaurant owner about just turning 40 this past weekend. Chris, the head waiter, said, "You know you're getting old when this month's centerfold was born the year you graduated from highschool"!

Barbara came over and sat in our back garden talking as we looked for the hummingbirds to show up. Perverse birds never did.

We talked about Jesus' feeding of the five thousand and the nature of miracles in general. I kept thinking of the grand miracle—Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

We tend to forget that the biblical word translated *miracle* can also be translated *sign*. The things Jesus did were signs to point out who He is.

Yes, it is humanly impossible to return from death three days after crucifixion.

That's the whole point!

Humanly impossible.

Yet St. Paul declares that Jesus is declared to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead.

He is never presented as a local boy who made good as far as death is concerned, but Jesus is proclaimed to be God come in the flesh, Emmanuel, God with us.

What He did is the sign of who He is.

Monday evening Ginny and I attended a neighborhood watch meeting where she reported on our CERTs training.

Our guest speaker was Lisa who gave us some fine gardening tips then led the group on a tour of her lovely garden, a garden which puts mine to shame. We only toured half before dark fell, so I invited her to speak again and continue the tour at a future meeting.

As the glorious president, grand phewbah, and exalted leader of the group, I got to end the meeting with one of my wonderful jokes:

Ernie was a very wealthy man.

He could buy anything he wanted.

But, alas, he forgot his wife's birthday.

She was furious.irate! She dragged him to the living room window and pointed to the driveway. "Tomorrow morning I want to see my birthday present sitting right there in the drive," she screamed. "It had better be something that'll go from zero to 200 in less than fifteen seconds, or you're going to be sorry!"

Well, next morning she looks out the window and sees a package in the driveway. It's wrapped in beautiful paper with a gold bow on top.

She rushes out, rips off the paper and finds a brand new bathroom scale.

You might want to pray for Ernie.

Wednesday, August 13, 2008
Grim Subjects & Hope

Tuesday I fiddled around waiting for a silent phone to ring.

It stayed silent.

During our Citizens Emergency Response Team class, we discussed grim subjects: field treatment for severe burns, amputations, impaled objects, blast injuries from suicide bomber actions, Bird Flu, eye wounds, setting up a treatment area and a morgue, etc.

We learned how to begin an Incident Command System in which the first person on the scene takes charge using the principle that you start where you stand. The goal is to do as much good for as many people as possible knowing that time is your enemy.

The best we can do in a widespread disaster is to give victims a best shot at surviving till professional help arrives—however long that may take.

Disaster conditions seldom disappear in one loud flash, they may go on for months on end.

Thinking in terms of my interest in history, I compare what we are being trained to do for widespread disaster victims with the medical techniques Florence Nightingale found the first day she arrived on the Crimean battlefield. In fact, I wonder if we don't even revert to Civil War medicine in order to cope with modern disasters.

It looks overwhelming.

I remember an old cartoon from the 1950s or early '60s when Civil Defense against nuclear attack ran high in everyone's mind and installing home fallout shelters was in vogue.

The cartoon shows an elderly couple shopping for a fallout shelter in a showroom where various models at various prices were on display.

The salesman is asking them, "Just how big a bomb do you want to survive"?

Our class makes me think of that cartoon.

The more we train, the more inadequate I feel.

In the prospect of widespread disaster, if I survive I'm confronted with the fact that while I will be able to do little, at least I can possibly do something.

That's something.

Friday, August 15, 2008
Now Wait One Minute, Lord

Last night, when tv news announced the possibility/probability of a major hurricane (still to be named) hitting Florida's east coast by next Monday, I immediately resorted to prayer.

"Lord," I prayed, "You can't send a hurricane now. We haven't finished our disaster training classes yet".

Saturday, August 16, 2008
Adam Jones, Cyber Hero

His hat says it—THE BEST.

His work confirms it.



Last night our friend Adam came over and restored my computer's hard drive. The thousands of pages of text and photographs I'd lost back in June are now back on my monitor screen.



Adam's work makes an enormous difference. For instance, one file I'd tried to restore myself came out at 162 pages with one page of footnotes; The same file which Adam restored returned to the screen at 256 pages with three pages of footnotes.

That's for the same file.

Adam said that one of my file folders ran so huge that it took his computer four hours to copy it.

Although I'd been freelance writing for years before, I bought my first computer back in 1982. Over the years I've been moving files from disc to disc and from hard drive to hard drive through a bunch of computers.

My daily diaries, photos of naked internet women, Bible study notes, several drafts of 19 different books, dozens of book manuscript starts, web site materials, old newspaper articles, menus, work schedules - all this stuff disappeared when this last hard drive failed.

Yes, 20+ years of work gone in a tiny electric buzz.

Adam used his cyber skills and computer systems to resurrect the whole lot.

Somehow, he linked my burned-out hard drive to one of his computers and jumped files from one to another. Then he took hard drive two and inserted it into the box on my desktop so that I now have two hard drives in the box.

You know something?

Only my name appears on the cover of my books. But the names of a host of other people should be there too. Donald who set me up with computers in the first place. Helen who worked in graphic designs. Eve who researched historical materials for me. Ginny who supported and encourages me in a thousand ways. Wes and Barbara who advise.... and now Adam who recovered all that I lost.

The Lord Christ richly blesses me with family and friends who believe in my work and make it possible for me to do it.

You know, this time in limbo without knowing if my work could ever be resurrected pained me; yet it also proved good for my soul.

While I felt anxious and fretted over loosing so many years of work, yet at the same time, I also reached a point of peace in reevaluating my work. If it had all been lost, what would have been lost?

Do I live for my writing? Or do I live for Christ through my writing?

Which is more important?

This time of trial brings me back to basics. Adam's cyber skills give me a chance to start anew. Having lost every file, strengthens me.

In a sense, my work is my corn.

I remember what Jesus said about that, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit".

So, my computer is fixed.

What will I find to complain about next?

Ginny says I hold a Black Belt in whining.

Monday, August 18, 2008
Preparing For Fay

Last week during a typical afternoon thunderstorm, the kind we have every day all summer long, a gust of wind twisted steel girders and toppled two cranes at the port about seven miles from our home. Each crane weighed 11,000 tons and cost about six million dollars. They are a total loss. Here's a photo that ran on Channel 12 TV:



What can man build that can withstand God's wind?

Even though Hurricane Fay which approaches today ranks as only a minimal hurricane, Governor Crist has declared Florida in a state of emergency and ordered the evacuation of the keys.

Sunday's projection by the National Weather Service predicts that our home lies right on the centerline in the Cone Of Uncertainty:



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 our prescriptions and renewed the ones that are low. We bought extra 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? We made a bunch of phone calls to check if family or friends needed help. Then we sat back and watched a great tv movie called *Fish Don't Blink*; a happy little movie we enjoyed tremendously although we had never even heard of it before.

As we talked and planned and worked (I still have to lug in Ginny's dirt-eating potted plants from the deck) Ginny made a memorable statement of Christian faith:

“If Fay passes, we’re ok,” she said. “If we loose the house and car, we’re ok. And even if we die in the storm, we’re still ok. Nothing to worry about”.

I’ve mentioned before that at times I develop a tremor in my hands and legs; well, yesterday at breakfast was one of those times. And I played a joke on Ginny.

Remember in the Jurassic Park movies, how the guy’s coffee cup rippled and sloshed at the approach of the Tyrannosaurus?

Well, at breakfast as we discussed the approach of the storm, I pointed out the ripples in my coffee and said that the storm would have to wait because the T-Rex was coming first.

Ginny got the giggles.

As the waitress in Country Kitchen came to the table, I tried to control the coffee cup by holding it with both hands and I said, “Country Kitchen, Home of the Two-Handed Cup of Coffee”.

Ginny got to laughing so hard.

God, I love her so much. After all these years I still feel free to act silly around her; and she’s still coquettish enough to giggle and laugh at my foolishness.

Fay may twist steel girders, but love endures whatever storms life sends.

Tuesday, August 19, 2008

Fun With Fay

Hurricane Fay strengthened today as it crossed west to east from the Gulf over land in south Florida; such a storm strengthening over land is almost unheard of.

It now approaches the Atlantic’s warm waters and threatens to curve back across the state, this time from east to west, here in North Florida with Jacksonville being the projected landfall.

Declaring a local state of emergency, Jacksonville Mayor John Peyton described Hurricane Fay as “Unpredictable, erratic, defying all odds”.

This morning, radio host Valerie Segraves, WEJZ 96.1, described Fay as, “ A lopsided, raggedy bully. She’s headed this way and she’s going to eat our lunch”.

Not mine!

Ginny’s taking the next three days off. And we have prepared as well as we are able to give ourselves the best chance. And we’ll do what we can to help others after the storm.

Our help promises to mean damn little because a minor health problem, beyond my normal dizziness, has kicked in for me and I doubt if much stumbling around in hurricane debris as a rescuer lies in my future; the professionals will have plenty of victims to worry about without my adding to the problem.

For days now the National Weather Service has issued announcements about Fay; some announcements are designated *bulletins*; others, *warnings*; others, *advisories*; and others, *watches*. Each designation means something different and tv commentators go nuts trying to explain the differences.

Radio and tv announcers have been updating weather reports every half hour. This piling on of information leads to storm fatigue and system overload.

This afternoon, one radio announcer interrupted the song playing. He said, “I’ve just been handed two important announcements... Oh, this one is just from station management canceling Bring Your Daughter To Work Day.... This other one is from the weather service and it looks like a warning watch ... or maybe it’s a watch warning”.

Ginny and I laughed till we cried.

I remember during a blizzard up in Washington, D.C., during the late 1960s, I was out driving in the ice storm on some mission of mercy (Christians do a lot of that sort of thing... Storm fodder, that’s what do-gooders are).

Anyhow it was about 3 a.m. in this monster ice storm with the wind howling and driving snow sheets straight out flat. The announcer on my car radio had been reading hazard warnings and weather updates for hours—I think he was snowbound at the station. During a pause in the

music he said, "Tonight's weather report is for clear and still conditions.... It's clear up to your ass and still snowing"!

Anyhow, during our regular devotional reading tonight Ginny and I came upon a Bible verse from Isaiah 30:

"For thus saith the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength - And ye would not".

I can't decide if those words are comforting or not.

Wednesday, August 20, 2008
Bye For A While



Fay's on the way.

Shutting down my computer.

Power may go off any time now. Last storm, it was off for nine days.

I just hung our hurricane warning flags at our front door.

Be back, God willing, whenever.

Love, John

Monday, August 25, 2008
Days With Fay

We survived.

Officially Tropical Storm Fay never reached hurricane strength although you'd never have guessed that here on the ground. In Florida eleven people died in the storm and property damage climbed into the millions of dollars. About half the population of Florida lost electric power and about eleven million people evacuated or huddled in public shelters.

While most offices and businesses closed, many bars stayed open.

I'm not sure, but this may account for some storm-related tragedies.

Three tourists here in Jacksonville decided it would be a cool idea to say they'd been swimming in the ocean during a hurricane. They all had to be rescued but one young lady drowned.

Down state, a young man decided it would be cool idea to fly a big kite in the storm winds along the beach. His kite first dragged him along the sand, then lifted him about 20 feet in the air, and finally slammed him into the side of a building. He only suffered broken bones but he know how a bug feels when it hits a car windshield. (I think videos of that kite suffer can be found on Google Video).

Ginny and I came out fine although one of our neighbors didn't. Tons of wood fell on the home of one of our neighborhood watch members around the corner:



Even with all the damage from Fay, Ginny and I were not called upon to exercise our CERT (Civilian Emergency Response Team) training; throughout the storm professional responders kept access to all areas of the city. Fay was not a big enough disaster for CERT to kick in.

However we did use things we learned in our CERT classes. For instance, when asked to travel 15 miles at the height of the storm to do a helpful but unnecessary chore for someone, I said a flat out “NO”. I felt guilty about it, but I saw no reason to risk becoming a victim myself because of someone else’s lack of planning. This involved only property damage not loss of life.

I canceled my appointment with Dr. Woody Friday morning and later that afternoon the radio announced that a 12-foot-long alligator was found swimming around in a flooded parking lot by the medical building.

Rising waters also drive snakes to higher ground—which often means into someone’s house.

Less dramatic but more common, ants, which normally live in underground nests, form rafts which float on water when the ground becomes supersaturated. People who waded in flood waters find themselves covered with stinging ants.

Mostly Ginny and I just hunkered down in our home listening to thumps as falling limbs crashed onto our roof. She caught up with tons of work in her home office; I studied the structure of Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*.

Great reading for stormy days.

I've mentioned before how *Dracula* influenced me to begin keeping a daily journal over 30 years ago. But this re-reading of the novel related to another book I'm writing.

Once TS Fay crossed the Florida the first time, it stalled in the Atlantic about 20 miles south of here and sat there storming for days. During the early days, every time we heard a tornado warning, we'd go to the safest area of our house; but when alert followed alert day and night day after day, we almost ignored them and went about our business.

After six or seven days without even opening our front door, Ginny and I went stir crazy and we ventured out yesterday although there were still a few tornado alerts now and then. We met the kids still in town up at Dave's Diner for breakfast. They are all fine.

Here's a strange experience:

As a leader in our neighborhood watch, I felt it my duty to check on the people living in the 59 houses in our horseshoe. So, using the CERT triage principal of "start where you stand", I began with our next door neighbor and moved from house to house around the horseshoe.

Now, I did not do anything for anybody.

I did not give our a single drink of water or rescue a single soul from a burning building. I just visited from house to house as best I was able and asked folks how they were doing.

The gratitude I encountered amazed me.

Brother Lawrence, author of *The Practice Of The Presence Of God*, said that it is not the greatness of a task that counts but the love with which it is performed. That we are to do little things for the love of God.

I almost agree.

But, I can't claim to have acted toward my neighbors with any degree of love. Going stir crazy from being cooped up in the house motivated me more than anything else. Yet I learned long ago to pay little attention to my own motives; when you give a starving kid a sandwich, he doesn't care diddle-squat about your motives—he just eats the sandwich. I'd go nuts looking for some pure motive in my own heart.

It just ain't there.

But so many of my neighbors seemed pathetically grateful that someone had come by to check on them personally.

Of course I was not able to get to all 50+ houses (my legs gave out and I started trembling too bad to go on) but fortunately about 40 houses in, I ran across four young people who took over for me. These kids loved the excitement of helping neighbors. I'm pleased and proud of them.

One funny thing:

Fay forced the cancellation of all sorts of activities in Jacksonville. The Monster Truck Rally had to be postponed. One wedding got postponed. Concerts, sales, drives, picnics—all canceled or postponed.

But one elderly lady in a house I visited told me that Friday she was scheduled to go in for a colonoscopy. She arrived at the clinic to find she was the only patient who made it there through the storm. They saw her immediately.

“Of all the things this damn storm canceled,” she said, “Why couldn't that have been one of them”!

Wednesday, August 27, 2008

Aftermath

Sunday I played Santa on the rooftop clearing off limbs and storm debris from the roof of our house. The lovely trees that overhand our property dropped Eight Million, *by actual count*, small branches in our yard.

The pile of storm debris I mounded by the curb so far is larger than a bus and I've hardly started with the back yard!

Yet our damage is minor compared to most people's.

Monday my friend Wes treated me to breakfast and we talked about how to live Christian in the midst of some work-related problems.

Tuesday, I repaired a pool pump which shorted out during the storm. Got a significant electrical shock from the old pump housing, so I had to replace it. Our pool was well on the way to greening up and becoming a 7,000-gallon vat of mosquito larvae.

I added chlorine.

Die bugs. Die!

CERT training class Tuesday night focused on light search and rescue operations. I wish I'd had this training back in the '60s before the riots surrounding Martin Luther King's assassination. Back then I played the part of an enthusiastic untrained spontaneous rescuer who may have done more harm than good.

I think CERT training should be a required course in every high school. This is something the present generation is going to need. What can they learn in school more important than survival?

Anyhow, last night the CERT instructor exposed us to thoughts about the structural integrity of damaged buildings, left-hand/right-hand wall searches, and mission focus.

I see that one of my mistakes in the aftermath of Fay as I visited each home in our horseshoe was that I overestimated my strength and I lost focus by talking too long with a couple of individuals who were upset and needed to talk, but who were physically uninjured. Therefore I did not get to as many homes as I might otherwise have.

As president of our neighborhood watch, I felt it my duty to check on the people living in our horseshoe. Our group motto is: Mind Your Own Business, But Look Out For Your Neighbor!

One advantage I had was that a day before the storm hit, after Ginny and I had secured our own home, I phoned everyone on my list of friends, family and Neighborhood Watch members; therefore, I knew in advance who planned to evacuate to a shelter, which households in the

neighborhood doubled up with others, and who planed to leave town altogether.

In my phoning, I followed CERT triage protocol by not getting bogged down in phone tag; I called once, checked on people, then made the next call.

Amazingly, I encountered four people who did not know a storm was coming!

Doesn't anybody watch the news?

In checking on my neighbors after the storm passed, I followed that same protocol of knocking on the door of houses I knew to be occupied (skipped one I knew vacant because of my phone calls). I knocked twice—with a metal key on the glass or wood so the sound carried better than bare knuckles. When someone answered I checked on them briefly and then I moved on to the next house.

Mostly I just listened to fears and problems, so some visits took a bit longer than others, but I tried to stay focused.

Last night as the instructor talked about the distraction of attaching yourself to a given situation and thus being deflected from your mission focus, I extrapolated that information into my own Christian life and into my writing. If this journal shows nothing else, it reveals how easily I'm derailed and blunder off what I'm supposed to be doing.

My ease at being distracted by circumstances causes my days to resemble a life lived as a human ping-pong ball.

What harm were those leaves doing on my roof? Could they have stayed there another week? Is reading a novel more important than prayer?

I question these things, but I know full well that in God's kingdom sometimes the sidetrack is the main road. I could have told my friend that I didn't have time to talk because I have a desk full of work to do; but listening to him may well be the most important thing I do all week.

Loving overrides doing.

People are more important than tasks.

The only thing that will last forever is people.

One thing the CERT class confirmed that I did right in my house to house visits after the storm: At each home I asked about physical injuries and medical problems. I asked about water and food. And I asked about electric power.

Later on, a JEA (Jacksonville Electric Authority) truck drove through the neighborhood and the workers asked me about power outages; I was able to tell them which individual houses had electricity, where a tree leaned against a power line, and which houses had generators running.

This last is important because electrical feedback from home generators can travel backwards in the wires and shock a JEA worker who thinks he's working on a line that has been cut off.

The JEA guys seemed surprised that I had the information they needed at my fingertips.

Our class instructor said "All guns are loaded, and all electric lines are hot".

I'd add to that—The metal casing of a swimming pool pump shocks like a rabid bluetoothed bitch!

That's not Neighborhood Watch or CERT training, that's personal experience.

By the way, three new hurricanes more powerful than Fay are forming in the Atlantic.

Oh the joys of life in Florida.

Thursday, August 28, 2008
Infernal Machines - A Rant

Machines hate me.

When it comes to mechanics and I need to do something complicated like putting staples in the stapler on my desk, I hand the machine over to Ginny.

But yesterday, I attempted to vacuum our pool. Nothing to it. All you have to do is attach the hoses and move the vacuum head over the bottom.

I tripped a circuit breaker.

It stayed tripped.

We'll have to call an electrician.

Perhaps water damage from Fay got into some wiring in the back yard and shorted out everything.

Machines hate me...

The feeling is mutual.

I forgot to mention it yesterday but Tuesday was a local election; Ginny and I voted first thing before she left for work.

Good thing maybe.

The kid in the attic will be happy to know about our quaint election customs. At one library, just down the street from where our kids went to school, there was a shoot out. Reports vary but anywhere from five to 15 men got in a gun battle at the library/polling station and they fired between 20 and 35 bullets.

Lousy shots.

Only one guy was hit.

Local news media hardly mention the incident.

But, here's my point about machines. Politicians have taken to rigging automated telephone machines to call me with a recorded message.

What an abomination.

I don't like to be called by a live person working for a political campaign but I'll tolerate that. However, it outrages me when a machine calls me. I don't talk to machines—especially if there are ladies present.

When a recorded political message comes in, I note the candidate and hang up.

Then I vote for his opponent.

Regardless of political affiliation I vote for the candidate who does not have a machine call me.

Use of a calling machine proves the person using it is an insensitive clod.

Humans, decent humans, talk to each other.

I'm happy to say that the candidate who had his machine call me lost the election.

The best human won.

Note From John:

The electrical problem resulted from a short in an underground wire I'd spliced months ago. The splice held up fine in normal conditions but water from Fay ruined it.

Fortunately my daughter Jennifer knew some electricians and brought them over to repair the damage.

Friday, August 29, 2008 In A Pinch

Thursday was spent waiting for electricians to show up, watching them repair an underground wire, then recuperating afterwards.

That was my whole day.

I didn't intend to post a journal entry this morning because yesterday was nothing to write home about... But...

Something our instructor said the other night about extracting victims of a disaster has been dwelling in my mind. Talking about how to extricate a person trapped in the rubble of a collapsed building, he said that sometimes the best thing to do is leave them trapped so long as they are not in immediate danger of death.

Of course if the building is burning that's another story.

But usually after the initial collapse, a pile of rubble is relatively stable—unless you start moving things. A person trapped in a void has a good chance of surviving for a long time, so the best thing for an amateur rescuer to do is pass them water and leave them be until professionals with heavy equipment such as air bags arrive on the scene.

He told about a rescue he'd been in on when a tree trimmer got pinched by a partially-cut limb high in the air. Rescue arrived and went up to the guy in a bucket truck. They started an IV, strapped him in a harness, and all that before removing the heavy oak limb which was pinching his innards.

The man was in pain and talking to the firemen and even telling jokes... but when the limb was lifted off of him, the pressure which it exerted was removed, and the internal organs which had been pinched together by the limb ruptured.

He was dead before he reached the ground.

And these were professional rescuers, trained paramedics with all the latest equipment working to save him.

Sometimes pressure holds us together.

Being in a pinch is what keeps us alive.

I transplanted this idea to my own spiritual life.

When I'm in a pinch. When I feel trapped, I try to wiggle out. I feel the pressure and try to escape. I'll do anything to get out from under. I'll want to kick rubble aside, shove branches off me, regain my freedom.

It's not that my building is on fire. It's just that I'm uncomfortable with the situation and want to change things immediately.

What says the Scripture?

“Be still and know that I am God... They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength... The Lord is my Shepherd... Come unto Me all ye that labor and are heavy laden...My peace I give unto you...”

Nothing about a frantic scramble.

Wait upon the Lord—For me, that's harder to do than levering and cribbing a two-ton slap of concrete rebar.

The more I learn in the rescue classes, the more inadequate I feel about rescuing anybody.

The longer I live as a Christian, the more I see the truth of the Scripture, “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”.

Saturday, August 30, 2008
Buffalo Bill In Jacksonville



Editorial cartoon from a 1907 Jacksonville newspaper

I suspect that sometimes I do something for a reason other than the reason I think I'm doing it.

Does that make sense?

I mean that I'll think I'm doing this for a specific reason, then after all is said and done it turns out that I did it for an entirely different reason.

Not that I'm a pawn.

But while I have my reason, God has His.

Case in point:

Friday I went with Ginny to a local hospital. My reason for going was to comfort her in case the doctor gave her bad news. (Dr. Scar said she's perfectly ok and that if the growth on her neck begins to bother her sometime in the next 40 years, she should come back to have it removed).

Anyhow, this hospital offers a monster huge parking garage with spaces for all but 50 or 60 of the cars trying to park in there.

We circled and circled up and down dark ramps for 15 minutes before we snagged a parking space—nerve wracking!

After the ordeal of parking we needed a smoke.

Jacksonville hospitals, in a move to improve health care, have banned smoking while they have not banned septic Mersa—a germ found in local hospitals which eats the raw flesh of patients—But that’s a rant.

Nevertheless, we found an ashtray beside a bench deep in the recesses of the gloomy underground parking tunnel.

We sat.

Ginny smoked her cigarette; I smoked my pipe.

A man approached and sat on a bench opposite to light up his cigarette.

“I hardly ever see anybody smoking a pipe anymore,” he said to me. “Used to be an old man down the street smoked a corncob pipe. Lived to be 90, but he’s dead now. You are the fist pipe smoker I’ve seen since then”.

We talked about corncob pipes for a short while, then the man began to tell me about how he and his 9-year-old son made turkey callers out of corncobs and bits of blackboard slate.

He talked about teaching his son to hunt deer, wild turkey and ducks. They live out in the country and build a hunting blind out of old railroad ties.

Ginny realized that we had not locked our car, which was miles away in the depths of the garage. She left me and the stranger talking about pipes and turkey calling..

Before long, the father began to pour out his heart to me about his boy’s life-threatening illness.

How he’d taken his son to a charity hospital and been turned away. How he’d taken the boy, the light of his life, to another physician who made arrangements for the kid to be admitted to this world-renowned children’s clinic.

I asked the boy's name so I could pray for him.

“His name is Cody; I named him after Buffalo Bill. He was a great hunter”.

Now, years ago I'd researched a local magazine article (it never got published) about Buffalo Bill, Colonel William Cody. During the early 1900s Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show often wintered here in Jacksonville.

The father in the hospital parking garage had never heard about this.

Yes, the 200 Indians in the show, sharpshooter Annie Oakley, the horses—the whole troop stopped touring and spent the cold months here in sunny Jacksonville.

They created quite a stir because Buffalo Bill Cody lived for showmanship. He always had a gimmick to generate free publicity for his show and managed to stay in the spotlight.

For instance, once when business slacked off, Buffalo Bill and his wife filed for divorce.

That made newspaper headlines.

Mrs. Cody accused the Colonel of adultery—with Queen Victoria!

After that news story played out, Mrs. Cody dropped the divorce suit.

Anyhow, the distressed father in the parking garage seemed touched to realize that he'd met somebody who even knew who William Cody, his boy's namesake, was.

And he seemed startled when the old man smoking a pipe in a dark corner of the basement offered to pray for his son.

My reason for going to the hospital was to hold Ginny's hand in case she needed me; but she didn't.

I wonder if God's reason for my going may have involved Buffalo Bill?

Beside the still waters is not the only place God leads us.

Jacksonville 12
SATURDAY, OCTOBER

EIGHTH AND EIGHTEEN

Marking a New Era in the History of Entertainment,
Sensibility and Modern Amusement Enterprises

BUFFALO BILL'S WILD WEST

Returns home after five years spent in Europe,
Bigger, Better and More Entertaining than Ever,
Presenting All the Features Which Have for
Twenty-four Years Made This Cultural Organiza-
tion the Leader Among Amusements, with
the Added Attractiveness of

NEW BATTLE SCENES

NEW LOUPESTRIAN FEATS

NEW WILD WEST FEATURES

All marshalled under the personal standard of
Advanced Entertainment, Sensibility, Inspiring
Perpetuated and Internally Directed by the
Last of the Great Scouts, the Original and Only



Col. Wm. F. Cody—(BUFFALO BILL)

Who will appear in the seats at every performance
and sporting his original role in the thrilling
and historically accurate open-air melodrama

THE BATTLE OF SUMMIT SPRINGS

Replete with desperate encounters, fierce and
thrilling hand-to-hand struggles and typical
illustrations of barbaric Indian warfare

A Holiday at "T-N" Ranch showing the pleasures
and pastimes of the Plainsmen—An attack
on an emigrant train depicting the privation
and perils of pioneering.

THE GREAT TRAIN HOLD-UP

and the Death Hunters of the Living Hell

SEPTEMBER

Tuesday, September 02, 2008 **Tropical Storm Fay Was Like Pandora's Box**

Monday, Labor Day, Hurricane Gustav sideswiped New Orleans as two million people evacuated. Early estimates of property damage run to millions of dollars.

Here in Jacksonville Ginny and I spent the three-day holiday weekend picking up debris from Tropical Storm Fay which swept through here last week. We also prepared for Hurricane Hanna which is predicted to hit here next weekend.

Minimal damage.

That's what the tv weathermen said about Fay.

These guys were not helping pick up storm trash blown down in our yard.

Minimal damage indeed!

City garbage men have hauled away one load of our storm debris; but here is a photo of the pile at our curb right now-- I hauled all that out to the curb myself.



Boy, does my back hurt from all that bending over and lifting.

However, Fay left behind more than broken branches and withered leaves. Like Pandora's Box or Noah's Flood, after all the trouble and mess, Fay also left behind a sort of rainbow or message of hope. You see, all the rain Fay dropped caused our dozens and dozens of bromeliads to bloom like crazy. Here's a photo of a few at our front door:



Trouble and trash and aching back followed by hope and promise and beauty—Like it's God's pattern.

Hurricane Hanna looks to be more serious than Fay; they predict it will arrive here by next Friday or Saturday, so during our devotions tonight Ginny prayed that we might have trust during all the upsetting and threatening storm news.

After her amen, I said, "Your prayer didn't work. My back still hurts".

"What does your back hurting have to do with my praying for trust," she said.

"Weren't you praying for me to get a truss so my back wouldn't ache so much"?

“Lord, she said, “If You want to hit him with a bolt of lightening, wait just a minute”.

She walked to the other side of the kitchen and said, “OK, Lord, I’m far enough away now. Feel free to zap him”.

Friday, September 05, 2008

Debris In My Life

Yesterday a giant claw machine, tires taller than my head, raked up half of the yard debris from Hurricane Fay that was in front of our house and loaded it in a dump truck. That filled the dump truck so the driver said the other half of the debris will be picked up Friday—Maybe.

Getting rid of this debris from Hurricane Fay concerns me because Hurricane Hanna circles just off our coast today. If the track shifts a little to the west, Hanna, with winds of 120 miles per hour, will blow around all the branches dropped by Fay, which brought winds of only 70 mph. Hanna has already killed more than 130 people down in the islands.

Then, forecasters project that next week Hurricane Ike will approach Florida as a Category Four hurricane with winds of 165 mph.

Hurricane Josephine remains far off in the Atlantic but heads in this general direction also. I hardly have time to clear up debris from one storm before another hits.

I picked up all the debris from Fay, carried it out front and piled it at the curb. And there it has sat till the city claw machine came by yesterday to haul it away.

But if the branches from Fay don’t get cleared away first, then the next storm turns them into deadly missiles.

So it is with the other messes in my life:

If I don’t clear one away thoroughly, the next storm stirs the crock, compounding the minimal damage of the first storm.

I’m sick of hurricanes.

Preparing for.

Living through.

Cleaning up afterwards.

Sometimes Ginny reads a prayer that contains the lines, “Lord, preserve us from the dangers of this night—And from the fear of them...”

Hear our prayer, O Lord!

Sunday, September 07, 2008
Ginny And Me And Two Prophets

About 2,500 years ago, the prophet Haggai peeked into the future and saw Ginny and me.

He spoke in that day and time directly to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, but I think he was talking about us in this modern day and time.

He said, “Consider your ways. Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes”.

Did you get that reference?

Earning money and putting it in a bag with holes in it.

Yesterday, while I put in an extra day’s work reducing over 2,000 pages of notes on Jacksonville’s fire history into a 300-page book, Ginny babysat with our car at the garage—that cost about \$600.

No problem.

There’s plenty more where that went.

Less than an hour after she got back home, our 18-year-old central heat and air system heaved inside the walls and died.

Big bucks.

Blowing in the wind.

Bag with holes.

We work hard to get to where we was.

Fortunately, about three weeks ago our daughter Eve brought us a fan she was not using. I stuck it in the hall closet thinking we had no need of it.

We do.

Temperature is pushing 90.

Since Hurricane Hanna passed to the east of us, and Hurricane Ike appears to be headed to the west of us, the two tropical systems suck every bit of moisture and breeze away from this area.

We've got to do something about that air conditioner—or not.

Our survival does not depend on it, only our comfort and our computers. (My computer fan whirls big time this morning).

Even with outlaying cash we don't have, we remain happy.

We spent a delightful afternoon hanging out in Dave's Diner sipping ice tea and talking about books and fishing, ACs and storm preparations, birthdays and anniversaries.

So, our money bag has a hole in it.

I think its always had such a hole; you could backtrack through our years following the trail of dropped silver coins. The money trail shows where we've been and who we are and the general direction we're headed in.

I doubt that it's to the poor house—car, hurricane expenses, prescription medicines, and home repairs not withstanding.

All around us I hear of job losses, banks foreclosing on homes, families being evicted, storms forcing evacuations, sickness, disease and death.

Yes times are hard.

Times are always hard, one way or another.

Like the old saying goes, "Everything gets harder and harder--except for me".

Yet there is hope.

And more than hope, joy.

That brings me to the other prophet I've been remembering this morning as I reflect on our financial situation.

The Prophet Habakkuk also spoke about 2,500 years ago.

He directly addressed somebody else, but I think he also was speaking to Ginny and me—and to you also, Dear Reader.

Here's what he said:

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.
The LORD God is my strength,
He will make my feet like hinds' feet,
He will make me to walk upon mine high places”.

Wednesday, September 10, 2008
Disaster Psychology

Tuesday I continued to muddle through with my book about firefighting history. For years and years I accumulated notes to write this book.

I shouldn't have.

My note files now swell into thousands of pages.

Fear motivates this kind of research. I'm so afraid of missing something essential (and looking like a fool when a truly knowledgeable person reads my book), that I collect every tiny scrap of information I can until I bog down in minutia which clogs the whole writing process.

Were I more confident, I'd have finished writing this book years ago.

But, it's getting done now, Thank God! I've accomplished a lot since Donald and Adam cured my hard drive crash.

My friend Rex came over the other night and worked on our air conditioner. I'm scheduled to pick up some parts Wednesday so maybe by the end of the week we'll

get cool again. Right now I work with a fan blowing on the computer to keep it from overheating.... Me, I work sweating in my underwear all day. (Wouldn't that make a great Author Photograph for the back of a book jacket?)

Last night Ginny and I attended our JaxCERT class where the subjects of the week were disaster psychology and emergency communications.

The communications expert, a ham radio buff, showed us various types of communication devices we can use in chaos conditions to talk with HQ and other teams 20 miles away... Er, make that other people can use those radios in chaos conditions; Me, I can't make the tv remote change channels ten feet across the room.

How am I supposed to use a tinny-tiny radio thingy?

It has buttons on it.

Little gray buttons.

And I'm supposed to know how to call in a helicopter with this thing?

Ha!

The other instructor, who introduced us to disaster psychology, covered a list of symptoms associated with traumatic stress encounter both among catastrophe victims and among rescue personnel.

I found this enlightening.

It explained so much of what I saw on tv about the outrageous behavior of hurricane victims.

We humans assign blame.

When abrupt, unpleasant changes intrude on our lives, we get mad at somebody—FEMA, the government, shelter workers, tv weathermen—even the very people risking their lives to rescue us.

Gets irrational.

"If you'da come yesterday, Granny wouldn't have died".—That sort of thing.

Like a drowning man fighting and clawing and biting the lifeguard who swam out to save him, we attack the very person who came to save us.

One fireman once told me that as he worked like crazy to resuscitate a heart attack victim, a family member threatened to shoot him if the patient died. The family member stood right over the first responder with a pistol in hand, “Ready to pop a cap in my head”.

People in trauma often get mad at God.

Last week I talked with someone who is upset with God—And with good reason. A 5-year-old child in that family was raped and murdered by a sexual predator. Where was God when this happened. Why didn't He protect this innocent little girl? God has a lot to answer for!

How could I address this person's anger at God?

I don't know an answer.

Heck, I don't understand why my wife does things, how am I supposed to know why God does?

All I could say was that its ok to be mad at God. He's a Big Boy; He can take it.

The Bible is full of characters who were upset with God—Job, David, Moses.

At least when we get angry with God, we're acknowledging Him on some level above apathy. The opposite of love is not hate, it's apathy. And sometimes it takes tragedy to shake us out of apathy.

Our CERT instructor said, “You should expect that survivors will show psychological effects from the disaster —and some of the psychological warfare will be directed toward you... The survivors appear to pull together against their rescuers, the emergency services personnel”.

Oh. That explains something .to me:

The Son of God came to seek and to save the lost.

Yet we nailed Him to a cross, mocked him with a thorn hat, poked Him with a spear, tried to make Him drink vinegar, and dumped His dead body in a cave.

We crucified our Deliverer, our rescuer.

Yet we could not permanently murder the Lord of Life who has life in Himself. He rose from the tomb and still reaches out nail-scared hands to rescue us.

That's heavy.

But here's something funny:

During a class break, a young lady and I were going over the page-long list of psychological symptoms of trauma.

"You know, Mr. Cowart, I could use this as a checklist for myself right now and I'd have to mark ever single one of these things—and I haven't been in a disaster"!

Ginny said, "That just means living from day to day is traumatic".

I glanced over the list and said, "I could check them all off too. I have every one of these symptoms—except for one".

"Which one is that," the young lady asked.

I patted my fat belly and said, "Loss of appetite".

Thursday, September 11, 2008

**Self-Immolation—
or
Happy Birthday, Patricia**

A few minutes ago, I set fire to the hair on my belly.

Like Esau in the Bible, I am a hairy man, and because our air conditioner is still broken (spent yesterday calling around about parts), this morning when I got up at 3:30, I began working while only wearing my swimming trunks—No shirt.

And I set myself on fire.

That's what happens when you stay out late partying the night before.

Yes, Wednesday night the Cowarts all gathered at a pizza party to celebrate baby Patricia's 29th birthday. Ginny and I whooped it up with the kids till almost 9 O'clock.

That's why I'm so groggy this morning.

Patricia drove up from downstate with her boyfriend, Clint, to introduce him to the family; Hope we didn't scare him off. He travels over the country designing and producing displays for trade shows. And this was the first time he'd met the thundering herd.

As part of the festivities we all sat in a circle and regaled Clint with stories from Patricia's childhood—Merciless love stories which we thought would embarrass her to no end. Like, the time when she was three-years-old and wandered away from home as parents, grandparents, police and neighbors searched only to find she'd walked to a nearby medical center and taken an elevator up to the eighth floor! ... Finally a nurse working up there recognized her as ours and brought her down.

Or the time as a young teen she showed great resourcefulness and ingenuity in caring for a stroke victim when a night-time tornado struck leaving her alone in the house with him.

Or the time she sewed dozens of my old neckties together to make a swirling skirt. Or how she snuck into a bar when only 14-years-old. Or... Well, there were other tales revealed by her sisters which don't bear repeating here because they are not suitable for family viewing (which never stopped the Cowart family for reveling in such tales).

For family devotions (as is our custom) I spoke from First John about love.

I used one of my tricks (an old orange juice bottle, a two-edged combat knife, and a two-pound sack of rice) to illustrate how love lifts us up when we stick together.

Beloved, let us love one another: for love is
of God;
Everyone that loveth is born of God, and
knoweth God.
He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God
is love.
In this was manifested the love of God
toward us,
Because God sent His only begotten Son into
the world,
That we might live through Him.

When Patricia opened her presents, she found someone had given her two sets of false teeth—All gold teeth with electric glitter that lights up and sparkles in your mouth. She and Clint inserted the teeth (apparently called GRILLS by the younger set) and put on quite a show to our screams of laughter.

After such a wild party, you see why I felt drowsy this morning, and dozed off with a burning pipe in my mouth—which I dropped on my belly and caught this patch of hair on fire and had to dowse it out with my coffee and now I have this big red bald patch just above the waistband of my swimsuit.

Works better than a rooster for waking a man up in the morning!

I don't think I'll post photos of that today.

Happy Birthday, Patricia.

Friday, September 12, 2008
Hot Times Are Over!

Our Air Conditioner Is Fixed!

Last night my friend Rex came over and installed the new parts to our air conditioner.

It Works!

We are the cool Cowarts again.

Thanks be to God and to Rex.

I find it difficult to cope with being on the receiving end of Christian charity. No way can I possibly repay the kindness shown me. Sometimes the only thing we can do is to be grateful.

Ginny and I survived the heat wave. It's been uncomfortable but we survived.

During the hot times at our house, we only suffered one casualty:



Monday, September 15, 2008
IKE or Rescuing The Stupid

At our JaxCERT class Saturday morning everyone discussed Hurricane Ike which was devastating the eastern coast of the Gulf of Mexico even as we met.

Ike measured as a Category Two hurricane with sustained winds of 110 miles per hour. It measured between 500 and 800 miles wide, with a storm surge of up to 17 feet; weather forecasters warned of its approach for weeks in advance.



In a strong warning with unprecedented wording, the National Weather Service said, "Persons not heeding evacuation orders in single-family one- or two-story homes will face **certain death.**"

Yet, authorities estimated that in the Galveston, Texas, area alone about 40 % of the residents chose to try to ride out the storm in their homes.

Bad choice.

Ike tore the hell out of everything.

In Houston, winds shattered windows in high rise buildings bringing a rain of millions of sharp glass shards; it looked like the accumulation of broken glass outside one office building was over a foot deep. Winds rained down computers, desks, file cabinets, chairs—everything down into the streets from several stories up.

Massive flooding, debris, devastation—all that was going on Saturday morning as our class studied rescue techniques.

One topic of conversation was the tv's glorification of a bunch of drunks who chose to ride out the storm in a fishing shack on piers with an ice chest full of beer.

Even before the storm fully passed, Texas launched one of the largest rescue efforts in history. Over 1,500 military personnel, 58 helicopters, and hundreds of professional firefighters had located and brought out over 2,000 victims by Sunday afternoon—a helicopter even got the drunks from the fishing shack who called for rescue when they ran out of beer.

So far, I've only heard of 28 deaths but rescuers concentrate on the living and let the dead lay where they lie.

Now, I am going somewhere by recounting all this.

The Kid In The Attic will not have even heard of Hurricane Ike.

A few days ago (Sept 10th) I wrote about disaster psychology; now I'm seeing that played out on two levels with Ike—among victims and among rescuers.

Only a day after Ike passed, the *Houston Chronicle* reports:

All of it -- the sweaty waits in line, the flooded interstates, the rampant mosquitoes, the desperate search for life's basic necessities -- fueled a growing sense of

frustration among ordinary residents and elected officials alike. Residents peppered radio and TV news programs with angry calls about price gouging at gasoline stations and food stores, low water pressure and a delay by emergency authorities in distributing food, water and ice.

The *Los Angeles Times* reports:

Under drenching morning rain that submerged more roads and underscored a mood of misery and frustration, emergency officials tried to unsnarl a last-minute snag that delayed deliveries of U.S. government food, water and ice to several million people struggling to cope. Federal officials blamed state leaders for abruptly changing distribution plans Sunday morning.

Victims are beginning to blame. Even with all the warnings beforehand, even though the damage and disruption came from a natural phenomena, yet people are blaming someone else for their misery. They are turning in anger against the people trying their best to help them.

On the other hand, an *Associated Press* article reports:

SWAT commander Sgt. Rodney Harrison and five other members of the Port Arthur Police Department drove a 2 1/2-ton truck into the waters to search for victims in Sabine Pass near the Louisiana border Sunday morning.

The waters were so intense and the roads so blocked that a gear shift broke off in the driver's hand. After two hours of struggle, the team had little to show for their work other than sopping wet clothes and exhaust-streaked faces. They even dodged an alligator.

"You have people that have families at home who put their lives on the line to come out here and save somebody that made a bad

decision," Harrison said. "I don't think that's right. I don't think that's fair to everybody."

I'm hearing that sort of sentiment echoed by many people in the rescue community—that the victims who did not heed warnings and who expect somebody else to take care of all their needs are to blame for their own dilemma.

I'm hearing value judgments about who deserves rescue, and who should be left to stew in their own decisional juices.

One nurse, who has been sued before when helping, said that in case of a traffic accident, she will not stop, or even identify herself as a nurse, nor help in any way. "They are not my patients until they are registered at my hospital. Before that, they are just people holding up traffic".

I hear more and more firefighters question about risking their lives to rescue people whose own stupidity caused the problem in the first place.

In JaxCERT training we learn that you can't rescue everybody. Some will die. We are volunteers and under no legal obligation to help anybody and under no moral obligation to help everybody. You a volunteer and you do what you want to in the constraints of your training to do the most good for the greatest number in the fastest time—but your own safety and the safety of your team comes first. You do not want to get hurt and add another victim to the scene.

When Ginny and I began this training, I started with the attitude that I wanted to learn how to protect ourselves first, then our family, then members of our neighborhood watch group, then finally our neighbors in general from the 57 homes in our horseshoe block.

Selfish, but that's the order of things for me.

Of course I don't know what I will actually do when a disaster hits our block. I may just hide under the bed whimpering.

Some people and situations I'm inclined to bypass in order to get to others. Since I can't help everybody, then I'll chose the ones I can help.

I contrast my own blanket and selective attitude towards rescue with the Parable of Jesus about the Ninety And Nine Sheep. The Good Shepherd left the 99 sheep safe in the fold while He sought out that one lost, endangered sheep that had gone astray.

Yes, He did seek and save the lost.

At risk of His life—and we all know how that turned out.

But He did not just abandon the 99 to their own devices; He left them locked safe in the corral.

Come right down to it, I suppose that just about the only reason I've ever needed rescuing myself is because of stupid, willful decisions of my own. I huddle in my own little shack on stilts and don't even call for rescue till the keg is empty.

Fortunately, Jesus never suffers storm fatigue.

He rescues us from our sin—and often from our stupidity as well.

But, one other thing I learned in JaxCERT class: Any conscious adult victim has the legal right to refuse rescue, treatment or transport. In that case, you leave him be and move on to the next person.

Tuesday, September 16, 2008
Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner
Conversations

Monday I ate breakfast with my friend Barbara. She's expending all her energies caring for her grown daughter who's battling cancer.

For three hours we talked about prayer and the joy of the Lord.

Then I ate a pizza lunch with my friend Wes.

For three hours we talked about job related problems.

Those two meals pretty much killed my day—Who needs to work anyhow? I'm keeping my priorities straight.

Saturday evening was the first chance Ginny and I have had to dine at home alone in ages; our whirling social calendar keeps us busy.

As we cleared the table afterwards, I stood by the sink rinsing dishes; she stood at the counter putting the last stick of margarine in the butter dish.

She noticed that the margarine carton had a coupon printed inside, so she took her scissors to clip the dollar-off coupon. She read the label on the carton as she did so.

“Oh,” she said, “It says here that margarine is a good source of Omega Three. I didn’t know that”.

“What’s Omega Three?” I asked.

“It’s a fatty acid that’s good for your heart. I thought it mostly came from fish,” she said.

“It’s not healthy to eat Omega Three, until you’ve eaten Omega One and Omega Two first,” I informed her.

“What”?

“Yes. That’s a dietary law. You have to eat Omega One and Two before you can eat Omega Three. That’s in Leviticus or Deuteronomy”.

“That’s crazy. Omega Three comes from fish oil,” she said.

“The best source of Omega Three comes from communion bread,” I told her.

“From What”!

“Communion bread. You know, those little white wafers they give at church for the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper”.

“Where in the world did you hear a thing like that,” Ginny said.

“It’s in the Bible; Jesus said, ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega...’”

That’s not the sort of joke you want to pull on a religious woman who has scissors in her hand.

In other news:

According to a New Orleans *Times-Picayune* newspaper article this morning, Ann Williamson, the director of social services in Louisiana, has been forced out of office because of complaints by evacuees she did

not have portable showers set up for hurricane victims till a whole three days after Hurricane Gustav.

Here's an AP photo from Texas yesterday showing conditions three days after their hurricane.

Where should we set up those portable showers?



Wednesday, September 17, 2008
Mass Casualties—One At A Time

When the famous newsman Edward R. Murrow broadcast his radio reports about the London Blitz during World War II, you could hear bombs exploding in the background.

Once, Murrow and some other war correspondents heard sirens and rushed to follow a fire truck. When they got to the site, instead of a bomb crater, they found a kitchen fire; An old lady had left a pot on the stove.

To her, that was a disaster.

The fire had scorched her kitchen wall and set her tea towels on fire!

She was distraught.

Murrow said that in his excitement and in his adrenaline rush amid the war bombings, he'd forgotten that little daily disasters go on just hurting people as they always have.

Last night Ginny and I attended our final Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) class. We discussed mass casualties related to terrorism, or to epidemic disease, or to natural disasters.

We plan to attend a huge disaster drill this weekend where we will fight real fires, search debris fields, rescue victims from a burning house, and extricate victims from under overturned car crashes.

We are both hyper!

We talked about it all evening.

Then when we got home, I found a phone message from Mike, a fireman friend, who was upset because his buddy, another firefighter, recently attempted suicide. Domestic problems shoved this guy close to the edge.

Mass casualties are just individual casualties that happen to happen all at the same time.

So, the Good Shepherd leaves the Ninety and Nine and goes to seek and to save the one lost endangered sheep that has gone astray. The love of our infinite God enables Him to deal with mass casualties one at a time. He lavishes us with individual attention even as the whole world and all the people in it fall deeper and deeper into the consequences of sin.

No matter what you have done, no matter what has been done to you, the love of God is commended towards us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

A world lost in sin explodes around us, and my forgotten pot on the stove catches the dishtowel on fire.

Christ focuses.

He's not distracted by things more important than my hot pot.

My friend Barbara's daughter suffers from cancer. It doesn't get any more "mass" than that. Mike's buddy's pressures push him to the edge, a tragic daily casualty of life.

Even when we try to help, the best we can do is mitigate the effects of sin.

If I pass the test this weekend, I'll be issued my mask and my cape.

I'll get my winged boots, and my special gloves that shoot out sticky strands of web so that I can swing from skyscraper to skyscraper while fighting evil doers and rescuing grateful clinging half-clad maidens...

Not exactly.

If I pass the test, I'll get a slip of paper certifying that I've completed Phase One of CERT training.

In my hyper, can't-get-to-sleep-thinking about the disaster drill, I've been trying to remember if there has ever been anyone at any time whose life I have ever saved.

I can't think of a one.

Except...

When I married Ginny, I saved her from a dull, drab, colorless existence.

Does that count?

Saturday, September 20, 2008

I'm Proud Of CERT Training. Can You Tell?

Our CERT Mock Disaster Drill ...

Drat!

Bad weather plagued our JaxCERT class.

Instructors postponed two classes when the Emergency Operations Center had to be activated because of tropical storms. Then Saturday morning our disaster drill was postponed for a couple of months because of heavy rain storms over the site.

Ginny and I feel both relieved and disappointed.

Relieved because the prospect of screwing up the disaster haunted us; disappointed because we were loaded for bear.

I mean, here we've studied and reviewed our manuals and class notes and talked of little else for weeks, then our disaster fizzled. We drove over the Fire Training Academy ready to perform amateur tracheotomies and then didn't even get to apply a band aid with Fred Flintstone's picture on it.

Drat!

All psyched up at 4 a.m. for nothing.

Just kidding about the tracheotomy thing, that's beyond our training. Maybe they'll cover that in the advanced class.

Our training teaches us the bare minimums to give disaster victims their best chance for survival. What I call the Ku Klux Klan Plus One:

Keep 'em breathing.

Keep 'em from burning.

Keep 'em from bleeding out.

Plus, Keep 'em from further shock.

But, although this morning's drill was postponed, Ginny and I and all the other students did graduate!

First our instructors registered us in a restricted group for communications on the web. Then Jennifer, the program director, called our names and gave us certificates, hard hats, badges, backpacks full of safety/rescue goodies, and other equipment.

Here's a photo of my new CERT helmet and backpack:

In addition to the backpack they supplied, I've equipped an emergency kit of my own containing essentials the Fire Department may not have thought of—pipe, matches and tobacco pouch, fruit bars and juice, pliers,



scissors, red bandannas, a small Testament with Psalms and Prayer Book containing the burial service, a pry bar, small bolt cutters, dry socks and canvas shoes, a headband with LED lights, curved off-set tweezers, mosquito repellent, folding trowel, permanent marker, clorox wipes, flat and phillips head screwdrivers, etc.

Here's a photo of me with some of the equipment CERT issued:



And here's a photo of Disaster Ginny in her new CERT rig:



And, no, they didn't let us take the fire truck home.

Drat!

Anyhow, I am now certifiable... Er, that doesn't sound right.

What I mean is that like Superman, I'm "faster than a speeding bullet. More powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap off tall buildings in a single bound..."

Er, Ginny says the phrase is "Leap over tall buildings..." Maybe leaping over them will be covered in advanced training.

Anyhow, with my first course of CERT training I may not be Superman, or even Batman, but today I feel as though I can kick Robin's ass.



Tuesday, September 23, 2008 Back To Normal

Sunday Ginny and I lay long abed talking and cuddling and listing to heavy rain drum on the roof.

After all our recent focus and thoughts about disaster training, it's good to return to normal life—such as it is.

We drove up to a crowded Dave's Diner for breakfast where I ordered pancakes and Ginny ordered sausage and gravy biscuits. Three waiters, Chris, Billy and Nicole, brought Ginny's dish to our table laughing like fiends.

Turns out the two fresh- baked biscuits rose to a peak in the oven—they looked like perky breasts!

The five of us laughed like crazy making risqué comments.

Well, maybe you'd have to have been there to see how funny that was.

Afterwards Ginny and I drove to the grocery store. My feet hurt so I sat on a bench outside while she shopped. As I waited, my thoughts turned to charity and how our giving to the poor has slacked off recently.

As she came out of the store, a young man approached Ginny. He'd been shopping too and his grocery bill cost more than he expected so he did not have bus fare to take his bags of groceries home. At first she passed him by, but she said, "I felt a check in my spirit" and she turned back to give him the bus fare he needed.

I'd watched the whole transaction as I walked to meet her and I just knew she was doing the right thing. We enjoyed a long talk about charity and the Spirit of God as we drove home.

Strange.

Back home, with an exciting football game on tv, and an exciting book open on my lap, I dozed for three hours in a more exciting nap.

Now, it turns out that our CERT training has not prepared us for every eventuality—sometimes, improvisation is the order of the day.

For instance:

Here's a scene from a video I watched last night; it's called *30 Days Of Night*.

The pack of vampires is attacking the sheriff in a town up on the Artic Circle where the sun disappears for a month. Without sunlight to thwart them, the vampires run amuck, burn out the town's people, chew their throats, and drink their blood leaving only six survivors.



Well, what can you expect to happen where there's no CERT training and the governor of the state is off campaigning in the sunny lower 48?

In another area, Friday my daughter-in-law e-mailed me an Associated Press news story about Hurricane Ike in Texas. It carried this photo:



Yes, that's a lion.

In a hurricane shelter.

Seems a zoo keeper tried to outrun the hurricane, but his truck got flooded out. He and a lion he was trying to save swam to the Baptist church on Bolivar Island, Texas.

People already in the church helped him get the lion inside; they shut it in a separate room to ride out the storm.

The full news story can be found at http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20080917/ap_on_re_us/ike_tales_of_survival.

Water in the church sanctuary deepened to four feet during the night.

People and lion survived. "They worked pretty well together, actually," said the lion's owner, Michael Ray Kujawa. "When you have to swim, the lion doesn't care about eating nobody."

So, vampire attacks and lions showing up in hurricane shelters—they did not cover such contingencies in our CERT training classes.

Or, if they did, I may have dozed off during that exciting class.

Wednesday, September 24, 2008

What Floats My Boat

Back before macular degeneration began to dim my eyesight, I built model sailing ships. In fact, one of the proudest accomplishments of my life is that I once constructed a schooner inside a beer bottle.

Pretty pathetic, isn't it. Looking back over almost 70 years and seeing a main highpoint of my life in a beer bottle—and the bottle was empty before I got it!

Last week I heard from Mike, my friend and former son-in-law. When he and Jennifer got married, as a wedding gift I built them a beautiful clipper ship in full sail. Worked on it for months and months. Thought of it as an heirloom for them to treasure...

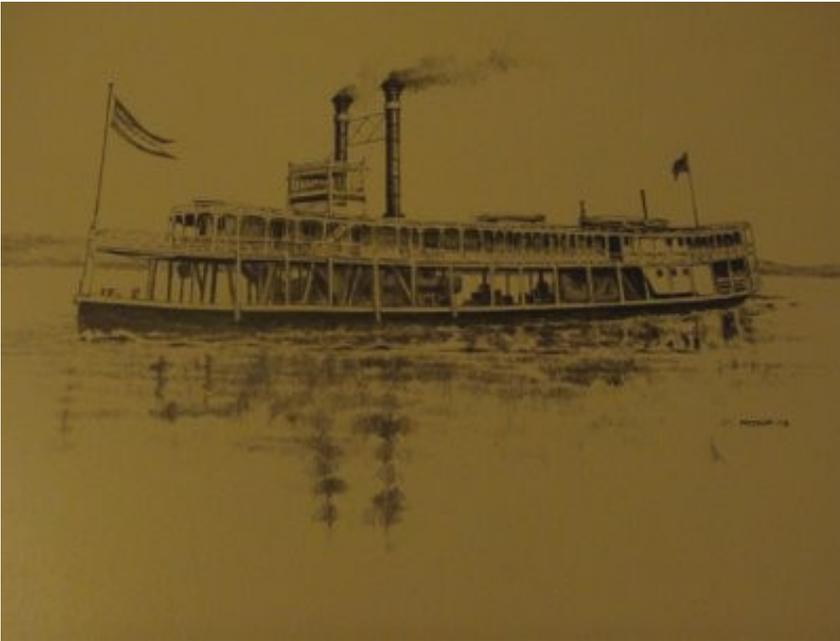
The model ship did not last as long as their short marriage.

They had this cat.

The vile beast viewed that full-rigged tea clipper as a mortal enemy. Shredded the sails, clawed the rigging, chewed the hull—utterly mangled the heirloom.

This week gave me three other occasions to think about ships:

Yesterday, some new e-friends, Bill & Michelle Leep up in Michigan e-mailed me a scanned copy of a print by John Fryant showing an 1885 riverboat once stationed in Jacksonville:



The *Queen Of The St. Johns* was built in Ohio, then sailed down the Mississippi, across the Gulf of Mexico, around the Florida Keys, up the East Coast to Jacksonville.

Yes, during the 1800s more paddlewheelers plied the St. Johns than the Hudson. One chapter in my book *Crackers & Carpetbaggers* tells their story; and another chapter tells about the worst maritime disaster on the St. Johns River when the *City Of Sanford* wrecked.

On the back of Bill & Michelle's print is a full account of the Queen Of The St. John's career on the river. The

Leeps say they are interested in selling the print; if you're interested, their e-mail address is billmichelleleep@gmail.com .

This week also, ZOM e-mailed me a clipping from: *Daytona Beach News-Journal* at <http://www.news-journalonline.com/index.htm> .

Archaeologists feel they're hot on the trail to discovering the wreckage of an entire French fleet shipwrecked between Daytona and St. Augustine during a September hurricane in 1565.

I find that exciting news because the Jacksonville area was settled by French Protestants who tried to drive a wedge between the Spanish at St. Augustine 20 miles south of us, and the English on St. Simons Island, 20 miles north of us.

The Daytona archaeologists, working with the Center for Historical Archaeology in Melbourne, and the Lighthouse Archaeology Maritime Program, in St. Augustine, have uncovered a camping spot where French survivors of the fleet's wreck got to shore. They figure the ships lie underwater near that spot on Mosquito Lagoon.

The camp site yielded coins, ceramics, personal articles and iron ship's spikes worked on a forge.

The fleet included the *La Trinite*, a 32-gun galleon, and the 29-gun royal galleon *Emerillon*, and many smaller ships..

French survivors struggled up the beach for weeks until they reached Matanzas Inlet (the name Matanzas means *slaughter* or *massacre*). When the French surrendered pleading for mercy, the Spanish rowed survivors across the inlet a few at a time in a small boat, then, once they were separated from the group, slit their throats—all 250 of them.

The survivors' trek reminds me of the one undertaken by the Dickenson party (see my July 23, 2008, "Seven Months Naked On The Beach", blog post in the archives).

Both the Spanish site on Mazanzas Inlet and the site of the French settlement at Fort Caroline on the St. Johns River in Jacksonville are now national parks.

Still with me?

I'm interested in this stuff; hope you are too, because I have one more.

Take a look at this ancient boat:

As I've been thinking about other ships this morning—this stuff floats my boat—I also remember how I used to use the measurements of this one as an illustration back when I taught adult Bible classes.



During a drought in Israel in 1986, two brothers, Moshe and Yuval Lufan, discovered this boat buried in mud along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Radiocarbon tests dated the boat as being 2,000 years old.

Some people went ape!

They concluded that a 2,000-year-old boat found in the Sea of Galilee just had to be the very boat Jesus taught from.

Not necessarily.

At best, this archaeological find shows us the type of boat used in New Testament times. Nothing at all directly connects this boat with Jesus. Nevertheless, many people named it "The Jesus Boat"; others call it "The Galilee Boat"; still others simply term it a roman boat.

Luke's Gospel tells an incident involving such a boat:

And He entered into one of the ships, which was Simon's, and prayed him that he would thrust out a little from the land. And He sat down, and taught the people out of the ship.

Now when He had left speaking, He said unto Simon, "Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught".

And Simon answering said unto Him, "Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net".

And when they had this done, they inclosed a great multitude of fishes

When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord".

For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the draught of the fishes which they had taken:

There were other boats mentioned in that same passage of Scripture. The boat found in 1986 was not the only one afloat on the sea 2,000 years ago.

However, from mosaic pictures uncovered in the same area, the Galilee Boat seems typical of ships of that day.

And, to me, the most interesting thing about the boat is its measurements:

Although the superstructure wore away under the mud, the remaining depth is almost five feet; the ship's length is almost 30 feet long, and the width... the width is only eight feet.

No wonder Simon Peter was wowed.

He'd fished all night. He knew what he was doing; he was a professional fisherman. He knew the futility of a waterhaul when your nets come up empty.

That's on one side of the boat.

"Nevertheless, at Thy word..."

On the other side of the boat—a mere eight feet away—swam a huge school of fish.

On one side of the boat we see the best of human endeavor. Eight feet away, we see the abundance of God.

What made the difference?

Obedience.

"Nevertheless, at Thy word..."

The Yigal Allon Museum in Kibbutz Ginosar, Israel, displays the Galilee Boat.

It is safely preserved.

I have it on good authority that the museum does not allow cats.

Thursday, September 25, 2008
Yesterday I Sinned

I knew before I picked up the phone that I courted sin.

I buried that uneasy feeling in the back of my mind and called her anyhow.

Oh, I justified what I was doing. I told my self that this was not a big deal. I assured myself that it hardly mattered.

I knew in my heart that I was doing wrong. In the split second before she answered, I could have hung up the phone, but the pulsing dial tone convinced me to hang on and go through with it.

My action betrayed Christ.

I publicly espouse Christianity, but I demonstrated a lack of trust. My action proves that I do not believe Him. Not really. Not when the faith hits the fan.

O, it's easy to believe in a Savior when it comes to eternal salvation, some far away afterlife. But for the here and now?

Is Christ my Lord in practical matters, or in just the esoteric?

Getting to specifics—yesterday I bummed some money from someone.

Like some Wall Street swindler, I finagled a bail-out.

I treated the Lord God as though He isn't real.

OK, it wasn't much money. I could have lived without it, but I treasure my comforts and our recent expenses deprived me of a few things to ease my soul and body.

She brought the cash I asked for right over. No hesitation.

I had what I asked for.

But my soul felt lean.

Then, about an hour after she delivered the cash, I read a passage from Charles Spurgeon, a 19th Century preacher in London. In his day Spurgeon was called "The Prince of Preachers".

He meditated on how, in the Bible, Ezra led a caravan of God's people from Babylon to Jerusalem. And crossing the bandit-infested desert, Ezra did not ask for an armed escort.

"For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, 'The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him; but His power and His wrath is against all them that forsake Him'."--Ezra 8:22

Spurgeon observed:

A convoy on many accounts would have been desirable for the pilgrim band, but a holy shame-facedness would not allow Ezra to seek one. He feared lest the heathen king should think his professions of faith in God to be mere hypocrisy, or imagine that the God of Israel was not able to preserve His own worshippers.

Ezra could not bring his mind to lean on an arm of flesh in a matter so evidently of the Lord, and therefore the caravan set out with no visible protection, guarded by Him who is the sword and shield of His people.

It is to be feared that few believers feel this holy jealousy for God; even those who in a measure walk by faith, occasionally mar the luster of their life by craving aid from man.

It is a most blessed thing to have no props and no buttresses, but to stand upright on the Rock of Ages, upheld by the Lord alone. Would any believers seek state endowments for their Church, if they remembered that the Lord is dishonoured by their asking Caesar's aid? As if the Lord could not supply the needs of His own cause!

Should we run so hastily to friends and relations for assistance, if we remembered that the Lord is magnified by our implicit reliance upon His solitary arm?

My soul, wait thou only upon God.

"But," says one, "are not means to be used?"

Assuredly they are; but our fault seldom lies in their neglect: far more frequently it springs out of foolishly believing in them instead of believing in God.

Few run too far in neglecting the creature's arm; but very many sin greatly in making too much of it.

Learn, dear reader, to glorify the Lord by leaving means untried, if by using them thou wouldst dishonour the name of the Lord.

You know, (this is John again, not Spurgeon) it looks like after close to 50 years of being a Christian, I would have learned this lesson by now.

To my shame, I haven't.

The love of God is shown toward us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

Christ died for sinners.

I qualify.

Friday, September 26, 2008
My Workaday World

In a sense, for the past couple of weeks I could have gotten by repeating a single journal entry—yes, my days recently have had that much sameness to them:

Got up at 3 a.m. Posted journal entry. Worked on fire history book. Shaved and showered at 4 p.m. before Ginny got home from work. Started dinner. Worked on history book till 10 p.m. Watched news on tv.

That's my exciting life.

I like it.

Ginny says I'd make a great troll in a cave.

Of course this summary misses the frustration of the fire history book. Drives me nuts!!! For years I've gathered materials for a history of our fire department—which is actually a history of Jacksonville told from the viewpoint of how many times the place has burned down... or would have without firefighters.

All this mass of materials, over 2,000 pages of it, I'm condensing into a 300-page book. But it all comes in different formats, different sized photos, different formatting, different section breaks, different formatting for scores of footnotes, different headers and footers, different pagination, different sized fonts—

And I'm trying to make a consistent whole of this mess—while my computer system thinks it should make helpful auto-changes without bothering to tell me!

Thus I see my life as a miniature model of the cosmos—the sort of thing God deals with all the time... Only He does it with hundreds of millions of people's lives..

Good thing He loves what He's doing.

Well, back to my manuscript...the little box on the monitor is flashing ...

What's a vindictive font with 12-pt kern?... Or maybe that's a veranda font???

Oh, here's a joke:

Two fonts go into a bar to order a beer.

Immediately the irate bartender starts yelling, "Get Out! Get Out! This is a nice place. We don't serve your type in here."

Sunday, September 28, 2008 **So Near--So Far**

Know how it feels when you stack up a house of cards, how the base seems stable, then how you add layer after layer till the tower gets two feet tall and you still have six or eight cards to ease onto the wobbly top?

Know how that feels?

That's where I've been all weekend in writing my book on the history of firefighting in Jacksonville.

So close to finishing; so many final steps to add.

Each time I touch the thing, it threatens to topple. Every comma I add makes the structure tremble.

But I think once I construct the index, the book will be ready for the printer to make me a proof-copy. It's that close to publication.

Then Saturday morning, as I made a section break for the index... a Microsoft Word pop-up box informed me that I have insufficient memory and no further change can be undone... then, another pop-up box said, I've made too many edits and my text can not be saved...

I've worked (off and on) on this book since I wrote its first edition in 1986. I've updated it to 2007. What does Microsoft Word mean saying my text can not be saved?

My son-in-law says I need to go into the page set-up menu, then the tools menu, then to the confirm tracking box and click on that—but I may lose existing formatting.

My son Donald says that I need to create a blank Word document, re-set mirror margins and gutters, then paste my existing text and graphics into that—but I may lose existing formatting.

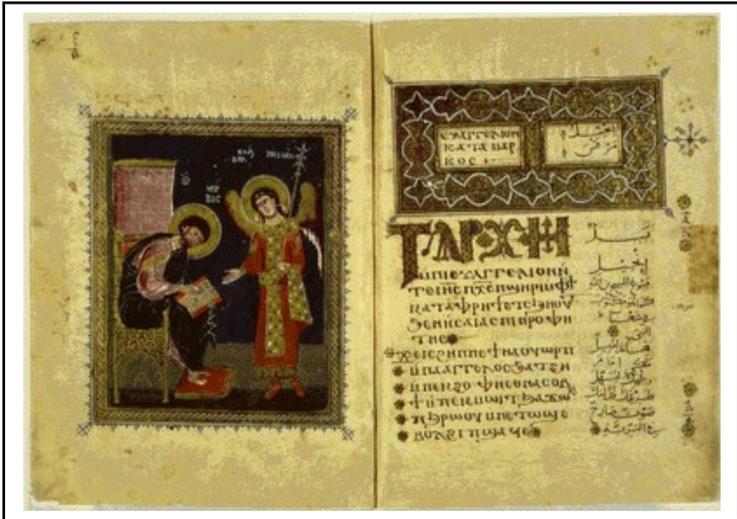
My beautiful wife Ginny says, "Calm down, John. I think you're losing it".

Hey, I just yelled at the computer a bit; I am not losing it.

I am calm.

I'll get it done. Whatever it takes.

In my mind's eye, I see a finished copy of my book. I imagine my finished book will look a lot like this:



In my mind's eye, I see a finished copy of my book printed on fine velum with gold inlay encrusted with precious stones, and ...

Oh, that's not really my book; the photo really shows an illuminated manuscript in Coptic of Mark's Gospel. Way back, when I worked at the Library of Congress, I actually got to handle a few such manuscripts. I'm not scholar enough to actually read one, but I did the heavy lifting to move ancient manuscripts from place to place in the library.

What a thrill.

When you handle an illuminated manuscript, you know you're touching treasure!

I marvel at the precision the scribes exercised in transmitting God's Word through the ages. These guys, working by lamp light, copied the Scripture in pains-taking detail. Like the guy who cut the facets of the Hope Diamond, the copyists knew they were handling something exceedingly precious and they treated the Scripture with the respect God's Word deserves.

And when today I hear someone babble about not trusting the Bible because of copyists mistakes, I think he only displays his ignorance.

Anyhow, back to the relationship between my fire history book, my computer's pop-up boxes, and the gold-encrusted Coptic Gospel in the photo.

The illumination shows St. Mark seated writing his book with a quill pen.

Mark is close to the end of his Gospel.

After the events of my morning with the computer pop-up messages fresh in my mind, I fancifully reconstruct what I think happened...

This angel pops up in front of Mark and says, "I have a message from God. Your subject/verb agreement is all wrong... You have to write the whole thing over".

I imagine that if you flip to the next page of that codex, you'll see an exquisite illustration bordered in lapis-lazuli with amber highlights—

I imagine it shows St. Mark strangling the angel.

Monday, September 29, 2008

Repercussions From An Ancient Kindness

Saturday Ginny decided to refurbish her wardrobe at a thrift store across the river on the far side of the city, an area of town we rarely drive to.

She has a degree in finance and a frugal turn of mind; so she saves money buying at this store where the used clothing is cheap and the store profits go to helping children with life-threatening illnesses.

Jacksonville covers 844 square miles and bleeds over into surrounding counties, so there are some areas which we rarely even see. In fact, we rarely even cross the St. John's River which bisects the city.

But Saturday we ventured far afield into the wilds of Southside.

She bought cloth things.... For hours!

Since we were on that side of town, we drove to a restaurant in Arlington for a late lunch.

There we met a lady who has been a waitress for many, many years. We did not recognize her, but she recognized us from having served us at another restaurant in the Northside many, many years ago.

You know, sometimes I get discouraged at trying to live like a Christian. Sometimes it seems a thankless task.

You do good. You do your best. You try to treat other people with respect and kindness; you try to spread the good news about Christ and His resurrection ... and nothing happens.

I see no results.

It all seems so futile.

Sometimes I feel as though I'm wasting my time. In fact, I often feel as though I'm pissing against the wind...

The ...er, lets say mature... waitress greeted us effusively. She remembered us from that other restaurant where she worked long ago...And, she remembered something Ginny did, something so tiny we'd both forgotten.

You see, when that waitress was younger, she could not afford a babysitter for her little boy. She had to bring the kid into work with her and park him at a corner table and make him sit for the eight to ten hours a day she served tables.

Ginny noticed that this little boy was bored out of his skull! He had absolutely nothing to do while his mama worked.

The next time we ate at that restaurant, Ginny carried a box of children's books and gave them to the kid. to read while his mother served tables. We thought little of it. No big deal. Such a little thing... Just a handful of books our own children had outgrown.

We'd forgotten all about it.

Saturday, the lady, still waiting tables but at a different place, reminded us about those books. She thanked us again. She told us that her little boy is now a grown man. He and his wife live up in Tennessee. They have four children.

He reads to them.

He reads to them all the time.

His mama says he does that because of Ginny's long ago kindness...

After she left our table, Ginny and I got to talking, trying to figure out how long ago that had happened... She said it must have been 15 years ago; I said it may have been 20 years ago. We just couldn't pinpoint the time...

"What does it matter," I said, "Fifteen, twenty years, what's the difference"?

My smart-ass accountant wife said, "Five years".

Tuesday, September 30, 2008

How I Burn To Be A Writer!

Writers should burn their own books.

That would save so much wear and tear on the nerves.

Why would I, a writer, think that?

Sunday evening, following the advice about track confirmations from my son-in-law, and advice on pasting into a new Word document from my son, and the helpful instructions in the Word Help Menu (HA!), I solved the problem revealed in the error messages mentioned in last week.

Remember? "A Microsoft Word pop-up box informed me that I have insufficient memory and no further change can be undone... then, another pop-up box said, I've made too many edits and my text can not be saved".

Yeah, that problem—not being able to save or change over 300 pages of text.

It's infuriating, but I can't tell which thing I did solved the problem.

Oh well, one of the many things I did finally worked.

Once that I'd solved that, I restructured section breaks, realigned pagination, confirmed the accuracy of and formatted 163 footnotes, created an index, gave the manuscript a final going over—then uploaded the book to the printer for a proof copy.

Joy, Oh Joy—my history of firefighting in Jacksonville is FINISHED!

After working on this manuscript off and on since 1986, and especially concentrating on it for the past two years, it's finally FINISHED!

Joy. Joy. Joy. Happy. Happy. Happy—**then yesterday afternoon, the phone rang.**

A source I'd asked for information back on September 9th (actually, I'd begun seeking this information more than a year ago) Information about heroic acts by local firemen called... He has the additional information.

His additional information looks to cover about another three to six pages to be inserted about two-thirds of the way into the book...

His information involves tales of bravery, courage, risk, dramatic rescues and inspiration... As it stands now, the inspirational highpoint of my text quotes a 1950s newspaper article about how firemen at one station planted petunias all around the entrance to beautify the firehouse.

But, if I add the information provided by my late-calling source, then I'll need to scrap my proof copy, restructure the section breaks, realign pagination, confirm the accuracy of and formatted 163 footnotes, created a new inde...

Like the rigging of an old clipper ship, in a book manuscript, if you change the tension on one line to one sail, you have to adjust the tension on all the other ropes on every mast. There are no simple changes.

Someone whispers in my ear, "Ignore the additional information; your book will stand without it. You don't want to do all that work all over again. Who'll know the difference?"

The voice in my ear even repeated a famous quote:

"What I have written, I have written".

That's a verse from the Bible.

That's a verse I can live with....

Er, who was it who said that?

Oh, that was Pontius Pilate talking about the sign he had tacked above Jesus' head on the cross.

Is that a Scripture verse I want to live by?

This Living-For-Jesus thing on a day by day basis, while observing the guidelines of Scripture, can be tricky.

I'll either have to revise my "finished" manuscript again, or find another portion of Scripture... Oh, here's a good one:

In Acts 19:19 many former occultists at Ephesus had become Christians and:

"Many that believed came and confessed and shewed their deeds. Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men... So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed".

Notice—this is important—they did not burn anybody else's book—only their own books. Never anybody else's.

I'd against censorship in all forms...

But, I'm beginning to think, when it comes to my own books... Especially this fire history which has plagued me for years and years and years, maybe those ancient Ephesians had a point.

My fire history book in a bonfire...

I see a certain appeal in imagining that.

Sort of a poetic vision.

Calming to the nerves.

Soothing to the mind.

Warming to the heart.

Marshmallows!

I need some marshmallows—and a long thin stick.

OCTOBER

Wednesday, October 01, 2008

Hit

A young woman hit on me yesterday.

At first I thought I might be misinterpreting her actions, after all I'm pushing 70 and she could not have been a day over 30.

But then, of course, I am a well-preserved 70; she may have thought... Well, who knows what she may have thought? Maybe she felt so desperate for a man that even I looked overwhelmingly attractive to her.

After all, I do resemble James Bond, a very mature James Bond.

And I clean up nice.

I'd spent the morning at yard work and a young man from another country came by to talk with me about his prospects of becoming a successful writer in America. I encouraged him as best I could. But when he left, I shaved and showered and combed my hair and dressed up before Ginny came home from work. So I was not shabby when we went out to the library..

Ginny and I returned our books to the library and she went off into the stacks looking for a life of Teddy Roosevelt; while she was gone, I browsed along the video shelves.

As I read the blurb on the back of *Annie*, unaware of the world around me, a young woman's hand brushed mine. She began speaking about the sort of videos she'd like to take back home to her apartment to watch.

I looked around.

Not many people frequent the library early Tuesday evening. There was not a single other person anywhere near the video section. Yet this young woman stood close to me. Very close.

A very nice looking young woman, smartly dressed, tasteful, wearing snug blue pants with a long-sleeved silk blouse with a floral print and a bow at the collar.. I thought she might be a receptionist just getting off work from some professional office; or maybe she'd come to the library from a job interview, or straight from some sort of important appointment.

I have an aversion to being touched so when her hand brushed mine, I took a step backward from the shelves; she moved a step closer still talking about films she likes.

I put *Annie* in my bag and went to see if any new Donald Westlake novels were on the shelves; the young woman walked over into the nonfiction section. *Curious*, I thought. But a few minutes later, she appeared in the *Ws* standing so close to me that our shoulders touched.

No other person was in that aisle.

What's going on here, I wondered.

Again I moved away. Hey, these days even a dirty old man needs to be cautious.

I sat at an empty library table—there were a number of empty tables around the room—and the young lady came and sat directly across from me. She placed three books she'd brought over from nonfiction on the table and began to leaf through one.

Pretending to scan my own choices, I peeked at her from the corner of my eye.

What was she after?

Ginny came out of the stacks and sat beside me sorting her own book choices. We talked about where to drive for dinner and decided on Country Kitchen. Ginny carried our books to the checkout desk; the young woman left the table and wandered off into the stacks leaving her three books.

As Ginny and I left the library, I noticed the titles of the three books the young woman had left on the library table—

Every one of them bore a title like *Coping With Your Cancer*.

Thursday, October 02, 2008

Busted!

Yesterday I tripped over an alligator.

Busted my left leg.

Appointment with Dr. Woody tomorrow.

Here's how it happened:

While waiting for the galley proof pages of my fire history book to arrive, I got sick of my computer and did

yard work to get outside into Florida's clean, fresh air. I edged and mowed and pruned and moved garden flagstones...

And I tripped over the gator, a cement lawn ornament weighing about 50 pounds.

Back when preparing the yard for Tropical Storm Fay, I'd moved the gator into a nook where it wouldn't blow away. And I forgot that I'd moved it. So when I went striding through that corner of the garden, I barked my shin on the gator's open mouth.

I also kicked it hard enough to cut open a place on the top of my foot.

Suppose I can get a storm damage grant from FEMA?

Oh, they don't give grants for stupidity.

So I limped inside to cool off—only to find our air conditioner is busted--again! Hotter in the house than outside—about 87 degrees. That's dangerous for the computer, so I shut it down to avoid its overheating.

Decided to go outside again to clean the pool and cool off myself—only to find the pool pump busted.

Limped back inside to sit in my favorite living room chair—it's busted too. My elbow has worn the arm's fabric away, and the hole wallowed through the cotton batting to bare wood, which chaffs my elbow. Ginny's favorite living room chair is busted too; a spring in the seat. Our kids say we should get rid of the chairs and buy new ones, but our chairs sag where we sag.

Besides, they fit our home décor.

So much is busted around here. Parting the Red Sea was fine for Moses, but the miracle of the Exodus that impresses me most is that during their 40 years wandering in the wilderness, God did not let the soles of the people's shoes wear out.

At my age I feel just about everything around me is wearing out, getting busted, or just flaking away.

That's as it should be.

Is there any valid reason I should keep a cement alligator in my yard?

Things are not as important as people.

Anyhow, with the A/C busted and the pool pump busted and the living room chairs busted...

Ok, so I'll prop my gator-bitten leg up and watch tv... Almost time for Oprah.

The recliner/love seat in the tv room is—busted. The footrest on Ginny's side will not come down; the footrest on my side, will not come up. Yet both backs recline part way at different angles and the seats twist.

Now Ginny and I are both robust people.

So, once we sit down to watch tv, we have a horrible time getting up out of that recliner. A horrible time...

Yet we often laugh like fools at our own antics and contortions as we try to get out of that love seat. We frail and huff and twist and wallow and laugh... There are worse places for a loving couple to get stuck than a love seat.

We remind me of an old joke from my truck-driving days:

This guy is telling his buddy about a new girl at the strip-tease club.

"You should see her. Her measurements are 48-26-34!"

"Wow. That's impressive. What does she do in her act".

"She crawls out on stage on her hands and knees and tries to stand up".

Saturday, October 04, 2008

Not Much To Say

After delivering our busted pool pump to the electric motor shop, Ginny and I spent much of the rest of the day Friday at Dr. Woody's office where he ran another test.

My prostate cancer still thrives.

While in general, such cancers are slow-growing, mine proves to be a robust little bastard.

Hanging around a doctor's office debilitates us. After a late lunch, we crashed then spent the evening watching a happy old video, *Harvey* starring Jimmy Stewart.

A phrase from one of the Psalms says, "The joy of the Lord is my strength".

What a curious turn of expression.

It's not my joy in the Lord, because that varies from day to day, waxing or waning according to circumstances; but it is the Lord's joy that gives us strength—the knowledge that our loving Lord is happy with the way He sees all creation turning out in the long-run.

On the last day of creation, I think it will be as it was on the first, "And God saw that it was good".

Yes, in spite of all that sin has screwed up in the world, in spite of all mankind has done, in spite of all individuals have done, in spite of all that I have done, He who sees the end from the beginning, the first and the last, He takes pleasure in the work of His hands and is satisfied.

And if He is satisfied, who ain't?

If He is happy with the eventual outcome, what have I to fear?

All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.

The Lord's joy is my strength.

Sunday, October 05, 2008
Talking With Ginny On Saturday

What a happy day!

The Post Office delivered the galley proof pages for my fire department history book and at first glance, I see fewer mistakes than I usually find in proof pages.

Of course, I immediately spotted a few formatting errors and began kicking myself for being so stupid... Long ago a psych major told me that self-negation is the highest and most insidious form of pride.

He said that I put myself down before anyone else can because I'm so proud and full of self that I really think I'm

higher than anyone else; and if I say loudly, “I am a lowly worm” then the hearer will jump in to correct me by saying, “Not so, John. You’re really an eagle!” That way I get double strokes—they said it, not me.

Of course, after 40 years of marriage, Ginny knows better than to play my silly mind game. When I put myself down, she does not contradict me, but says, “I wish you wouldn’t talk that way; it annoys me”.

Puts an end to my game playing.

So when she called me up short this afternoon, I retrenched to my own comfort level saying:

**Self-flagellation
Beats The Hell
Out Of Being Flagellated
By Somebody Else!**

She said I ought to engrave that Cowartism on a polished walnut plaque and see how many of them I could sell on E-bay as office wall-hangers.

Talking with Ginny is one of the great joys of my life. I get such a kick out of this strange woman who was wise enough to love me and see me as better than I truly see myself ... Not all my downputting is an act or a mind game; sometimes it reveals genuine pain; and Ginny discerns the difference.

Over the course of the day we talked about: sex; car maintenance; the vice-presidential debate; 12th Century stave churches in Norway; Jimmy Stewart as an actor; tv programs we each watched as kids; Jewish newspapers; English drawing room mysteries; living wills; the people moving in next door; our children; the use of radios to communicate in disasters; our tentative plans for 2009; our philosophy of life; recipes for pot roasts; wild birds; windshield washer fluids, the parables of Jesus; checks and balances in government, prescription medicines, Neolithic monuments, a book on ethics she’s reading, a philosophical society in Scotland, and I forget whatall else.

My but we have fun!

As we discussed the question “Who Is My Neighbor” over Bar-B-Que at Georgie’s , I told her this story my e-friend Carol sent me the other day:

A Sunday School teacher, wanting to emphasize social responsibility, told the kids about the Parable of the Good Samaritan, how robbers mugged this guy, robbed him, beat him, stripped off all his clothes, and left him for dead in the road, but the Good Samaritan came along, found him, rescued him, and nursed him back to health.

The teachers asked the kids, "What would you do if you were walking along the street and found a man laying unconscious in the gutter all beat up and bruised and naked and bleeding? What would you do?"

One little girl replied, "I think I'd throw up".

Monday, October 06, 2008

Leaves

A gray tarp stretches between my shed and two nearby trees. Our favorite outdoor chairs rest in the shade of that tarp and Ginny and I often sit there watching various species of birds come to feeder and fountain.

That is one of our favorite places for morning coffee and conversation.

Fall leaves accumulate on the tarp creating pleasing patterns overhead. These photos are taken from the underside:



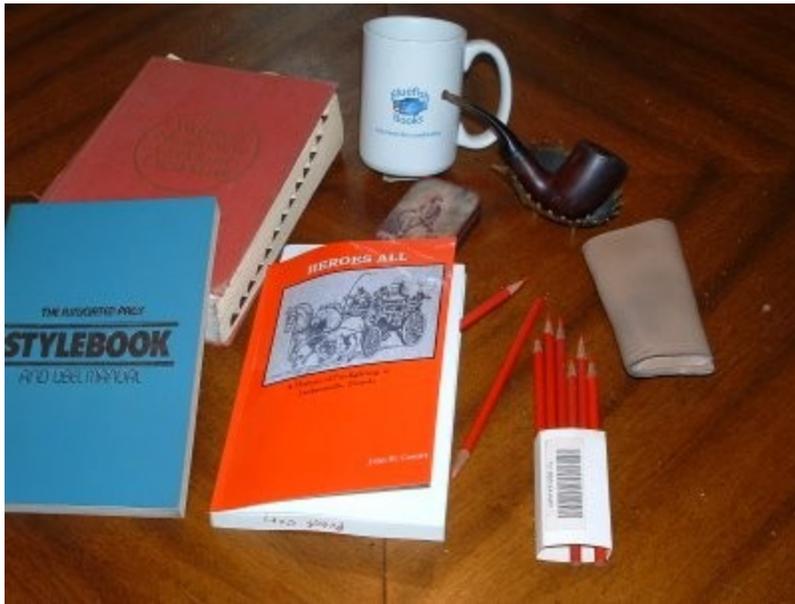


But, this week I focus on a different kind of leaves—the leaves and pages of my fire history book. Yes, the printed front and back of each leaf of a book make two pages. Hence the expression “turning over a new leaf”.

I think the printing press runs large sheets of paper through and inks all the odd numbered pages on one side, and all the even numbered pages on the opposite side. Then some machine folds and cuts the large sheets into leaves which are correlated into pages in order. Ideally, the odd numbered pages will always be on the right as you face the book.

This week, my job shifts from writer to editor and enditor—the last person to handle a book manuscript before it goes to the printer.

Here’s a photo of the proof copy of *Heroes All* with some of my essential tools for the job: coffee mug with my publishing logo (www.bluefishbooks.info); tobacco pouch, pipe and matches; dictionary and style manual; and lots of sharp red pencils.



I'll check facts and dates and pagination and captions and fonts—and I'll worry that I missed something obvious which I won't see till the final print edition comes out..

Heroes All tells the history of Jacksonville from the viewpoint of how many times the place burned down, or would have burned down if not for the actions of firefighters.

It begins in 1852 when volunteer firefighters got out their guns and shot an arsonist off the roof of a hotel; and the book traces the development of firefighting men, women, and equipment through to the rescue of a puppy from the Humane Society Shelter fire earlier this year when hundreds of other dogs and cats burned locked in their cages.

But mostly my book focuses on acts of courage, bravery and honor in which Jacksonville firefighters risked their own lives to rescue others.

Oddly enough, one of the hardest things about writing this book has been locating records of the daily acts of heroism by local firefighters—because they don't keep track themselves. They are not boastful. After horrendous explosions and fire with buildings falling over their heads, the firefighters usually say something like, "Just doing my job. All I do is put the wet stuff on the hot stuff".

Well, my job this week is proofing the leaves of 298 pages so that I can tell their story as well as I possibly can.

After that, I'll admire the autumn leaves in our backyard.

Thursday, October 09, 2008
Let Each Esteem Others...

About 4 this morning I uploaded a finished copy of my fire department history book to the printing company; in a week or ten days they'll send me a sample copy and, if there are no major glitches, that book will be published.

Thanks be to God!

The final push to get the thing done leaves me numb and exhausted.

And... ashamed.

I tweaked and tweaked the proof pages, yet I'm not satisfied. I've left out so much information. I've avoided controversial problems. I've short changed some people who deserve great credit.

This is the 19th or 20th book I've written or edited, and every book has left me feeling as though I could have done so much better... Although as far as I can tell my fire history is the most complete and thorough treatment of the topic I know.

After working on this thing, off and on, since 1985 and collecting about 2,000 pages of notes, I become keenly aware that I know little about my subject. There are more knowledgeable people who could have done a better job.

But, they didn't.

I did it because this is what I do.

One thing bothered me greatly: in the final throes of correcting proofs, I had to call for help. The formatting of some photos and captions (the book is chock full of them) defeated me. Any way I tried, they came out wrong.

So I called on Helen, my daughter-in-law, who is a graphic artist to bail me out. She cheerfully came right over and restructured tables and cells and photo- shopped

things in a matter of minutes. Problems I've struggled with for weeks, she solved.

In all sorts of areas, she cuts right through crap and comes up with solutions.

I don't know what our family would do without her.

One problem—the book covers.

For ages, whenever I've thought of this book, I've imagined a red cover with a black and gray charcoal drawing of galloping horses racing with a fire pumper wagon billowing smoke. Ages ago Mose Bowden, curator of the Jacksonville Fire Museum, sketched such a picture for me. We used it on the cover of an earlier history I wrote for the museum before he died. The firemen's credit union printed that same sketch/book cover on the chest of tee shirts and distributed them.

I gloried in that.

So, the horse picture carries many emotional attachments for me.

But Helen sees with the eye of a graphic artist. She's designed many book covers and other pieces of commercial art. She sees the book cover I envisioned as static. She suggested we use a dynamic colorful photo of firefighters toiling at a massive oil tanker explosion and fire.

I balked.

"What do you mean cut my baby's ears off," I questioned. "He's perfect. His ears are not too big. You can't cut them off. He's My Baby!"

As we worked together discussing the book cover, I calmed down and prayed a spot prayer that the Lord would help me not to be recalcitrant and demand my own way but to be teachable and go in the way He would have me go.

Not that God cares a fig about red covers as opposed to black covers, but He cares deeply about conforming me to the image of Christ.

As I prayed silently, and as Ginny, Donald and Helen talked, a phrase of Scripture came to my mind, one I have not thought of in years.

Paul told the people living in Philippi, “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind, let each esteem others as better than themselves”.

That means deferring to the judgment of people smarter than I am (or dumber—yes, I’ve learned a lot from dumber people).

I certainly was not expecting a spiritual lesson that late at night in the midst of formatting a pdf file and covers for a history book. But, God reaches us where we stand and when we’re in a listening mode.

I re-looked at Mose’s horse sketch. I looked at the burning oil tank with firefighting equipment in array. I looked at Helen’s cover design and at the one I’d done myself... “Nothing out of vainglory”...

Helen, bless her, listened as I explained my emotional attachment to the drawing and to the old man who sketched it. She understood my conflict. She said the cover decision is entirely mine and we would go with my choice.

She also said she would stay up late and reformat the back cover of the book to include the antique fire pumper and galloping horses. And she would redesign and brightened the front cover all over again.

She would abide by my decision and help me accomplish whatever I chose.

Look for the flaming oil tank on the cover when the book comes out.

Helen’s a treasure.

I hold her in esteem.

She’s much smarter than I am... Someday maybe I’ll write about all the things I’ve learned from people I considered at the time to be dumber than me—like the illiterate who taught me how to change a car tire, or the gravedigger who taught me how to dig a proper hole...

Let each esteem others as better—because they are!

I just don’t always recognize that.

Saturday, October 11, 2008
The Creative Process

Years ago a critic told me, "John, you are not a writer; you are just a synthesizer".

That hurt.

I bristled.

I defended myself thinking that it was a terrible thing to be called a synthesizer who only collects things someone else has created and combines them, as opposed to a real writer who imagines stories and creates characters out of whole cloth.

One just patches things together; the other creates.

Over the years, I've come to realize that the critic was right. I do take bits and pieces of this and that and glue them together to tell a new story... Take the history of our fire department for instance. In 288 pages, I cite 174 source footnotes. I've gathered materials from microfilm, old newspapers, books, magazines, websites, museum exhibits, personal conversations, tv news broadcasts, phone interviews...

I weave all this stuff together into a panorama of adventure, thrills, information and inspiration.

My fire history book portrays the brave and the bizarre Like a Christmas-time plane crash in the '50 when they knew the airliner carried 22 crew and passengers, but they recovered 23 bodies—That created a puzzle till they found out the plane had been carrying a corpse who died in Miami back north for burial.

Anyhow, for humans, to create is to combine existing things, we can't even imagine anything original. Only God creates out of nothing. All of our creative processes are derivative.

We take what He has made, and imagine new combinations for it. Even our mythology does this. Attach a woman's body to a fish's tail and get a mermaid. Put a man's torso on a horse's body and get a centaur. A man's head on a lion is a sphinx. Substitute snakes for hair, and you have Medusa.

The gods and creatures we imagine are mere composites of original things, they are not original in themselves. All the gods of the nations are idols. Cold stone chiseled or wooden logs sawn into combined shapes of existing things.

We can't come up with anything original, that has never existed before. Even the brightest of us synthesize.

Even real writers do that.

Take Sherlock Holmes, a unique detective. Arthur Conan Doyle did not create him out of air. Doyle exaggerated the qualities of Joseph Bell, one of his professors at the University of Edinburgh. The fictional character is based on the unusual talents of a real man.

Ian Fleming knew some suave, debonair, handsome rake and combined this person's qualities to make James Bond.... Maybe Fleming had me in mind. Have I told you that I resemble a very mature James Bond and that although I'm only 69 years old, around the Agency they already call me Double-O Seven-O...

My point is that there is but one true Creator. He needn't combine existing things to make anything. With Him all things are new.

Of course, when He hit on a design that worked well, He didn't scrap it, but used it with endless variations. For instance, any living thing you may think of is essentially a tube with a mouth at one end and excretory organs at the other. Repetition with variation, from mouse to giraffe, all are hollow tubes.

Hey, it works.

Why change it?

Also, both the mouse and the giraffe both have exactly seven bones in the neck; all mammals do. Yet, each creature is unique. We are fearfully and wonderfully made.

God need not rely on any existing thing to create a new thing.

He is original in Himself...

Although I have heard a camel described as "a horse designed by a committee".

My point in this ramble is that now that I have a few years on me, I feel honored to be a synthesizer. I think I'm good at it. In putting things together, we imitate Our Father, and sometimes He lets us tape our crayon drawings on the refrigerator.

He creates, we imitate.

Nothing wrong with that.

Children should imitate their Father—the goal of the Christian life is to become more and more like Him, to be godly, to reflect the brightness of His glory. The Scripture says, “When He shall appear, we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is”.

There is but one God and one go-between between God and man, Jesus Christ, Himself both God and man.

That's heavy.

But, Wow! Back to me. Think of it: 174 sources cited in a 288-page book.

That's plagiarism on a grand scale—only, to make it respectable, I call it thorough research.

Monday, October 13, 2008
Anticipation Of Our 40th

With the stock market crashing, banks failing, home repairs looming, jobs disappearing, prices increasing, income decreasing—Ginny and I decided to spend money to go on vacation to celebrate our 40th Anniversary next month.

We consider that a good investment.

We are investing in us.

Can we afford to rent an isolated cabin deep in the far-off woods? Why not? If we did not spend cash on us, what would we spend it on?

We'd intended to forego an Anniversary trip this year. We'd be just as happily married without going off anywhere. But this past week we reversed our reasonable decision and made our reservations.

Now we anticipate.

We do this by looking ahead...And by looking back.

Yesterday we spent about five hours looking at slides of our previous Anniversary trips. My but we had fun! We talked about books we read on our last trips. And about scenery we saw, and animals we watched, and meals we ate, and waters we swam, and churches we visited, and people we talked to, and love we renewed, and jokes we laughed at.

All that was looking back.

But we also looked ahead talking bout roads we'll travel, places we'll stop, harvest fields we'll view, prescriptions we'll need, things to pack, mail to stop, animals to arrange care for...

It's like getting ready for Heaven.

Anticipating by looking forward and back.

Back on November 20, 2005, I wrote in my diary about a previous trip and posted some photos; if anybody's interested that's in my blog archives at http://www.cowart.info/blog/2005_11_01_rabidfun_archive.html

But that was then; this is now.

Yesterday as I sat at my computer browsing, Ginny sat in her rocker directly behind me. I got interested in a site about cake recipes and began to tell her about them as I clicked here and there to enlarge photos of cakes.

I talked and talked about this site, until I made one statement and asked her, "Don't you think so"?

No answer.

I turned around to find her chair empty.

For ten or 15 minutes I'd been talking to myself in an empty room.

I walked back to find her sorting laundry in the bedroom and putting clothes on hangers. "Didn't you know I was talking to you," I asked.

"Yes, but I wanted to get this done," she said.

"Just how do you expect this marriage to last, If you walk away and leave me talking to myself"?

“You are so much easier to love when you’re in another room,” she said.

Tuesday, October 14, 2008
Hearts Of Oak (stained)

Monday my friend Wes treated me to breakfast at Ayre’s where we talked about stave churches, sin, and pine boxes.

I’d never heard of a stave church before my e-friend Felisol from Norway posted a photo of one in her blog, *On The Far Side Of The Sea* at <http://felisol.blogspot.com/> . Here’s one of her beautiful photos:



A great article, with lots of photo links, in Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stave_church) tells about these unusual wooden church buildings.

These wooden buildings have lasted over 900 years! The builders saturated the wood posts and planks in tar. They endure.

I wonder if the builders modeled their construction on Viking ships?

Anyhow, as Wes and I talked about sin—mine in particular—he used the analogy of a pine box stained to look like oak. That’s how stave churches entered our conversation.

Let me explain.

In my recent triumph at uploading that fire history book to the printer, almost immediately, instead of thanking God about the completion of that project I began to browse the internet for photos of girls wearing bikinis (or less).

I’ve observed this same pattern in my behavior again and again over the years. I will attempt to live in Christ, enjoy some minor triumph, then fall into squalor quick as peaches through a goose.

And I’m not alone in this.

It was not the wicked, ungodly Philistine giant Goliath who screwed Bathsheba in the bathtub; no, that was David, the man after God’s own heart.

It was not the wicked betrayer Judas who denied Christ said, “I do not know the man”; no, that was Simon Peter, leader of the apostles.

Why is it that guys who want to walk in love with Christ, so often fall into squalid sin? And look at the glee of the world when some preacher leaves his wife and runs off with the choir leader. The media acts as though no electrician or post man had ever done anything of the sort.

Perhaps the world expects to see something different from us Christians.

As well they should.

But, that's them; this is me.

I am a Christian. So, why do I fall so hard and so often.

At this point in our conversation, Wes brought up white pine boxes.

Among Wes's many talents is carpentry; he builds stuff. And here in Florida the cheapest, most common wood for any project is soft white pine, a near worthless wood often used for shipping pallets.

Wes likened what Christ does to our souls to a man who builds a box of white pine. After he knocks the thing together, he stains the cheap wood with oak stain.

And, like the tar in those staves in Norway, the oak stain begins to soak into the wood. Deeper and deeper it permeates the pine fibers. The box looks like oak. The only way you'd know it is pine is to cut into it deeper than the stain.

Wes said that at conversion, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell inside a cheap, common human heart. This is a supernatural act of God. The shed blood of Jesus Christ, like a stain, begins to soak in, to color everything about us, till we start to look, on the surface, a bit like Him. By soaking up God, we start to become godly—no credit to us, you understand.

But sometimes, things cut.

Temptation comes.

The cheap common pine shows through.

Not to despair, the oak stain is still soaking in.

Neither David nor Peter (nor John Cowart—nor you) remains the same. Those planks in the stave churches of Norway took 900 years to harden to their present solidity... And God has all eternity to work with us.

The Scripture says, "A new heart will I put within you".

We shall have hearts of true oak.

The downside of this hope, is that the preserving stain works better when applied under intense pressure—That, I think I can do without, Lord.

Wednesday, October 15, 2008

I'll Keep The Car Today

The repair shop called saying the pool pump can be picked up today...

So, I need get dressed to drive Ginny to work with a fruit salad for Boss's Day, drive to the motor shop, the post office to pick up a package, to Wal-Mart for pool chemicals, to the mission to deliver clothes to poor people, and to the book store.

Somewhere in there I need to get by the bank to get cash to pay for all this stuff and to a gas station so the car won't conk out while I'm running around.

And, depending on how things go, I may need to drive by the fire museum (not sure about that side trip yet).

Then I drive back home, change clothes, apply the chemicals, re-attach the pump motor, change out the filter, fill the bird feeders, climb a ladder to remove books from top shelves and pack them for a second trip to the book store, shower, shave and get dressed again to go pick up Ginny again. Then come home and cook our dinner—or maybe eat out.

I hate days when I have to have the car.

Thursday, October 16, 2008
Happy News/Sad News



In the midst of my running around yesterday, I received the final test copy of *Heroes All: A History Of Firefighting In Jacksonville, Florida*. I scanned the text for errors. Then I completed the final steps for publication.

My book is now available at www.bluefishbooks.info

I'm elated.

To see the published product after all those years of work pleases me.

As usual when I finish a book, I gave the first copy off the press to Ginny; on the title page. I inscribed it:

To Virginia, The Hottest Woman In Jacksonville!

She got such a laugh when she read that.

I'd taken that first copy to her office when I picked her up after work. To celebrate this major Cowart triumph, we drove out to dinner at Georgie's BBQ, where, on

Wednesdays, they offer a substantial price reduction—call it our *Decrepit Discount*—for senior citizens....

Back on July 29th of 2007 (see page 291, *A Dirty Old Man Stumbles On*, www.bluefishbooks.info) I wrote about the loving care strangers lavished on Georgie's manager when he had a heart attack while Ginny and I were in the restaurant. And, and on August 3rd, I wrote about how a local radio station read a portion of my blog posting on the air.

After he recovered and came back to work, one of the waitresses showed him some of my diary postings including the one about his heart attack...I don't know what he thought of it...I hope he read more than those two postings...

Well, last night as Ginny and I celebrated the happy news about my fire history book finally getting published, the cashier at Georgie's told us that last week that manager took a gun out to Ponte Vedra Beach at sunset and killed himself...

Incidentally, last night our youngest daughter, the one who'd been in the traffic accident, called from downstate with interesting news; She will not be spending Christmas with us; her boyfriend is taking her up to North Carolina to meet his family over the holidays. That may prove interesting.

A newspaper story about the death of the restaurant manager can be found at http://www.jacksonville.com/tu-online/stories/101108/met_342692942.shtml

Saturday, October 18, 2008

Precious In The Sight Of The Lord...

My friend Barbara White was sitting alone in a room with her daughter's body when she phoned me.

Mary, who was in her 40s, died yesterday of cancer which started as brain tumors then, after she had surgery for those, moved into her lungs.

Barbara, who gets around on an aluminum walker, has given Mary hands-on care for the past 18 months or two years; it seems longer. Barbara drove Mary, who was too sick to drive herself, to chemotherapy, radiation

treatments, doctors' visits, and such practically every day during that time.

"God made me strong for this very thing," Barbara said.

Last year, I edited and published four books Barbara wrote, collections of her award-winning weekly newspaper columns which were titled, like her books, *Along The Way*. The series can be found at www.bluefishbooks.info. Many, many people have written saying how much Barbara's records of her own struggles as a Christian help them in the problems of their own lives.

About 25 years ago, when Barbara worked as a newspaper editor, she read an article I wrote about family worship and asked if she could join Ginny and me and our four kids for dinner one night. Ever since then she's been one of us, a regular member of our family.

Last week, when Barbara treated me to breakfast at Dave's Dinner, we talked about Mary's health and some other problems Barbara faces. She told me, "I don't know what to do. Right now all I need to do is to stand there in the midst of these circumstances and be a person who knows God in that place".

A few minutes after Mary died, Barbara called me to talk as she waited for the funeral home to pick up the body.

When the phone rang, I'd been in the back yard lying on my back in a mud puddle while filthy stagnant water streamed into my face as I tried to fix a hose leak underneath the pool filter. I've been working on this project two days and finally solved it (Please, God) by using a surgical glove, a section of bicycle tire inner tube, some string-trimmer cord, and a hose clamp. I think the leak has at least slowed down. I left that stuff to stew while I talked with my friend.

I had little comfort to offer.

Mostly I listened.

In her younger days Mary was somewhat of a hellion and brought all kinds of grief to her mother. Yet, I'm happy to say that when the cancer appeared, it forced mother and daughter to spend lots of time together. And

in that time spent together, Mary grew to value, appreciate and love Barbara in a way they'd not experienced before.

Whereas before, Mary appeared to regard her mother's faith in Christ with scorn, over the past few months Mary did come to profess that very same faith as her own.

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.

"She died at peace with God and with me," Barbara said as we talked yesterday.

"It's been hard. Very hard. But it's been all worthwhile," she said.

Monday, October 20, 2008
Disaster Communications

Saturday morning as Ginny and I gathered stuff for our CERT emergency radio communications training class, she muttered something about wanting some political papers related to the upcoming elections.

Being an ever-alert husband, I began loudly singing:

I'll seek no more the fine and gay
For each does but remind me
How swift the hours did pass away
With the girl I left behind me.

After a good many verses of that song, I broke into singing all the words I could remember to "Hard-Hearted Barbara Allen".

"What in the world are you doing?" Ginny asked.

I told her I was singing a simple ballad for her.

That's when she gave me *That Look*.

All long-married men know the look I mean.

The All-Men-Are-Idiots-And-I've-Married-Their-King look.

At the disaster radio class we practiced stuff about channels and sub-channels and tones and radio protocol as each team walked all over downtown Jacksonville.

We learned that some area CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) groups form equestrian units or 4-wheel-drive units so they can reach areas inaccessible except by horse or ATVs. This type of unit can get to an airliner which crashed in a swamp or to a wild fire.

The Jax fire department even has some bike-mounted firemen who can respond in emergencies at sports events because they can get through dense crowds where as a regular fire/rescue truck would have trouble maneuvering through a crowd.

During the radio drill, both Ginny and I got to push a button and talk with Team Leader who relayed our important information to Base Net at the Emergency Operations Center.

All we were doing was counting parked cars around City Hall in this drill, but we did learn the benefits and limitations of this radio system. We'd never even seen this kind of radio before. It was cool.

Communications is so important in disasters—such as marriage.

For instance, earlier that morning Ginny had not yearned to hear me sing a simple ballad—she'd said she was looking for her sample ballot.

Wednesday, October 22, 2008
The End Of History

Seeing a finished copy of my book on the history of firefighting in Jacksonville pleases me inordinately.

I'm tickled. It's not too shabby.



But, having last week finally published my fire history book, this week I find myself in limbo.

Finishing that book renders me unemployed.

Oh, I'll write another book. But I have no idea which book to write next.

One thing appears sure; it will not be another history of anything. For years now, I have emphasized historical articles and books. But now my eyesight dims too much to hunch over a microfilm reader for hours.

This saddens me.

Some of the greatest thrills of my life have come on discovering some obscure event I've uncovered with a magnifying glass in the coffee-colored pages of *Niles Weekly Register*. I'd get such a charge at linking one obscure fact to another, seemingly unrelated, one in a different document, then weaving the two into an exciting narrative.

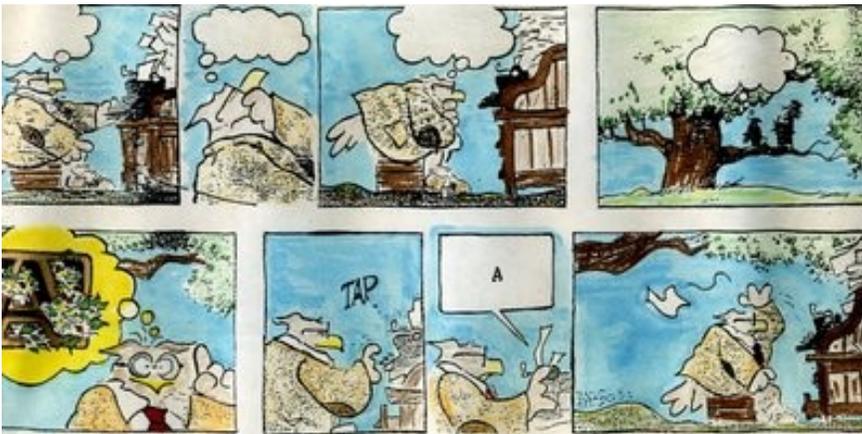
Alas, those days are over for me. For me, history has ended.

What the Lord has in store for me next, I have no idea. At His right hand are pleasures forevermore, so I'm confident that the next step will also be something satisfying—but I'll miss being able to do historical research.

A file drawer full of book starts and ideas await me but I'm reluctant to start anything till after Ginny and I return from our Anniversary trip next month.

To work, I need huge blocks of uninterrupted time; that's one reason I usually start work at 4 a.m. before the phone starts ringing or visitors knocking. My mind is slow and once I get off track, I have a hard time getting back on.

And, so often what looks like a good book idea at first, melts when you begin typing. I love this old *Shoe* cartoon, I keep a framed copy above my desk:



While I'm waiting for the Muse of inspiration (or the JEA bill collector) to strike and spur me into a new book project, I battle algae in our swimming pool. The pump motor burned out a month ago and by the time the repair man fixed it, algae entrenched itself in the water and I can't get rid of it.

I've reattached the pump, installed new hoses, applied shock and algaecide, revamped the filter... Nothing works.

Green slime defeats me.

Then, yesterday a rubber gasket stretched allowing air into the system. No problem, I'll just replace it with ...

with the extra rubber gasket I sold at the yard sale last Spring thinking I'd never need it.

Whenever I get rid of ANBYTHING, within a few weeks, I need that very thing.

Never fails!

That's my history.

In other news: yesterday Ginny received a letter informing her that some money in her retirement account is gone.

In the current national financial crisis that same thing happens to a lot of people. Money there one day, gone the next.

\$25,000 REWARD



**JESSE JAMES
DEAD OR ALIVE**

© 1999 by John H. and Helen H. James

Somebody took it.

In more enlightened days, if Jesse James—I wrote an article about Jesse James once (at <http://www.cowart.info/Rabid%20Fun%20columns/Jesse%20James/Jesse%20James.htm>)

Anyhow, in more enlightened days, if Jesse James or some other criminal took the money out of your pocket, the marshal would hunt him down, shoot him dead, and put the money back where it belonged.

Why doesn't that happen any more?

Friday, October 24, 2008

Suddenly There Are More Of Us

At 11 o'clock last night, Ginny received an e-mail from Mark, one of her brothers, and his wife, Becky. The e-mail let us know in advance that they were flying from Maryland into Jacksonville—Last night.

We did not know they were coming and we are not sure how weekend plans will work out. Ginny and I plan to attend the funeral service for Barbara's daughter Saturday morning, so we are not sure about how to greet out of town guests.

And here's the kicker—Mark and Becky are coming here to pick up two children they are adopting. Here are two photos of the kids from the e-mail attachment:



First we've heard a word about this.

Mark and Becky have three children of their own already; now they are adopting two more. What a handful.

Mark and Becky certainly are more Christian than I am. I doubt if I'm capable of that level of commitment.

Personally, I subscribe to the King Herod school of child care—Having a family is like having a bowling alley installed in your brain. But I admire the gumption of a young couple who of their own volition chose to raise children. As the father of six, I've been a father for three fourths of my life. I don't know how I managed to survive.

What do you do with small children? It's been years since we had a little kid visit us although when our own were school-aged the house was aswarm with them and their many friends all the time.

I'm still in the midst of fixing the pool filtration system so I can't let them swim. Maybe we can take them to the beach or to the zoo... Or maybe we can all go to Jennifer's house, her pool is up and running... Or we can take them to Eve's house and let them chase cats.

I'm off balance (not an unusual state for me).

So, Mark and Becky swoop into town abruptly for a visit and they suddenly increase our extended family by two... Don't know what to make of that. Heck, I didn't even know she was pregnant.

Welcome to the family, Kids.

Saturday, October 25, 2008
Across The Finish Line

How you finish the race is more important than how you started it.

That theme recurred again and again at Mary's memorial service yesterday.

Ginny & I, our daughter Eve, and our friends Wes, Randy & Lisa attended the memorial for our friend Barbara's daughter Mary who died of cancer on the 17th. I estimate about 200 other people attended also demonstrating the high esteem Barbara is held in. She's retired as religion editor of the local newspaper and people of virtually every religious persuasion attended her daughter's funeral.

Mary had been married four times.

Barbara later told me, "It's not every woman who has three of her ex-husbands care enough to attend her funeral".

As Ginny and I stood in a long line to sign the guest book I teased Barbara that there was no need for me to sign unless there was going to be a drawing for a door prize.

She laughed looking better and more relaxed than she has in ages as she's been worn out giving daily hands-on care to her dying daughter for months and months.

Psalm 84 opened the service:

"My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young-- a place near your altar, O Lord Almighty, my King and my God".

Speaking in the service, Barbara said of her daughter, "She was a strong-willed child and became a strong-willed woman; that fitted her to fight against the disease... Early on, our relationship went through some difficult and dry places but became lush and wonderful".

Brittany, Mary's 17-year-old daughter, did not say anything but she stood beside Dan, Mary's husband, as he read a tribute to his wife. He said, "My beloved wife and I only had a short time together. Let me tell you, you need

to make the most of the time you have... We believed in God before her illness, but we went through a battle. Believe and trust in God for now and eternity”.

Mary’s cancer first manifested itself as a brain tumor, and, after surgery for that, metastasized to become an aggressive small cell lung cancer.

“It’s more important how you finish than how you start,” said Pastor Joe Newton who conducted the service.

“Mary did not live a perfect life, but she did have a perfect Savior,” he said.

I thought it a bit strange since it’s not even Halloween yet, but to deliver his talk the pastor stood near a decorated Christmas tree already set up in the sanctuary.

He chose John 14:1-6 as his text:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going."

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

The pastor explained that Jesus came with a message and a function. “The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand”—available to us was His message.

His function was to die on the cross to make that happen.

The pastor spoke of hope for the future. “The desire of God’s heart is that we spend eternity with Him,” he said.

We need no outsider to tell us that sin has separated us from God; our own hearts tell us that. We do not live up to our own expectations, much less God’s.

But the love of God is shown towards us in that while we are still sinners, Christ died for us.

But the Lord of Life rose from the tomb and ascended back to where He had originally come from. He does not just give us directions about how to get to Heaven and say “That’s the way you should go”. He is the way, He personally comes to get us by the hand and lead us Home.

The Way. The Truth. The Life—Exclusive. “No man cometh unto the Father except by Me,” Jesus said.

In conducting the service the pastor did not try to preach Mary into a glowing saint. Those of us who knew her for years before and after her conversion know better than that. But he emphasized that it’s not how you begin the race, or even how you stand midway along, but how you finish that counts.

“Like Mary, you may not have lived a perfect life,” he said, “But like her, if you’ll accept Christ, you too have a perfect Savior”.

Monday, October 27, 2008

Meeting Our New Niece & Nephew

My blog has been down for two days because of a log jam; this morning, Donald went into the server and removed old log files and republished. He solved the problem. Thanks Donald!

Sunday for the first time Ginny and I met the two kids (Sabrina, age 7, and Rob, 5) which Ginny’s brother, Mark, and his wife, Becky, are adopting.

I see my roll as an uncle as being the guy who teaches kids the neat stuff their new parents would never teach them.

Alas, that was not to be.

I brought along a pipe shaped like a horse head so I could show the kids how to smoke—and that if the bowl of the pipe is the horse’s head, then what part of the horse is at the puffing end?

Becky, the new mother, was not amused.

I think she’s over-protective.

Why she even covered their ears when I tried to teach the kids the words to a grand old hymn of the church (well, it ought to be).

Since the kids were not allowed to hear me sing, perhaps someday they can read the lovely lyrics in this diary; I'd hate for these kids to grow up culturally deprived—.

Cigarettes and whisky,
And wild wild women,
They'll drive you crazy,
They'll drive you insane.

Cigarettes and whisky,
And wild wild women,
They'll rot out your innards,
And coddle your brain.

Becky said it's a good thing they live five states away; Ginny agreed.

Drat.

I think I'd make a great uncle.

Wednesday, October 29, 2008

A Day Without Religion

I did nothing overtly religious Tuesday.

Because I needed to go to the Jacksonville Fire Museum to see Lt. Treadwell, the curator, to tie up some loose ends with my book on the history of firefighting in Jacksonville, I drove Ginny to work and kept the car.

Several odd things happened.

Borderline religious experiences that made me think that Jesus lurks just at the corner of my eye, yet out of sight. No big epiphany, just everyday things that make me realize we walk every day through the world of the Spirit. That there's more to life than the seen. That we move on the edge of wonder. That Jesus Himself walks unseen right at your elbow.

First, I dropped Ginny at her office then drove to Dave's Diner for breakfast. An old guy came in and sat in a booth across from me. Nicole, the waitress, reminded him to take his medicine. He ordered something and she reminded him that he had to drink milk with his pills. She acted so caring and motherly toward this old man; surely such care lies beyond the duties of a waitress. I felt so touched by her kindness.

Nothing overtly religious here. Just goodness acted out in a corner diner.

At the hardware store—yes, yesterday as the temperature reached 87 degrees, I finally did get the swimming pool pump working and the pool clean except I needed some hose clamps **today when the temperature here dropped to a record low of 37 degrees!**

I don't see the hand of Jesus in that!

But anyhow, at the hardware store, the guy in plumbing directed me to the guy in electrical conduit. As I approached, the young hardware guy stood listening intently to an old man, (a farmer?).

I waited my turn.

The farmer was saying he could not be away that long. "I need to be there to feed my dogs. And milk the cows. And the take care of the horses. If I'm not there, they'll die. The doctor just don't understand that. He says I'll have to be in there a week or ten days. I can't stay in there that long. My animals need tending".

I could see the wheels turning in the hardware clerk's mind. He was considering it. He really was thinking of volunteering to care for those animals while the farmer was in for his operation.

"Got to get going. Cain't be away from the place too long. I'll come in for that other stuff tomorrow," the farmer said hobbling away.

"Are you part of his family," I asked the clerk.

"No. He doesn't have any family. He's just a customer; comes in here regular. He's got cancer and this is his forth operation".

That's what the clerk said... but his eyes, his mind was on something else. Hungry dogs and horses and cows. He was thinking about it. He really was.

I have no idea if he actually will tend the customer's animals.

But the mere fact that the young man would consider doing such a thing thrilled me.

I thought *Jesus is in Aisle 42.*

Aisle 42, electrical conduit, is holy ground.

Walk carefully.

At your next step you may bump into God.

I drove off with my hose clamps (too cold to wallow in the mud to put them on today) and the car radio said something about some company laying off workers.

I thought I ought to maybe pray for the unemployed... Who do I know that's unemplo—Pete!

Why in the world would I think of Pete?

Plenty of folks I know better and who live closer to me are looking for work; there's Randy and Rick and Greg and Linda and Nathan and Helen and Homer and Reece and Alex ... and Pete who lives a world away.

But Pete is the person who sprang strongly to mind.

He's a guy lives in England who used to comment on my blog now and then. A couple of months ago (see May & June in my blog archive) , my computer overheated and melted stuff in the hard drive. I lived without a computer for close to two months. It was eventually restored but, in the process, I lost all my favorites and bookmarks and site links—including Pete's. No contact with him in the months since.

Pete got laid off (only over there in Britain they call it "being made redundant") from his job back before we lost contact. Out of sight, out of mind. I have not thought of him in ages...

But, as I drove to the fire museum, my mind fixed on him so I prayed for Pete.

This evening when I got home, guess who had commented on my yesterday morning's blog?

Nothing supernatural in my day, just tiny hints of things far beyond myself.

Like I said starting out, I did nothing overtly religious today, common ordinary mundane things, but I feel as though I've walked near Jesus all day.

I don't see Him.

I never do.

But there's a shadow beside my own.

Thursday, October 30, 2008

My 999th

Today my Blogger Dashboard marks the 999th on-line diary entry I've made—Time To Celebrate.

This means I can write about anything in the world I want to!

Anything!

Since my days recently have been filled with yard work and tying up loose ends from the fire history book, I chose, for my own amusement, to write about— King Herod.

The other day in writing about meeting our new niece and nephew for the first time, I jokingly mentioned that I advocate the King Herod School of child care—say what you will about King Herod, but he did have a way with children.

However, many readers will not catch my reference because there were actually six King Herods (maybe more) and it's easy to confuse them.

So, just for my own fun, I'll try to straighten them out.

First came **King Herod Antipater**. He backed Julius Caesar in the Roman civil wars and when Caesar came out on top, he awarded Herod Antipater the territory of Israel, then occupied by Roman troops.

One of Antipater's sons became king after him by killing off siblings. That son was known as **Herod The Great**. He's the one who rebuilt Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, and he engaged in many other extensive building projects.

Herod The Great had several sons who each wanted to become Herod The Greater. When he discovered their plots, he killed three or four of them at various times. Augustus Caesar observed that as a Jew who avoided eating pork, Herod had no scruples about slaughtering ambitious relatives; "It's safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son," Augustus said.

Herod The Great wanted to protect his throne and title.

When wise men came out of the east saying they had followed a star and were come to worship Him born King Of The Jews, Herod The Great engineered the slaughter of the innocents; every male child under two years old in Bethlehem was killed.

The ancient historian Flavius Josephus says that Herod's brother, who also wanted to become king, "escaped death only by dying".

Sons, kids, and brothers were not the only ones Herod The Great suspected of wanting his throne. He had married a woman named Miriamne (Herod married ten different women but she was his favorite). Her reputation for beauty exceeded that of Cleopatra (Mark Anthony and Cleopatra were friends or business associates in intrigue with Herod The Great).

Anyhow, several times Miriamne was accused of adultery and plotting to seize Herod's throne. Her own mother testified against her (because Mama had a plot of her own going).

In a fit of rage, Herod The Great, even though he loved her to distraction, killed Miriamne... But, he regretted her death. He missed her company... so, (according to the Talmud and Josephus) he coated her dead body with thick honey as a preservative and had servants sit the body at the table with him for meals. He talked to the honey-coated corpse while he ate. And, tradition has it, that for the next seven years, he took Miriamne's body to bed at night and had sex with it.

What can I say?

She was his honey.

Anyhow, at age 69, Herod The Great died himself in Jericho about the year 4, just after he'd tried to kill the baby Jesus by killing all male children in Bethlehem.

With the old king dead, brothers and sons and generals and priests scrambled for power. In the midst of all the backbiting and treachery, the Emperor Caligula split power in Judea among several contenders.

Coming out on top was **Herod Antipas**, a son of Herod The Great.

No great improvement.

Herod Antipas earned New Testament fame by beheading John The Baptist at a birthday party.

Herod Antipas fancied a lady named Herodias who happened to be married to his brother Philip. John The Baptist said it was not right for him to have his brother's wife. So Herod Antipas locked John in jail.

At a birthday party the daughter of Herodias danced pleasing the guests and Herod Antipas who promised her anything.

Hollywood likes to portray the daughter, who may have been named Salome, as an exotic, erotic lap-dancer who turned the king on, but Bible scholar Edward Vernon says that the dancing daughter may have been a five-year-old child prancing and skipping around at the party charming king and guests with her cute antics.

The girl asked her mother what to ask for and Philip's irate wife, said, Ask for John The Baptist's head on a platter.

Ever one to please the ladies, Herod Antipas beheaded John... but later, when Herod heard about Jesus, he said, "This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in Him".

Jesus referred to Herod Antipas as "That old fox".

When the mob brought Jesus before Pontius Pilate to be crucified, Pilate tried to wiggle out of making a decision by sending Jesus, a Galilaean, to Herod Antipas who held jurisdiction over that territory.

"When Herod saw Jesus, he was exceeding glad; for he was desireous to see Him of a long season, because he had heard many things of Him, and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by Him. Then he questioned with Him in many words; but He answered him nothing... And Herod (Antipas) with his men of war set Him at nought, and mocked Him, and arrayed Him in a gorgeous robe, and sent Him again to Pilate".

Later, Herod Antipas traveled to Rome to ask Caligula for more power and a crown; this peeved the emperor who banished Herod Antipas to Lyons where he died in exile.

Herod Philip The First (who'd been disinherited by Herod The Great) and **Herod Philip the Second** (son of Herod The Great and Cleopatra) contended with **Herod Agrippa The First** (he's the one who executed the Apostle James) and **Herod Agrippa The Second**, (who seems to have married his own sister, Bernice).

These four jockey for power and preeminence. Sometimes their reigns overlapped, coincided or conflicted. The Roman Emperor Claudius favored Herod Agrippa The First and promoted him above the others.

In the New Testament book The Acts Of The Apostles, two of the Herod Agrippas earn mention:

Herod Agrippa The First put the Apostle James to the sword and imprisoned the Apostle Peter until God sent an angel to free him. Herod Agrippa I put the jail guards to death because of Peter's escape.

A trade/political dispute arose involving the cities of Tyre and Sidon. "Upon a set day Herod (Agrippa I) arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them".

Some ancient sources say that royal apparel was a suit made of polished silver plates which reflected sun light so strongly that it blinded onlookers.

As King Herod Agrippa I delivered his oration at that meeting, people proclaimed, "It is the voice of a god, and not of a man".

"Immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory; and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost. But the word of God grew and multiplied".

What a sad sight. The king arrayed in silver, brilliant in the sun. He orates. People cheer. He relishes the applause — until explosive diarrhea hits him right then and there. Worms gush out all over that shining silver suit.

Some poor servant had to clean up the dead king's throne.

Like his father, Herod Agrippa I, **King Herod Agrippa II** seemed to savor elaborate pomp and showmanship. Herod Agrippa II flaunted his relationship with his sister, Bernice.

On a royal tour of Caesarea where the Apostle Paul was awaiting trial for agitating people by proclaiming Christ...

“On the morrow, when Herod Agrippa (II) was come, and Bernice, with great pomp, and was entered into the place of hearing... Paul was brought out... Then Agrippa said unto Paul, ‘Thou art permitted to speak for thyself’.

And the first thing Paul, standing there in chains, said was “I think myself happy, King Agrippa...”

Paul said, “I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers... Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead”?

Paul told the king and Bernice about his own conversion on the road to Damascus and why he believed that Jesus is Lord risen from the tomb.

Paul said the ancient Hebrew prophets foretold that, “Christ should suffer, and that He should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people and to the Gentiles”.

Then King Herod Agrippa uttered one of the saddest lines in Scripture:

The king said, “Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian”.

Almost persuaded...

Almost.

NOVEMBER
Sunday, November 02, 2008
Changes

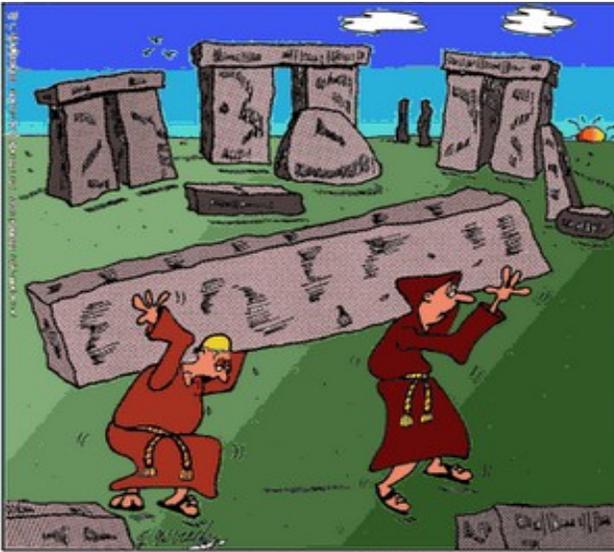
Time to change the clocks again.

Set them back one hour.

Drat!

My mind knows the time changed last night; my body doesn't.

So this morning I woke at 1:30 instead of my usual 2:30. Joy, O Joy.



"I hate changing to Daylight Saving Time."

I've spent much of my life preparing for changes that never happened. Before Tropical Storm Fay, I put away or fastened down everything loose in the yard—lawn chairs, flower pots, tools, statues—but Fay came in as a tropical storm instead of as the predicted hurricane.

I need not have taken such thorough precautions.

I still have not got everything put back where it belongs.

Then last week, anticipating a visit from our Mark & Debbie and two new adopted kids to our home, I began to

child-proof the place. Did you know that as a pipe smoker I have eight boxes of strike-anywhere matches scattered all over the house in easy reach of any chair I happen to sit in? And there are sharp things and breakables and prescription bottles all over the house—it's been years since we've had small children in the house, so we just didn't think of child-proofing until anticipating their visit.

But the kids never actually made it into our house; we met at Eve's and all went to the park instead. I could have left my matches where they were.

Every year Ginny and I prepare for an elaborate Halloween so we can give out tracts to the people who come to our door. We set up a display and pack generous goodie bags for kids (see October 30, 2005 or 2006 or 2007 in my Blog archives for photos)

Last week we added even more candy than usual to the goodie-bags and Friday night we canceled our date and skipped Eve's party so we could sit at a table in our driveway to dispense candy and tracts and toys and comics to the kids... and only eight kids showed up the whole evening.

Some years we've had as many as 60 trick-or-treaters, but this Halloween, only eight.

We made all these preparations for nothing.

I spend much of my life preparing for things that never happen.

Earlier this year (on October 16) I wrote mentioning the suicide of the manager of Georgie's BBQ—well, yesterday after shopping for a new vacation wardrobe at a local thrift store, Ginny and I drove to Georgie's for lunch only to find the restaurant closed.

We've been going there regularly for 15 years.

But now, with the manager's suicide, the owner decided to shut down the place entirely.

As best we can figure, ten or twelve employees worked each of two (maybe three) shifts at the restaurant. At least 24 people lost their livelihoods instantly and unexpectedly because of the manager's suicide.

Then also, Gin and I are not the only old people who depended on the decrepit discount for a cheap, pleasant lunch or dinner out. Customers always packed the restaurant. Whole shifts of police officers, dozens of seniors, church groups and many families ate there often.

The poor manager attempted to end his own pain by ending his life. Maybe he did not realize the ripple effects his death would generate. Maybe he thought his life didn't matter. Maybe he felt useless. Maybe he felt he was alone in facing his difficulties.

Poor bastard.

He wasn't.

Monday, November 03, 2008

Which Switch

When I was a bad little boy my mother punished me with a butcher knife.

She'd hand me this big sharp knife from the kitchen drawer and make me go out into our backyard and cut a switch for her to swack me with.

She never cut the switch herself.

She always made me do it.

I remember standing in the yard looking at various bushes asking myself questions. Would a little switch hurt less than a big one? Long and thin? Or short and thick?

I'd ponder about bamboo: those knotty places where the leaves branch out hurt like crazy. Tea weed grows flexible and tough, but the fibers and rough bark will cut my bare legs when I get switched with it.. Plumb branches sport thorns and they are not as flexible as tea weed or bamboo, but, even if I trim the thorns off, those little knobby places where they grew will snag my skinny legs..

I have to make a choice.

If I go back into the house with a switch too little, the wrong one, Mama will get mad and make me come out again to cut a different one...

That was sixty years ago.

Odd thing is that I never remember what it was I'd done to deserve punishment. And I never remember the

actual whippings she gave me... All I remember of those long-ago days is having to chose which switch...

Now why in the world am I dredging up those painful memories this morning?

Oh, yes,. tomorrow is Election Day.

Tuesday, November 04, 2008

Seeking Sage Advice

Monday morning my friend Barbara White treated me to breakfast at Dave's Diner. Like everyone else in Dave's, we talked about football (Florida/Georgia game, World's Largest Outdoor Cocktail Party)... and books. Barbara, a retired newspaper columnist, is the author of the *Along The Way* series of books.

Monday evening, Donald, my youngest son, called.

He and his wife face a decision of monumental proportions with life-changing implications, a decision which can influence their livelihood, residence, careers, and income. They contemplate a change that may put them on the razor edge of disaster or joy.

Understandably Donald wanted the advice of someone noted for wisdom, discernment, spiritual depth, common sense, wise counsel, and dedication to Christ.

Naturally he called me—to get Barbara White's phone number.

Anytime you need me, Son.

Dad always stands ready to help.... I have a phone book.

Today is Election Day; in an hour or two, Ginny and I will go to the polls to vote for president, legislature, judges, and many other officers; as well as seven Constitutional Amendments.

Our pre-election sample ballots offers us 58 choices.

Last night we again spent several more hours discussing our sample ballots and looking up on-line references related to the proposed candidates and amendments.

We solidified our choices.

May God give our country better leaders than we deserve.

Wednesday, November 05, 2008
Election Results

Jacksonville voters turned out in near-record numbers yesterday to elect Katrina Finley to a board seat in Duval County Soil & Water District, Group 4.

On other local, state and national levels, other candidates also won or lost offices.

Viewing this election from the standpoint of an amateur historian, I predict that in a only few years all winners and losers on all levels will be as well-known as Ms Finley.

Fame flees.

Some of today's high and mighty may even be remembered as well as one of the famous King Herods I wrote about last Thursday— Although, I hope for more noble reasons.

Fame flees.

The burning issues of this day become the ho-hums of tomorrow.

I have studied the candidates and issues, and I've voted in every election since I became old enough to vote about 50 years ago. I feel it is a Christian duty to act as a good citizen. However, I do not get excited about leaders or issues—these are candle moth things, mundane things. You do the best you can about them, then move on to the important.

In our society, I stand in about the same position as one of the peasants digging sand for the foundation of an Egyptian pyramid, what happens politically at the top has little effect on my day to day life.

I have sand to load and carry.

I follow the news and activities of my times. I pray for the king. I cheer for my nation and support our troops in foreign wars. I volunteer to help the needy. I pay my taxes, oppose crime and corruption, and I've raised my children to be good citizens in their own right with their own political opinions independent of mine.

But I concern myself little with the doings of the powerful. They live in a different world. But I am pessimist enough to suspect that no politician means me any good. They're all thinking about getting me a bigger basket to carry sand in.

I laugh at the political rhetoric of both Democrats and Republicans as they define the economic "middle class" as being people much richer than I'll ever be. What world do these candidates live in?

Now, I did not vote for Ms Finley; I voted for one of the other three candidates for that office. However, I wish her well and I pray for her success in her governmental roll.

In the long view, God Himself raises up one and puts down another and the heart of all kings is in His hands.

Incidentally, my own choice for President did not win. This morning I checked the Supervisor Of Elections website at <http://www.duvalelections.com/> And, in so far as I can tell, I am the only voter in Jacksonville to write in the name of my presidential choice—Aaron Solkin.

Sorry Mr. Solkin. Now that you've beaten the cocaine addiction, I think you would have made a great President.

That's all I have to say about politics.

I have another empty basket to fill with sand.

I'm building a pyramid.

Thursday, November 06, 2008
The Beauty Of A Gray Day

Wednesday, a gray day, overcast, drizzling rain, chilly — perfect for hunkering down inside with a good murder mystery.

I'd intended to spruce up the yard in preparation for taking time off for our 40th Anniversary; tomorrow is Ginny's last day at work and I wanted all ready so we will not have to worry about mundane things for a while.

In recent weeks we've graduated from CERT training and disaster drill, coped with major appliance breakdowns (heater/AC, microwave & pool pump), published the fire history book, prepared for Halloween, finished my term as president of our neighborhood watch, studied candidates and voted. Ginny has also been deeply involved in contract bidding at her office—We are ready for a vacation!

Ahead, between now and January we have another disaster drill, Thanksgiving, four family birthdays, Christmas, and the start of another book.

We are ready for a vacation first.

I was to get everything ready... but the gray day proved too tempting.

Instead of doing the yard work in the rain, I read all day.

My mystery of choice is Ruth Rendell's *The Rottweiler*. I haven't quite finished the book, but the story tells about this poor serial killer who is being harassed by these mean, nasty, juvenal delinquent, criminals who blackmail and torment him.

All he does is strangle a handful of girls, but the vile delinquents do not play fair.

I hope he gets them!

Vacation reading at its finest.

Ginny does not get off till tomorrow; I'm already in vacation mode.

I'm unlikely to post another entry again till after November 17th. If you can't wait that long to read my words of life and wisdom again, then browse in my blog archives on the sidebar and check out previous November Anniversaries from 2005-2007.

I hope this one will be an instant replay.

I wanted to write something spiritually uplifting this morning, but I have nothing to offer. I'm just too depleted.

All I can do is relish the beauty of the gray day spent reading my murder mystery and anticipating time to come alone with my beautiful bride.

Monday, November 17, 2008
Together We Climbed Kolomoki Mound



To celebrate our 40th Anniversary Ginny and I rented a cabin in the woods of southwestern Georgia at Seminole Lake State Park which is near...

Actually, it's not near anything.

And one day we climbed Kolomoki Mound which is near...

Well, in giving us directions the ranger at Seminole said, "It's more in the middle of nowhere than this place is".

When we arrived at our cabin, a flock of Canadian geese greeted us; Ginny counted 64 and new flocks migrated in every day.



The geese waddled out of the lake to graze in the pine straw right in front of our rocking chairs on the cabin porch.



One day a team of rangers raked up wagon loads of pine needles around our cabin. Ginny, wearing her Seminole shirt, posed for a photo beside one wagon load:



I'm smiling because I don't have to rake leaves till we get back home:



Every day we rocked and talked and hiked and snuggled on cold nights before a blazing fireplace. This was a time of celebration, and getting acquainted again, and catching up on our reading, and recharging our spiritual batteries.

Not sure how effective that last goal was. I carried along a Bible and a prayer book but didn't even crack the cover of either one. The most spiritual thing I encountered came from my favorite Stephen King novel, *Desperation*, in which a drunk minister tells an 11-year-old boy, "You've had a conversion... The job of the new Christian is to meet God, to know God, to trust God, to love God. That's not like taking a list to the supermarket either, where you can dump stuff into your basket in any order you like. It's a progression, like working your way up the math ladder from counting to calculus. You've met God, and rather spectacularly, too. Now you've got to get to know Him".

I needed that reminder.

Thanks, Mr. King.

Every day Ginny and I enjoyed long walks in the woods. This area of the wilderness is called "Wiregrass Country":



That's a beaver pond in the distance; here's a closer view:



On our anniversary we drove into the middle of nowhere to visit the Kolomoki Mound complex, a cluster of Indian burial and temple mounds which radiocarbon tests date to about 1,920 years ago, that's about A.D. 30. Some of the mounds in the complex were destroyed by agriculture, road building, or development; only seven of them remain. The Indians abandoned the site—no one knows why—about a thousand years before Europeans arrived in the New World. Therefore, much speculation about the various types of mounds on the site exists.

The Georgia Park Service build a museum into the side of one excavated burial mound. Apparently someone important was cremated and the remains raked into a deep stone-lined pit; then two warriors were strangled and buried there as an honor guard, and several trophy skulls and a collection of effigy pottery placed as a mound of clay was raised above the initial grave.

In this photo the burial pit is to the left and a sacrificed guard in the foreground:



Here are some intact pots and effigy figures from the mound:



Mound A, the largest remaining mound in the complex, rises 56 feet above a plaza between it and

another burial mound. The base of the truncated pyramid measures 325 feet by 200 feet. Apparently Indians got to the top via an earthen ramp, but in the 1940s the Corps of Engineers build cement stairs into the side of the mound.

Here is a photo of Ginny half-way up those stairs:



I made it to the top too:



In the distance over my left shoulder you can see a burial mound across the plaza. Archaeologists speculate that the plaza was used as a playing field for a ball game

called... Sorry, I've forgotten the name of the game. It consisted of competing teams from various tribes or villages trying to get a ball through a ring on a pole. Apparently game winners and spectators killed and possibly ate the losing team.

Super Bowl just ain't what it used to be.

Anyhow, in spite of what our doctor says about our age and medical conditions, Ginny and I both made it, panting with frequent rest stops, all the way to the top of the mound—where we kissed.

Ginny quipped, "The couple that wheezes together, squeezes together".

That's how we celebrated our first 40 years of marriage, happy, climbing together, watching geese, reading, cuddling by the fire, rocking on the porch, listening to the wind in the pine needles.

Were anyone to ever write my biography, it would be a love story.

So we begin year 41.

If God continues to give us love and health and strength and mental stability we'll climb to higher heights. Or maybe sink to lower depths... Whether our journey is moving into the sunrise or into our sunset, we feel we're just getting started.



Saturday, November 22, 2008
Elevator Hermeneutics—A Rant

Ginny and I spent a weary, weary Friday hanging around various doctors' offices for routine but, they say, necessary stuff. Were we not healthy to begin with, the ghastly waiting rooms would have done us in for sure.

Part of the time we spent enduring in the waiting rooms, we talked about a tv program we'd watched the other night on PBS about sources of the Bible.

Whoever put the program together cheated.

Either they were misinformed, or they deliberately cheated.

If they had billed their program as "Why we believe the Bible is a crock" I'd have no problem with their right to free speech; but they didn't. They promoted their program as an impartial examination of how the Bible came to be written, and in that, they cheated.

That was really sad because it was unnecessary. Their program could have been just as effective had they not

misconstrued facts, distorted ideas, and founded their ideas on preconceptions.

For instance, they began with the premises that in ancient times the people of Israel came up with the unique idea that there is only one God. The tv producers treated this as a novelty. With beautiful photography they showed a variety of idols proving that ancient people honored many gods, then the announcer said that the Jews came up with the idea that there should be only one God, a purely human fabrication.

The preconception presented is that there is no god at all except in the human mind and that thinking of one god instead of many gods represents some improvement or advancement in human thinking.

How so?

If there is no God to begin with, then how is thinking of one god any improvement over thinking of 436 of them?

The tv producers expressed surprise that archaeologists have uncovered idols in peoples' homes in Israel; had they read the very first book in the Bible they would have seen that Rachel, Jacob's wife, stole idols from her father's house to take home with her.

When her dad came looking for his household idols, she hid them under a camel saddle and sat on it. When he came to search the tent, she claimed to be menstruating so he would not check under the camel saddle.

Rachel, a mother in Israel, knew the one true God, but she hedged her bets.

All through the Old Testament the prophets condemn idolatry as the people mixed it with belief in the one true God.

Why should the tv present this fact as a new startling discovery?

It's old hat.

Another thing that stuck in my craw—it's the same thing actually—is that they presented Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis as a startling new discovery!

Hadn't they done any research?

Wellhausen first published his theory of destructive criticism in 1878!

Not last week.

In 1878!

How is this “new” (to tv) discovery supposed to shake biblical scholarship to its foundation?

Back a 120 years ago, German scholar Julius Wellhausen noticed that sometimes the writer of the first five books of the Bible used a Hebrew word for God beginning with the letter “J” as in *Jehovah*. Other times the writer used a Hebrew word for God beginning with the letter “E” as in *Elohim*.

Wellhausen figured that no writer would ever use two different names for the same God, therefore there must have been at least two different writers whose work got combined to make the Bible text.

Interesting.

Using that strategy, I look back over the pages of my own diary and see that in referring to the Godhead, sometimes I say “Jesus”; other times I say “Lord Jesus”; other times, I say, “Christ the Lord”.

Obviously I did not write this diary—three different guys did.

And they published it under my name... They owe me royalties.

Anyhow, back to the tv program, the section on radiocarbon dating was also skewed. And the section about Ashtaroth idols (female fertility symbols) concluded that the one God, who does not really exist, had a wife, who does not really exist either.

Perhaps I do the tv program an injustice because I did fall asleep part way through the program, but I think the program would make great fare for any hospital waiting room.

There is another way to approach Bible hermeneutics, that’s what they call the science of interpretation.

If the plain sense of Scripture makes sense, that is the sense.

For instance if the text says, “Jesus sat down in the boat” that means that there was this boat and Jesus sat down in it.

Big mystery.

But scholars have to make reputations or they don’t get awarded grants.

Of course there are sections of Scripture that we don’t understand.

Skip ‘em.

Go on to something you do understand.

If “Thou shalt not steal” is too hard, then move on to “Thou shalt not commit adultery”. I keep on going down the list of the Ten Commandments till I hit on one that fits. A section of Scripture that rings a bell.

Therefore, I’m proud to announce that never once in my whole life have I ever coveted my neighbor’s ox.

What the hell would I do with an ox?

See why I need a Savior?

Why we all do?

What’s so hard to understand about that?

I think it was Mark Twain who said, “It’s not the parts of the Bible that I don’t understand that bother me, it’s the parts that I do understand all too well”.

Well, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

And the love of God is shown towards us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

When it comes to biblical hermeneutics, a sign from an elevator helps me remember how to interpret what I read in God’s holy word:



One further note about biblical archaeology—remember how two weeks ago (on October 30th in my blog archives) I wrote about all those fascinating King Herods?

Well, last Wednesday (November 19th), Reuters News Service reported that Israeli archaeologist Ehud Netzer of Jerusalem's Hebrew University has uncovered the palace and the tomb of Herod The Great. You'll find the Reuters' report at

<http://www.reuters.com/article/scienceNews/idUSTRE4AI7S920081119>

Sunday, November 23, 2008

Our Yard Display For Thanksgiving

Saturday morning Ginny and I lingered over breakfast at Dave's Diner till nearly noon. Two reasons: first, the heat is off at our house in this record-setting cold snap while Dave's is warm; second, we kept meeting and talking with friendly acquaintances in the crowded restaurant.

We've been eating at Dave's regularly for about 15 years. So have many of the other customers. And essentially the same staff has served there during that time span. Therefore it's rare for us to go in there without bumping into someone we know.

This morning we talked with Mike who drove the bus Ginny used to catch to work, and Chuck who runs the newsstand. Plus several other people whose faces I know without knowing their names.

Because the place was packed, instead of a booth, Ginny and I ended up sitting at a table in the middle of

the floor; so we were exposed to many conversations all around us. At one table several folks discussed a vampire movie. At another table some rough laborers discussed stress in sub-surface construction (whatever that is). Another group discussed a girl's drug problem and whether or not she was menstruating and whether or not her boyfriend has stopped beating her.

And, of course everybody talked about the Jaguars/Vikings football game and JU's chances in the playoffs.

After breakfast we visited a used furniture store where we discovered that one single chair now costs more money than we've spent on every bit of furniture we have in our whole house!

Sticker Shock, indeed!

By then, the temperature warmed up enough for us to return home and stuff a cloth turkey for our outside Thanksgiving display. Here's a photo of Ginny making a few final adjustments:



Here's a close-up of our display:



We are not much for witnessing or evangelism. We're pretty low key about such things. But we do want our lives and testimony to cause the people whose paths cross ours to give Jesus a serious thought. We'd like folks to know that God is good.

Hence, our little yard display.

Just a reminder as to what Thanksgiving is all about—we are actually thanking Someone for something. We're not just sending warm fuzzy thoughts out into the ether.

There's no reason to thank the ether for anything.

That makes no sense.

And usually we are thankful (or resentful) about material things.

Stuff.

Passing stuff.

Perishing stuff.

But one Psalm says, Give thanks unto the Lord for He is good".

I think it most appropriate to thank the Lord because God is good in Himself.

And towards us.

The first newspaper article I ever wrote was published back in the early 1970s. It was about Thanksgiving.

Odd how that came about:

A lady living a thousand miles away from me, up in Ohio, read a magazine article I'd written. She noticed that the author lived in Jacksonville where her son was a newspaper reporter, so she called him to suggest that he get in touch with me.

We did not have a phone at the time, so he couldn't call.

He decided to forget it, but his mother's suggestion dwelt in his mind...

One day while I was in the bath tub getting cleaned up for a job interview because I'd decided to give up writing and get a real job, a paying job, I was feeling enormously down and discouraged.

Ginny knocked on the bathroom door saying, "John, there's a man at the front door. He says he's a newspaper reporter."

I'd never seen a real live reporter before ever in my whole life.

I threw on a robe and went out. We got to talking and he offered to introduce me to the newspaper's city editor. He wanted me to bring in a sample of my writing... *The Little End Of The Horn* was the article I gave the editor. (www.cowart.info) .

He published it.

And I've kept on free lance writing during the 35 years since.

Give thanks unto the Lord for He is good.

Wednesday, November 26, 2008
**A Tormented Man's Declaration Of
Faith**

Sunday the Cowarts & company gathered for breakfast at Dave's Diner.

There was Ginny and me and Becky and Rodney and Donald and Helen and Maggie and Sabrina and Lindsey and Eve and Mark and Ginny and me and Becky...

I don't know who was there.

Lots of hugs and laughter, but they kept moving around the table in a dozen conversations, mostly about whether our family Christmas get-to-gather this year would fall on December 19th, or 20th, or 25th .. It all kept changing, and I can't keep track.

Mark and Eve are celebrating Thanksgiving with gangster Al Capone. But they are not going to Michigan for Christmas because they have wolves up there and Eve fears being shoved off the sled into the snow so the horses and yankees can get away from the howling pack.

That breakfast was my highpoint for the past couple of days.

But even that early in the day I felt a fit of depression coming on.

I have no idea what triggers these things.

I just know the symptoms.

My mind begins to dredge up all my mistakes from childhood on. All my failures. All my sins. All my faux pas. Every embarrassing thing I've ever done. All the stupid things I've said or thought or imagined.

This gets really rough.

No audible voices. I just hear mental tormentors who tell me what appears to be the whole truth at the time.

"John Cowart," they say, "You are fat and ugly and toothless and lazy and stupid. You're not worth the water it'd take to flush you down. You've wasted your life and screwed up the good life for your wife and your children and for a lot of other people. You fail again and again and again. You are such a disappointment. You've never amounted to anything. Such a loser. And you're going to die. and leave Ginny with nothing but debts, regrets— and 260 pounds of rotting meat on her hands..."

And the relentless tormentors keep on and on and on.

It feels like being a batter in a baseball stadium where not just the pitcher throws the ball at me, but every one of the 73,000 fans in the stands throw balls at me at the same time!

By Sunday evening, after such a day of my being hagridden, certain physical problems showed up too. Among them was a trembling in my hands which made it impossible for me to keep food on my fork to eat dinner and I dribbled stuff down the front of my shirt.

And the gleeful tormentors said, “And you’re clumsy too. You eat like a slob and drool and...”

The clamor of the tormentors in my head grew unbearable because, according to my lights when in such a state, every word they said, every accusation, every name they called me—it’s all true.

That’s how I felt.

But I am a Christian; that’s not what I believe.

I mentally shouted at the tormentors, “Jesus loves me. Damn it! So fuck you in your left eye!”

My declaration of faith toned their volume down. The tormentors retreated to a dim corner of my mind to mutter among themselves.

You’re unlikely to find my statement of faith in the Shorter Catechism.

The closest biblical parallel I know was penned by the Apostle John in his First Letter. He said, “We... shall assure our hearts before Him. For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. Beloved,... then we have confidence toward God”!

I think that, in essence, the Apostle and I say the same thing.

Thursday, November 27, 2008

One Thing I Like

On one hand, the Scripture says that the Lord maketh His servants flames of fire.

Blazing flames of fire.

Maybe I’m thinking too much in terms of the book on the history of our Jacksonville Fire Department I wrote recently, but I can’t help noticing that flames of fire often get hosed.

That’s the way of the world.

On the other hand, the Scripture says that Jesus will does not snap off a bruised reed, nor does He snuff out a smoldering wick.

In other words, Jesus does not kick you when you're already down.

As one of the smoldering wicks in this world, that's one thing I really like about Jesus.

Friday, November 28, 2008
A Peaceful Day In A War Zone

With the family dispersed here and there all over the state celebrating Thanksgiving on their own, Ginny and I enjoyed the empty nest syndrome—a reward for parents who've successfully raised children to productive, independent adulthood.

We slept late, watched parades on tv (saw Mark's mom & dad riding their Arabian horses in the Detroit parade) and we ate a simple and simply wonderful feast of Thanksgiving. Then Ginny snuggled in the crook of my arm with her head nestled on my shoulder and we napped with the white noise of an uninteresting tv football game in the background.

To round off a perfect day we watched a biographical profile about Jimmy Stewart's Wonderful Life.

Fascinating.

Such Christmas shopping as we can do has already been done— just as well because repairing the house's heater/air conditioner system last week wiped out all our discretionary funds. You cain't give what you ain't got. We can live with that.

But, while our idyllic day flowed with peace, in Mumbai, India, a city of 18 million people which used to be named Bombay, terrorist strike teams attacked ten hotels, a synagogue, and various other undefended sites. They killed at least 120 people.

Only sketchy news comes from India right now, but when I heard of the atrocity, my first thought was of Amrita, an e-friend who lives in northern India away from the war zone. Her blog is at

<http://yesugarden.blogspot.com/> ;she reports events closer to the source.

For the world, this has been a day of mayhem, turmoil, blood, and gunfire; for us it has been a day of quiet, happy peace rooted in Christ...

I wish the world had what we have.

Poor world.

Poor, poor world.

Of course there's no reason for me to feel smug just because I've enjoyed a cozy day. The Lord does grant His servants in life's battles days of R&R, but we remain in combat with evil both internal (as witness my postings last week) and external.

The day before Thanksgiving some workers here in Jacksonville lost their jobs abruptly. The company they worked for lost a contract; but the workers did not know this until Wednesday afternoon when a supervisor came around the job site, collected their tools, announced their firing, and left without giving them their final paychecks.

This tragedy may not rank up there with the attacks in India but it has the same source. The devil, though defeated, his head crushed by Christ's heel, yet rages in his scorched-earth retreat to the place he belongs.

Thinking about my own spiritual warfare and about the awful news from India and such evil in the local workplace, I also think in terms of evangelism—and how little I do of it. How shall they believe without a messenger to tell them of Christ's love?

But, I am what I am. At this moment a man at peace, but with a sense of responsibility and a modicum of caring.

Lord, help me to do what I can, where I am, with what I have.

On some level, I do love You.

Saturday, November 29, 2008
**The Heard National Bank Of
Jacksonville**



No matter how carefully I research the historical pieces I write, someone always pops up who knows much more about the subject than I do.

Over the years this has happened again and again no matter how thoroughly I research or whether I write about cars, boats, trains—or banks.

Case in point:

For a business magazine back in 1987 I wrote a history of banking during Jacksonville's early years. Later I modified the article to use as a chapter in my book *Crackers & Carpetbaggers*. (An online copy of the article is at www.cowart.info ; the book is available at www.bluefiswhbooks.info)

Just before Thanksgiving Mr. Reed Dearing, a retired banker from Macclenny, sent me an e-mail about the article; he asked how I could have missed mentioning a famous landmark like the Heard National Bank in my book.

I checked and sure enough I'd missed mentioning the Heard Bank at all. In fact I'd forgotten that I'd ever even heard of the Heard.

I rummaged through my files and discovered that the only thing I had on the Heard National Bank was this photo of the bank building's columns taken in 1987 after what had once been Jacksonville's tallest building had been reduced to a parking lot, but the demolition crew allowed the bank's columns to remain in place for a time:



Since I didn't know much else, I asked Mr. Dearing to fill me in on that bank; here is his reply:

November 26, 2008

John,

I just have memories. When I was a youngster, my father had an insurance office in the Graham Building (Heard). When you entered the building from Forsyth Street, there were monster white columns, and as you entered - a large round vault door where all the money was kept. That, I remember.

Dad told me a story that my grandfather told him: The Barnett's had the First National Bank on one corner of Forsyth & Laura Streets, and Captain Heard had the other national bank. Captain Heard was a sail - or steamship captain from somewhere, and his bank was much more aggressive toward the import export trade, which Jax was a center (still is I guess). Barnett was jealous and started a rumor that the Heard National Bank was in trouble during the Panic of 1917. Barnett even told the national bank authorities. They came in and closed the bank; later,

after an audit was completed - the Heard National Bank was *not* insolvent, just the victim of a spiteful competitor.

In the 1980's Barnett Bank bought the defunct Heard (Graham) Building to make way for their huge *Tower of Power* as we use to call it. In demolishing the building, the contractor had a hell of a time knocking down the columns. Barnett people said they wanted them intact. They finally dismantled the columns and hauled them off to some unknown location. The ghost of Captain Heard had the last word....

That is an oral history. I have inquired to Jax Historical Society but info on the Heard National Bank building is sketchy. There are some old photos on the Internet that show The Heard as one of Jax's tallest buildings!

Reed Dearing



I investigated.

Between 1911 and 1913 the Heard National Bank—named after J.J. Heard of Arcadia, said to be the wealthiest man in Florida—gave out postcards promoting travelers checks issued by the bank; here's a copy of one:

The Heard National Bank opened in 1911. After the bank closed, the building was renamed the Graham Building. It was later named the Florida Title Building. It stood at 110 West

Forsyth Street, on the southwest corner of Forsyth and Laura streets. Barnett Bank acquired the property and, in 1982, tore down the Heard Building—saving the columns and façade—to make way for the Barnett Tower (which now belongs to Bank of America).

A history of the Federal Reserve Bank Of Atlanta says, "The Fed moved to straighten out the management of faltering banks in ways that appear informal today. When the Heard National Bank in Florida was found to be in "very deplorable condition" in 1916, J.B. Pike, cashier of the Atlanta Fed, resigned his post temporarily to take over as president of Heard National. He returned to his old job at the Fed 17 months later".

A 1911 newspaper (uncovered by my friend the late Bill Foley who taught me much about using microfilm for local history research) announced the opening of the Heard Bank Building. The bank occupied the lower floors, while over 300 offices occupied the upper floors of the 15-story building. In those re-air conditioning days, each office would have "outside light and perfect ventilation," the newspaper said.

"Designed with the idea of making the building the ideal location for business offices and banking facilities, the new structure will be one of the handsomest in the city... As far as possible, the building will be made fireproof, and wood will be used in the trim and finishing of all offices."

Not only that, but the newspaper boasted that hot and cold running water would be available in all parts of the building!

"The fact of the building being so high will not interfere in the least with its general appearance... Looking to the rapid transaction of business, it has been arranged to have an up-to-date elevator service. Four passenger cars will front on the main lobby.

"No building erected in the city will have a more magnificent appearance," the newspaper said.

For years the building stood as a Jacksonville landmark.

Now, not only does Mr. Dearing know more about the Heard Bank than I did, but so does my wife. I mentioned to Ginny that I wondered what had happened to the magnificent columns that fronted the bank and she said she knows where they stand today.

So the day after Thanksgiving she drove me down town to the Times-Union Center For The Performing Arts and parked on the side. Because of the surrounding trees I did not see the columns till we were right up on them. Here is a photo:

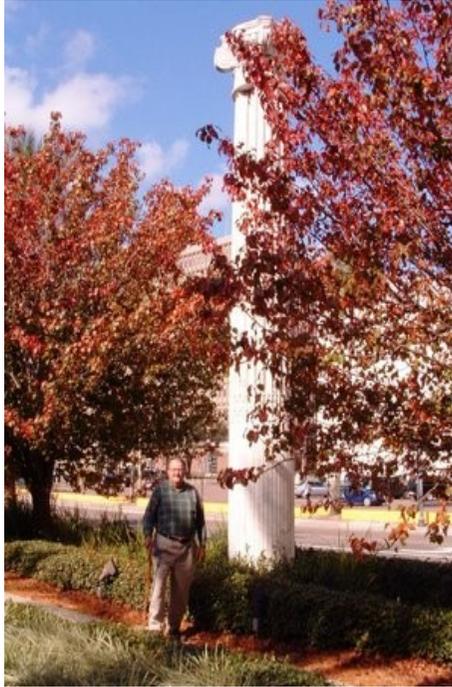


According to the plaque, in 1997, the Visiting Nurses Association acquired two of the columns and erected them in front of the Performing Arts Center as a memorial to Patricia Austin, the wife of our former Mayor Ed Austin. She died in a tragic automobile accident. She is well and fondly remembered for her Christian character, many charitable endeavors, and her support of the arts.

Here is a photo of Ginny beside one of the columns:



And, here's a photo she snapped of me beside the other one:



I asked Ginny how she happened to know where these columns were, and she said that although it has nothing to do with her employment now, her having a degree in banking and finance does come in handy at times.

Stepping just a few feet away from the columns, we watched falcons circle the Barnett/BOA tower—the hawks hunt downtown pigeons over Jacksonville Landing where patrons of the outdoor restaurants feed tidbits to the pigeons and the hawks feed on those same pigeons—The tower stands right where the Heard Bank Building once stood. I tried for a photo of the falcons but they were too quick for me to catch in silhouette against the Barnett/BOA tower:



As Ginny drove me home from downtown, she cut through from Riverside Avenue to College Street on Roselle. As we drove we discussed whether the columns we'd just seen were Corinthian, Doric or Ionic—neither of us could remember which kind was which.

I spotted something.

“Stop the car,” I shouted. “Back up about a hundred yards. I see an Ionic Column”.

No traffic around so she reversed till she could see a steel carport beside the building I showed her.

“Those are Ionic Columns,” I said.

“John, those are nothing but two steel posts on that car port,” she said.

“But look at the sign,” I said...

It read: Ionic Masonic Lodge...

“If it’s the Ionic Lodge, those must be Ionic columns,” I said.

And Ginny made a noise, one of those groans that say And-I’ve-Been-Married-To-This-Man-For-40-Years!

I though it was funny.

Thanks to Mr. Dearing’s e-mail, we enjoyed a happy day delving into another aspect of Jacksonville’s history.

DECEMBER

Monday, December 01, 2008

Decorations



“Alfred, you may instruct the staff to begin decking the halls”.

Over the long weekend Ginny and I focused on taking down Thanksgiving decorations , packing them away, and talking about decorations for Christmas. The key word there is *talking*.

We talked about how in Christmases past we hosted decorating parties. When Donald and Eve were in college they'd round up all the kids stranded on campus far from home and bring them to our house for the Christmas holiday. They'd camp out sleeping on the living room floor, eat us out of house and home, bring in tons of laundry for Ginny to do, and enjoy conversations with students from other countries. We had Arabs and Israelis and Haitians and Bulgarians and yankees and Nigerians and I forget what all else.

Ours was a mad house... but it was a lavishly decorated madhouse.

And I'd spend all holiday driving kids to and fro from college, to the airport, to the mall, to the doctor's office—crazy days. But fun.

Only once did I have to put a student out for inappropriate behavior.

But now that our kids are grown and gone to establish their own homes and lives, peace on earth reigns in our house over the holidays and we hardly decorate at all any more. Instead, on Saturday, we drove downtown to the main library to enjoy their parade of trees, we strolled looking at window displays in downtown businesses, and we ate lunch on a Landing balcony overlooking the giant community Christmas tree.



“No! No! For Rockerfellow Center
we send them with the branches on”.

We lack energy and inclination to decorate much this year and consequently we enjoy the season more.

So, now and then until Christmas, I'll occasionally post favorite cartoons from the book *Ho! Ho!Ho!* edited by S. Gross and Jim Charlton (Viking Press). I bought it as a present for someone else but I've enjoyed the cartoons so much I may keep it myself.

On the rainy Sunday we read sipping coffee in silent companionship: Ginny is working through every Agatha Christy mystery in print; I finished reading C.S. Forester's *Age Of Fighting Sail: A History Of The War Of 1812*.

And we talked about Christmas plans and home repairs and sex and worship and health and terrorism and

a multitude of other things. We never finish the fascinating conversation we began 40 years ago.

We decided not to erect a Christmas tree this year—too much furniture to move.

But, Ginny did unpack a tacky glorious angel she likes and a tasteful singing dog which she plans to display on her office desk.

And I broke out a manger scene with small figures made of pressed tin painted with translucent glaze. I bought it at a yard sale for a nickel last year. The entire thing fits into a matchbox....I set it up in front of the aquarium;

This photo dosen't show it, but in real life the figures gleam much shinier than our goldfish.



The other 30 or so cartons of our 40-year's-accumulation of Christmas decorations can stay in the attic for this year. This year we'll leave the heavy decorating to Laacoon's family.



Tuesday, December 02, 2008
We Saw A Star

Ginny pulled in our drive right at sundown yesterday.

When I opened the door for her, I saw something that made me run back inside to get my camera and to check our kitchen cupboard.

I expected to see what I saw, but I didn't expect it to be right above our house, right at our front door.



National Geographic News, December 1, 2008, foretold the event.

It's a planetary conjunction seen beyond the crescent moon. Jupiter and Venus line up so that although the three bodies stand 500 million of mile apart, from earth they look close together.

Back in the 1500s astronomer Johannes Kepler figured out the movements of planets are so regular that he developed laws of planetary motion which NASA still uses today to plot the course of satellites and the space shuttle. I wrote a chapter about this great astronomer in my book *Strangers On The Earth*. Kepler even composed music, the music of the spheres, using the movements of heavenly bodies as the basis of his composition.

Such a lining up of planets as Ginny and I saw last night occurs regularly. But too much sunlight makes them hard to see without a telescope. The next time a planetary occultation with Venus will be visible from North America is on the morning of April 22, 2009.

But this one happened right in our front yard.



“Historically, striking planetary groupings have held special meaning to ancient astronomers and astrologers,” National Geographic News said.

“In fact, some historians think that a similar conjunction between Jupiter and Venus in 2 B.C. may be the source of the "Star of Bethlehem" story related in the Bible. The stellar pair would have appeared so close together, scholars think, that they might have seemed to meld into one brilliant beacon of light.

“A similarly close conjunction between Venus and Jupiter occurred in June of 2 B.C., and some scholars have connected the event with the Christian nativity story...

“According to the Bible, three magi in the East were alerted to the birth of Jesus and led toward Bethlehem by a superbright star—a celestial phenomenon that could be explained by two planets tightly grouped in the sky,” National Geographic said..

Could be.

Of course the Bible says nothing about the number of wisemen, and makes no mention of the star being superbright.

Some scholars think the star may have been a nova; others, a planetary conjunction; still others think it was a supernatural phenomena.

Some Bible scholars connect the appearance of the Star Of Bethlehem with an obscure prophecy made by Balaam, a strange figure in the book of Numbers where he is identified as “the man whose eyes are open”.

Isn't that a mysterious appellation?

Anyhow, Balaam said:

I shall see Him,

But not now:

I shall behold Him,

But not nigh:

There shall come a Star out of Jacob,

And a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel,

And shall smite the corners of Moab,

And destroy all the children of
Sheth.

Some scholars see a reference to Bethlehem's Star or even to Christ Himself in those words.

Could be.

Matthew's Gospel is the only one to mention Bethlehem's Star:

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

Supernova? Planetary conjunction? Supernatural light?

Who knows?

But here's a strange thing—in the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, on the last page of the text, Jesus

identifies Himself as the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last...

Then He says, *"I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star"*. And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely".

The bright and morning star!

That's something to think about.

Isn't it?

I tried a close-focus of the moon, Jupiter and Venus but my hands shake too much to eat soup much less get a crisp clear photo of the Heavens, but it seems to me that Jupiter (faint on the far right) has a red glow about it.



And this astrological phenomena stood right above our house.

So I checked our kitchen cupboard carefully.

Just in case, I want everyone to know that we have plenty of frankincense

and myrrh.

But if anyone has a spare camel-load of gold...

Thursday, December 04, 2008

It Ain't My Brother Nor My Sister...

Perhaps neither supernovas, planetary conjunctions, nor even supernatural phenomena explain the appearance of the star:



“Lets hope it’s not one of those anti-balistic missels”.

Writing about the sign in the sky above our house the other day (it was Tuesday) reminded me of an old joke:

Without fail, Old Reprobate Joe, a sinful degenerate, faithfully attended church every Sunday.

Without fail, every Sunday in his sermon the preacher tried to convince Old Reprobate Joe to repent and turn to Christ.

Without fail every Sunday at the end of the service Old Reprobate Joe would shake the preacher’s hand and say, “You sure told ‘em today, Preacher”.

The old sinner let the words of the sermon flow right over his head. He always assumed the message was for somebody else.

He always said, “You sure told ‘em today, Preacher”.

Finally, one deep winter Sunday came which snow-locked the whole town. The preacher struggled through hip-deep snowdrifts to the church where he found only one other person had made to through the blizzard, Old Reprobate Joe.

To his congregation of one, the preacher delivered his most powerful evangelistic message urging repentance and faith.

At the end of the service Old Joe met him at the church door, shook his hand and said, “Preacher, if they’d a been here, you would’d a sure told ‘em today”.

When I wrote about the planetary conjunction Monday, I cited the examples of Balaam, the man whose eyes were open, and the last page in my Bible. I thought

to myself, *People, my readers, really need to know about these Scriptures.*

Then yesterday, I decided to read over these same passages for my self again and I saw that like Old Reprobate Joe, I was letting the message flow over my head to apply to somebody else.

Yes, Balaam's ass, though dead, yet speaketh—to John Cowart.

The old camp song came to mind:

It ain't my brother nor my sister,
But it's me, O Lord
Standing in the need of prayer.

I've run into this same problem again and again. Back in the days when I taught an adult Bible class, in preparing the lessons, I'd be tempted to apply Scripture to the needs I perceived in class members; I'd have to continually reign myself in from judging others and see what the Scripture said to me.

This seems to be a common trait among religious people. We tend to have a clear view of what other people ought to do. We tend to say how much the other guy should drink, or smoke. What tv programs or movies he should watch. Whether or not she should have an abortion. Whether his hands should be folded to pray or raised in the air. Whether he should vote for this candidate or that. Whether he should serve in the military or be a conscientious objector.

And what about that mote speck in his eye?

I can get that out.

I have a chainsaw.

Yes, it's easy for me to apply the message to somebody else.

But I often forget the one essential question: Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do.

Me.

Not him. Not her.

Me.

If Scripture does not teach me first, how can I apply it to others?

Leaving that subject...

Recently I've been hammering out a work schedule and time line—without much success. I just don't know what, if anything, to do next.

I wonder if I should continue to write at all.

On one hand, my lack of success tells me, "If you keep doing the same thing you've been doing, you'll keep getting the same thing you've been getting".

On the other hand, thinking about perseverance tells me, "Winners never quit and quitters never win... He that puts his hand to the plowshare and turns back..."

Ginny tells me that I go through this dilemma every time I move from writing one book to another; she says it's part of my own creative process. But I forget that every time. The pain seems always new as though I'd never felt it before.

I loose sight of the essential question—Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?

While I struggle with this problem, I fill my workdays with rote clerical chores; I'm transcribing an old hand-written diary into the computer. Typing is not my forte. I can't read the script and I can't type and I get frustrated—Don't they have little people to do this sort of rote clerical work?

Oh.

Sorry.

I forgot.

I am a little people.

But at least I'm doing something. I'm moving. Sluggish, but I am moving.

And, Oh, Oh—Here Comes the Yule Tide!

Yes, here come Christmas in Florida:



Friday, December 05, 2008
**A Sample Reading Fom A Young
Lady's Diary**

A while back a friend entrusted me with numerous volumes of her diaries dating back to 1976.

I'm honored.

Since I remain in confusion about my own work, recently I've begun transcribing the hand-written text into my computer. Tedious work but worth the effort; it's likely to take a year or two before it's ready for publication.

Here's a sample page followed by my transcription from manuscript to type:

December 10, 1980

Daddy, I am so very tired. Somehow it is a tiredness that goes before doing anything. It brings a sense of futility.

Is it really all right that I am so I don't even know the word - but I see other kids are capable and I am not!

My child, I never ask you to be capable of doing anything that I do not expect you to do.

Now, Daddy, I must ask to know you will forgive me so I may know what you want me to be capable of. But how will I know, Dad?

Love does to 'Me. Abide in my commandments - come to me often in prayer - surrender your life to me moment by moment - and when you look back, you will see. You be not need to worry about knowing ahead of time, just obey me in each present moment.

Daddy, I give you my life today. I praise you because you are the God of all, the Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier, the Comforter. In you, from you and through you my life has meaning. Pardon my procrastination on old things I can't do. Pardon my refusal in the past to do things I could have done. And guide me into each step you have prepared for me to walk in.

December 10, 1980

Father, I am so tired. Somehow it is a tiredness that goes before doing anything. It brings a sense of futility.

Is it really all right that I am so—I don't even know the word—but I see others who are capable and I am not.

My child, I never ask you to be capable of doing anything that I do not equip you to do.

True, Father, I must seek to know Your will for me so I may know what You want me to be capable of. But how will I know, Lord?

Live close to Me. Abide in My commandments. Come to Me often in prayer. Surrender your life to Me moment by moment. And when you look back, you will see. You do not need to worry about knowing ahead of time. Just obey Me in each present moment.

O Lord, I give You my life today. I praise You because You are the God of all, the creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier, the Empowerer. In You, from You and through You, my life has meaning. Forgive my concentration on the things I can't do. Forgive me my refusal in the past to do things I could have done. And guide me into each step You have prepared for me to walk in.

Saturday, December 06, 2008 **Mary's Climbers**

I thought I was finished with any more references to the old Heard Bank building.

Back on November 29, 2008, I told about how the old bank changed hands, how it fit in Jacksonville's history, what happened to some of the columns from the old building, how a new Bank of America tower replaced the Heard Building, and how falcons nest on the tower and swoop to snag pigeons.

Climb JACKSONVILLE
an Extreme Challenge

Mary's Climbers

Bank of America Tower
PARADE REALTY PARTNERS

42 Floors • 838 Steps

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Saturday, February 7, 2009

8:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m.

All Proceeds Benefit

AMERICAN LUNG ASSOCIATION
of Florida

REGISTER TODAY! www.climbjacksonville.org

Back on October 18, 2008, I wrote about how my friend Barbara White's daughter, Mary, died of lung cancer. And I wrote about her funeral on October 26th.

Well, Dan, Mary's husband, organized a team at his work called Mary's Climbers. They intend to walk up 42 flights of stairs in the Bank of America tower as part of a fund raiser for the American Lung Association.

This event is scheduled for February 7, 2009, between 8 a.m. and 2 p.m.

42 Floors—That's 838 steps they plan to climb.

These guys are heroes.

It's all I can do to climb out of bed in the morning.

So, my contribution to the cause is to post this notice on my website—any reader interested in signing up as one of Mary's Climbers can register at www.climbjacksonville.org.

Feel free to step up and sign up—then really step up!

Monday, December 08, 2008
Happy Happenings

For her birthday our eldest daughter got a new puppy; she named it Bumble. Jennifer loves her new puppy:



Her cat reserves judgment::





Friday, two interesting phone calls came in.

In the first, a lady asked me if I knew any poor people. Her group wants to supply a poor family with a Christmas food basket—but they don't personally know any poor people. She wondered if I had any suggestions.

"Certainly," I replied.

Fill your food basket with goodies then take it to any Ford, Chrysler or GMC dealer with a note to send it to the company CEO. Those poor CEOs are begging for grocery money (they want 235 Billion dollars) from Congress. Poor guys don't know that to get government food they need to fill out an application at the Food Stamp office instead of pestering Congress. Or they could apply at the Salvation Army.

I have a problem giving money to people who make more than I do.

I can see giving to people poorer, but giving to people richer doesn't make much sense to me.

Of course I need to temper my resentment with the idea that perhaps we should all go a little hungry so that none may starve.

Anyhow, after my taunting the lady who called, I gave her the name and address of a family of recent immigrants with several children; Both mom and Dad were professional people in their own country, but here they both work menial jobs and are having a rough time making ends meet.

The second phone call came from my youngest son, Donald. He's recently acquired a webcam and decided to become a film producer. He said he wanted me to star in a webcam film for the internet.

I told him that I will not undress on camera—that's the only webcam stuff I know, but he assures me there are other kinds of films.

He brought his equipment over Saturday morning and filmed me (fully clothed) telling the Christmas Story.

Donald is editing the film and will post it online in a day or two. I'll post a link when he does.

Our middle daughter, eve, invited Ginny and me Christmas shopping in Waldo with her and her husband, Mark. The little town of Waldo, about 70 miles from Jacksonville, hosts a gigantic farmer's market and flea market where, on acres of ground, vendors gather on weekends to sell everything from turnips to jet turbines. Used furniture, lamps made of artillery shells, live chickens, antique bells, dolls, knives, flags, used clothing, pots, cement fish ponds—anything they scrounge and think might sell.

I proudly announce that I did not buy a copy of Michael Angelo's statue of David, nor an Egyptian mummy case, nor olive jar fragments from a 16th Century Spanish shipwreck, nor...

One of my besetting sins is to buy any nick knack that strikes my fancy at a garage sale or fleas market. With Mark and Eve, I enjoyed browsing in this wonderland of junk but I resisted buying. I'm proud of me.

The kids wore out of shopping and left early. Ginny and I continued viewing crystal door knobs, Indian

pottery, chenille bedspreads, swords, stuffed animal heads, and other treasures.

One small problem:

Ginny drove, I navigated. I mean there are only two roads, so what could go wrong?

I told her where to turn.

We drove and drove.

After about 30 miles, Ginny finally realized that I had her driving south instead of north.

Oops.

My mistake.

Do you know what she said about my goofed directions?

“This has been a really beautiful drive, Honey”. Not one other word. See why I love her so.

Thursday, December 11, 2008

Christmas Reading

While I wait for my son to finish processing the video presentation I modestly star in, a film sure to win an Oscar and bump Brad Pitt right off the screen, I spend my time reading.

Yesterday my e-friend Felisol in Norway (at On The Far Side Of The Sea,



<http://felisol.blogspot.com/>) asked me about a story by Count Leo Tolstoy, one of the world's greatest writers.

Here is a photo of the Count as a young man in 1854:
Does that photo resemble anyone you know?

Maybe a certain movie star?

A complex and confused man, Tolstoy wrote *War And Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, and many other great works of literature, as well as scores of profound short stories.

In spite of his literary success and critical acclaim, for a time he grew suicidal.

He said, "I abnormally developed pride and an insane assurance that it was my vocation to teach men—without knowing what (to teach)... My life came to a standstill... the truth was that life is meaningless. And it was then that I, a man favored by fortune, hid a cord from myself lest I should hang myself... and I ceased to go out shooting with a gun lest I should be tempted by so easy a way of ending my life."

Yet, in 1870, his diary says, "I knelt down and prayed; and as I prayed I just knew there was a God. . Then I remembered the Gospel of John that I had read, and how it seemed to be written by an eye-witness, and I knew that if that was so, then Jesus was the Son of God and I was saved!"

That spiritual experience colored the rest of his life and is reflected in many of his writings.

Here's a photo of him taken later in life:



I searched and found the story Felistol wants to read. It is one of Tolstoy's finest. It's named : "Where Love Is..." The text is at <http://thriceholy.net/Texts/Tolstoy.html> .

If anyone is interested in one of my own Christmas stories, I recommend "Gravedigger's Christmas" a true tale of something that happened to me and my family back in the mid 1970s. It forms a chapter in my book of the same name. The on-line text is at:

<http://www.cowart.info/John%27s%20Books/Gravedigger%27s%20Xmas/Gravedigger%27s%20Christmas.htm>

Now, I may not write like Tolstoy, but I am beginning to look like him—

In that later photograph.

Saturday, December 13, 2008
A Preview Of Coming Events

My son Donald tells me that processing the film we made last week will take another few days. Even before

this one is ready to post on You-Tube, we are discussing other movie possibilities...

Given my love for 1950s era science Fiction films, and my bent toward matters of faith, perhaps we'll produce something like this:



GINNY and I visited Dr. Oz, my oncologist, yesterday.
My PSA reading is up to 9.

Dr. Oz gave me some disturbing news: my prostate cancer is not likely to kill me for another ten years. I thought it was more efficient than that.

It's like going to the dean's office expecting to graduate and being told you don't have enough credits so you have to take another ten classes.

Nice to stay a college student, but you really expected to graduate.

O goodie/ O damn!

My train does not leave for hours yet.

Does this mean I have to unpack my bags?

Lots of stuff to re think.

Last night, Ginny said the nicest thing to me.

She said, "You are the most sanest man in the world".

Her words surprised me; I treasure them.

I treasure her.

Sunday, December 14, 2008
Christmas In A Little Tin Box

Limos line the curb.

Fans press against the velvet ropes.

Searchlight beams arc across the night sky.

Starlets smile as they sashay along the red carpet.

Stephen Spielberg gnaws his teeth and weeps in envy.

Ginny's diamonds flash beside me as I wave photographers aside.

Yes, today marks my film début as I star in my son, Donald Cowart's film production of *Christmas In A Little Tin Box*.

Donald originated the idea, directed, produced and masterminded this sure-to-win-an-Oscar, 12-minute, classic movie.

You can view it on line at either <http://blip.tv/file/1572083/> or, even better, at <http://bluefishvideo.blip.tv/>

As a viewer at this Premier Showing, you can even start a John Cowart fan club by telling all your friends to watch.

As you might can tell I'm as pleased and tickled and delighted as a kitten catching his first mouse.

Ok, I'll admit it. There were really no searchlights, starlets, limos or diamonds at the first showing of my film; that was all in my mind. In reality, I even had to pop my own popcorn--but I'm as pleased as if all the Hollywood glitz did really happen.

Donald put a lot of work into this thing.

He plans to produce more Bluefish Videos in the future.

Wait! I have to hide. There's a paparazzi approaching my front door...

Never mind, it was only the mailman.

Relax, click the white triangle, and enjoy the movie.

Wednesday, December 17, 2008

Ginny's Hearty Pre-Christmas Stew

When we visited yard sales over the summer, Ginny bought used or out-of-date pillar candles for next to nothing; yesterday, she surrounded these with glass balls we scrounged from the trash to decorate our table with this centerpiece which cost less than \$3.

Clever girl.



As Christmas approaches, so do a myriad of activities. More shopping, wrapping presents, phone ringing, church meetings, Luminary Night, birthdays, parties, house cleaning, decorating, visits from friends, charitable activities—we hardly have time to eat.

Problem solved.

Clever Ginny cooks up a huge pot of her hearty Pre-Christmas Stew.



Theoretically, when pressed for time by all the goings on, we can eat on this delicious one-dish meal time and time again. All it needs is warming up and serving.

Here's how she makes it:

First she buys a two or three pound beef roast and cuts it up into bite-sized chunks; She spoons some flour into a paper bag, drops the beef chunks in and shakes it up to coat them.

In her largest pot, she browns the meat in about a $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of oil.

Then she adds about four cups of water, a can of stewed tomatoes, four or five onions cut up into wedges, 6 or 7 bouillon cubes, a bay leaf, a teaspoon each of ground coriander, cumin, oregano, and a dot of garlic powder.

She brings this stuff to a boil then turns down the heat to let it simmer for about two hours.

Now, she adds a head of cabbage she's cut up into wedges, several sliced carrots, and a couple of ears of corn.

She tops all this off with a can of mild green chili peppers.

She lets this stew cook until the cabbage, corn and carrots are soft.

Served with buttered toast, this meal sticks to your ribs on a cold day.

It's supposed to serve eight and I'm told that it stays delicious for days and days and days for eating through out the busy days before Christmas.

I wouldn't know—the two of us ate the whole pot over this past weekend!

Here's the clipping from Ginny's receipt book:

← RIO GRANDE STEW
Makes 8 servings

1 2 pounds beef cubes for stew
Flour
1/8 1/4 cup vegetable oil
2 1/2 4 1/2 cups water
1/2 1 (16-ounce) can stewed tomatoes, undrained
1 2 medium onions, cut into wedges
3 7 teaspoons Wyler's® Beef-Flavor Instant Bouillon or 7 Beef-Flavor Bouillon Cubes
1/2 1 teaspoon ground coriander, optional
1/2 1 teaspoon ground cumin
1/2 1 teaspoon oregano leaves
1/2 1/4 teaspoon garlic powder
1 bay leaf
1/2 1 cup sliced carrots
1 2 ears fresh or thawed frozen corn, cut into chunks
1/2 1 small head cabbage, cut into wedges (about 1 pound)
1/2 1 (4-ounce) can chopped mild green chilies, drained

In paper or plastic bag, add meat, a few pieces at a time, to flour; shake to coat. In Dutch oven, brown meat in oil. Add remaining ingredients except carrots, corn, cabbage and chilies. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat; cover and simmer 1 1/2 hours. Add remaining ingredients; cook 30 minutes longer or until vegetables are tender. Remove bay leaf. Refrigerate leftovers.

In other news:

Donald dropped in Sunday afternoon to discuss making further movies; he's posted a description of technical details on his blog at <http://www.rdex.net/blog/> .

More about our movie plans later.

A Note For The Kid In The Attic:

At a press conference in Baghdad where President Bush spoke, some little person threw his shoe at the President of the United States.

The President ducked.



Secret Service agents did not spray the whole room with machine guns; the U.S. Air Force did not A-Bomb the city; Cruise missiles did not obliterate the country.

The President ducked.

The arab reporter was ejected from the conference.

What would have happened to that same roomful of arab reporters if one of them ever had thrown a shoe at Saddam Hussein?

Our President soft-pedaled the incident as

an expression of free speech!

Petty little insignificant people seek revenge; the great and mighty pass over insults.

I'm not particularly a Bush supporter, but I'm impressed in that he teaches me that the king does not swat flies.

Forbearance.

Maybe that's why God puts up with so much that we do.

Thursday, December 18, 2008
Hide & Seek At Christmas

Happens every Christmas.

I heard about it on the radio this morning as I transcribed more pages of that old hand-written diary I've been working on.

Once again vandals have been stealing images of the baby Jesus out of nativity scenes in front of churches and homes.

Nothing new there.

Pathetic losers.

Somebody needs to buy these folks a Gameboy or something.

What is new, to me at least, is that some security firms now hide GPS devices inside the images so authorities can locate the stolen figures in a hurry.

An Associated Press news bulletin tells all about it; the bulletin can be read at <http://news.google.com/news?hl=en&tab=wn&ned=&q=stolen+jesus%2C+gps&btnG=Search+News>

Some folks train security cameras on their Christmas displays to identify thieves, as well as attaching GPS locators to track down the missing Jesus.

One church chained Jesus to a heavy cinder block, but thieves made off with the whole rig.

I find all this ... I suppose *amusing* is the word I want. But it borders on hilarious.

A Jesus that can be stolen is not the God I worship.

He's too big to lift for one thing.

I have no use for a GPS to find Him.

Indeed, our roles are reversed.

If anyone is lost, it's us, not Him. The first thing God called to Adam after the fall was, "Where art thou?"

Adam and Eve were hiding in the bushes from God.

We, their descendents, do the same thing.

Only the bushes are different.

We hide.

God seeks.

Now, manger figures are just that, figures. Someone carved or molded them out of plastic, wood, plaster, stone, papier-mâché—even pressed tin like the ones I showed in the video last week.

These things rust, get chipped, get weatherworn, misplaced, stolen. They perish in the using. I suspect that for most Christians they rank more as decorations than as representations of Christ the Lord.

Even if they are meant as representations, they are poor ones.

The Scripture tells us that God who came to earth to be born in a stable, held the universe together while He was becoming a baby. He later said, “All power is given unto me in Heaven and in earth...” While soldiers hammered nails into His hands, He gave their arms the strength to swing the hammer. And the Lord of Life rose from death under His own power.

The Scripture says, “In Him we live and move and have our very being”.

He can not be lost, He holds all creation in the palm of His nail-scarred hand.

And here is the wonder—the Mighty God, the Lord of Life, the Bright and Morning Star, the King of Kings, the Alpha and Omega, the Creator and Sustainer of all—Jesus seeks us.

We can't hide from Him. I have this mental picture of kids playing Hide and Seek with Dad, they crouch behind the cellar door, giggling that Daddy can't see them.

But he can.

God can too.

He knows where we're hiding.

As far as God is concerned, everyone of us has a GPS stapled to our ass.

Every hair on our heads is numbered by Him who calls every star by name, who sees every fallen sparrow, who sees every tear to well up in our eyes, who heals the broken in heart.

And His call to us now is still the same as it was at the world's beginning to sinners in the Garden of Eden:

Where art thou?

Come Home.

Come Home.

Come in free.

I Need A Scorecard

In a different vein, Patricia, our youngest daughter, the one studying to be a phlebotomist (great pun: vein/phlebotomist—I'm so clever!) came home yesterday.

She brought her friend(fiancé ?) Clint (his mother is a long-time Dirty Harry fan) to meet us; from Jacksonville they plan to drive to a cabin in the mountains for Christmas with his parents so Patricia can meet them for the first time.

Anyhow, I'd spent part of the day cleaning house getting ready for their arrival... Then, Jennifer, our eldest daughter, called saying that she'd invited Eve, our middle daughter, and they'd all meet me and Ginny at a Chinese restaurant.

Ginny and I got there first and waited in the parking lot.

The kids called on a cell phone to tell us they were at a nearby duck pond in the park and would meet us in a few minutes.

Meanwhile, this car pulls up with a young couple inside. The man got out, approached me, extended his hand and said, "How are you doing, Sir?"

I had no idea who this stranger was.

The young lady got out of the car.

I had no idea who she was either.

Of course, the couple was Clint and Patricia. I did not recognize either one at first (she has a new hair color and style).

I felt so embarrassed.

In the New England of the 1600s, people considered gross mental confusion a sign of being bewitched

(Recently, I've been reading a book about psych/sociological elements in colonial witchcraft trials).

Must be that I'm being hag-ridden... or just plain going nuts.

Anyhow, we enjoyed a nice dinner with all those kids —whoever they were.

Friday, December 19, 2008
An Annual Ritual

Thursday I visited my parents' Grave



Saturday, December 20, 2008
Examining My Motives As A Writer



This Christmas tide, while the rest of the nation freezes under sub-zero blizzards and crippling ice storms, here in 80-degree sunny Florida, (I like to rub that in to poor yankees) I dabble at a systematic program that leads to reading through the Bible in a year.

I want to talk about that, but first let me say that last night Eve and Mark hosted a riotous combination birthday and Christmas celebration at their home.

Because of travel plans and folks wanting to spend Christmas with their spouses' families, the Cowarts exchanged jokes, jabs and gifts last night. It was a hoot! Poor Clint, our newest, must wonder what he's gotten into by falling for Patricia. He's got a treasure, but he didn't recon on the family being thrown into the bargain.

We played with candy rats (long story of an odd Cowart holiday tradition. We teased Mark about mistaken a perfectly good manatee for a walrus! (Mark hails from up north). We prayed, feasted, read Scripture and told bizarre, embarrassing stories about each other, and exchanged even more bizarre gifts (another Cowart tradition).

For our Christmas devotions I read the Ten Commandments and short passages from three of the

Gospels. And to reinforce the seriousness of the gathering, I told about this cartoon:

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Thanks to Keisha Jenkins (See Matthew 2:1-12)

12-22-2006

I SURE HOPE MY WIFE LIKES MYRRH

Terri didn't get the joke—which made it all the funnier for the rest of us.

Now, back to my original intention of reading day by day through the Bible in a year.

I'm not making it.

I miss a lot of days, but reading all the way the whole thing again remains my goal.

Sometimes, that practice creates a posterior pain

For instance, Friday's reading brought me to Peter's First Letter, Chapter 2, where I read:

For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

Now the passage primarily reveals Christ, telling what He did and our relationship to Him. I believe this passage

is literally true. Every phrase pictures the situation accurately. But one phrase in particular captured my attention: *An example that ye should follow His steps.*

Years ago I read Charles Sheldon's popular novel titled *In His Steps*. And yes, I know it advocates a watered-down, liberal Christianity and a social gospel; (O Horrors!) but it's still a cool, thought-provoking book.

Here, I've scanned in a brief passage from that book which I ran across again recently; it's about Jasper Chase, a writer:

His book was nearly done now. He had not forgotten the question "Would Jesus do this?" Would He write this story? It was a social novel written in a style that had proved popular. It had no purpose except to amuse. Its moral teaching was not bad, but neither was it Christian in any positive way.

"What would Jesus do?" He felt that Jesus would never write such a book. The question intruded on him at the most inopportune times. He became irritable over it. The standard of Jesus for an author was too ideal. Of course Jesus would use His powers to produce something useful or helpful or with a purpose. What was he, Jasper Chase, writing this novel for? Why, what nearly every writer wrote for—money and fame as a writer. There was no secret with him that he was writing this new story with that object. But he was urged on by his desire for fame as much as anything.

He turned to his desk and began to write. When he had finished the last page of the last chapter of his book, it was nearly dark. "What would Jesus do?" He had finally answered the question by denying his Lord. It grew darker in his room. Jasper Chase grew into a cold, cynical, formal life, writing novels that were social successes, but each one with a sting in it, the reminder of his denial, the bitter remorse that, do what he would, no social success could remove.

Money and fame as a writer.

All this gives me something to think about.

I hate examining my own motives!

See where Bible reading gets you?

I've got to stop reading such stuff.

It messes with my head and gives me another (well-deserved) posterior pain.

I like the parts where Peter talks about how vile, nasty sinners are going to get their comeuppance—those passages make for easier reading.

The thing is, when reading the Bible, you can never tell which phrase is going to stick. Alive, powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword, comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable—that's God's written word.

As Peter says, "Prophecy came not in old time by the will of man, but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost".

Theologian term the process of the Holy Spirit's working on the writers *inspiration*. It means God-breathed.

Reading Scripture carries that same sort of supernatural dynamic.

At His discretion, the Holy Spirit sometimes causes certain phrases to jump out at the reader. Theologians term this process *illumination*, which means to light up.

Sometimes I wish the ideas of Scripture did not light up for me...

Say, I wonder what's on tv this evening?

Sunday, December 21, 2008
\$9,999.00

Suppose that someone gave you a gift of \$9,999.00.

You would not have to pay income taxes on that gift. It is a free gift and not earned income.

OK, suppose some gave me a gift of \$9,999.00, I would not have to pay income tax, Ginny—she's an accountant—says the tax has already been paid by the giver. The recipient enjoys the gift, tax free.

Unfortunately, no one gave me \$9,999.00 for Christmas this year.

Instead, one of the kids presented me with this:



It is a lovely electric rat in a coffee mug.

When I lift my mug, the rat squeals and kicks his feet and thrashes his tail trying to back out of the mug.

Hey, it's the thought that counts.

Right?

At Eve's party the other night, our kids showered many such lavish gifts on us. (Eve tells about her shindig on her blog today at <http://www.eveyq.blogspot.com/>).

A lady in a parking lot yelled something that got me to thinking more about gifts yesterday afternoon when Ginny and I stopped at a department store to buy some batteries.

As we approached the store, we passed a family coming out into the parking lot. A sullen teenager lagged behind his harried mother. The irate woman shrieked at him, "That's what you're getting! You asked for three presents, and you're getting three damn presents"!!!

Nothing like family togetherness for the holidays.

A gift originates with the giver.

What that gift is comes at the giver's discretion.

The recipient is just that, a recipient. He can be grateful for the gift, regard it with indifference, or reject it according to his nature.

Our kids gave Ginny a delightful gift. Here's a photo:



My photo can not do it justice. It's about a foot long and all those things dangling from the dorsal fin are bells that tinkle when you move it.

Ginny is the first on our block to own one.

She's the envy of all who see it.

This morning Ginny woke at 4 a.m. with me this morning and we talked about taxes. She says the gift limit has been raised to twenty thousand dollars. You can receive that much without having to pay income tax on it.

The gift comes free because you have not earned it; the giver paid for it before you even knew he was giving it to you.

If you work and earn, then the person who hands you \$9,999.00 is merely paying a debt. That is not a gift; you've earned the cash and you have the bragging rights to how worthy you are to get such a sum.

It's only a gift if you have done nothing to deserve it.

See where I'm going with this?

St. 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".

Salvation comes tax-free. Christ, the giver, has already paid everything that needed paying. He paid for it on the cross.

We can accept His gift with gratitude, reject it with resentment as not something we really wanted, or ignore it with indifference—to our peril.

Like the old hymn says, “Jesus paid it all; All to Him I owe”.

It’s a good thing gifts come free.

Otherwise, just think of all the tax I’d have to pay on my Squealing Rat In A Mug. Or what Ginny would owe on her tinkling, flowered, yellow and purple fish.

Some gifts are priceless.

Tuesday, December 23, 2008
For Service, Punch Option 84.
Let Me Repeat That In Spanish...

Here it is two days before Christmas and we’ve spent the last six days trying to reach AT&T to get our telephone working again. Their shabby system causes us to investigate dropping AT&T altogether and going with a rival cell phone company.

My dealing with AT&T brings to mind this cartoon:

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Thanks to Josh Alves (See Job 1)

12-02-2005

JOB GOES FOR A SNACK

On the up side, Ginny and I finally put up our outdoor Christmas display. Smaller than usual, but we got it up in time for Luminary Night. Sunday night we walked for three hours enjoying lights and decorated homes.

Here's a photo of Ginny adjusting our little display



Being anchored to the house for six days waiting for the telephone repair man to show up has put a crimp in my Christmas activities. And while I practice hostage negotiations with the phone company, I also struggle with the problem of where my own work should go from here.

Talked with my friend Barbara White at Dave's Diner yesterday about knowing the will of God. Barbara pointed out that I do not have to know what to do next, I just have to decide what to do next.



Thanks to Dad Hengeveld (See Luke 2:1-16) 12-20-2001

SORRY FOLKS, WE'RE BOOKED SOLID ... GOD HIMSELF COULDN'T GET A ROOM HERE TONIGHT

We're about ready for Christmas.



**Wednesday, December 24, 2008
Baby Clothes**



Thanks to Dad Hengeveld (See Luke 2:1-16)

12-23-200

HORSES HATE SWADDLING CLOTHES

Polly caught a frog.

That's the way she worded it.

It's an occupational hazard for prostitutes.

Polly worked the same truck terminal where I worked back when I drove a tractor trailer 40 years ago.

I met her late one night in the men's shower room. Both of us were naked.

Years later, I wrote a newspaper column about meeting The Girl In My Shower; a copy of the article can be found at:
<http://www.cowart.info/Rabid%20Fun%20columns/Girl%20in%20shower/Girl%20in%20shower.htm> .

Polly asked Jesus into her heart that night—But the process of working out exactly what that meant in her life did not happen in an instant. For most of us, it doesn't.

Salvation, becoming a Christian, is not all about solving our problems and getting our life all straight. No, Salvation is all about Jesus, about acknowledging His Lordship and giving Him His rightful and proper place.

Any happiness that relationship brings is a by-product, not the reason, of honoring Christ as Savior. So Polly's life didn't turn rosy the second she accepted Christ.

As I crossed the country, whenever I'd pass through her town every couple of months, she'd update me on how her life was going. I think she felt relieved to able to

share a cup of coffee or meal and chat with a male who was not a potential customer.

One day in the mechanic shop, she told me that she'd "caught a frog" from somebody or the other. She was pregnant and her man was upset about it, but she'd decided to have the baby anyhow.

(Now, please fellow Christians, don't throw rocks at me, but I'm not at all sure that sometimes an abortion is not the best thing for all concerned, including the baby—and no, I do not care to discuss it.)

Anyhow, my views on the subject didn't matter because the prostitute had already decided to have the baby before she even told me about it.

Ginny and I were expecting our own first child by then, and when I told her about Polly, Ginny knitted a little cap, booties and baby clothes for the prostitute's soon-to-be-born baby. Not knowing whether Polly's baby would be a girl or boy, Ginny knitted the tiny outfit out of pastel green yarn with yellow trim.

Ginny's kind gift touched Polly.

Polly delivered a little girl child a few days before Christmas that year. She told me that her man raped her as soon as she got home from the hospital. It hurt, she said, but she was glad he did it because she'd been scared he wouldn't like her or find her attractive after she had the baby.

What a prince.

Like many abused women, Polly feared him but also feared being without him. The thought that he would leave her alone in the world terrified her. She could see no way to get along without him as her "protector".

Although Polly was a Christian and, on a deep level wanted to extricate herself from street life at the truck terminal, she would never make a Bible scholar.

But, she was so proud of her newborn daughter.

"John," she said, "I named her Merry. You know, after Merry Christmas, the mother of Jesus".

Yes, she thought the two words were the same.

I saw no reason to correct her.

Months later when I left the road, I lost contact with Polly.

This time of year, when I hear people wish “Merry Christmas” I always think of Polly and Merry, and I wonder what happened to them.

May God bless them whatever.

If I make it there myself, I expect to see Polly again in Heaven. Not all of us who come to Jesus need to know all the right words, just the right “Man”.

Merry Christmas.

Monday, December 29, 2008

Preview Of Coming Attractions

Film reviewers attribute the worst movies ever made to Hollywood personality Ed Wood.

Mr. Wood stands in danger of loosing his number one spot.

My son Donald and I plan to make several movies over the next few months. Our films are sure to become classics.

After all, I’m noted for my refined taste in movies.

For instance, I rank among my personal number one box office favorites *The Lost Skeleton Of Cadavra*—a classic film in which Ranger Brad says, “Seriously, folks, around these parts we’re serious about taking horrible mutilations seriously”.

And the space aliens conquer the world using house painters’ caulking guns as props. (That solved some budget problems).

According to my cinematic taste, another prime example of the film maker’s art should attract the attention of other refined, cultured viewers with discriminating tastes.

It’s called *Jesus Christ: Vampire Hunter*.

In the opening scenes of this fictional cinematic event, vampires attack lesbians in the city. Church leaders appeal to the Savior of the world for help. Jesus, who’s been studying karate before his second advent, comes out of retirement to battle the vampires. He whisks along

city streets on his skateboard healing the sick, blind and crippled as he goes. A gang of 36 atheists attack, and Jesus karateizes the lot. But then, vampires beat him up and leave him bleeding in the gutter. A priest passes by on the other side, a cop passes by, but the Good Transvestite picks him up and nurses him to health. Then Jesus teams up with a professional wrestler and they whack vampires right and left in an auto junk yard and -

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

No account of my refined taste in cinema is complete without mention of *Lair Of The White Worm*. In this film an evil giant snake attacks the village demanding an offering. The townsmen decide to sacrifice Alice because, "She the closest thing to a virgin we've got in this village". But the intrepid Scottish hero saves Alice and the village by thwarting the evil serpent by the simple ploy of going into the snake's lair with a mongoose hidden under his kilt.

These are three of my top movie picks, these films make the early *Godzilla* movies look like cinema!

So naturally, the films Donald and I plan to make may rank right up there with these other film classics. Here's a photo of Donald as cameraman/director:



Not really.

Seriously, our films lack such luster; they have different roots.

For several years back in the mid 1970s I taught Bible lessons at a sort of half-way house for drug addicts. A judge had given convicted residents the choice of going to jail or staying at the shelter and one requirement of living there was they had to attend my Bible classes.

Talk about a hostile audience!

To win their attention, I developed various odd gimmicks to both amuse and instruct. They worked pretty well. Although in one class, while I illustrated a Bible lesson with poster paints, one guy went to sleep. I continued my talk as I crept out into the audience and painted his nose red. The class thought that was a hoot.

Years later, I taught these same lessons at a skid-row mission where the administration made the men sit through one of my Bible classes before they could have supper.

Many resented this requirement so I felt it necessary to do my best to win their attention and sympathy.

I felt I was battling for men's very souls there because almost every week one or two of the down and out guys would have died between meetings.

So, although I fooled around and joked a lot to gain attention and interest, I trembled at the seriousness of what I was doing.

Then, once after a couple of years, the pastor of one of Jacksonville's society churches happened to visit our house while I was rigging one of my demonstrations for the mission. The project intrigued him and he asked me to make a presentation to his Pastor's Bible Class, a group made up of physicians, attorneys, architects, bankers, etc.

After praying about it, I felt that if a lesson was good enough for the guys at the mission—if I were giving them my best—then that same lesson was good enough for the society class. So I taught the exact same lesson both places that week.

The class proved popular enough that the pastor asked me to take over, and I taught that way for several years.

Incidentally, I was not exactly a high society person myself; as I was teaching that class on Sundays, during the week I worked as a janitor.

A strange situation.

Anyhow, because my son Donald got this bug about making video films for the internet, his idea is to use me teaching some of these same lessons with the same gimmicks and my tasteful jokes.

He wants me to star in his films.

Seriously folks, he's serious about making serious religious-type films for a serious viewership...

What am I to do?

I can't find my caulk gun!

Know where I can buy a mongoose cheap?

Wednesday, December 31, 2008

TEST POST

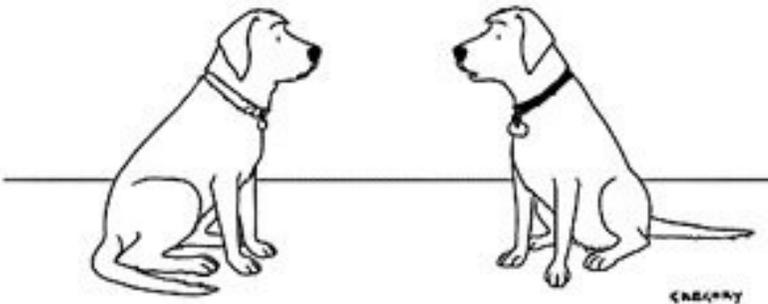
Since Christmas and the telephone line troubles, my computer went wonkie on me. Donald worked on it today. This is a test to see if it works right now.

Testing...

One, Two. Three—Testing.

Wednesday, December 31, 2008

Bruce's Umbrella, Donald Duck, & My On-Line Diary



"I had my own blog for a while, but I decided to go back to just pointless, incessant barking."

This last day of 2008 causes me to reevaluate my life, to recall why I keep this diary, and to remember Bruce's umbrella, and Donald Duck.

To start with, I remember Bruce's umbrella!

O do I remember Bruce's umbrella!

It was horrible!

As soon as I turned 11 years old, I joined Boy Scout Troop 36. To initiate me established members stripped my pants off and hung them from a lamp pole on Hendricks Avenue. I ignored busy traffic and hooting car horns to climb the pole and retrieve my pants.

From then on, I belonged.

My initiation shows what a rowdy bunch of ruffians we were, calling each other vile names and teasing each other unmercifully—except this once.

We were Scouts. We chopped down trees, explored caves, dug in fossil beds, explored ruins, built forts, passed around illicit copies of *Argosy: The Men's Magazine*, and exchanged highly improbable information about how babies are made.

We were Scouts.

We were tough.

One drizzly Saturday morning we loaded our gear in the back of a stake truck and 30 of us began to pile aboard to go off on a camping trip. Laughing, catcalling, shoving, we pushed for the best places at the front of the truck bed.

This kid named Bruce entered the fray seeking his place under a tarpaulin out of the rain.

A car pulled up in front of the Scout Hut.

Bruce's mother got out and ran toward the truck waving a woman's umbrella.

The lady back then was dressed like the female's in a *Desperate Housewives* tv show today. Tight skirt, low-cut, bouncing bodice, high spiked-heeled sandals, Bouffant hairdo (Is that what you call that sort of 1950s hair style?)

She was a sight.

We all looked.

She was yelling, “Brucie! Brucie, you forgot an umbrella”.

An umbrella on a Scout camping trip?

Bruce balked—he argued that nobody else in the troop carried an umbrella camping.

She insisted—he might get wet, catch cold.

From the bed of the truck, the rest of us watched the exchange.

She threatened not to let him go camping unless he carried that umbrella.

It was yellow.

It had flowers on it.

Bruce relented.

He climbed back on board the truck with the umbrella.

Not one boy—Not one—teased him.

None of us had ever heard the word *mortification*, but we knew its meaning. In our minds we every one pictured his own mother, and we all knew that kind of humiliation could happen to any boy.

There but for the grace of God is me with a yellow, flowered umbrella on a truckload of boys going camping to rough it in the woods.

We realized our common humanity.

We knew that what happened to one, could happen to anybody.

So not one boy teased Bruce.

But I doubt if any of us ever forgot him.

Mortification. Humiliation. Universal experience. Things we share, or could share, in common. Bonds with humanity that we’d just as soon hide. Vulnerability. Transparency.

A saint once said, “There has no temptation taken you but such as is common to man...”

But we try to maintain our dignity—at least I do. I cringe at the thought of anyone seeing how weak I am, especially when life forces me to carry a yellow flowered umbrella.

Pride punctured wounds deep.

Rather slip with a chain saw.

At least that's manly... I'm a lumberjack and I'm OK!

That brings me to Donald Duck, an eminently successful corporate attorney I met as an adult when I was driving a tractor trailer over the road cross country. We met "by chance" at a one-time meeting in a church where neither one of had ever been before.

I wrote about our meeting back on May 31, 2007, *This Couple Wanted My Bed*, in my blog archives.

Donald Duck, successful attorney, and John Cowart, blue-collar truck driver, had nothing in common except that on some level each of us wanted to follow Christ whole-heartedly. On that basis we hit it off as fast friends.

We often talked about commitment, about how Jesus is worthy of our devotion because of His love for us, because of His death for us on the cross, because He rose from death, and because He sends His Spirit to be active in this present world through everyday ordinary people like you and me.

Don told me his insight that I am a proud man. He told me that if I chose I could be a passable Christian, attending church, dropping a little tithe in the plate, refraining from overt noxious sin—but that for me such a path would be hypocrisy.

Don said that if I chose to really follow Jesus, I would need to become vulnerable and transparent and honest. He said that I would not be an *example* of a Christian, but more of a public display, like when you visit an archaeological site and walk through the ruins seeing how primitives coped and made things fit.

On some shallow level, without realizing what I'm getting into, I chose to follow.

At a safe distance.

That brings me to this on-line diary.

For years I've kept a diary recording my day to day acting out of my own Christian life. Of course I try to put my best foot forward and I try to avoid looking like too much of an ass.

But at the same time I try to avoid hypocrisy. I do not record every time I browse for naked ladies on the internet; I do not tell all my resentments or the grudges I've held for years and years—but I mention enough such squalor to give a taste of my sins, temptations and struggles. I try to reveal and acknowledge my sins but not to wallow.

By the same token, I try not to record all my virtues and good deeds, but I try to give a taste of those also. Like the old Puritan teacher told theology students, "Be thou not overly pious". I try not to relish and exalt in how nice I am.

For instance, yesterday I helped my son pick up surplus bread from a bakery and delivery it to a shelter for the homeless (how virtuous of me); But, I opened a package, took out the best pastry, and ate it myself (stole food right out of the mouths of the poor, What a creep). Those are the two sides of me my diary reveals.

My writing lets readers stroll through the ruins.

My goal in all this is to present a transparent picture of what the Christian life is like for one guy.

In seeing what it's like for me, maybe something will strike a cord, maybe someone will identify, maybe some reader will recognize their own heart-yearning...

Maybe someday some reader will see through my transparency and vulnerability and realize— Hey! This is real. This rings true. Jesus is indeed the Christ, Son of the Living God, the Savior.

I want readers to see through murky me to catch a vision of Him...

And to see Him as worthy.

--- jwc

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